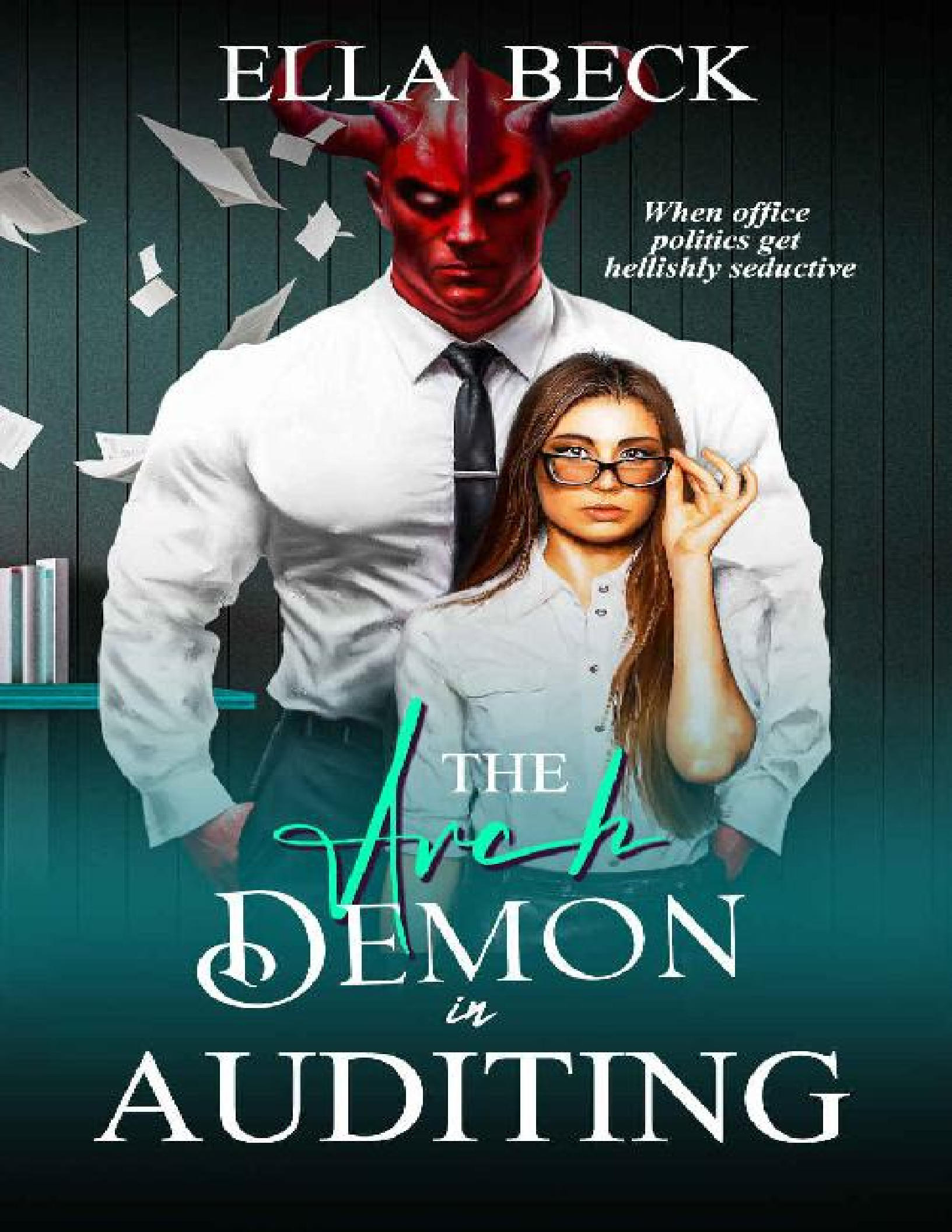


ELLA BECK

*When office
politics get
hellishly seductive*



THE
Arach
DEMON
in

AUDITING

The Archdemon in Auditing

Monsters in Management

Book 1

Ella Beck

Dedicated to every upstanding lady with a secret taste for the unholy.

*And to all who've been good and wish they'd been a little naughty: your time
has come.*



Here's to breaking rules, hearts, and headboards.

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The Archdemon in Auditing

When I landed a dream job in the Underworld, I never expected my boss would be the infuriatingly handsome archdemon, Bax Daemonus.

As Chief Soul Auditor, he's been cutting corners for centuries - but I'm here to reform his corrupt department. Bax fights me at every turn, yet the tension between us crackles hotter than hellfire.

Those sculpted horns and smoldering eyes tempt me in dangerous ways no mortal should crave. And the more we clash over changing the old ways, the more our true passions threaten to ignite.

I came here with an important mission. But now my focus keeps wandering to projects of a more personal nature — like being seduced by the master of sin himself.

From bitter enemies to forbidden lovers, office politics suddenly seem trivial. Every smoldering glance from Bax tilts the scales further in his favor...

But a romance between a demon like Bax and a mortal like me has potentially eternal consequences...

Can I risk it all in the name of love?

Chapter One



Bax

Ugh, Monday already? Another day in the pit. My alarm shrieks like a damned soul, jolting me from a perfectly good nightmare. Bleary-eyed, I slap around until I find the infernal snooze button, silencing its wailing. Just five more minutes of hellish rest...

But despite my efforts to burrow back under the heated blankets, peaceful slumber eludes me. With a resigned sigh, I haul myself upright, spine cracking from eons of less-than-heavenly sleep. Being an archdemon doesn't leave much time for indulging in restful luxuries—too many mortal souls to torment with endless paperwork and audits.

Sure, judging the recently deceased and sentencing them to eternal punishments sounds badass, but in reality, it's just a job. And after a few thousand years, you've seen it all. The chaos, the screaming, the rivers of fire, etcetera, etcetera—meh, you get desensitized. Now it's just reports, quotas, and paperwork. Hellish paperwork.

I stumble through my gloomy apartment toward the bathroom, scratching idly at centuries-old burns etched into my skin. One quick sulfuric shower later, I'm looking a bit more alive and dressed to torment.

A crisp white shirt is tucked neatly into tailored black slacks. Adding a sleek black tie completes the look. The white provides a nice contrast against my crimson skin tone. Obsidian cufflinks shaped like tiny screaming souls fasten my shirt sleeves. A splash of brimstone cologne to give the day a fighting chance.

Very dapper by demonic standards. Running a clawed hand over my smooth, curved horns, I nod at my reflection.

In the kitchen, I skip my routine breakfast blood sacrifice. Not in the mood to hear the begging and whimpering so early, even if it would soothe my soul—if I had one. Instead, I settle for a strong cup of liquid hellfire brewed from the coffee maker I 'borrowed indefinitely' from work last month. The searing heat scalds my throat deliciously, jolting my senses awake. Ah, sweet sinful caffeine.

Might as well get this week over with. Mondays are the worst.

Finally prepared, I'm ready to head into the office and wreak some bureaucratic havoc. Stepping through a swirling portal, I land in the fiery halls of Damnation Financial, the largest soul accounting firm in the underworld. The air hums with the whirring of torture devices and the hissing of damned paperwork. Just another day on the deathly grind.

As I stride toward my department, lesser demons scatter from my path, not keen to provoke my ire on a Monday morning. But they also seem tense. Murmured whispers stop as I pass cubicles.

They're hiding something.

What drama awaits me this week?

I make a mental note to schedule random torture sessions later to loosen their tongues. But before I can interrogate the nearest cowering lackey, my section manager head, Asmodeus, slithers up with a too-wide grin.

"Bax! There you are. I have news from corporate—we're getting a new team member."

My eyes narrow to slits. A new minion? I run a tight operation down here. No need for useless additions mucking up my system.

Asmodeus steamrolls on, cheerfully ignoring my simmering annoyance. "Upper management sent her specifically to help improve productivity. She'll be arriving shortly to—"

"She?" I interrupt. "Who authorized an incubation minion without my approval?" Infernal resources are already stretched thin without diverting energy to a useless she-demon.

"Well, that's the thing..." Asmodeus falters, smile dimming. "It's not a demon. She's human."

Now I know he's playing games with me. "Human?" I scoff. "Since when does Damnation Financial employ mortals?" The notion is utterly absurd. No human could withstand the pressures of soul-crushing audits or endless torture quotas.

"Straight from corporate," Asmodeus insists with a helpless shrug. "We must cooperate fully to welcome her." His tone makes it clear this isn't up for debate.

Fuming silently, I storm toward my office. A human assistant? Ridiculous. This has failure stamped all over it. I'll give the mewling quim a week before she's begging for the sweet release of death instead of this job.

Settling behind my desk, I crack open the first tome of the day. As Chief Soul Auditor, I decide which fate befits each pitiful human who ends up on

our registration rolls. Eternal torture in the fiery pits? Reliving their worst nightmares? Or special personalized hells tailored to their misdeeds in life? The options are, of course, deliciously endless.

This is an art form perfected over eons of creative cruelty. We have quotas to fill. Sinful souls don't punish themselves. Only a fool would think a human could understand our work down here.

I'm halfway through categorizing adulterers for specialized torment when my senses tweak. My head snaps up, awareness heightening as I stare at the thick mahogany that separates me from the rest of the office. Something has caught my attention. *A creature with a soul is at my door.* Without a second thought, I extend my senses and brush against this visitor's essence. Just a cursory glance, merely to gather the proper context before greeting the next condemned spirit pleading their worthless case outside my door.

What I encounter nearly makes me swallow my own forked tongue. Blinding purity untainted by neither sin nor hellfire. An abundance of compassion wrapped in ironclad will. It's like gazing into the fiery heart of a star, blazing with virtuous intention.

It almost makes me want to hurl.

No, surely not. This goody-two-shoes do-gooder can't be my new assistant. The corporate buffoons upstairs can't be this idiotic, saddling me with a naive mortal untested by the harsh realities of existence. Is this their idea of a joke?

Because having this naïve altruist disrupt my gleefully corrupt domain is the furthest thing from amusing. I've crushed far mightier spirits than some starry-eyed mortal.

At precisely 9 AM, a sharp rap at my door announces the human's arrival.

She...waited at my door until the clock struck the hour... Now I'm not sure if she's just perfectly punctual or if there's malicious intent. A power play?

No. Her essence is too spotless.

Just the thought of it makes me arrange my face into a glower that has made even archangels cower.

"Enter," I bark, feigning focus on the accursed stacks of paperwork on my desk. The polished mahogany door creaks open to reveal...a petite female in a crisply pressed skirt and blouse and wearing spectacles. I allow my gaze to drag slowly up her figure—all luscious curves barely contained by that prim outfit. A mane of brunette hair pulled back in a bun, piercing eyes, and a

neutral expression that gives away nothing. No trembling or tears in the face of my bark. Curious. My demonic roar usually reduces minions to groveling puddles.

As she steps closer, I brush against her aura once more, reflexively inhaling the intoxicating scent of untapped innocence. Her soul shines bright, a beacon that promises to tempt every dark creature in the Underworld. Every red-blooded demon will relish the chance to tarnish such tantalizing purity.

Even thinking that, I can already see their shadows outside the frosted glass bordering my office, dispersing the moment my attention snaps to them.

I resist the urge to growl. I know full well the havoc one alluring mortal can wreak amongst demons. Productivity will plunge to the pits of perdition if I let this human roam these halls unchecked.

My minions are slackers at best. I'll be drowning in a backlog of unfinished reports instead of leisurely fudging the numbers.

Tearing my focus back, I see the little do-gooder meeting my gaze through those perched spectacles, unflinching.

Unfazed by my menace, she extends a hand. "Elara Hunt, your new executive assistant. I believe you were informed of my arrival?" Her tone is soft but firm. And still no quivering.

Well, well. This mortal has fire. I flash her my most devilish grin. "Bax Daemonus, at your service. Welcome to Damnation Financial. Now, how can I help you...quit?"

Elara

Stepping into the fiery halls of Damnation Financial, I find the underworld is not what I expected. Sleek black marble floors, ergonomic torture devices, and demons in tailored suits hustling between cubicles. More corporate office than lair of eternal torment.

I straighten my jacket and smooth my hair. When I applied for this position, I never imagined I'd get it. But the CEO of Damnation himself, Lucifer Morningstar, informed me my mortal credentials were exactly what they needed to “shake things up.” After searching for a job Aboveworld for several months, this opportunity was a godsend—or, rather, devil-provided.

The pay was too good to pass up—a six-figure salary for just six months of work plus free boarding on the sixth-floor penthouse of a luxury hellfire hotel. No idea what I'll do after the six months are up, but I'll think about that when I get to that point.

I told Lucifer the raw truth in my interview. I'm here for the money, plain and simple. He admired my “capitalist initiative”—money's the root of all evil after all. Little did he know about the selfless reasons I need this wealth. But I held my tongue, not about to jeopardize this opportunity.

But standing here now, I never expected my boss would be *him*. Bax Daemonus. Tales of his soul-crushing audits and creative tortures are legendary, so much so that he's one of the few demons known Aboveworld by name. My Religious Ed teacher used him as a talking point of why we should all be good. He's merciless, exacting, and possibly worst of all, the rumors were true. He's also *devilishly* handsome.

Bax Daemonus looks at me with eyes that feel like he's staring at my soul. And he probably is. He's an archdemon after all. Nothing like the lower demons that escorted me here or the imps that processed my travel documents.

He's huge. Imposing. And power emanates off him in waves.

It takes all my willpower to keep my expression neutral under his smoldering gaze. His eyes narrow at my lack of fear, seeming surprised by my composure. But this job is my only shot at raising the funds to pay for my sister's college tuition.

There's a distinct look of annoyance in the archdemon's eyes, even though there's a smile on his face. As if he's wondering just what a mortal like me is doing down in the pits of hell alive and well and not screaming in some accursed torture chamber.

If only he knew the daily struggles I've endured Aboveworld—the soul-sucking job hunt, barely scraping by paycheck to paycheck, sacrificing my dreams to support my little sister. The human world can be just as cruel and unforgiving as Hell.

At least here, the rules are clear. Do your job, hit your quotas, and you'll be rewarded. Aboveworld, you can work yourself to the bone and still end up with nothing. Down here, the torture may be literal instead of figurative, but pain is pain.

That's why I won't fail. Bax may be the cruelest demon in Hell, but if handling his torment is what it takes, so be it. I've handled tyrannical bosses before.

I'm stronger than I look.

So here I stand, trying not to gape at the perfectly chiseled face and sculpted physique beneath Bax Daemonus' pristine white shirt. Those elegant horns, the smoldering eyes...he's the epitome of temptation.

Get it together, Elara.

When he flashes a grin full of gleaming fangs and drawls, "How can I help you...quit?" I clench my fists behind my back to stop their shaking.

I lift my chin in what I hope is defiance, not nerves. "I'm here to do this job to the best of my abilities."

His eyes narrow, but that infuriating grin remains.

He studies me for a long moment, seeming to weigh his next words. When he speaks again, the mocking edge has left his voice.

"Why would a soul like yours *willingly* come to a place like this..." He pauses, studying me, and I almost squirm under the weight of his stare. "I've been around a long time, and one thing I've learned is that nothing is ever as it seems on the surface."

Rising languidly from his seat, he circles his desk, giving me ample time to admire the muscles straining underneath his perfectly pressed shirt. He steps closer, using his considerable height to loom over me.

"So, perhaps there is more to you than meets the eye, Elara Hunt. More than that prim suit suggests." His gaze sweeps over me. "But only time will tell if you have the mettle to withstand this place."

Despite the warning in his tone, something about his demeanor has shifted. He seems...intrigued.

I tip my chin up to meet his burning eyes. "I'm stronger than I appear, Mr. Daemonus. I would not have come if I intended to fail."

He makes a thoughtful noise. "Please, call me Bax." One claw lightly traces my jaw and I suppress a shiver at the thrill his touch ignites.

"Very well...Bax." I'm unable to keep the breathless quality from my voice.

Brimstone and spice envelop me as he murmurs, "I'll give you a week, little mortal, before you're begging on bended knee to return to your quaint pastoral life." His eyes trail over me in a way that makes my pulse jump and skin prickle. "So do yourself a favor—spare that delectable body of yours the torment and resign now. While you still can."

Delectable? No one has ever...

Focus, Elara!

Tightening my lips, I force myself not to dwell on his words. This is a demon and I shouldn't let my guard down around him, especially when his voice drips temptation, promising comfort, an easy exit from the madness I've willingly entered. But I swore I wouldn't cave so quickly, despite the treacherous heat spreading through me. I took classes for this! Passed Resisting Temptation 101 with straight As. I can handle one arrogant, if unfairly attractive, demon.

Meeting his hypnotic gaze, I reply evenly, "While I appreciate your concern, Mr. Daemonus, I assure you I'm up to the challenge of this position." I offer him a polite smile I hope conceals my racing heart. "Differences in our realms aside, I'm confident we can have a productive working relationship."

Something unreadable flickers in his eyes, there and gone. He leans infinitesimally closer, lips grazing my ear. I almost jump out of my skin. He must have fire on his breath because heat shoots from the spot of contact straight through my entire being.

"We shall see, my dear."

His husky tone turns my brain to butter. Before I can respond, he brushes past me to the door, crisp shirt barely grazing my arm and sending wholly inappropriate sparks skittering across my skin.

I take a steadying breath, pressing a hand to my burning cheeks. Surviving six months will test my limits like never before. But failure is not

an option. Too much depends on me seeing this through.

And, oh fudge!

I turn to see he's gone out of sight and I'm completely alone in the huge office.

I had a presentation prepared and everything!

Chapter Two



Elara

Lost. Utterly lost in a fiery maze of endless hallways and cavernous demon-filled spaces. My heart thumps hard in my chest as I wander past imposing steel doors etched with scenes of human suffering.

My new boss—if one could call a millennia-old archdemon a boss—disappeared down these halls over an hour ago, leaving me adrift. I don't even have a cubicle to call my own. Just a pleather folder clutched to my chest containing my new hire paperwork and the presentation I'd prepared.

Fat lot of good that does me now. I suppress a sigh. Some first day this is turning out to be.

When I applied for the Executive Assistant position at Damnation Financial, I expected nonstop chaos and torment. Endless screaming souls, pits of fire, creatures with dripping fangs. You know, a typical Monday in Hell.

But so far, the underworld has subverted my expectations at every turn. At first glance, it seems almost refined, but a closer look reveals the faded grandeur masking flaws - chipped floor tiles, outdated technology, and the occasional leaking pipe breaking the illusion. Still, it's a far cry from the chaos I anticipated.

I pass a pair of demons in tailored suits muttering over steaming cups of coffee. The logo on the cardboard cups reads "Hellbucks: Fiery Freshness Served Daily in the Abyss Below." Who knew Hell had its own trendy coffee chain?

Far from the nightmare realm of my imagination, Damnation Financial resembles a budding corporation that you'd see Aboveworld. Except, of course, for the demons.

Sharp horns, crimson skin, glowing eyes and ritual scars that swirl like living tattoos—the denizens here defy mortal aesthetics. Yet, it's the innate sensuality in their movements that draws my eye, the predatory grace with which they prowl the halls. Power and hunger given form.

Get it together, Elara. Gawking will only attract unwanted attention.

I duck my head and hurry onward, ignoring the eyes tracking my progress. As the only human, I'm an oddity. An amusement.

The first few demons I passed leered and licked their fangs. But now their demeanor has shifted from menacing to overly helpful. A tall demon with curling ram horns dips into an awkward bow as I approach.

“Good day, Miss Hunt! I’m Ragoth, Assistant Torture Scribe.” His voice is peculiarly harmonic. “Might I escort you to Lord Bax’s office?”

I blink. Lord Bax? I stifle an inappropriate giggle at the pretentious title. “Oh, um, no need. I’m just trying to find my assigned workspace.”

Ragoth grimaces. “Terribly sorry, but I’m afraid no desk has yet been arranged for you.”

Of course, not. Why make anything easy on the unwelcome mortal?

Ragoth continues oozing syrupy sympathy. “Such inconvenience! I shall speak to Facilities at once to remedy this oversight.”

“It’s fine, really.” I force a smile. “I’ll sort it out, eventually. Don’t trouble yourself.”

“No trouble at all!” Ragoth trills with exaggerated cheer. “We aim to make your transition as seamless as possible.”

Translation: They aim to get rid of me ASAP. This whole friendly act reeks of artifice. They expect me to fail just as badly as Bax does.

Well, too bad for them. I didn’t come this far by being easily intimidated.

Leaving a spluttering Ragoth behind, I continue my exploration. More demons scramble to assist me with transparent insincerity. As I politely decline their offers, another presence catches my senses—something smooth and sultry and...right behind me.

I turn to find a tall, raven-haired demon leaning casually against the wall mere inches away. How did he sneak up so silently?

Inky horns curl back from his temple, framing devastating bone structure. He straightens languidly, black tunic rippling over a leanly muscular frame. Dark, soulless eyes brim with mirth as they rake over me.

“Well, well. What have we here?” His voice slides like velvet over my skin in a way that instantly tells me he’s done this a thousand times before. “You must be the audacious mortal brave enough to join our little corner of the Underworld. I’m Zarien.” He executes a courtly bow. “Welcome to Damnation.”

A playful grin reveals one glittering fang. There’s a cunning to his expression, a deception behind the flashy smile, and it only makes my guard go up.

“Elara. A pleasure to meet you, Zarien.”

“Oh no, the pleasure is all mine.” Another targeted grin. “Let me take you on a proper tour of our facilities. I promise it will be...memorable.”

He extends a clawed hand, eyes glinting with possibility.

When I don't respond immediately, he continues. “Come now, don't be shy. I vow to show you many shadowed delights.”

A warning prickle skitters down my spine. Not only is his presence like an alarm bell going off in my head, fraternizing is the fastest way to ruin my chances here. And my soul.

“Tempting.” I smile to take the edge off my words. “But I should really locate my new supervisor first. Rain check?”

Zarien presses one hand theatrically to his heart. “Ooh, we do hate the rain down here. You wound me! But very well. I won't distract you from your duties.” His eyes spark with mischief. “I'll be seeing you soon, *Elara*.”

With a wink, he prowls into the shadows, leaving me unsettled. Focus! He's only doing the exact thing I expected from a demon.

As I wander onward, the halls widen into a vast cavernous space like an underground cathedral. My jaw drops. Turning around, I look back where I came from, but the hall I was wandering through has vanished.

Hell's bells. I really am lost.

Turning back around, I peer ahead.

A forest has been cultivated here, complete with skeletal oaks, swirling mist, and softly glowing mushrooms. Lost souls drift through the underbrush, waving spectral limbs in silent pleading.

Before I can process this bizarre sight, a commotion erupts ahead. A line stretches down the hall of this forest-filled cathedral—damned human souls attempting to renew their ectoplasmic driver's licenses at the DMV portal. A woman, her face showing a constant flicker of differing emotions, is arguing with the exhausted clerk.

“What do you mean I failed my ‘emotional fortitude’ exam? I've been suffering the torment of the Damned Choir for decades!”

The clerk, nonplussed, drones in a monotone, “Ma'am, you broke down and caused a sympathy riot among the empathy imps. Clearly, your emotional fortitude requires further conditioning.”

Keeping to the side, I sidle past the escalating scene toward a corridor marked Cafeterium. Wisps of smoke play along the checkerboard tile floors and the scent of brimstone and spices waft from the bustling food portals lining the walls.

One glowing entryway is labeled Café Diabolique. The chalkboard menu lists offerings like Brimstone Bouillabaisse, Soul Stew, and Sinner Sangria. I pass on the questionable cuisine, stomach rumbling.

Weaving between demons, I search for anyone who might know how I can return to the halls of Damnation Financial. Or anyone who knows about new employee procedures. But none of these demons look approachable.

Though they seem to be completely unaware of my presence, I can feel their eyes on me the moment I turn my head. It's a strange feeling that makes the hairs all along my arms stand on end, but I remind myself this was all part of the package. I don't trust any of these citizens to give me the right directions, so I just have to find the way back without asking for help. I'm well and truly on my own.

After another hour scouring endless halls and cavernous rooms, I end up at a central obsidian staircase. With a huff, I seat myself on the bottom step, prepared to just...wait. The presentation folder crinkles in my clenched hands, pages most likely futile. Bax has made his low opinion of me clear.

Still, I have to make a good impression as his assistant. Our partnership is doomed otherwise.

Leaning back against the cold step, I steady my nerves. Patience and perseverance are key. I've handled far worse trials than this. A horde of stuffy demons doesn't scare me, no matter their pedigrees of cruelty.

I'm there only for a few moments when a commotion at the top of the stairs snags my attention. Speak of the devil—it's Bax himself. I straighten, watching his approach.

The archdemon looks just as imposing as before. His gaze finds mine instantly, brow arched.

"There you are." He pauses before me, molten eyes amused. "What a pity if you had somehow gotten lost."

I rise quickly. "I was waiting for you, Mr. Daemonus. Since I'm yet to be assigned a workspace, I thought we could discuss—"

"Please, Elara," he rumbles, "call me Bax."

The sound of my name on his lips makes my pulse skitter oddly. *Get it together!* "Bax, then, sir." I hurry along before I bite my tongue. "I wanted to go over my proposal for increasing productivity in your department." I extend my folder like a shield.

He considers it with a tilt of his horned head, then turns on his heel. "Walk with me."

It's not a request. I fall into step beside him, nerves rising. His presence is even more overwhelming and distracting than before. *Focus!*

"So." Bax slides his burning gaze to me. "You wish to share your insights into improving my efficient regime?"

His wry tone implies how little he values my mortal perspective. I lift my chin.

"Yes. I believe an outside viewpoint could benefit—"

"Darling!"

I falter at the unfamiliar voice as a stunning female demon intercepts our path. Crimson curls tumble over her shoulders, partially obscuring the black lace negligee that leaves little to the imagination.

She disregards me completely to drape herself over Bax with possessive familiarity. Long nails trail down his chest as she gazes up with sultry invitation. "I missed you at the pits last night, lover. You promised to take me soul-gazing."

Lover? I risk a baffled glance at Bax. His expression remains bored, detached, as he deftly loosens her clutches.

"Another time, pet. I'm busy." With that cool dismissal, he steps around her. I offer the demon a weak smile before following.

"But Baxxy—" Her wheedling fades into the distance.

My thoughts churn as I study Bax's impassive profile. Lover? His personal affairs are none of my concern. I need to stay professional. But my wayward thoughts linger on the alluring female long after we leave her behind.

"You were saying?" Bax prompts.

I startle. Right. My proposal. *Focus!*

"I have a proposal—"

"So you've said." His voice dips, annoyance hardly concealed.

I swallow away my nervousness and push forward. "Yes, my proposal outlines—"

"Hmm, perhaps we could visit it later." His tone suggests the opposite. With that, he pushes open a mahogany door. "After you."

I blink. His office again? We've come full circle.

As the door shuts behind us, I slowly turn to face him. Bax stands just inside the door and says nothing, waiting expectantly.

Wetting my dry lips, I venture, "Um...my proposal has all the details. I prepared it specifically, outlining all the steps we—"

“Gradual adjustments are best.” Firelight plays over the panes of his face. “You have only just arrived. We can visit your...proposal tomorrow.”

Despite myself, I tamp down frustration. Lucifer specifically mandated that I begin implementing changes the moment I arrive. I don't know what the punishment is for disobeying the Devil, but it has got to be worse than anything Bax Daemonus would throw my way.

Sensing my irritation, Bax smiles without humor. “Patience, little angel. All in due time.”

The amused endearment grates. I'm no closer to proving myself than when I started this wasted day. Dammit. *Fine.*

As Bax continues scrutinizing me with that penetrating stare, I lift my chin. “I will have the presentation ready for you tomorrow.”

His brows flicker at my tone. A smile teases his lips, more genuine this time. “Such spirit. I begin to see why they sent you.” His voice drops intimately. “But spirit alone cannot protect you here, Elara.”

I'm suddenly hyperaware of his proximity, his overwhelming masculine presence. Dangerous thoughts I dare not entertain.

Clearing my throat, I step back and my shoulders hit the mahogany door. “Will I be assigned a workspace soon?”

When I look up, I wish I hadn't.

The archdemon is staring at me in that way that makes it feel like he's looking straight into me. As if his gaze is heating every inch of my skin and he can see me bare. As if he would consume me whole until there is nothing left.

“Yes,” he finally says after a few charged moments. “Of course. Asmodeus!”

With that bark, Bax turns away from me and heads to the seat behind his desk, putting distance between us. I can breathe easier.

There's a knock at the door behind me and I ease off it as it creaks open and a tall, slender demon slips gracefully into the office. Asmodeus.

He cuts a refined figure in his impeccably tailored black suit that accentuates his lithe frame. Wavy black hair cascades over his shoulders almost blending in with the base of his obsidian horns that spiral back from his temples. His dark red, ageless face holds an almost ethereal beauty. Aboveworld we're taught demons are ugly. So far, I've only been seeing the opposite.

Piercing red eyes alight on me immediately with undisguised curiosity as

Asmodeus glides farther into the office. He ignores me completely though, turning his focus solely to Bax.

“You asked for me, my malevolent majesty?” His melodic voice is polite and professional.

Bax remains seated behind his imposing desk, expression serious. “See to it the mortal has a place to sit.”

“Of course, sir. Right away.” Asmodeus gives a polite nod.

Bax flicks a dismissive hand. “Very well. Carry on.”

Dismissed again, but feeling a bit less adrift, I make my exit following behind Asmodeus. As the door closes behind me, I lean briefly against the cool mahogany.

One day down in Hell. It’s sure to only get stranger and more challenging from here.

I allow myself a small, victorious smile. Only 181 days to go.

Chapter Three



Bax

I stalk through the shadowed halls early this morning, a steaming mug of hellbrew in one hand and a stack of falsified records in the other. Another day of “creative auditing” awaits.

I’m running on fumes, having tossed and turned all night, haunted by thoughts of a little do-gooder who has come to upend my department.

As I reach my office, my mind inevitably drifts to her yet again—the fearless mortal who dared waltz into my domain yesterday proposing “improvements.” As if eons of finely tuned torture craft require adjustments from a newly arrived *human!* The notion is laughable. This mortal thinks she can waltz in here and tell me how to run my department? I don’t care how shapely her legs are. No human gives orders to an archdemon.

Yet, try as I might, I cannot banish the intriguing Elara Hunt from my mind. Her boldness in challenging me directly was...unexpected. And oddly enticing.

I avoided the meddlesome mortal all of yesterday, ducking into portals whenever I caught a whiff of her intoxicating aura. Usually, I savor a challenge, but that human is trouble wrapped in a delectable package of pure, innocent *goodwill*.

I round the corner, lost in thought, when, as if summoned by a pentagram, Elara appears right in my path. I nearly spill scalding coffee down my crisp white shirt.

“Mr. Daemonus!” Elara says, glasses glinting and a blinding smile on her face. “I’ve been looking all over for you.”

“Perfect. I was just thinking my day could use a little more torment.”

Unperturbed, that innocent smile doesn’t even falter as she taps the folder tucked under her arm. “I’ve prepared a thorough presentation on streamlining your department and updating protocols to align with corporate standards.”

Her words come across as hellish nonsense. Just a slew of sounds merging, solely because I choose not to hear them. I narrow my eyes at her in a scowl, but she powers on.

“This will only take an hour of your time.” Long eyelashes bat at me. Wonder how she’d feel if I singed them right off. Her eyebrows too. And that

precious hair on her head. “Lucifer stressed how crucial your cooperation is in implementing these changes.”

I bristle at the casual use of my boss’s name. Exactly how chummy did she get with him during her interview? Prince of Hell or not, we all know Lucifer has a weakness for mortals.

When I don’t immediately respond, this *Elara* presses on. “I know change can be challenging, but modernizing these outdated methods will increase productivity and accuracy tenfold.”

I blink slowly, letting out a low chuckle. “Oh, Elara.” The nerve of this human. I barely resist the urge to torch her damn folder. “My auditing systems are perfected *masterpieces*.”

“Be that as it may, Mr. Daemonus, corporate demands an overhaul.” Her expression softens slightly, a small smile spreading across her lips as her voice gets small. “I promise, this transition will make your job easier, not harder.” She squints at me behind her glasses, her face scrunching into a pleading pout only mortals Aboveworld would fall for.

All this innocent goodness...wouldn’t be surprised if I break out in hives.

Her smile doesn’t crack as she waits for my answer and I’m half-tempted to conjure a horde of paperwork gremlins to drown her in a sea of administrative chaos, to give her a taste of the ‘ease’ she’s promising. But, perhaps if I indulge her whims, she’ll scurry back to the mortal realm on her own once she realizes how out of her depth she is down here.

“One hour,” I bite out. “My office.”

And so here I am, forced to endure “orientation” from this Elara as she outlines her “improvements” to streamline productivity. Standing at the accursed blackboard she doesn’t even flinch at the billows of chalk dust I specifically increased with a flick of my claw to stuff her poor little lungs.

Smiling at me, scribbling her absurd ideas about “efficiency” and “proper auditing practices” all over my departmental blackboard without a care. She should be choking on the clouds of particulate annoyance I conjured just to drive the point home that she’s not welcome.

Yet, her composure doesn’t crack in the slightest. Just a small wrinkle of her pert little nose at the dust, before she dives back into her nonsensical equations and diagrams. Acting like she owns the place after less than three days on the job.

Clearly, this human needs a reminder of who exactly is in charge down here. And it certainly isn’t some feisty mortal with perfect hair and tropical

beaches in her eyes. It's me, the Devil's own auditor, master of rebel souls and banisher of hope.

I tune out her droning, nodding occasionally as I plot my revenge. Maybe a little fire to torch that perfectly pressed pencil skirt? Or a staff-wide plague of boils should do the trick. I'm partial to locusts too...

A sharp snap of fingers in my face drags me back. "Pay attention, Mr. Daemonus. This is important." My brow dives at her complete audacity. Meanwhile, she adjusts her glasses and our gazes lock.

Her eyes widen as if she's just realized what she's just done and, for a moment, I forget my surge of annoyance.

No. *Moments*. I suspend time as I stare into those blue eyes—so different from the dark soulless pits or the red flaming orbs of the countless minions in this part of the realm.

But I suppose you don't need hellfire to pierce someone with your gaze. Only, this is a different sort of piercing than I'm used to. Her eyes don't arrest me. Instead, I could drown in them.

"M-Mr. Daemonus." Her lips purse as if she's trying her damndest, while mine curve into a smile.

"Bax," I reply.

Her throat moves, the only indication she isn't as unaffected as she's putting forward. When she straightens her glasses and points her gaze away from me, I know she's just summoned some more bravery from the depths of her being, a reservoir deeper than the River Styx. "I'll reiterate..."

I plaster on a patient smile. "Of course, dear Elara. I'm all ears."

"The current sorting process is a nightmare. Too many bottlenecks," Elara clears her throat and continues. "We need to streamline intake, implement better tracking, and distribute cases more evenly among clerks."

She taps her diabolical organizational chart with a manicured nail. "See here?" She leans in. Cursed musk filling my nostrils with the scent of Aboveworld flowers. A heat that has nothing to do with hellfire blooms in my groin.

Lucifer...my, my how devious.

Time and time again, he shows us just how he's come to earn his title as Lord of this domain. This Elara presents a new type of torment none of us hellborn would have even expected. Pure temptation wrapped in a neat little bow of righteousness, right here in the Underworld.

"We consolidate the Limbo overflow units and reassign those demons to

backlog triage,” she continues. “Add a few automated torture machines to free up manpower elsewhere.”

I’m loath to compliment her, but through gritted teeth, I reply, “Your grasp of our systems is surprisingly adept for a mortal.”

Her eyes glint with righteous victory. Insufferable. “Well, I aim to please.”

“Oh, do you?” Despite myself, my gaze heats. What can I say? It’s in my nature.

The barest hint of rouge graces her pale skin before she pointedly takes a fresh set of files from the stack she brought in. “Shall we move on to phase two improvements?”

And just when I thought we were about to abandon this farce of a meeting and move on to other more *pleasing* topics.

“By all means,” I force out politely. “Dazzle me.”

This mortal seems to have made it her mission to be an irritation in my existence. My gaze narrows on the small little thing some more, my jaws aching from repressing my fangs.

I try to tune her out again as she prattles on about optimization and productivity goals or whatever nonsense she’s peddling. But despite my best efforts, her proposed changes continue to infiltrate my mind. As much as I hate to admit it, many of her ideas have merit. Streamlining the soul-sorting process and implementing automated torture devices would free up more minions for important work, like groveling at my feet.

I tune back in just as Elara finishes explaining the final stage of her overhaul proposals. Her eyes gleam as she regards me. “Well, what do you think, Mr. Daemonus?”

What do I think? I think it’s time she returned Aboveworld.

I force a tight smile, fangs glinting. “Elara, angel, your proposals are as likely to be implemented as I am to sprout angel wings and sing hymns. And trust me, neither is happening.”

Her face falls.

Excellent.

Chapter Four



Elara

My face falls as Bax dismisses my proposals with a wave of his clawed hand.

“Elara, angel, your proposals are as likely to be implemented as I am to sprout angel wings and sing hymns. And trust me, neither is happening.”

His razor-sharp fangs glint as he gives me a tight smile. It’s like staring into the jaws of a predator, only this one is wrapped in a surprisingly handsome package. I can’t help but feel the tingle of danger—and something else—thread its way up my spine.

I take a deep breath and remind myself I didn’t expect reforming centuries of bureaucratic corruption to be easy. I also didn’t descend into the bowels of hell to flirt with a dangerously attractive archdemon. “Mr. Daemonus, I—”

“Bax,” he growls, and I swear the vibration skitters along my skin.

I swallow hard. “Bax, I understand change can be uncomfortable. But ignoring inefficiencies helps no one.”

He snorts, a puff of sulfur escaping his nostrils. “So eager to baptize the underworld with your ‘modern’ touch. Let me enlighten you.”

He picks up my meticulously prepared folder, giving it a casual once-over before setting it back down with a thud that echoes through the silence. At least he didn’t burn it to a crisp.

“In Hell, we have a saying,” he begins, leaning back in his chair and steepling his claws. “‘If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.’ And angel, these “outdated” systems you’re so keen on overhauling? They aren’t just working; they’re waltzing. My department runs like a well-oiled machine.”

I bite my lip to suppress a laugh, but I can’t help the smirk that teases at the corners of my mouth. Bax’s eyes narrow immediately. I clear my throat.

Focus.

While he ‘conveniently’ disappeared again yesterday, I took my time going around Damnation Financial. I’ve seen the haphazard stacking of backlogged paperwork, the cluttered archives, the overwhelmed imps scrambling to meet impossible quotas. This place is no well-oiled machine.

Time for a new tactic. I clasp my hands behind my back, meeting Bax's fiery gaze. "Perhaps I could get a better idea of your 'smooth operations' if you gave me a tour?"

The moment hangs in the air between us, thick with unspoken tension—this strange, electrifying undercurrent. His fiery gaze holds mine for a heartbeat longer than necessary, but then he blinks, breaking the spell, and I'm left wondering if I'm imagining things.

Finally, he raises one elegantly curved brow. "A tour?"

I nod, pushing back the strands of hair that have escaped my bun. "Seeing the process up close would give me a better idea of why you're hesitant about it." I offer him my most earnest smile, my heart pounding as his gaze sweeps over me, unrestrained. I can see exactly what he's thinking. Exactly how he's stripping me bare. "I-I'm sure I'll gain some valuable insights."

For a long moment, Bax just stares at me, eyes flickering with some unreadable emotion. Then he smiles slowly, fangs glinting.

"But of course. What better way to scorch your idealistic beliefs?" He strides toward me and offers his arm. "Shall we?"

Ignoring the flutter in my chest, I take his arm. His bicep is rock-hard beneath the crisp dress shirt and I have to force my hand not to tremble as I accept his offer.

Bax leads us out of his office and down the winding halls of Damnation Financial. Each brush of our arms sends a spark of electricity through me, and I can't help but wonder if he feels it, too. His proximity is both a curse and a blessing; it's distracting, but it also gives me an excuse to study him—the broad shoulders and muscular arms, the chiseled abs visible through the tight fabric of his shirt. The way his eyes glow with an inner fire, the way his lips curve into that maddeningly self-assured smile.

Everything about him radiates masculine magnetism, from his towering height to his graceful movements. His raw physicality and evident power almost leave me captivated.

Our first stop is the Archive Room. He gestures as we enter the cavernous chamber. "Behold, the perfectly organized Archives. Every condemned soul meticulously cataloged for eternity."

I blink at the mountains of teetering files and loose parchment strewn across every surface. He wasn't kidding about eternity—some of these documents look centuries old.

"Ah, I see," I murmur. "And how exactly do you locate specific records?"

“Demonic intuition.” His gaze slides to me, one eyebrow rising slightly. “Sometimes a summoning circle and blood sacrifice.”

I force a smile. “Well, perhaps a digital database could—”

“Moving on!” Bax steers me from the Archives.

Our next stop is the Bureau of Soul Weighing. A massive stone scale dominates the chamber, while demons scurry about loading stones etched with sins onto one side, counterbalanced by feathers etched with good deeds on the other.

“Here we determine each soul’s fate,” Bax explains. “Too many sins, and the lucky fools get an eternity of torment.” He grins.

I watch a demon straining to add just one more small stone to an already overloaded side. The scale tips, sending the soul crashing with a piercing scream toward the Pit of Fire.

Bax chuckles.

“Doesn’t seem very precise,” I comment. “A digital system could quantify sins versus good deeds rather than this crude weighing.”

Bax’s smile tightens. “It’s all in the fun. We get the job done just fine.”

We continue on. Every step we take together is charged. We’re like two opposing forces drawn together. With every inefficient process that Bax shows me, I counter with a suggestion for improvement. Each time, his smile tightens, his grip on my arm hardens, and I can practically see the gears turning in his perfect crimson head. I’m challenging him, pushing him, and it’s clear he’s not used to it.

Our final stop is the Bureau of Torture, and I can’t help but shudder as I take in the gruesome scene. But even as I recoil in horror, I can’t ignore the way Bax’s eyes gleam with a perverse delight. It’s a morbid fascination that both repulses and intrigues me.

“Angel,” he says with false sympathy as I blanch. “Mortal minds can barely comprehend such infinite torments. Don’t worry, we crafted each one to punish the specific sins of every wretched soul.”

I take a deep breath. “Actually, several of these contraptions seem redundant.”

Bax whirls to face me, eyes blazing. He looms over me. This close, the heat rolling off him is staggering.

I lift my chin. “I’m only here to help this department reach its full potential.”

“You know nothing of our potential,” he growls.

“Then educate me,” I counter, holding my ground. “Because from what I’ve seen, this bureaucracy is dangerously outdated.”

A ring of fire surrounds us. I stifle a yelp. Imps scramble for cover.

Okay, maybe that was too far.

“Dangerously outdated?” His voice is far too soft for the power emanating from him. “My methods have been molding chaos since you were but a glimmer in some celestial eye.”

For the first time in his presence, genuine fear makes me tremble. He could torch me right here. End my life. Cease my existence. Or, at the very least, cause me to feel nightmarish pain from the many forms of torture he could choose.

But Bax Daemonus does none of that.

Instead of making me feel the brunt of the violence swimming in his eyes, he turns and storms down the corridor, fire raging in his wake. Alarms sound as flames lick the walls. The sprinkler system activates, quickly drenching me and the entire floor. Demons scramble to save their paperwork, or worse yet, their cubicles from complete destruction, casting me pointed looks of anger and annoyance.

I hurry after Bax as he leaves smoldering footprints down the halls. So much for not losing his temper.

“Mr. Dae—Bax! Please reconsider!” I call after him.

He whirls, eyes molten. “My methods are *flawless*.” Eyes locked with mine, he extends one clawed hand toward a severed soul chained to a wall. Blue fire erupts around the writhing thing.

“But unnecessary redundancy wastes resources,” I counter, forcing my voice not to tremble. Probably not my best idea to keep arguing, but I refuse to back down. I need to succeed in this job!

Bax growls and I wonder if I’ve done it now. If he directs his anger at me, I’m done. But with another growl, he sends a blast of fire at a torture device. It explodes in a rain of shrapnel. Imps whimper and dash for cover.

That alone should make me back down. So why am I continuing. Why are my shoulders stiffening, my hands forming fists at my side. Rage building inside *me*. Because I can’t let this go. That’s why.

“If you would only take even *one* of my suggestions,” I say. He ignores me, purposefully setting a stack of paperwork ablaze.

As we continue our heated debate down the halls, leaving destruction in our wake, we seem to reach a stalemate. Bax is too enraged to concede, but

equally, he hasn't tried to incinerate me for daring to challenge him. I call that a win.

But I will not yield either. There are too many flaws that demand remedies I can provide. Soul-crushing bureaucracy may be Bax's comfort zone, but it is vulnerable people who pay the price for inefficiency. I owe it to them, and my sister, to stay the course.

At long last, we reach Bax's office. He slams the door behind us with enough force that the walls shake. And suddenly, I'm painfully aware that I'm soaking wet from the sprinklers, my white blouse is printed against my skin, my red bra quite obvious underneath, and we're alone. Bax could snap me like a twig if he wished.

Chest heaving, Bax pins me with his burning gaze. "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't end our little partnership right now."

I lift my chin despite the panic his words send through my veins. "Because you know I'm right."

He stalks toward me. I hold my ground as he looms over me.

"You think you're *right*?" he scoffs.

Our faces are inches apart now. His heat envelops me, challenging and enticing all at once. I can almost taste the brimstone on his breath.

I meet his fiery eyes unflinchingly. "Prove me wrong, then."

Is it wise to go toe to toe with your boss? Probably not. Aboveworld, that's a sure way to get your ass fired. But I'm not Aboveworld.

For a breathless moment, we stare each other down. The office fills with crackling tension. I'm hyperaware of Bax's perfectly sculpted face so close to mine, his searing aura surrounding me. His eyes flicker with that unreadable emotion again. Is it anger? Or something far more dangerous?

My pulse pounds erratically. I'm in over my head. Surely Bax can hear my heart threatening to beat out of my chest.

But I refuse to show fear. I will not forfeit this chance to reform a broken system plus earn the money I need. No matter how lethal the demon challenging me may be.

The moment stretches taut. Then Bax's eyes dip down, moving to my blouse then up to linger on my lips. A different sort of hunger burns in their depths now. My breath catches.

He leans even closer and I forget how to breathe.

I should push him away. This is highly inappropriate! But I can't find the strength to move, even as his lips come to brush against mine.

Shock and desire bloom inside me with such an explosion, I almost whimper.

“Perhaps you do have potential after all,” Bax murmurs against my lips. His gaze smolders as it travels down my body, then slowly back up to meet my eyes. “I look forward to witnessing exactly what you can...handle.”

Oh. Oh no. My face flames as his meaning sinks in. Bax smiles wickedly, seeing he’s gotten to me at last.

Before I can formulate a response, he steps back and straightens his tie. “Well, that concludes the tour for today. I’ll...review your proposals in more detail later.” The low timbre of his voice betrays the professional words.

I clear my throat, trying to slow my racing pulse. “Y-yes, excellent. I’ll compile some data analytics and revised organizational charts for your perusal.”

“I look forward to it.” Bax’s gaze lingers. Then, with a flash of his hand, a swirl of smoke surrounds me and then I’m no longer in his office. I materialize just outside his door, in the chaos we left behind in his wake. I stare at the mahogany, lump in my throat.

I release a shuddering breath. This job just got a lot more complicated. But I cannot lose resolve now. Too many souls depend on me succeeding.

No matter what unholy diversions Bax conjures to throw me off course.

Chapter Five



Elara

The next day I wake up with tired eyes, almost as if I hadn't slept all night. Despite living in the penthouse of a luxury hotel, I could still hear the wailing of damned souls emanating from the river of lava flowing nearby. Walking to the window overlooking Upper Hellfire Street, I yawn.

The skies are dark today, as they usually are. But this time there's a certain trepidation that seems to seep down even from the billows of dark smoke rising into the sky.

And I know exactly why.

I get dressed, that trepidation coiling in my gut as I slide on my skirt and collared white blouse. I let down my hair today, opting for simple pins to keep it pulled back behind my ears and force a smile at myself in the mirror as I perch my glasses on my nose.

I have to face him again today. Bax Daemonus.

My heart beats unsteadily as I say his name in my head.

And it isn't just his barely contained anger and cynicism that make me a little scared. I can handle that. What I can't handle is what happened outside of that.

His scalding looks. The brush of his lips against mine.

Even when I know he hates my presence in his domain.

I shake my head to clear my thoughts.

He's a demon. I have to remember that. And demons play games.

He's only playing a game, Elara. Get with the program.

Finally ready, I grab my handbag and head to the elevator, grabbing on to the rail the moment I step inside and punch in G.

The creaky contraption immediately picks up speed as if it's going to slam into the building's foundation, but slows down at the split second I reach the ground floor. The first time it did that, I almost pissed my pants. Now, I step out like it's just another regular occurrence. You'd think in a luxury hotel like this, everything would be top-notch. But this is hell. They have to keep you on your toes somehow.

Once my heels hit the bustling streets of Upper Hellfire, I'm reminded

that in the heart of the underworld, life—or rather, the afterlife—goes on as usual.

Demons of all shapes and sizes throng the streets, their horns glinting under the eerie light. Infernal food vendors hawk their wares, the smell of brimstone burgers and cursed cakes filling the air.

Curious eyes watch me when I'm not looking. Some even stare without trying to hide it, but as I walk to the bus stop, I ignore them all. It's so common now, even that's become usual, too.

Boarding the bus to work, I take a seat near the back. As the vehicle lurches into motion, I can't help but notice the diverse array of passengers.

There's a minotaur in a suit reading the Hell Herald, a harpy in a floral dress chatting animatedly on her phone, and even Medusa, her snake hair tied up in a neat bun as she scrolls through her tablet.

Seeing these legendary figures, once feared and revered in human myths and legends, reduced to everyday mundanity is oddly comforting. It's a reminder that, in the grand scheme of things, we're all just trying to make our way through this crazy, chaotic existence.

I'm almost at my stop when a raspy voice interrupts my thoughts. "Well, if it isn't the mortal girl. Fancy seeing you here."

The mortal girl? Surely my presence in the Underworld can't be that important that it's widespread news.

I turn to find a wizened old crone sitting next to me, clutching a cane carved from human bones. Her single milky eye regards me with interest.

I offer a polite smile. "Good morning. I don't think we've met..."

"Hecate's the name." She cackles, revealing a mouthful of crooked teeth. "Goddess of witchcraft and the restless dead. What brings you to our neck of the woods?"

My eyes widen. Hecate—a goddess from ancient Greek legends! I can't believe she actually exists. "I'm, uh, working at Damnation Financial for a bit," I explain.

"Oho! A living mortal in the bowels of Hell?" Hecate chuckles. "You've got pluck, girl. I like that."

I can't help but grin, warmed by the goddess' praise. We chat about her work with restless souls until my stop, where Hecate gives me a wink and a warning: "Watch your back, girl. These demons will eat you alive if you let 'em!"

Her words stick with me as I disembark at the grand, fiery entrance of

Damnation Financial. Navigating through the winding corridors, I no longer feel like a lost lamb in a den of lions.

I've quickly learned the trick to getting around the labyrinthine building: simply think about the exact opposite place you want to go, and somehow you end up at the right destination. It's as if the building itself is a sentient, contrary creature.

Arriving at my gloomy cubicle, I settle in for the day.

Out of habit, my gaze drifts to the frosted glass separating Bax's office from the common area. A part of me is glad for the barrier. But another part wishes I could see through it and glimpse the imposing archdemon within. Ever since that heated moment between us, I can't stop speculating what he's thinking. If he regrets his impulsive actions...or plans to repeat them.

A smooth voice in my ear makes me jolt. "Daydreaming on the job, pet? How naughty."

I whirl around to see Zarien leaning against the edge of my cubicle, a roguish smirk on his face. His dark eyes take me in, making me painfully aware of every other demon in the office listening in.

"Zarien," I say, forcing a smile I hope seems genuine enough on my face. "What brings you here?"

"Just wanted to see how you're faring in our little slice of Hell," he replies, his voice dripping with charm. "And perhaps offer some...personal assistance, if needed."

Before I can reply, another voice cuts in. "Zarien, stop bothering the mortal."

Both Zarien and I turn to see Asmodeus approaching. The elegant demon gives me a sympathetic look, then turns his attention to Zarien.

The office chatter quiets as Asmodeus reaches my desk, his graceful stride commanding respect. "Miss Hunt, apologies for the disruption. Please know that harassment of our mortal guest will not be tolerated."

The surrounding demons bow their heads, properly chastised while Zarien slowly slinks away with a scowl but not before winking at me, a suggestive look in his eyes as his gaze slides down my frame.

I give Asmodeus a tight smile of gratitude.

"How are you finding your position thus far?" he asks kindly.

"It has been...interesting," I admit.

Asmodeus smiles. "I imagine so. You've handled things remarkably well, all circumstances considered." His gaze grows serious. "About yesterday's

dramatic exit—”

Oh, fudge. That’s right. We basically destroyed the whole office with that argument.

“I’m so sorry about the damage, Asmodeus,” I burst out. “I never meant to provoke—”

Asmodeus holds up a slender hand. “Damnation, Elara. Demons thrive on spectacle and chaos. Bax’s tantrum was a delight.” His lips quirk. “But do not think it means you’ve won our archdemon over so easily. Patience and persistence are key with Bax.”

I let out a breath. “Thank you, I’ll remember that.”

Asmodeus gives an approving nod before gliding away. I feel bolstered after his reassurances. Having one powerful ally down here is a relief.

The morning passes quickly as I pore over ledgers and file reports. The work is tedious but satisfying.

At midday, I join some of my coworkers in the cafe, where we chat over cups of bitter, tar-like hellbrew. While most of the demons still regard me warily, a few are starting to warm up to me. I count that as progress.

In the afternoon, I draft up some new process improvement proposals to bring to Bax. The work keeps me focused and distracted from worrying about his reaction. Before I know it, the day has slipped by.

I’m tidying up my desk as the workday draws to a close when suddenly shouts of glee erupt from the nearby cubicles.

I glance up to see demons cheering and gathering around a huge Baphomet cake. I look around, gaze skipping from one demon to the other, trying to figure out just what’s happening.

Ragoth sidles up and notes my unease. “It’s our department’s 666th anniversary!” He grins. “A very special occasion!”

Cheers and revelry commence, the office quickly transforming into more of a chaotic club scene than a place of business. But all through the partying, I notice one office remains dark.

“Will Mr. Daemonus be joining us?” I ask.

Ragoth’s eyes widen. “The archdemon? Never. He despises such trivial events.”

I bite my lip, watching demons laugh and feast while Bax remains alone in his office. Making up my mind, I slip away and retrieve a plate holding a slice of the nightmarish cake.

At Bax’s door, I hesitate. He likely won’t welcome an intrusion,

especially from me. But leaving him out seems wrong. I ease inside, eyes flying to his desk. It's empty.

I roll my eyes at myself. Of course. I haven't seen him all day. He probably isn't even here. Glancing down at the cake, I shrug. I should leave it anyway.

For some reason, even though I'm alone, I tiptoe anyway as I approach his desk. Just as I place the slice down, a dark voice speaks.

“Are you in the habit of entering an archdemon's private office uninvited?”

Chapter Six



Bax

The sounds of revelry echo down the halls of Damnation Financial, seeping into my private sanctuary. A raucous celebration for an anniversary that means nothing to me. The trivial pursuits of my minions often baffle me. But then again, I've long since lost any fascination for the mundane.

I lean back in my chair, twirling a pen between my fingers. The darkened office is my refuge from the chaos outside. Here, I can sort through the mass of paperwork on my desk in peace. Fudge the numbers in peace and cause chaos in some other part of hell that I don't care about. Here, I can forget the existence of the stubborn mortal who's invaded my domain.

Elara.

Her name rolls around in my head, leaving a trail of sparks in its wake. The thought of her, all fiery spirit and defiant eyes, sends a rush of heat down my spine. She's a paradox, a blazing star in the depths of Hell.

I'm in the middle of reviewing torture quotas when an irresistibly sweet scent tickles my senses. I freeze, inhaling deeply. There's only one creature in my domain whose aroma calls so tantalizingly to my baser instincts.

My door creaks open, and I tense.

My gut clenches. She's here. In my office. Alone.

A rush of emotions sweeps over me. Anger. Desire. Confusion. But most of all, a sense of anticipation. It's as if we've been dancing around each other, and the music has suddenly stopped.

I remain still, allowing her to approach. The foolish mortal likely assumes I'm not here. Unaware I've simply hidden myself with a basic incantation. Her footsteps draw nearer, accompanied by the rapid patter of her pulse. Such innocent nerves. Does she think her mortal stealth can evade my ancient senses? The notion is almost endearing.

The soft sound of a plate contacting my desk heralds her arrival. I wait a few more heartbeats, savoring her nearness, before speaking.

"Are you in the habit of entering an archdemon's private office uninvited?"

Elara jumps as I swivel my chair to face her, revealing myself at the same

moment, and her cheeks flush a delightful pink. “I...I didn’t mean to intrude. I just thought...” She trails off, her gaze dropping to the cake still partially in her hands.

I raise an eyebrow, my gaze following hers. The huge slice of cake looks ridiculously out of place in her small hands.

“What’s this?” I ask, even though the answer is clear.

She bites her lip, a flicker of uncertainty crossing her face. “It’s, um, cake. For the anniversary. I noticed you didn’t join the celebration, so I thought I’d bring you a piece.”

She sets the plate down on my desk, her fingers brushing against mine. A jolt of electricity shoots up my arm, and I have to force myself to stay still.

She’s trying to be kind. To make a peace offering. But all I can think of is what she might taste like on my tongue.

“Is this some sort of human custom?” I question, trying to keep my voice steady. “Bribing your superiors with cake?”

She looks taken aback. “No, it’s not a bribe—”

“But it’s a manipulation,” I interrupt, leaning back in my chair. I need the distance to think clearly. To remember she’s my assistant, not some tantalizing temptation.

“No, it’s not like that,” she protests, her eyes wide and earnest.

“Then what is it, Elara?” I ask, my voice softer than I intended.

She hesitates, wringing her hands in front of her. “I just...I thought you might like some. That’s all.”

I study her for a moment, her flushed face, the way she nibbles on her lower lip, the nervous flicker in her eyes. And I realize she’s telling the truth. There’s no hidden agenda, no ulterior motive. She’s just trying to be...nice.

How utterly blasphemous.

It’s a concept so foreign to me, so out of place in the depths of Hell, that for a moment, I’m at a loss for words.

“Demons have no need for inclusion,” I dismiss. Yet, even as I speak the words, I’m unsettled by an unfamiliar pang. I harden my gaze to hide it.

Companionship is a weakness demons like me eliminated long ago.

Sensing my indifference, Elara squares her little shoulders. “Well, I wanted you to have this. Enjoy, Mr. Daemonus.” Politely defiant, she holds my gaze.

I admire her boldness, misguided as its intent may be. With a small sigh, I levitate the plate and take an experimental bite from the lurid cake. The taste

is foul, but I force myself to swallow.

“Satisfied?” I raise a brow. “I assure you, I won’t wither away without tasteless pastries.”

With a curt nod, she gives me a small smile, turns, and leaves my office, leaving behind a slice of cake and a swirl of emotions I don’t quite know what to do with.

I stare at the door long after she’s gone, her scent still lingering in the air. I’m left with a strange feeling, a mix of frustration and...something else. Something I can’t quite put my finger on.

This persistent mortal continues to invade my thoughts and blacken my mood. I should incinerate her. Yet, the idea brings me no satisfaction. I find myself anticipating her next annoyance. What else will she do to disrupt my days?

I swivel my chair slowly, pen spinning between my clawed fingertips as I attempt to refocus on work. But concentration eludes me. Sighing, I conjure a viewing portal and check on my vexing assistant.

Even though the workday is done and her colleagues are partying around her, Elara sits at her desk, sorting through a stack of soul contracts. Her brows are drawn in concentration, lips pressed together. A lock of hair falls into her face and she brushes it back absently, oblivious to my attention—and the attention of all the other partying demons in the department. The fools should be working, I realize with a frown. I should go out there and send a few of them down to level four for torturing, but I can’t pull my gaze away from the human.

Watching her, an unfamiliar restlessness stirs within me. The need to speak with her again, to see those eyes alight. Feel that intoxicating purity wrap around me.

I close the portal with a growl. This fascination needs to end. She’s complicating my existence here in ways I cannot allow.

A knock at the door provides a welcome distraction. I close down the portal and straighten.

“Enter.”

A demon from deliveries peeks inside, his ram-like horns curling around the doorframe. “Apologies for the interruption, Lord Bax. But you wanted to be informed when the new shipment of torture devices arrived.”

“Excellent.” I stride toward him, thoughts of work driving out my previous distraction. “Show me these acquisitions.”

I spend the next hour inspecting and approving the latest tools designed to creatively inflict agony upon the damned. Each spike-covered contraption and soul-skinning blade provides satisfying proof of the commitment to suffering I demand from our vendors.

By the time I complete the inspection, I'm feeling much more centered and in control, the pleasures of reciprocal torment grounding me once more. Elara's disruption now seems a trivial thing. I know who I am—*what* I am. Bax Daemonus, scourge of mortal souls and relentless torturer. No gentle-hearted mortal will change that.

Chapter Seven



Elara

Over the next few days, I begin implementing my proposed changes across Bax's department. It's an uphill battle, but I'm determined to drag this office into the 21st century, kicking and screaming if I must.

Bax fights me at every turn. The first time I show up with a team to overhaul the Archives, he's nowhere to be found.

After that fiery incident, and then the cake incident, I've tried to remain professional. But now this is about work.

I search his office, the cavernous Audits Department, even the fiery pits of Bookkeeping. But the infernal demon is conspicuously absent.

Finally, I threaten his sniveling minions with the Rack until one cracks.

"Mr. Daemonus took a sudden sabbatical, milady. Urgent soul-harvesting duties Aboveworld. He sends his deepest regrets."

I fume silently. Soul-harvesting? More like intentionally evading me. But if he thinks a little vacation will deter me, he's dead wrong.

When he finally returns more than a week later, I'm elbow-deep in his precious bookcases, meticulously reorganizing the haphazard collection of ancient tomes and modern novelties. I glance up as Bax materializes in a plume of smoke, his arrival announcing itself with a gust of wind that sends loose papers fluttering.

"Elara," he growls, his voice a rough rasp that immediately sends shivers down my spine. Fudge, I thought I was over this. Apparently not.

Bax strides over, his eyes smoldering with an intensity that causes my heart to skip a beat. "What do you think you're doing?"

I look at him, unafraid. "Improving efficiency," I retort, refusing to back down. Or maybe it's because of that tense moment we shared and the fact he just shut me out completely. "These books are a mess. How are you supposed to find anything in here?"

"That's just it, angel...you aren't supposed to." He grins, fangs and all, that devilish handsomeness almost disarming me.

I grit my teeth. Not only has he been avoiding me, but if this keeps up, six months will pass, I'll have gotten nothing done, and I wouldn't put it past

Lucifer to just rescind any salary he's paid. That would be evil. But he's the Devil after all. Evil pulses through his veins.

"Your order," I say, steadying my voice, "is not a logical one."

Bax's gaze smolders on me, and there's a moment of tense silence. Then, with a wave of his hand, the books I've painstakingly organized shuffle themselves back into their original places. My jaw drops as I watch years of knowledge rearrange itself at his command.

"There," he says, a hint of satisfaction in his voice. "Back to normal."

I bite back the urge to retort.

Over the next few days, I counter each of Bax's delay tactics with ruthless efficiency. If he doesn't order equipment we need, I put through the orders myself. When he locks down the system and resets all the passwords, I access my remote backup drives. He may be an all-powerful demon, but I'm no amateur either.

Bax simmers with resentment at the fact I still find ways to move forward. It's a snail's pace but with Lucifer himself mandating these changes from on high, even Bax can't override me completely. Instead, one morning I arrive to find my requisition forms have been "accidentally" set on fire and that the printer spits sulfur every time I try to print anything.

I take it all in stride. If pranks are the worst he's got, I can handle it. Though his glowering presence provides endless distraction. It's hard to focus whenever the privacy of the frosted glass disappears and those burning eyes follow my every move.

Three days later, after an extended period of bitter power struggles, Lucifer calls for a mandatory meeting in Hell's grand hall. All the department heads are required to attend, and, despite my reluctance, I know I can't miss it. I might not be a department head, but I'm assistant to one. And I need some change. Every step I take to make things better around here, Bax steps right in and thwarts my efforts. If I can have an audience with Lucifer...

I cringe. The last thing I want to do is to run crying to the big boss, but what other option do I have? It's either that or this will all be futile. I'll lose my contract and possibly my salary.

Straightening my skirt, I tilt my chin up and square my shoulders as I head to the meeting.

Hell's grand hall is a monstrous cavern, an imposing sight that could make the most hardened of souls feel insignificant. The vast expanse is filled with department heads, each as unique and terrifying as the realm they are

from. I stand amidst this sea of power, trying my best to look unfazed.

Bax is late, of course. But when he does arrive, he makes quite an entrance. The grand doors swing open with a thunderous clatter, and Bax strides in, oozing confidence and contempt. His eyes find me and he grins, a sardonic smile that sends a delicious shiver down my spine.

The meeting begins. It's tedious, filled with hellish bureaucracy I struggle to comprehend. Lucifer, in all his wicked glory, presides over the meeting with an air of bored detachment, but I fight myself to focus, to take it all in, and ask questions.

I'll get through this. I must.

Bax

The mandatory meeting in Hell's grand hall drags on interminably. Lucifer drones on about "synergizing deliverables" and "leveraging core competencies." I stifle a yawn, glancing around at the other assembled department heads. Most are in various stages of sleep or catatonia.

All except one. Elara sits straight-backed and attentive, scribbling notes and asking astute questions that make Lucifer preen. Giving suggestions regarding *my* department. Offering ideas on how she plans to implement them.

I roll my eyes. Of course, she's enthralled by these fanciful plans that won't amount to much. The road to Hell is paved with good intentions.

And Elara is oh so very *good*.

Finally, Lucifer concludes his torture and dismisses us. As the masses shuffle out, I make my way toward Elara, who is—predictably—continuing her barrage of queries.

"...analytics dashboard to track KPIs across departments," she's suggesting enthusiastically. "We could build traction around shared metrics and—"

"Fascinating," I interrupt, grabbing her arm. "If you'll excuse us, Lucifer, I need a quick word with my assistant."

I steer a sputtering Elara out into the empty hallway. When we're alone, I round on her. "*What do you think you're doing?*"

Elara yanks her arm from my grasp. "Taking initiative. I know that's a foreign concept to you."

Ooh, fire. My favorite element. I guess my efforts trying to derail her have hit a nerve.

"Initiative, you say?" I drawl, closing the distance between us. She's a tiny little thing, this mortal. Barely reaches my chest. "More like currying favor with the boss."

I can't help the wicked thought that enters my mind. The urge to scoop her up in my arms, press her against my hardened body. The surprise that would flit across her face, followed by a blush that'd make even Lucifer himself feel saintly. The tremors that would wrack her delicate frame, a moth

caught in the spider's web.

A dark chuckle escapes me as the image sends a bolt of want searing through my veins. Ironic, isn't it? The tempter is being tempted.

Far from intimidated, Elara lifts her chin. "I'm doing my job. Maybe you should try it sometime instead of sulking like a toddler."

I bare my fangs, a smirk playing at the corner of my lips. "Careful, angel. Your wings won't carry you far in these realms."

"Oh?" She crosses her arms, meeting my gaze without flinching. "Seems like I'm doing just fine, even without wings. Face it, Bax. I'm here to stay, and so are my improvements."

Is she...taunting me? Torment is my middle name. That sort of thing only makes me hard. This little angel has no clue what she's playing with.

"I've said it before. I'll say it again. Your so-called improvements will upend centuries of tradition." I force more depth into my voice, the gravelly tone designed to unsettle her, to make her aware of the dangerous creature she's so casually defying. "You think you can just waltz in and turn Hell upside down on a whim? You don't understand how it works down here."

Elara's eyes flash. "I understand you're afraid of change. But lashing out at me won't stop progress." She straightens her back, chin lifting with such strength I'm almost impressed by her tenacity. "I'm not going to give up so easily."

"Afraid?" I echo, letting out a low, sardonic laugh. "I am an archdemon, Elara. I don't cower in the face of change. And certainly not at the bidding of a mortal like you."

"Then prove it." Elara steps closer, her intoxicating aura enveloping me. Does she realize her soul glows with such purity that it sparks a primal urge within me to taint it with my darkness? See just how dirty she can be? That her coming closer with this bravery is only making me want to devour her? Nobody warned this little angel before she took up a job working for an archdemon like me?

"Give my methods a real chance," she says. "Or are you too afraid they'll actually work?"

I bristle at the challenge in her voice. "Careful, little angel. You don't want to start a game you can't win."

"Try me."

For a charged moment we stare each other down, the air simmering between us. Then I grab Elara's arm and storm down the hallway, half-

dragging her along.

“Hey! What are you—”

“You want to prove yourself?” I toss over my shoulder. “Then prove it. I’m taking you to the Forbidden Library.”

Chapter Eight



Elara

Bax's words hang heavy in the air as he leads me away from the grand hall. His grip on my arm is firm, unyielding, a clear reminder of the power he wields in this realm. The challenge in his voice sends a thrill of anticipation through me—mixed with a healthy dose of apprehension.

His long strides force me into a near jog to keep up as he leads me deep into the bowels of Damnation Financial.

“Where are we going?” I pant, nerves rising.

“You wanted to further your knowledge for your reform agenda, did you not?” Bax tosses over his shoulder.

I blink. “Well, yes, but—”

“Then consider your wish granted.”

We descend spiral staircases that seem to extend into endless darkness. The air grows heavy with brimstone and crackles with unseen energy. Strange symbols glow on the walls, casting everything in crimson light. This area radiates ancient power and feels forbidden for good reason.

I've only been in Hell a short time, yet I'm about to enter a place more forbidden than any mortal has ever seen.

My breaths come in hard, and I only realize Bax has slowed his pace for me when I find myself jogging beside him, instead of trailing slightly behind.

The further we delve, the more menacing the environment becomes. The air thickens, growing colder with each step, while the flickering hellfire lamps cast long, ominous shadows on the rough-hewn stone walls. The light fails to penetrate the growing darkness, making the abyss seem infinite and all-consuming.

Finally, we slow down a bit and Bax strides ahead, silent as a specter. And I wonder briefly how a big guy like him can move so silently. His presence is a blazing torch in the frigid gloom, a stark contrast to the chilling air of the underworld. He offers no explanations, provides no comfort, answers none of the questions bubbling up inside me.

Like why the Forbidden Library? What does he hope for me to find there? Is this another test, another chance for me to prove my worth or falter under pressure?

The silence stretches between us, the only sound the echo of our footfalls and the distant wails of tormented souls. Unable to bear the quiet, I muster my courage and break the silence.

“Where exactly is this library?” My voice sounds small and insignificant, swallowed by the vast expanse of the Underworld.

Bax doesn't break his stride, his voice reverberating off the stone walls when he responds, “In the heart of Hell. But don't worry, angel, I won't let you get lost.”

His nickname for me sends a jolt down my spine. Angel. A stark contrast to the demonic entities surrounding us. The nickname is a stark reminder of our differences. But it also sparks a strange warmth in my chest. One that makes me more afraid than even the shrouds of darkness around us.

As we journey deeper, the tunnels transition from rough-hewn stone to reflective dark marble with inky veins that seem to writhe in the flickering firelight. Hellfire sconces cast our wavering shadows over the gleaming surfaces. The temperature warms marginally, yet a chill remains coiled around my spine.

We pass other demons lurking in alcoves - each one stopping to bow their heads in deference to Bax. But their eyes linger on me with unveiled curiosity and hunger. I can feel their gazes like slick, oily caresses, appraising me as an oddity or trespasser. With effort, I ignore them and focus only on matching Bax's tireless strides.

After an endless trek, the claustrophobic passage opens into a vast cavern. We've reached the bowels of Hell, far deeper than any mortal was meant to delve. Bax directs us toward a structure carved into the cavern's heart.

My pulse quickens. I guess this is it. Our destination. A towering set of double doors blocks our path, forged of bones and etched with sinister runes and screaming faces. Dark energy rolls off it in waves. Bax presses his palm to the stone and the doors dissolve to smoke, allowing us entry.

Ageless power throbs from the portal.

Bax turns to me, eyes unreadable shadows. “The Forbidden Library,” he intones. “No mortal has ever crossed this threshold.” His hand engulfs mine, sending an illicit thrill through my veins. “There's no turning back now, little angel.”

Bax

Behind me, Elara gasps.

I turn to find her staring at the library, her eyes wide with awe. The sight brings an unexpected twist to my chest. It's been centuries since anyone looked at anything in Hell with such wonder. She is looking at it with new, pure eyes.

For a long moment, she stands there, taking it all in. Then, she steps forward, her steps sounding in the vast silence. She moves down an aisle, her fingers trailing over the spines of the books.

“Well, angel,” I say, my voice echoing in the quiet. “Welcome to your proving ground.”

She looks at me, confusion evident in her gaze. “I don't understand.”

I allow my gaze to rise over the endless shelves that tower into chasmic darkness, stacked with ancient tomes and long-forbidden scrolls. The air is thick with the scent of old parchment and dust, a testament to the centuries of knowledge stored here. Arcane artifacts glimmer from shadowy alcoves. The very walls thrum with the knowledge contained herein—every dark secret ever whispered, every bloody pact struck beneath a waning moon. Millennia of occult lore, just waiting to be unleashed by one daring enough to seek it.

Let us see how bold she'll be now.

“You wanted a chance to prove your worth. This is it.” I know my gaze smolders as I give her the full brunt of my stare, but down here in the quiet darkness, she has nowhere to run, and I can't help it. “So where shall we begin your quest for answers?”

Elara eyes the shadowy archives warily. “Answers? What exactly do you expect me to find in here?”

“Proof to support your proposed changes.” I smirk, trailing one claw along endless book spines. “Beyond your own assumptions.”

I relish the uncertainty that flickers across her face. The Forbidden Library is no place for half-formed convictions. Many a soul has wandered in foolishly, never to wander out. Such is the price of unsanctioned knowledge.

But Elara merely lifts her chin in that stubborn way she has. “I'm not afraid of research. There must be something useful amidst all these...” She

squints at one blood-stained tome. "...interesting texts."

I grin. "The knowledge here can be quite...potent for mortals." I lift the book, fanning tattered pages filled with ancient curses and demonic anatomical illustrations. Elara flushes.

"I'll, uh, start with the auditing resources," she says quickly, turning down a row of ledgers. I chuckle, replacing the book. So much yet to learn, little one.

I trail her as she tries to find the books she needs, chin high and shoulders straight. She moves through the library as if this is second nature, and I get a distinct image of her Aboveworld doing the same thing.

Through all this, I track her without even meaning to. It is hard not to. Her soul shines through her like a beacon, radiant and irresistible. Even through the layers of hellfire and brimstone, her soul is a brilliant white star, a contrast against the relentless darkness. It's not just purity that makes her soul stand out, it's the resiliency, the vibrancy of it. It's like a melody I haven't felt in centuries, one that makes what's left of my essence pulsate to a different rhythm.

The demons around us are drawn to it, like moths to a flame, their dark eyes reflecting the light. They keep their distance though, their instincts warning them against crossing the invisible boundaries set by Lucifer himself. It's a game of fire, and no one dares to get burned—even in Hell.

I watch as she steps forward, her hand reaching out to trace the spine of a book. The library is her domain, a place where she finds comfort, even in Hell. It's fascinating to see her so engrossed, so oblivious to the dangerous desires swirling around her.

Watching Elara, a protectiveness bubbles within me, wanting to shield her light from being extinguished by the darkness that permeates this place. A dangerous emotion I thought myself incapable of.

The urge to corrupt her, to mark her as mine, is a potent pull. It's a challenge, a dare. The very idea goes against my nature, against the rules of this realm.

As a demon, my purpose is singular—to corrupt mortal souls and condemn them to these fiery pits. Giving in to attachment, possessive desire? That leads down a treacherous path.

The laws that bind my existence, the regulations of this dark underworld, are as old as time itself. They are absolute, immutable, and sternly enforced. We demons are forbidden from forming connections with mortal souls, let

alone claiming them as our own.

If word spread that an archdemon felt something for a mortal beyond conquest, it would invite challenge. My brethren would see it as a weakness to be exploited. Everything I've built crumbling because I forgot my place.

She thinks I only toy with her, but the truth is far more perilous. She's stumbled into a viper's nest, yet I find myself yearning to preserve her from its sting. A fool's impulse I cannot indulge.

Yet, the thought of her, fallen, corrupted, and mine, is *intoxicating*.

I can't help but feel a sense of ownership already. Her presence in my domain, the way she looks at everything with such untainted curiosity, the way she seems to trust me, despite our disagreements and even though she shouldn't. It's...compelling.

"Bax," she calls out, a deep frown on her perfect face.

I take a step closer, the distance between us closing. I can feel the heat of her soul, the pull of it. It's a dangerous game we're playing, a game that could burn us both.

"These texts contradict themselves endlessly," Elara mutters, snapping a moldy book shut. "How does anyone make sense of this mess?"

"Mess makes more sense than order in the demonic realms," I say, her words pulling me back to the whole reason I brought her down to this place. "Your human logic is the opposite." Surely, she sees my point now.

Doubt creeps across her face once more.

"There must be something usable amidst all this." Elara drags a finger down a shelf thick with forbidden rites and blood magick texts. "Some insight that can—"

"Can what?" I send a small lash of fire along the books, searing away centuries of dust before I lean in, watching hope gutter in her eyes. "Prove your young, mortal way is wiser than our ancient order?"

Elara is silent for a long moment. When she meets my gaze at last, a familiar stubbornness glows once more in her eyes. "You're right. The answers aren't written in some book." She gestures around us. "But that doesn't mean they don't exist."

I scoff. "And am I to simply take your word they do?"

"No. You're going to help me find them."

I blink, once again startled by her audacity, and, at the same time, pulled in by her tenacity. "Help you? Why would I assist you with overturning my domain?"

Elara steps closer, undaunted by my skepticism. “Because you know it’s the right thing to do.” She lays a hand on my arm and irrational hellfire blooms under her touch.

A growl rumbles in my chest as something snaps. And I realize belatedly it’s the little control I have.

“You above all should know I don’t care about *righteousness*...” I draw closer to her, each step measured and deliberate. The air between us seems to hum with a palpable energy, a crackle that might be the result of my flaming touch igniting some nearby tomes. “Goodness? It leaves me cold. But what truly stirs the depths of my hollow soul,” I pause, a wicked grin playing on my lips, “is the deliciously...undeniably...*wrong*.”

Elara swallows hard enough for me to see her throat bob. “S-somewhere deep down,” she stutters, “beneath the cynicism, you want progress as much as I do.”

The air’s charged now the closer I get to her, and the little thing doesn’t back down. So small, this little angel. I could snap her in two without a moment’s thought. Yet, the only damn thing that’s hammering in my brain is the image of her, legs spread wide and pleading, as she takes my hard, aching cock.

“Sorry to disappoint, angel, but I really fucking don’t.” I’m standing over her now, so close I feel the heat from her skin. “But there’s something else I’ve been wanting...”

Elara swallows again, her gaze involuntarily drifting to my lips.

“Caught you, angel,” I rasp, the words heavy with insinuation. “Only sinfully tempting thoughts dancing through that pretty little head now, aren’t there?”

A blush flames across her cheeks. “I...don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I chuckle low at her denial, the sound rumbling from deep within my chest. “Oh, Elara,” I coo, leaning in closer so my words brush against her ear. “You don’t need to say anything.”

Her eyes widen, a mix of surprise and curiosity swirling within their depths as she wonders how much I know. Can I read her mind? Can I see the desires she keeps veiled?

I pull back slightly to meet her gaze, my own eyes twinkling with amusement. “I don’t need to peek into your thoughts, angel,” I tell her, my voice a soft, teasing whisper. “Your face...it’s a mirror reflecting the desires

you're trying so hard to hide.”

Her blush deepens, painting her cheeks a delicious shade of rose. “I—” she starts, but I interrupt her, my hand gently tilting her chin up to hold her captive in my gaze.

“No need for words, Elara,” I purr, my thumb tracing the line of her jaw. “Your eyes, they’re telling me everything. They’re begging me to close the distance, to give in to the temptation we both feel.”

“You’re my boss. This is...against the rules.”

My laugh is a low rumble, reverberating through the shadowy confines of the library.

“Sweet, innocent thing,” I purr, my voice a low, grating growl. “Creatures like me...we exist to *break* the rules.”

Chapter Nine



Elara

Before I can respond, I'm pulled against a hard frame as Bax's lips crash down on mine. It's a fierce, passionate kiss, a storm of emotion and raw intensity. And the taste of him...oh Lord of the Shadows...it's *intoxicating*.

I hesitate for a second, stiffening against him, but it doesn't take long for me to melt into his embrace. Raw, hot desire overcomes my resistance. All the complicated emotions and tempting thoughts I've been suppressing when it comes to this alluring demon—they surge to the forefront.

My fingers curl around the base of his horns, pulling him closer, and he lets out a low growl of pleasure that's so intense I feel a throb go through my core.

It takes the strength of ten thousand fallen angels for me to break the kiss. Breathless, I lean back slightly to take him in. To try and calm the hammering beats of my heart that's making my chest rise and fall in quick succession. But Bax is staring at me, his eyes dark with desire. And then he smirks, demonic instincts taking over.

“You want progress, Elara? Let me show you true progress.”

I slap a hand over my mouth, preventing a yelp from escaping as he suddenly lifts me. “Bax!”

“Mm,” he growls, “Say my name again.”

He carries me to the nearest reading altar and sets me down, books and scrolls scattering around us. It's only then that I get a moment to think. *What the hell am I doing?* But all sense of logic dissipates as Bax trails a claw slowly down my frame. With each inch, a shudder of what can only be delight and anticipation goes right through me.

“You want answers, angel? Let me give them to you in the most primal way possible.”

My eyes widen as he suddenly grips and spreads my legs, causing my skirt to ride up to my hips. The thin fabric of my panties does nothing to hide what's underneath. I can feel my pussy lips pressing against them, outlining the entire thing.

And the self-preservation that one fact should bring is nowhere to be

found. All I can feel is the hard throb that goes through my center.

I should stop him. I should stop this from happening. But the look in Bax's eyes as he feasts on the image before him—it holds me in a grip. No one has ever looked at me like this before.

“Beautiful,” he breathes, his voice a rough whisper that sends shivers down my spine. His hands, strong and warm, hold my thighs apart, his thumbs tracing small circles that make my heart race. And then he lift his gaze and his eyes never stray from mine. A silent challenge. A promise of more.

The look in his eyes is more than just desire—it's admiration, *possession*, a hint of reverence. It's as if he can see all of me, the parts I keep hidden from the world, the parts I scarcely admit to myself. No one has ever looked at me like that, as if I'm the only thing that matters. As if I'm the center of his world.

Every instinct tells me to close my legs, pull down my skirt, and grasp at the little bit of decorum I have left. But another, stronger, part of me revels in it. The part that has always craved to be seen, to be valued, to be wanted. And right now, in Bax's eyes, I am all of that and more.

I swallow hard, my heart pounding in my chest as his fingers trace a path up my inner thigh, causing me to gasp. But it's the look in his eyes, so intense, so full of desire, that makes my breath hitch. I can't look away, caught in the raw need I see in his gaze.

“Tell me you want this, Elara,” he murmurs, his voice low and husky. His fingers pause just under the edge of my skirt, a silent question hanging in the air.

I should say no. So why is my head nodding, my throat and mouth suddenly parched?

There's a sizzle and the scent of smoke as twin holes burn right through my blouse and bra, baring my breasts before him. Another low growl escapes his throat and my eyes roll back as Bax suddenly dips his head, taking one of my nipples in his mouth. The intense heat and wetness of his mouth make another throb go through my core as my head falls back. I release a guttural moan, grabbing for the only thing I can. His horns.

My fingers splay over his head before I grip them, and Bax releases another rumble. With a moan that vibrates against my breast, he bites down gently but hard enough that I inhale sharply. Immediately after, his hot tongue circles the nipple, easing away the pain as he pinches the other

between his claws. I can't help it. Another moan leaves me as my hips rise off the altar. Bax groans and holds me down before releasing my nipple with a pop.

"You've desired this," he growls. "I feel it. *I fucking sense it*, but I want to hear you say it."

My breath's coming faster, my chest rising and falling hard, and I can feel the heat in my cheeks. But I can't even respond. I'm speechless even as the look in his eyes promises he'll have me screaming in no time.

His gaze slowly travels down my body, clothing singeing and disappearing the lower he goes. He takes in my flushed skin and the apex between my thighs. My panties are the only thing that remains, and I can already feel the spot of moisture darkening the thin fabric.

Bax smiles, forked tongue coming out to slide over his lips. "Well, I guess you aren't as innocent as you try to make out."

Without his hot tongue assaulting me, I get a moment of clarity. My brows furrow. "W-what are you talking about?"

Bax leans even closer, tracing a claw along my hipbone. "Because there is nothing innocent happening here. You want me as much as I want you, and I can smell it."

My eyes widen, my cheeks heating enough that they hurt. "That's not true."

Bax tilts his head. "It isn't? Are you sure about that?"

His claws curl, caressing my inner thigh. "I can smell the blood, Elara. Your blood. The way your heart's beating doubly hard, pumping it through your veins. It's as sweet as any nectar I've ever sucked."

My breath catches in my throat, and I start to shake my head, but whatever denial I have doesn't take form as Bax's mouth covers mine once more, cutting off my words. When I whimper against his lips, he bites down on my bottom lip and sucks hard. A moan barrels through me as I decide, for just a moment, to let this happen.

My tongue pushes against his, and the big archdemon groans, sliding a finger against my crotch. The heat of his touch sends another throb through me. I know that he's feeling the warm, wet material coating my pussy. One flick of his finger and my panties are gone.

The heat of my core almost feels reflected on his palm.

Another growl and I fall into his temptation. I know it's coming, but I still whimper into his mouth as he retracts a claw and slides his middle finger

inside my slick channel. It's unbelievably thick, stretching me when a human's wouldn't, and I whimper again when he circles it inside me and hooks it to stroke that perfect little spot inside that makes me see stars. Another whimper and Bax growls again, pressing his palm against my pussy, and cupping me with his entire hand.

"Damnation, Elara," he takes my bottom lip between his teeth and pulls in air as he hisses. "Your moans are even better than the sound of souls screaming for mercy." Leaning in, his kiss is both gentle and demanding. Finger sliding deep inside me, he presses his hand against my clit and grinds his palm against it.

When I whimper again, hips pushing forward to press my clit into his palm, Bax allows me to.

His head dips, trailing kisses down my neck as his fangs brush across my sensitive skin. With a growl that vibrates against me, he pushes his finger deep, fucking me sweet and slow with just the one digit. And when I think I can't take it anymore, he pulls out almost all the way. I think this is it, that he's done, but my eyes widen, pleasure shooting through me as he forces another finger in.

"Sweet temptation," he murmurs, watching me with those smoldering eyes as his hand picks up speed, fucking me in the way only an archdemon can.

Electricity pulses through me, heat coiling in that sweet little bud as he grinds his palm against me and fucks me hard.

Fire plays in Bax's eyes as he leans forward again, pushing me back against the scattered tomes as he takes my nipple into his mouth once more.

I grip the books, fingers digging into the spines, painfully aware I'm being defiled on top of records full of sin. Even with that irony, I can't find the thought to care.

The pleasure is building, climbing. An exquisite torture that only Bax can deliver. His fingers move within me, unrelenting, driving me to the edge but not over it. And then his mouth leaves my nipple, trailing kisses up my neck to my ear.

Hot and wet, he slides the forked tip of his tongue over my ear.

"Tell me what you want, Elara," he whispers, his voice as dark and tempting as sin itself. He licks my ear, nibbling lightly even as his hand continues its maddening pace, his palm hitting that sensitive bundle of nerves with timed precision.

I bite my lip, holding back the words on the tip of my tongue. He growls, a low, warning sound that sends a shiver down my spine and his fingers slow, almost ceasing their movement. Panic flares within me, the thought of him stopping too unbearable to consider.

“Please,” I gasp, my voice trembling with need. “Don’t stop.”

A wicked grin spreads across Bax’s face, his eyes glowing with triumph. “That’s not what you truly want, is it, Elara?” he teases, his fingers still barely moving.

“Bax...” I moan, the pleasure so intense it’s almost pain. “I need...”

He leans in, his lips brushing against my ear as he whispers, “Say it, Elara.”

With a ragged breath, I finally give in, the words spilling from my lips in a desperate plea. “I need to come, Bax. Please...make me come.”

His triumphant smirk is the last thing I see before he plunges his fingers deep, striking that sweet spot within me that has me seeing stars. The world narrows down to the exquisite pressure of his palm against my clit and the force of his fingers as he drives them deep inside me over and over again.

With a strangled cry, my body tenses, pleasure washing over me in waves. I shatter, my climax a fierce, white-hot explosion of sensation. I become undone, lost in the throes of an ecstasy that leaves me breathless and spent.

Everything’s foggy as I come back down, as if I’d transcended from the bowels of this place and I’m only now returning.

Almost reluctantly, Bax slips his fingers from my greedy cunt.

I watch as he brings them to his lips. One second later, his tongue is sliding out, cleaning my juices from his claws as I watch him with wide eyes.

My heart pounds in my chest, my body still quivering from the intense orgasm. Bax gives me a moment to recover, his eyes never leaving mine as he cleans his fingers, savoring the taste of me. The sight sends another rush of heat coursing through me, so much so that I’m almost feverish.

“Bax,” I murmur. He understands what I’m asking for immediately, the wicked grin returning to his face.

“Impatient, my angel?” he teases, his voice a low growl. “I’ll take care of you, Elara.”

With that, one claw unfastens his fly as the other reaches for me, skimming over my thigh then hips. He leans in, eyes locked with mine, and I gasp as I feel him at my entrance, large and insistent. Anticipation skitters

through me. Every slight shift rubs that velvety head against my wet folds, making fresh anticipation rise inside me all over again.

The size of him alone...I don't think it will fit...

"Elara," he whispers. His eyes are still locked on mine, a silent question in their depths.

I nod, giving him my consent, and the look that he gives me makes a delicious shiver go right through me. Pure carnal delight. I expect him to push in immediately. Instead, Bax slides his thick rod up through my folds, making a soft moan leave my lips as heat rekindles in my core.

He's terrifyingly large, tapered at the tip, but that's not what has my eyes widening, pure anticipation making my inner muscles twitch with need.

There are ridges. Rows of them. Each more pronounced than the last. They drag against my wetness with each of his movements, sending shockwaves of pleasure radiating through me. Every ridge feels like a pledge of the bliss waiting on the other side, tantalizing glimpses of the ecstasy they might stir inside me.

I try to look down, but he leans in even more, one claw moving to my neck.

His grip is tight enough to hold me there without pain and I stare up at him, this demon who has me under his power, knowing that he's in control here, and I'm willingly giving it to him.

Slowly, agonizingly so, he begins to push inside me. My eyes roll back. The sensation is overwhelming, a stretch that's almost too much. His eyes never leave mine as he takes me, inch by inch, my pussy stretching to accommodate him, sucking in every ridge and node until he's fully seated within me.

I gasp, a mix of pleasure and pain whirling inside me. "Bax," I moan, my nails digging into tomes at my side. He doesn't move, allowing me to adjust to him, his clawed hand still holding me down by the neck.

Then, with a mischievous glint in his eyes, he pulls back and thrusts into me. I cry out, the sensation intense. His pace is slow, deliberate, each thrust calculated to drive me to the edge but not over it.

"Is this what you wanted?" he asks, his voice a low growl as he continues his maddening pace. The pleasure is building, a crescendo of desire that threatens to consume me. I nod, my voice lost in the sea of pleasure he's drowning me in.

"Good," he says, his grin devilish as he leans in to whisper in my ear.

“Because I’m not done with you yet, Elara.”

With that, he quickens his pace, his hand tightening on my neck as he drives me towards another peak. With the other hand, he grips one leg, opening me even more for him.

The pleasure is overwhelming, a tidal wave that threatens to pull me under. But I’m ready for it, ready for him, ready to be consumed by the fiery depths of pleasure he’s offering.

“Faster,” I beg, the need for him consuming me. With a growl, he complies, his pace increasing until all I can focus on is the feel of him inside me, my ass vibrating against the reading altar, the tomes and scrolls around us toppling in the crescendo of our fucking.

He’s relentless, taking me higher and higher until I’m on the edge. When he leans in, taking a nipple into his mouth, my control shatters. His name falls from my lips in a breathless chant, and with one final, deep thrust, he sends me spiraling over the edge once again, my body convulsing around him. I don’t expect it, but he follows me over the edge, his own release roaring through him. Pumping into me, buckets and buckets to the point I can feel it all over my thighs, drops dripping from the reading altar onto the floor beneath us.

As we come down from our high, Bax slowly releases me, his claw loosening from my neck as he braces on both arms, closing me in on the altar. We stay like that for a while, the only sounds in the room, our ragged breathing.

And then, he’s suddenly gone.

Startled by his sudden disappearance, I push myself up on shaky arms, glancing around the room. Only darkness greets me, the sconces on the wall hardly providing any light. But then, a moment later, he’s back, a soft cloth in one hand.

My eyebrows rise. “Where did you...”

Only a small smile graces his lips.

Without a word, he begins cleaning me up, his touch gentle and considerate. The cloth is warm, soothing on my oversensitive skin, and I can’t help but stare at him as he wipes me clean. He takes his time, making sure every inch of me is catered for before he’s finished.

Next, he sets the cloth aside and those smoldering eyes lock with mine.

“Are you okay, Elara?” he asks, his voice barely above a whisper. I nod, unable to find the words to reply.

What just happened between us...

I know I should be furious. That I should push him away, but all I can think about is the taste of him, the feel of him inside me.

I know this changes everything. But right now, at this moment, I don't care.

But even as we lock eyes, I know that later, when we have time to think, we'll make excuses. He'll tell himself it was a move to assert dominance, to remind me who's really in charge. And I'll say it was a momentary lapse in judgment. People make mistakes, and I'm only human after all.

But deep down, we both know it was more than that. We both know that something shifted between us, something fundamental and irrevocable. This isn't just about work anymore. This is personal.

And I have a feeling things are about to get a whole lot more complicated.

Chapter Ten



Elara

In the charged days since our forbidden encounter, I've scarcely glimpsed Bax at all. He materializes in his office, then vanishes just as swiftly, without so much as a glance in my direction.

At first, I told myself he was simply busy. The massive influx of new souls from a cult sacrifice Aboveworld has overwhelmed the entire department. But as the days pass in awkward silence, doubt creeps in.

Does he regret what transpired between us? Was it merely a heat-of-the-moment mistake? After our little tryst, Bax had conjured me fresh clothes and stood watching me with those scalding eyes until I got dressed. The silence between us as we left that ancient library had been deafening. I thought, for one blazing instant, that our clash of wills had given way to a deeper understanding. But perhaps I read more into his actions than was there.

Sitting at my cubicle in view of Bax's shut door, I strain for any glimpse of those elegant horns, any echo of his rich voice bellowing orders. How can two people share such an earth-shattering moment, then continue on as if it never happened?

But I'm no fool. Bax is not merely a 'person'. He's a demon. A being of fire and brimstone. And demons, as everyone knows, operate on a different plane of existence, driven by primal desires and the pursuit of power. The concept of regret, of remorse, is as alien to them as the idea of love or compassion.

I'm such a fool for even letting it bother me. For Bax, our encounter was perhaps nothing more than a momentary diversion, a dalliance to break the monotony of his eternal existence. In the grand scheme of his existence, our moment together was but a blink of an eye. A fleeting moment of passion in an eternity of scheming, power plays, and damning souls.

I know all this...so why does some part deep inside still hurt?

People have one-night misadventures all the time. That's just what happened. Time to move on.

When I hear a blast of flames my head pops up from the charts I've been mindlessly staring at to see Bax appear in his office in a gush of fire.

His gaze locks with mine immediately and I have to force down the lump

in my throat.

Right. I need to fix this so I can move on. Avoiding what happened between us solves nothing. We must acknowledge it and find a way to work together despite our differences.

On stiff legs, I approach Bax's office, ignoring the other demons whose heads pop up immediately, almost as if they can sense the tension between their boss and me. A soft knock on the mahogany and I hear his booming voice ordering me inside.

"Enter."

The door opens on its own to reveal Bax sitting in his chair. The heaviness of his gaze is almost too much to face. That guarded look in his eyes mirrors my own apprehension.

"We should talk," I begin gently, stepping inside to allow the door to close and give us a bit of privacy, as I'm sure the entire office is listening. "Clear the air, reset our working relationship. What happened was..."

"A mistake." Bax is expressionless. "It cannot happen again."

I swallow my hurt. "You're right. It was inappropriate."

The silence that follows is deafening. When it's clear there's not more to say, I give Bax a curt nod and slip back outside, allowing the door to close softly behind me. There's the sound of a blast of flames, and I know he's gone again.

I'd thought perhaps we'd turned a corner in our working relationship. But now it feels like we're right back where we started—walled off and at odds. Only now, my heartstrings are tangled up in it too.

I distract myself sorting files, one eye perpetually trained on Bax's office, waiting for him to reappear. But when he does, his gaze slides right past me as if I'm invisible. My shoulders slump.

Enough moping, Elara. I came here with a purpose greater than myself. If Bax prefers to ignore what transpired and revert to our previous animosity, so be it.

I will continue pressing forward with the overhaul. My sister needs me, and too many lost souls depend on me succeeding for any personal turmoil to stand in my way. Bax's cooperation would have been ideal, but I don't need it to fix what's broken here.

With renewed determination, I gather my proposals and march toward Bax's office. His door is ajar; perhaps he'll actually speak with me this time. I push it open, ready to be civil, but firm regarding—

The room is empty. My steps falter. Bax's unique scent of brimstone and spice still hangs in the air, his ornate pen atop scattered papers. He can't have gone far.

I sink into the chair opposite his imposing desk to wait, heart pounding at being in his private workspace. But as the minutes tick by, he does not return.

With a sigh, I begin to rise. Yet, my gaze snags on one document tucked under a massive tome. Elaborate calligraphy spells out my full name. Why has he been looking into my background?

Curiosity wars with caution. After an internal debate, I tug the folder free and open it. Inside lies a formal petition...for my transfer out of the department. No, out of the actual Underworld. Effective immediately.

The parchment crumples in my shaking hands. He's firing me? Without any explanation? Just because of what happened in the library?

Footsteps sound outside. I lurch up, but it's too late. Bax stands in the doorway, inscrutable eyes taking in the scene. He knows I've seen the petition.

Straightening slowly, I drop the offensive page on his desk. We stare at one another for a suspended moment. Then I lift my chin, ignoring the ache in my chest.

"Request denied," I state crisply, brushing past him. If he wishes to be rid of me, he'll need to try a lot harder than avoiding the issue. I'll be damned if I make it easy for him.

Because I have no intention of leaving this job unfinished.

Storming out of his office and plopping my butt in my chair, I glare at the work set out before me, not seeing even one bit of the information written on the many pages of files scattered across my desk. All I can see is Bax's annoyingly handsome face in my head. I can almost feel his gaze on me through the still-open door, but I refuse to turn and look.

"Uh, mortal Elara..."

"What?!" I snap, turning my attention to the demon that approached my desk. Asmodeus quails a little and I immediately regret it. He's one of the nicest demons working in this department. Always ready to help me with my many requests.

"A phone call," he says. "From Aboveworld. Would you like to take it at your desk," his gaze slides to Bax who is still visible through his open door, "or—"

Releasing a heavy breath, I nod and take the phone from his outstretched

claw. A knowing look at Bax's door and he sighs before disappearing shortly after.

"Hello? Elara Hunt speaking."

"Elara! Oh my gosh, it's so good to hear your voice!"

My chest constricts at the beloved sound of my little sister's voice. "Hey, Tessa! I miss you so much."

"Miss you more! How's the new job going?" Her tone turns hesitant. "Are you okay down there?"

I glance toward Bax's office and steel myself. "It's been...challenging. But nothing I can't handle." I inject confidence into my voice. "How are you? How's school?"

Tessa launches enthusiastically into updates about college life. With every word, my resolve strengthens. I'm enduring all of this for her future, simple as that.

"Oh, guess what?" Tessa says after chatting for a while. "I applied for that study abroad program in Spain! Isn't that amazing?"

My pulse quickens. The program fees are astronomical. "That does sound amazing! We'll have to look at budgets and loans to make it work."

"Actually..." Tessa lowers her voice. "Please don't get mad, but I was kind of hoping you could cover the costs with your new job? I know tuition is enough to ask for already, but this is such an incredible opportunity."

I stare sightlessly at the Hellscape out the large windows on the other side of the office. Already, I send all my weekly wages to cover Tessa's education costs. But denying her this chance would crush her spirit.

"Of course. I'll figure it out," I reply brightly. Inside, my resolve hardens to a diamond. I will finish overhauling this department and secure a permanent role to access more funds. Nothing will jeopardize Tessa's dreams—not even an obstinate archdemon.

After I bid Tessa an upbeat farewell, I stand and straighten my skirt with renewed purpose. For her, I can weather any storm. Even the burning tempest of Bax Daemonus' moods.

Speaking of, the object of my frustration stalks by just then. As he passes my desk, surprise flashes briefly in his eyes at seeing me still here. Then his gaze shutters again, and he sweeps on without a word.

Fine. Keep ignoring me if you must, Bax. It changes nothing.

I came here with a vital mission, and I intend to see it through.

Chapter Eleven



Elara

The work is slow going. Without Bax's full cooperation, instituting new systems department-wide remains a challenge. But gradually, scrolls give way to spreadsheets. Quills and ink pots replaced by sleek computers and scanners.

The demons under Bax are wary at first. But as the changes smooth out the daily grind, I see spirits lifting. Simple fixes like an espresso machine in the breakroom are met with tears of joy. Apparently, the last coffee machine mysteriously disappeared years ago and was never replaced.

Bit by bit, the tides turn. My inbox fills with department memos marked "URGENT: Please Update!" Records that once took weeks to locate now take seconds. The benefits become undeniable.

Which is why I'm shocked when I receive a meeting invite from Bax himself. Subject: Integration Strategy.

After the petition incident, I've been avoiding Bax as much as he'd avoided me. For days, I've turned and walked in the other direction whenever I caught a glimpse of those elegant horns or the slightest boom of his deep voice. And I've declined his repeated requests to see me, citing excuses about urgent paperwork and deadlines.

Part of me knows I'm being petty, but a larger part is simply afraid of what Bax might say if we're alone again. I can't handle more rejection after opening myself up. And my track record for maintaining composure around him is...lacking.

So receiving a formal meeting request from him triggers my fight-or-flight instincts. Every logical bone urges me to make another excuse. But the professional part of my brain knows avoiding him forever isn't sustainable. We have to work together, even if the thought makes my pulse race for all the wrong reasons now.

Taking a deep breath, I accept the meeting invite, heart pounding at the prospect of being trapped with Bax in his office. But I refuse to let personal turmoil stand in the way of the overhaul's progress.

When the appointed time arrives, I smooth my hair and clothes before stepping into the lion's den once more. This time, Bax waits behind his desk.

There's no trace of any emotion, just cool reserve.

Bax leans back in his imposing leather chair, tenting his clawed fingers. Fingers that had been pressing against my crotch, two of them slipping inside me. The memory flashes through me like a bright light and I frown, silently berating myself.

That had been a mistake. I need to remember that. It won't happen again.

I hate him for it. I hate myself for dwelling on it. But more than anything, I hate I can remember how good he'd felt as he'd stroked deep inside me.

The memory haunts me every night, stirring a heat I can't seem to extinguish no matter what I do.

"I believe it's time we...revisit the overhaul initiative with fresh eyes." He speaks. His tone is casually professional, but tension simmers beneath. His eyes, for one, flash as he stares at me. Does he realize he's looking at me like he'd singe my clothes off again? "Certain changes might make things work better together."

My eyebrows shoot upward, but I quickly school my features as I hide a triumphant smile. Maybe my work is paying off after all. "I'm open to any suggestions."

He nods. "I'll have my team compile a list of 'pain points' for your perusal."

"Excellent."

I leave the meeting with a strange sense of happiness and despair. It seems he's finally coming around. But on the other hand, we're moving straight on as if nothing happened in that library...and as if I didn't see that petition of him trying to get me fired either.

I take a deep breath as I return to my desk. Ignoring the pain in my heart, this is a win. This is what I'm here for.

But I should know better than to underestimate a sly demon. After sending me a towering stack of "Suggested Revisions" to pore through, Bax somehow produces an even bigger stack of new changes for me to incorporate.

Soon I'm drowning in a sea of edits, addendums, and exceptions. Bax needles me at every turn: "This didn't account for the moon cycle's effect on soul weighing," and, "The genealogy chart should be formatted in concentric circles of damnation."

Each day my inbox overflows with a thousand tiny tweaks. My carefully organized plans get lost in the onslaught of "fixes". At this rate, we'll end up

right back where we started!

I finally confront Bax in his office, where he's examining a struggling soul in a jar on his desk with bored detachment.

"This deluge of requests is absurd," I cross my arms across my chest and immediately release them when his gaze shifts to my breasts pushing up over my bra. The soul is suddenly engulfed in fire, a scream piercing the air before Bax kills the flames. The poor little thing pants, almost fainting in shock.

"My team is dedicated to perfection," Bax replies mildly, gaze shifting to mine. The heat in his eyes is ungodly. Swallowing hard, I force myself to not look away.

Is this the same demon that fucked me in an ancient library? The same one that cleaned me up afterward with so much care the memory's seared into my mind?

"You're hindering me." My hands form into fists as I frown at the huge demon. He gives the soul jar a little shake and the soul's amorphous form jiggles.

"By all means," he says, "override the recommendations if you see fit."

Fuming, I turn on my heel. I shouldn't let him get under my skin. That's clearly his aim.

From then on, I'm selective in implementing only suggestions that genuinely improve systems. But, unfortunately, Bax's sneak attacks don't end there. A few days later, after working all day in the archives, I return to the office to find him looming behind an employee using the new database.

Despite myself, the sight of him sends a delicious shiver right through me, and as if the devil can sense it, he turns and locks eyes with me.

"I—I don't—" The demon sitting beneath him types frantically on his keyboard. "I don't know what went wrong!"

"Um, boss..." When another from across the room stands up in his cubicle, red eyes wide with confusion and maybe fear, I know something is wrong.

My gaze snaps to another demon, shaking his head in horror as his wide eyes focus on the screen before him. Without even seeing what's there, a sinking feeling develops in my gut. When I move closer, I see error messages blazing across every monitor. The new database has crashed catastrophically.

My heart sinks as I rush to assess the damage. All the carefully digitized records are corrupted. Hours upon hours of planning and implementation gone. Days of meticulous data entry, wasted.

As I'm helplessly trying system reset after reset, my gaze shifts to the largest demon in the room. Bax is still where he is, looming over the lower demon as he watches me fight for my life. His expression is unreadable as he stands in the center of the chaos.

Realization hits me like a punch to the gut. *He did this.*

Red hot rage courses through me. Before I can think twice, I'm storming over to him. Grabbing him by the tie, I storm into his office, not caring that a small mortal like me is leading a frickin' archdemon of Hell like he's nothing but a dog on a lead. Shoving him inside, I slam the door behind us.

"*What the hell is wrong with you?*" I shout. All my frustration and stress come boiling over. "Do you have any idea how much precious time you've wasted with these antics? *Do you even care?*"

"Elara..."

"No! I'm *done!*" I yell, shoving Bax again. "Do you have any idea what your little stunt has cost me? Everything I've worked for, gone!"

Bax's eyebrows shoot up. "Elara..."

"What is wrong with you?" I shout, anger boiling over. "I've sacrificed everything for this job! My time, my dignity, my sanity—all to be toyed with by you!" I poke him hard in the chest. But I'm not finished. "This isn't a game to me! I'm not like you—I don't enjoy cruelty or torment! Not all of us have the luxury of eternity, Bax. I took this job out of desperation. My sister's entire future depends on the money from this contract. And you treat it all so frivolously..."

My voice cracks, tears of frustration spilling over. "As if I'm nothing. Well, I'm not nothing! But I guess that doesn't matter to a heartless demon like you."

Before he can say another word, I'm storming back out. Not caring about the many demons standing and watching the fiasco. Not caring I'm wearing my heart on my sleeve.

Blindly, I storm through twisting corridors, tears blurring my vision. I don't care where I end up, as long as it's far from Bax and the smoldering wreckage of my dreams.

But as with Hell and Damnation Financial, without a purpose in mind, you tend to end up where you need to go.

The bar isn't much, just a hole in the wall tucked away in one of Hell's many winding corridors. The sign hanging above the door creaks ominously, the letters barely visible in the dim lighting: "The Devil's Brew." I push open

the door, the scent of cheap booze and stale smoke washing over me.

Inside, the bar is bathed in a dim reddish light. Rough laughter and smoke fill the gloom. The mix of strange and unfamiliar faces look up from their drinks as I enter, their expressions ranging from mild curiosity to outright fear. I ignore them, striding to the bar and sliding onto a worn stool. The bartender—a demon with too many eyes and not enough ears—eyes me warily.

“Whiskey. Leave the bottle,” I croak. I know drinking away pain never works, but right now I’m desperate for any escape.

The bartender nods, pouring a tumbler full and sliding it towards me. I down it in one go, the liquid fire scorching its way down my throat.

Round after round, I lose myself in the burn of the alcohol, each glass a brief respite from the gnawing anger and hurt. The demons keep their distance, their sidelong glances seem tinged with...fear? I must look deranged in my disheveled state.

But I can’t find the humor in it. Not tonight.

I keep drinking, the world around me blurring until all I can focus on is the sharp sting of the alcohol and the dull throb of my heart. I’m on the verge of ordering another drink when the drink catches up to me and I pass out atop the bar. When I come to, a demon bouncer is dragging me outside. “You’re cut off, human. Sleep it off elsewhere.”

Humiliated, I shuffle into an alley. What am I doing? This won’t help matters. Bax may have dealt the blow, but wallowing in self-pity solves nothing.

As I sober up, steely determination settles over me. My goals remain unchanged, no matter these temporary setbacks. Starting tomorrow, I’ll redouble my efforts, on my terms this time.

With renewed conviction, I stumble my way to the bus stop. The late-night bus will take me to Upper Hellfire Street and I can sleep this off in my cozy bed in my free-for-now penthouse.

I weave through the winding streets, the world tilting and blurring around me. The harsh, otherworldly lights of Hell’s cityscape dance and flicker in my vision. Demons of all shapes and sizes scatter as I approach, their eyes wide, their mutterings lost in the haze of the alcohol still clouding my senses. That’s right. Buzz off.

I barely register their fear, too consumed by my thoughts and the gnawing pit in my stomach.

The bus stop is a beacon in the swirling chaos, the only solid, stable thing in my world right now. I collapse onto the bench, the cold metal seeping through my clothes, grounding me. I close my eyes, the darkness behind my eyelids a spot of relief from the whirling colors in my vision.

The bus arrives with a hiss and a groan, its doors creaking open to reveal a packed interior. Damn. I'll probably have to stand and I'm hardly steady on my feet. But when the demons inside glance my way, their eyes widen in fear. A wordless ripple passes through the crowd, and like a wave receding from the shore, they scramble to the back, pressing against each other in their haste to create as much distance as possible between us.

I can't fathom why, I've never experienced this on the bus before, but I don't have the energy to care right now. I shrug and stagger into the suddenly vacant front seat, the bus jerking into motion as soon as I'm seated. The world outside the window becomes a blur of lights and colors, a swirling vortex that lulls me into a restless sleep.

The abrupt stop of the bus jolts me awake. I blink, disoriented, as the doors slide open. The sign outside reads "Hellfire Street." I frown, confused, I hadn't pressed the bell. But the bus driver, a massive demon with rows of serrated teeth, simply grunts and ushers me off the bus without a word as if he can't wait to be rid of my presence. As soon as my shoes hit the pavement, the bus screeches off with a speed that sends a gush of air flying around me.

The street outside is eerily quiet, the towering buildings casting long shadows that stretch out into the night. The demons on the street scatter at my approach, their eyes wide and fearful. I don't understand why, but again, I'm too tired to care.

Finally reaching the looming edifice of Hellfire Hotel, I slump against the cold stone of the building. The smooth surface is a stark contrast to the chaotic whirl of my thoughts, the coolness seeping into me, grounding me. I decide to rest here for a few minutes, just to gather my thoughts.

Leaning against the wall, I slide down to the pavement, my knees drawn up to my chest. My thoughts are a whirl, spinning and twirling, the events of the day replaying in a never-ending loop.

The night stretches on, the city's cacophony fading into a distant hum. The demons continue to give me a wide berth, their eyes wide with something akin to fear or respect. It's a mystery that I'll solve another day.

For now, I close my eyes, the weariness pulling me into its embrace. The last fleeting thought before I succumb to sleep is a promise to myself:

tomorrow, I'll start anew.

I'll fight, not for Bax, not for Hell and Damnation Financial, but for myself and my sister. I'll make it through, on my own terms.

Chapter Twelve



Bax

E lara storms out of my office, leaving me with a room filled with her righteous anger. Her accusations hang in the air like a curse. The door slams shut behind her, the sound echoing in the tense silence. I stand there, stunned and fuming.

Hell's bells, what a temper.

I didn't crash the system. Damn it, why would I do that? It was a glitch, a stupid, unavoidable glitch. Just as I'd been trying to explain to the lower demon when she walked in.

But she didn't give me a chance to explain. She just assumed the worst and stormed off. It's maddening and somewhat...exciting. I can't remember the last time someone stormed off on me. It's...refreshing.

But that doesn't mean I'm going to let it slide. Oh no, not at all.

It's not easy following a woman in Hell who doesn't want to be followed, especially when you're trying to be discreet. I'm not exactly inconspicuous. But I manage. I keep my distance, trailing her through the winding corridors. Her rage is palpable, even from a distance. It's like a beacon, leading me straight to her.

I watch as she stumbles into a bar. The Devil's Brew. Not exactly the classiest place in Hell, but it'll do in a pinch. I slip in behind the shadows, far enough away that she can't see me. I watch her throw back shot after shot. She's trying to drown her sorrows, and it's a sight that twists something in my gut.

It's one thing to see her angry, but this...this is something else entirely. It's not right. It's not her. This isn't the same woman who looked at the library with such awe, who fought for what she believed was right, who stood up to an Archdemon without flinching.

I...can't stand it. Seeing her like this. It's a revelation that I can't quite process, a feeling that's too raw, too new.

Using my power, I make my presence known. It's a subtle thing, a shift in the air, a drop in the temperature. But it's enough. The demons in the bar sense it. They go still, their eyes wide as they glance around in fear. They know an Archdemon is near, they can feel it. And they know better than to

cause trouble.

I watch as Elara leaves the bar, a clear stumble in her step. She's drunk, more than drunk, and it's a sight that tugs at that same spot in me. I follow her, keeping a close eye as she makes her way through the streets. The demons she passes give her a wide berth, their eyes wide with fear the moment their gazes find me. They can sense my power, my anger. And they know better than to cross me.

Elara finally stops at a bus stop, slumping onto the bench. She's a sight, her clothes disheveled, her hair a mess.

And a deep realization hits me.

I did this.

Bax Daemonus. *I've done this to her.*

It should thrill me. Send a deep source of satisfaction through me for achieving something so very basic to my demonic desires. But that thrill doesn't come.

There is no satisfaction here.

There's something about Elara, something that pulls at me. Something that almost made me forget the rules that bind us when she whimpered into my mouth as I fucked her tight little pussy.

I watch as she closes her eyes, the lines on her forehead smoothing out as she gives in to the exhaustion. It's not long before the bus arrives, and I use my power again. The driver senses me, his eyes going wide as he opens the doors for Elara. She gets on, the demons inside the bus scrambling to get as far away from her as possible. They sense me, and they fear me. Good.

I follow the bus, keeping pace as it winds its way through the city. When it stops, I'm there. I watch as Elara stumbles off, her steps unsteady. My gaze follows her as she makes her way to the Hellfire Hotel, her movements slow and uncertain.

She doesn't make it far. Just a few steps away from the entrance, she slumps against the wall, sliding down to sit on the pavement. She's a pitiful sight. Her body slumped, her head resting against her knees. And it's a sight that twists my gut, a feeling that I can't quite put a name to.

I can't just leave her there. I won't.

So, I approach, my steps slow and careful. I don't want to startle her. But as I get closer, I realize she's asleep. Her chest rises and falls in a steady rhythm, her face relaxed.

I reach out, gently lifting her into my arms. She's light, so very light. Her

head lolls against my chest, her breath warm as she mumbles something in her sleep and burrows deeper against me. It stirs something in me, a feeling that's both foreign and familiar. It's...unsettling.

Carrying her to her room is easy. I've got the strength and the power, and no one dares to stop me. Not when they can sense my power, my anger. They know better than to cross me, especially when I'm like this.

The hotel door opens easily, and I stride through the opulent lobby. The doorman, a lesser demon with no horns, all but trips over himself in his haste to get out of my way. I suppress a smirk. Fear has its uses.

Once we're in the elevator, I take a moment to look at Elara. Even asleep, she's a sight to behold. Her hair is a mess, her clothes rumped, but there's a determination in her, an unwavering spirit that I can't help but admire. She's fighting battles on all fronts, standing up to me, to the demons of Hell, even to her own fears. She's brave, braver than anyone I've ever known.

The elevator dings, and the doors slide open to reveal the penthouse. The place is luxurious, a stark contrast to the chaos of Hell outside. I carry her to the bedroom, gently laying her down on the plush bed. I take a moment to tuck her in, pulling the blanket up to her chin. She sighs in her sleep, a soft, content sound that makes me stay by her side for far longer than I should.

As I turn to leave, I find myself pausing, looking back at her. There's a vulnerability to her now, a stark contrast to the fiery spirit I've come to know. It's a side of her she's kept hidden, a side I'm only seeing now.

I shake my head, forcing myself to step away. This isn't me. I'm a demon, a creature of darkness. I'm not supposed to care, not supposed to feel. But as I look at Elara, asleep and vulnerable, I know it's there.

That protectiveness.

That *possession*.

With one last look at her, I leave, closing the door behind me. The hotel room is silent, the only sound is the soft rustle of sheets as Elara shifts in her sleep. It's peaceful, a stark contrast to the chaos within me.

Chapter Thirteen



Elara

I wake with a pounding headache, disoriented and confused. Where am I? This isn't the dingy little apartment I share with Tessa. As I glance around the opulent penthouse suite, memories from last night slowly come back to me—the fight with Bax, storming out, drinking myself into oblivion at the bar. I must have blacked out at some point. But how did I get back here?

I blink blearily at the clock on the wall; the hands pointing to a time that has my heart hammering in my chest. Shit. I'm late. I'm so, so late. Scrambling out of bed, I hurry to the bathroom, my movements clumsy, my head pounding. This is bad. I must have drunk more than I thought last night. I can barely remember getting home, let alone going to bed.

I shower quickly, the hot water doing little to soothe my throbbing head. Dressing myself happens in record time as I pull on a pair of slacks and a blouse, not caring if they match. After brushing my teeth, I gulp down some painkillers for this throbbing hangover, silently cursing myself. This is why I don't drink much.

I'm just shutting my door when my cell phone rings, the sound grating on my already frayed nerves. I almost ignore it, but one glance at the screen, and my heart skips a beat when I see my sister's name. Is something wrong?

I answer, my voice a croak.

"Elara!" my sister's voice is excited, her words tumbling out in a rush. "I can't believe it! You've paid my entire tuition?! All three years of it?! And there was even enough left over for my trip to Spain! I can't believe it!"

I choke on air, my eyes wide. I haven't sent any money. At least not enough to cover even half of what she's suggesting. I couldn't have, not with the contract not yet complete. I try to speak, to tell her that there must be a mistake, but she barrels on, her words a flurry of excitement and joy.

"Elara, I can't thank you enough! This...it means so much to me. You're the best!"

I don't have the heart to tell her the truth, not when she sounds so happy. So, I let her talk, her words washing over me as I try to make sense of it all.

I walk the rest of the way to the elevator in a daze, my mind a whirl as I

try to process everything. How did the money get there?

I'll have to sort that out later.

The elevator crashes to the ground floor and for once, I'm truly thankful for its death fall. I reach the lobby in record time and hurry out onto the street, hustling to the bus stop. The bus is crammed full of other late commuters, demons jostling and grumbling as I shove my way on. For a brief moment, I have a flash of memory, the demons backing away from me in fear last night. But I shake it off as some drunken hallucination.

My head is pounding too much to think about it right now. I need to get to work. I'm dreading facing Bax after storming out on him yesterday. Surely he'll have my head for it, or worse. But I don't have much choice.

The bus finally wheezes to a stop at my building after what feels like an everlasting ride spent crammed between countless foul-smelling demons. I push my way through the cramped aisle and stumble gratefully off the bus, the imposing black tower of Damnation Financial looming above me.

I steel myself as I enter the office, expecting to face Bax's explosive wrath for my dramatic exit yesterday. But instead of anger, I'm met with a round of...applause.

I stop short, confusion washing over me. The demons I pass break into smiles and cheers, shouting things like "I haven't had this much fun filing paperwork since the Great Plague of 1348!" and "Damnation feels more damnable than ever!"

Meanwhile, Asmodeus bustles over, a grin stretched wide across his face. "Elara! The new systems are working even better than expected. You've really turned this place around!"

I blink slowly, wondering if I'm still drunk or hallucinating. The office has been utterly transformed overnight. The drab cubicles are now sleek and modern with ergonomic chairs. Gleaming new tech and equipment adorn every desk. The musty stacks of paper are gone, replaced by an orderly digital filing system. White motivational posters with slogans like "Creativity Counts (So Get Creative with Punishments)" and "Seize the Day (by the Throat)" line the charcoal-grey walls.

The leaks in the ceiling have been patched and reinforced. The exposed wiring and flickering lights have been replaced with recessed lighting on dimmers, illuminating the space in a cool, professional glow.

A giant video wall dominates one wall, displaying real-time data analytics. Chic, efficient, and brimming with technological innovations. It's

everything I've been pushing for, magically implemented overnight. I can hardly believe it's the same workplace that was ready to implode just yesterday.

"I...I don't understand," I stammer, still struggling to process this abrupt 180. "How did..."

Before I can demand answers, Zarien slinks up beside me. His clammy hand slithers around my waist.

"We should celebrate your success later, Elara," he leers, tongue flicking out obscenely. "Maybe with a private party for two?"

I blink at him, stunned.

Suddenly Zarien goes completely still. The arm around my waist bends off my body at an awkward angle and the sound of bones breaking cracks the air. Every demon in the office is suddenly looking at us, as a look of horror transforms Zarien's face. And then he's gone. All that remains is his clothes that flutter silently to the floor.

The other demons in the office cheer and I turn my bewildered gaze to Asmodeus.

He shrugs. "Transferred to the lowest level of hell, where he belongs."

"But who..." Even though the words slip from my lips, my head turns slowly as I speak, my point of focus Bax Daemonus' office. My breath hitches in my throat.

The privacy of the frosted glass is gone and Bax is right there. Sitting at his desk. His eyes on me. Our gazes lock. He's been watching me this entire time and the thought makes it hard to breathe.

I swallow hard. "Asmodeus...who implemented all these changes."

Even though I can't pull my gaze away from Bax, I can feel Asmodeus' smile. "Only one person could."

I swallow hard again, taking one step toward the center of my chaos, but Asmodeus stops me with a soft hand on my shoulder.

"Elara," he says, "there's something you should know, before you go in there."

It takes great effort to pull my gaze away from the archdemon so I can look at Asmodeus.

"I've known Bax for a long time. Long before you ever existed," he says. "There's a power here. An undercurrent. You are in danger."

My eyebrows lift slightly.

"Your soul..." Asmodeus presses. "It would not be wise to continue."

Your job here...is done.”

But, is it? I swallow hard as I pull my gaze away from him and face Bax once more. He’s right of course. Everything I wanted to implement is done and it didn’t take six months either.

I should be happy.

So why...why is there some part of me that’s feeling lost and alone?

With each measured step forward, it’s like Damnation Financial fades around me. The closer I get to Bax’s office, the more that thing inside me grows and demands attention. And before long, I’m right before the heavy mahogany door.

My palm presses against the wood and it opens slowly.

I swallow hard, standing in the doorway and facing the archdemon before me.

“Bax,” I whisper.

“Elara,” he says.

He doesn’t move an inch and yet still I’m drawn forward until I’m standing right before him. At my back, the door slides closed, shutting out the rest of the office around us.

“You...you did this.” My voice cracks and I can’t seem to care. “You implemented all my changes.”

That red-hot gaze of his searches my face.

“I thought you hated my ideas. I thought you didn’t care.” I release a shuddering breath. “Yesterday, when I stormed out, I—”

My gaze falls. How can I admit I was so hurt I almost drank myself into a coma? Risking seeing annoyance on his face, I lift my eyes back to his.

The expression on his face is one I’ve never seen before. Gone is the cocky surety that is always there to be replaced by something I could almost mistake as caring.

Bax searches my face. “Yesterday...was it about what happened between us in the library?” he asks carefully.

The memory causes a fresh wave of pain. “Let’s not talk about that.” I choke out. “That’s in the past. A mistake. Something that didn’t mean anything to you, clearly. You have many lovers.” Ugh, just remembering that female demon from that first day makes something akin to jealousy rise within me. “It was nothing. Anyway—”

Bax rises and suddenly he’s before me. “It wasn’t nothing, Elara.” His voice drops low. “Trust me.”

I laugh bitterly. “Trust you? How can I possibly trust someone who delighted so much in sabotaging *everything* I did? I mean, you’ve fixed it now. Am I supposed to not be upset?”

His jaw tightens. “You’re right. I made a hell of a mess of things. But don’t for a second believe you mean nothing to me.” His eyes blaze with sincerity. “You’ve worked your way far deeper under my skin than you realize.”

His words hold me speechless and I lift wide eyes to him.

With one hand, he gestures and the glass around his office turns completely opaque.

“You shouldn’t be here,” he whispers.

Another pang of pain. What is wrong with me?!

Forcing a nod, I start to turn. “Right. You’d made that painfully clear.”

He winces slightly before taking a step forward and I stop in my tracks.

Shoulders rigid, my hands form fists by my side. These swirling emotions. Why am I so unstable around this demon?

“Just tell me one thing. Why destroy all my work just to implement it the next day?” My anger from yesterday returns and I glare up at him. “Is this some power play? You just wanted to implement it all yourself?”

He steps closer, not answering my questions, and my brows dive. Lifting a hand, I try to stop him in his tracks. “Don’t you dare come closer to me. Not after what you did.”

He takes another step forward anyway. Silly me to think a demon like him would actually do what I asked for once.

“I said stop.” The growl on my voice almost surprises me. But Bax doesn’t stop. Only when he’s right before me, close enough I can feel his heat, does he finally halt.

“I didn’t sabotage your work, Elara.” His words are so soft, it stuns me into silence and I swallow hard, forcing down the lump rising in my throat. “It wasn’t me.”

A laugh erupts from me, bitter and hollow. “You expect me to believe that? After everything?”

“No. I don’t expect you to believe me,” Bax says steadily, his gaze boring into mine. “But I give you my word. I didn’t sabotage your work. There was a systems glitch. We traced it back to one technician.”

He pauses, a shadow passing over his face. “A technician who was clearly not being worked hard enough. His idleness led to incompetence

which led to the failure.”

Something in his tone, an earnestness I’ve rarely heard from him, stills my retort. I want to believe him. Gods, how I want to believe him. But the hurt, the anger, it all bubbles up inside me, a raging storm threatening to tear me apart.

“Why should I trust you, Bax?” My voice is a harsh whisper, a stark contrast to the earlier shouts. “Why, after everything?”

“Because,” he murmurs, closing the distance between us, “Across eons, you’re the first thing I’ve ever tried to resist, Elara.”

I stare at him, confused until his words sink in slowly, kindling a fragile hope.

Bax takes my hands in his, his touch impossibly gentle. “You intrigue me in a way no creature ever has, mortal or demon.” His thumbs brush over my knuckles. “I told myself it was mere fascination. That given time, I would grow bored, as with all things.”

His eyes meet mine, simmering with sincerity. “But the more we clashed, the more I wanted you near. It terrified me. And the more it terrified me, the more I lashed out, trying to force you away.”

My lips part in surprise. I had thought it was hatred, not fear, fueling his sabotage.

Bax continues hoarsely. “After what happened in the library, I convinced myself destroying your work would end this maddening fixation. But seeing your pain...” His hand cradles my cheek, wiping away tears I didn’t realize escaped. “I would rather face an eternity of torment than be the source of your suffering.”

I press into his palm, afraid to hope and yet unable to resist. “Then it’s really true? You didn’t sabotage the system?”

Remorse flits across his face. “As much as it pains me to do so, I speak the truth. I wanted to drive you away, but not like this.” His thumb grazes my lip. “Never like this.”

My heart stammers. But doubts still gnaw at me. “After everything between us...believing you now...”

Fire smolders in Bax’s eyes. “If I have to get on my knees and beg for a chance to prove myself, I’ll do it gladly.”

To my shock, he sinks gracefully down before me. The mighty archdemon, kneeling in supplication at my feet.

Chapter Fourteen



Bax

The words hang in the air between us, potent in their raw honesty. I know she wants to push me away, to shield herself from the tidal wave of emotions stirring within her. But she's rooted to the spot, caught in the intensity of my gaze.

I can see the desire warring with anger in her veins, a maelstrom of confusion and longing. She hates me for what I've done, for the chaos I've brought into her life.

Leaning forward, I press my face into her lap, inhaling deeply. How I've longed to scent her again. Resisting was so incredibly difficult.

Her breath hitches, the only sign of her surprise and I press closer into her, until there's no space left between us, until I can feel the rush of blood in her veins...the pulse at her center.

"I hate you," she whispers.

My lips curve into a smile. Ahh, music to my ears.

Hatred is the highest form of devotion. It consumes the soul, spreading like a cancer to taint everything it touches. Such all-encompassing loathing has far more weight than fleeting notions of love.

And I revel in it.

No sweeter words could she possibly speak to me. Her hatred is a gift, proof that I have left an indelible mark upon her soul. While love fades, hatred endures.

"I don't want to see you in pain," I growl against her slacks. "Never again."

For even though I relish in sin, pain, and torment, what I crave most is her pleasure. Not the fleeting highs mortals chase, but a darker ecstasy. I want to push her to the brink, draw out her carnal hunger, awaken desires she never knew she had.

I will show her pleasures to make the heavens weep. Raw, primal, and obscene. I will wring every ounce of bliss from her mortal flesh, consume her mind with lust, make her beg for sins to match my own. Her pleasure will be tainted by darkness and depravity.

She will come to crave my touch, the wicked delights only I can give. I

will ruin her for any mortal lover. She will know satisfaction only in my arms, surrender herself fully to the profane passions I unleash in her. Mind, body, and hollowed soul—I will have her pleasure utterly.

Before she can protest, I rip her slacks in two, her pale skin baring itself to me as I press my face into the center of her thighs. One more flick of a finger and her panties are in shreds at her feet. Her thick musk envelops me immediately and I groan so loud the walls shake.

I've lost count of how many times I've imagined this. Imagined her. And though my angel is pure, this scent—her arousal—is potent.

My tongue flicks out, lapping at her, tasting her, teasing her. It's like nectar from Satan's garden. Her thighs tense in response, her muscles contracting as she tries to resist.

"So sweet," I groan.

Pressing my mouth against her again, ecstasy fills me at the way she shudders, moaning above me. I suck her clit into my mouth, flicking my tongue against it. Elara shudders, stumbling back until her naked ass presses into the edge of my desk. Hands gripping the edge, I can see the tension in her fists as she holds on tight.

"That's it, sweet angel," I murmur against her clit. "Let me taste you."

Elara whimpers as I suck her into my mouth again, sliding the little nub between the forked section of my tongue and fucking it within the groove. It pulses against me, throbbing as I lap at her before nibbling on the sensitive skin.

And my angel can't resist. Her hips buck, pressing into my lips as a moan wracks from her frame. Her legs fall open wider, granting me better access to her dripping pussy as my saliva mixes with her honey to drip to the floor beneath us.

My fingers trace the swollen lips, gathering moisture as they slide along her slit and down to her ass. I trace the edges of her tight little hole, spreading her cheeks and pressing my index finger against the little puckered bud.

She's so wet. So perfect. I add another digit and then another, sliding both into her pussy, needing to stretch her, needing to feel her suck me in.

A shuddered breath huffs out from her lips as she moans. "Bax—"

"Yes, angel. Take me in."

The image of her becoming undone on my tongue is everything.

I know I'm being selfish, but I'm not thinking of her. I'm thinking of myself. I want to make her feel more than good, I want to make her feel

pleasure so intense, it will consume her.

My tongue is relentless, the hot, slick muscle lashing against her pussy, and I watch my angel fall apart. I feel her muscles clench and release, her inner walls clenching around my finger.

Warm honey flows from her pussy into my mouth and I lap it up, sucking and licking until she does it again, her body shuddering with the force of an orgasm. Her muscles pulsing, contracting against my fingers, her mouth hanging open as she pants and moans, her hands gripping the desk for dear life, her eyes closed.

I find my cock dripping with pre-cum, straining against the fly of my slacks, wanting to be buried deep inside her again.

“I hate you so much,” she whispers, fresh tears forming in her eyes.

What little heart I have left shatters.

“I know,” I reply, voice husky with desire.

This is why I’d pulled back. This is why I’d chosen to do what comes naturally to a demon like me. Torment her. Make her feel pain. To push her away, I did the exact thing that was expected of me. Because this soul is too pure for Bax Daemonus. I do nothing but corrupt and destroy. And after that moment in the library, I realized one thing.

I want Elara Hunt for myself.

And hence, I should resist.

Only now...here I am, on my knees before her. A great archdemon kneeling in front of a mortal, her slick on his tongue, and a thirst for more in his chest.

I should pull back now. Stay the path I’ve chosen and make her leave this place.

But I can’t pull away. And suddenly, Elara’s on her knees before me.

Her lips crash against mine, the world falling away as she meets me with enough fervor to make me fall back in surprise. I hold steady, taking everything she’s offering and still greedy for more. Her kiss is heated, desperate, a release of all the tension that’s been building between us.

Growling against her lips, I rise with her in my arms, lifting her onto my desk, papers scattering as she wraps her legs around my waist.

“Won’t they hear us?” she whispers.

The thought of my subordinates listening to her exquisite moans makes a flare of jealousy shoot through me. With a flick of my hand, we’re at one of the abandoned altars far away from any demon ears or eyes.

There's no room for thoughts, for doubts. There's only this moment, this female, and the undeniable pull between us.

Elara

The towering spire we materialize on overlooks the fiery expanse of Hell.

The ancient altar itself is carved from dark material, intricate symbols and scenes of depravity etched into its surface. It stands at the very precipice of a jagged outcropping, a sheer drop all around down to the lava flows and smoldering wastelands below.

My eyes widen as I take in the sweeping vista before us. Rivers of molten fire carve glowing paths through barren plains. Volcanoes spew plumes of ash into the sky. In the distance, the imposing black tower of Lucifer's palace juts up from the glowing embers blanketing the ground.

Up here, the sulfurous haze gives way to a clear, crimson-tinged sky. The chaotic noise of Hell fades into the distance, replaced by the gentle whispers of hot wind. It's oddly peaceful.

Bax walks slowly and sets me down on the warm, smooth stone, and as our lips collide once more, Bax's tongue slithers into my mouth, exploring every crevice. His kiss is overpowering, intoxicating, and I'm lost in the sensation of his lips over mine, even as I taste myself on his tongue. I break the kiss, gasping for air, only for him to move to my neck, biting and sucking on the sensitive skin there. His fangs graze against my smooth skin, sending shivers through my frame.

A moan escapes my lips, and I feel his curve into a wicked smile. "Do that again, angel," he growls, the words filled with a demonic edge that sends more shivers down my spine.

I moan again, unable to form words as he continues his assault on my neck. Instead, my hands are busy with the buttons of his shirt, his skin pebbling underneath my fingers. He chuckles, a deep, lusty laugh that only makes me want this more.

"So eager, Elara. I might have to punish you for that."

"Punish me?" I pant.

Bax growls, lifting his head as his eyes flash flames. "Don't tempt me, angel."

I don't care. I don't care about the consequences. I don't care about anything except the feel of him beneath my fingertips. Bax's shirt comes off

easily, and I run my fingers over his chest, tracing the ridges of his muscles, the lines of the thin scars on his chest. He's warm, so warm under my hands, and I press myself against him, needing to feel his body against mine.

I drop my head to his shoulder, my lips finding the soft flesh at the base of his neck. Something makes me take the skin between my teeth, nipping him lightly.

Bax growls, the sound reverberating through his body, and lifts me higher on the altar, my back against the scorched stone wall as my legs tighten around his waist.

I feel the moment he flicks his hand and superficial flames whip around us, dissolving all our clothes and lighting the edges of the altar.

I'm suddenly bare before him and I ease back a little more, realizing that for the first time, he's bare before me, too.

My eyes widen at the sight of him. His body is perfect, his skin that deep crimson, reflecting the shades of firelight around the altar. He's all muscle and sinew, every inch of him seeming to be chiseled from marble. On his head, two smaller horns spring from his temples, silhouetted by the larger ones that curve up from his skull.

He's like a something unreal. A dream. And I can't help but reach out to trace the lines of his body with my fingertips. His muscles jump under my touch, making me smile as he takes a deep breath, his eyes darkening as he studies my reaction.

As if unable to hold back, he pushes against me, his hands gripping mine, and I feel his erection pressing against my thighs. Unable to help it, I rub myself against him, reveling in the jolt of pleasure it sends through me.

My hands slide down the planes of his chest, biting my lip in concentration as I move lower. Then Bax's claws are over mine, guiding me until I grip his cock with both hands. I can't help but suck in a breath at the sheer size of him, the velvety smoothness of his skin. Just the memory of him plowing into me, the hardness, the thickness, the stretch—looking at the beast before me I can't believe I actually took it the first time. The sight of him makes a pulse go through my core, my pussy tightening on nothing and wanting it all.

His cock is deep crimson, dark veins peeking through underneath. Those ridges that drove me insane last time decorate the underside, forming a forked pattern that goes all the way to the tip. On either side of his shaft, raised veins form a pattern leading upward. My fingers slide over each one, eliciting a

deep rumble from his chest. That's when something whips behind him that catches my attention.

With a sound that's half-sigh, half-growl, Bax's wings unfurl. I gasp, both at the suddenness and the sheer spectacle of it. His wings are magnificent. Spread wide, the sight is as breathtaking as it is intimidating, adding yet another layer to the primal, otherworldly allure of this demon before me.

I'm left speechless, tension and need growing between us, and when his barbed tail curls to wrap around my arm, I gasp a little.

He's in his true demon form.

It's so strange, and yet so intimate. His wings, his tail, his large hands covering mine as I run them along his heated thickness. Bax is bare before me. As I am before him.

I've never seen anything so beautiful.

"I think you need to be taught a lesson, angel, for your forwardness." His voice is low, growling, and I can't help my grin.

Bax's claws move to my hips, and then he's pressing me back against the altar. My body trembles with anticipation as the flames surrounding the altar sway and lick, casting shadows and light over my nakedness. When I feel the brush of his velvet head right against the center of my folds, another throb of pleasure goes through me.

Bax growls and then he's slipping into me, slowly, taking his time as he did before. Filling me up and making me get used to his size as he presses me deeper into the altar. I let out a loud moan at the intrusion, my nails digging into his shoulders as he moves.

"Damnation," he spits, the word laced with heat and need. His hips rock against me, forcing his thickness deeper, touching every single nerve in my channel as he pulls back, only to slide forward again.

"Still hate me?" he growls.

"More than anything," I whimper and he chuckles, leaning down to capture my lips as his cock slams deep.

And then he's pounding into me, and I'm moaning, my head thrown back as the pleasure swells within me.

My eyes roll back, the skies of Hell fading as I'm overcome with ecstasy.

Bax's hips continue their relentless assault, an almost punishing thrust that makes my breath hitch. When his lips find mine again, he kisses me hard, growling into my mouth.

"You feel so *good*, Elara," he growls, his voice thick with desire. "So

tight and *warm*. It's as if you were made for me."

His hips grind against mine, his movements slow and deliberate. "Do you feel that?" he whispers against my lips, his breath hot against my skin. "That's me, deep inside you. Claiming you."

His words are like a drug, sending a rush of heat through me. I whimper in response, the sensations and his words overwhelming me.

The slow build of pleasure peaks, and when his tail slips between us, pressing hard against that little nub, I shatter, my orgasm washing over me in a wave of intense sensation. I cry out, my body convulsing as the pleasure consumes me.

"Elara," Bax purrs, his voice a low, gravelly rumble that resonates deep within me. His hand squeezes harder on my hip, his fingers digging in to keep me anchored. The look in his eyes is intense, a blend of desire and something almost too overwhelming to put into words.

And then, I feel it—a thick swelling almost as if his cock is growing in size. The intensity of the stretch makes my eyes roll back as the base of his cock swells and locks inside me. Sweet honey brims around that one spot, making my pussy clench and throb hard.

"That's right, angel?" Bax murmurs, his voice a velvet whisper against my skin. "Every inch of you filled, every part of you taken. You're mine, Elara, now and always."

I whimper, the sheer intensity of the sensation, the raw, primal reality of his words and him knotted within me, overwhelming all my senses. I rise and crash again, pure pleasure making my body quake.

At that moment, I know that everything, absolutely everything, is different. *I'm* different.

I'm not just Elara, the newest assistant. I'm not just the girl who lost her parents and only has her sister for a friend. I'm not even the girl who fell for her boss.

This very moment has changed me...and there's no turning back.

Chapter Fifteen



Elara

I wake up swathed in the soft embrace of my bed, the sheets cool against my skin. The comfort and familiarity of my suite envelop me, a stark contrast to the chaotic whirl of emotions and memories from the previous night. My mind is hazy, the events of yesterday a blurry mishmash of sensations and feelings.

I remember falling asleep on top of the altar, nestled against Bax's chest, his arms around me. His heat was a comforting presence, a solid anchor in the tumultuous sea of my emotions. But now...now, I'm home, alone in my bed. My heart clenches at the thought. How did I get here? Had Bax brought me home?

The memories flood back, unbidden. I remember the morning I'd woken up in my bed after my drunken adventure, the confusion and anxiety that had consumed me then. It is oddly familiar. Had Bax carried me home that day, too?

Yesterday was unlike anything I'd ever experienced, the connection between us so profound it had shifted the very essence of my being. Again and again, he took me on that altar, filling me to the brim with his spend, only to take me again and again once more. The taste of his lips, the feel of his skin against mine, the sound of his voice whispering sweet nothings into my ear...it was all so vivid, so real.

But now, alone in my bed, a sense of unease creeps in. I can't shake off the feeling that something is wrong. The fear that Bax may have retreated into his shell again gnaws at me, the anxiety making my heart pound in my chest.

I scramble out of bed, my eyes landing on a note by the nightstand. My breath catches as I reach for it, my hand trembling. The note is simple, Bax's handwriting clear and precise:

"Elara,

Your work at Damnation Financial is concluded. You've done more than we ever expected, and for that, I'm grateful. The agreed-upon compensation has been transferred to your account.

I enclose a portal ticket for your journey back to the Aboveworld with this

note.

Thank you for everything.

Bax.”

The words hit me like a punch to the gut. I can't breathe, can't think. Was I just...dismissed? Did our time together mean nothing to him? The thought fills me with hurt and doubt. No—yesterday was different. I trusted Bax in a way I've trusted no one.

I stare at the note, my thoughts a whirl, and anger bubbles up inside me, hot and fierce. With a shaking hand, I grab my phone and dial the office.

“You've reached the audits department, Ragoth speaking. Please tell me the name of the soul you want tormented.”

“Ragoth, it's Elara.”

“Elara!—”

Ragoth is suddenly cut off as someone else takes the phone.

“Elara?” I recognize Asmodeus' voice, and he sounds tense. “Elara, we weren't expecting...”

“I need to speak to Bax. Can you transfer me to his office, please?”

“I'm afraid that's not possible right now.”

“Why not?” I demand, my voice rising in pitch. “Is he not in?”

Asmodeus is silent for a moment too long.

“What's going on, Asmodeus?”

“As I said, Elara, it's not possible. Bax can't come to the phone.”

“I swear, Asmodeus, if you don't tell me what's happening, I will come down there myself!”

There's a long pause, then a heavy sigh. “Elara, it's a matter of your soul.”

His words drop on thick air, hanging there as I have to face them.

“What do you mean?” I ask, my heart pounding in my chest. “What's happened to Bax?”

“That's not for me to say. You should speak to Lucifer.”

“*Lucifer?*” I gasp, my blood running cold. “Why would I need to speak with Lucifer?”

Before Asmodeus can reply, there's a flash of light. Lucifer himself appears in my room. I instinctively grip the sheets to my bare body, but he doesn't seem to notice or care. “I believe I can answer that, Elara.” His eyes, dark and inscrutable, meet mine. My phone call with Asmodeus ends abruptly, leaving me alone with Lucifer, my heart pounding with fear and

uncertainty.

Lucifer's dark gaze scans the room, his presence filling the space with an oppressive weight. Even in my own suite, I suddenly feel like an intruder.

"Elara," he begins, his voice as smooth as silk, "Your work here at Damnation Financial has been...impressive. Your improvements to the soul audits department have truly exceeded my expectations."

He pauses, a small, inscrutable smile playing on his lips. "I suppose you must be relieved to return Aboveworld. After all, you've done your part, haven't you?"

His question hangs heavily in the air, laden with unspoken implications. I swallow hard, feeling the cold weight of his gaze. "I...have unfinished business here at Damnation."

His laughter is a low, dangerous rumble, like the stirrings of a dormant volcano. "Unfinished business, you say?" Lucifer's eyes gleam with a dangerous sort of amusement. "And what might that be?"

I hesitate, biting my lip. His gaze sharpens, and I feel a chill run down my spine.

"No need to answer," he says, his voice rich with amusement and something darker. "I think I can guess your reasons."

The unspoken name hangs between us, a silent accusation: Bax.

Lucifer's eyes narrow as he paces the room, the heavy silence broken only by the sound of my own heart beating hard in my chest.

"Elara," he begins, his voice cool and measured, "I understood when I hired you that there would be...temptations. After all, it's the nature of our kind." His gaze flickers to me, a dark amusement in his eyes. "But I did not anticipate—could not have anticipated—the extent to which you would tempt one of my highest-ranking officers."

My heart pounds in my chest at his words. "What are you talking about, Lucifer?"

He stops pacing, turning to face me. His expression is unreadable. "Possession, Elara. You've driven Bax to the point of possession."

The word reverberates through the room like a death knell. Possession? The implications of it cause a shudder to ripple through me. "I...I don't understand."

Lucifer's expression is pitiless. "Of course, you don't. You're from the Aboveworld. But here, in our realm, possession is a serious matter. It's not just about desire—it's a claim, an ownership. It can lead to a demon's

downfall.”

“But...Bax,” I stammer, “he...we...”

“Perhaps you didn’t intend for this to happen,” Lucifer interrupts, his voice ice-cold. “But it did. And now, you should leave. For both your sake and Bax’s.”

“I can’t just leave. I can’t—”

Lucifer’s eyes fix on mine, his gaze as sharp as a blade. “You’re not understanding the gravity of the situation, Elara,” he says, his voice low and stern. “This is not just about your soul or a simple desire. Bax wants to *possess* you.”

I flinch at his words.

His tone drops an octave. “This isn’t a light matter, Elara. It’s forbidden. This type of possession goes against the pact I have with my Father. Against the balance we’ve maintained.”

I feel my heart drop. “So, what...what does this mean for Bax?”

Lucifer sighs, but his next words are almost nonchalant. “It means he is being punished.”

“Punished?” My eyes widen, pinning him with my question.

“Tortured.”

The words hit me like a punch, stealing my breath away. “Tortured?” I echo, my voice coming out as a horrified whisper.

“Yes,” Lucifer confirms, his gaze heavy on me. “For his desire for you, for his intent of possession, Bax is paying a steep price.”

“Wait,” I say, my voice shaking. “If this is about my soul, then there must be something I can do to fix this. There has to be a way.”

Lucifer’s gaze is unreadable, his face a mask of cool indifference. “And what would you propose?”

I swallow hard, searching his face for any hint of empathy. “I...I don’t know. But there has to be something. Can I make a deal with you?”

Lucifer’s eyes suddenly glint and his laugh is a cold, harsh sound, devoid of any warmth or humor. “A deal? With me? You truly are desperate, aren’t you?”

“I’m willing to do anything,” I say, my voice barely a whisper. “Please, Lucifer. I can’t just abandon Bax. Not like this.”

Lucifer studies me for a moment. “Elara,” he says, his voice almost gentle, “This is a dangerous path you’re treading. Are you sure it’s one you want to walk down?”

“I’m sure,” I say, my voice firm. “If there’s a chance I can help Bax, I have to take it.”

Lucifer’s gaze is unflinching as he speaks. “You must understand, the implications of a relationship with Bax are...severe.” His voice holds a depth that sends a chill down my spine.

“What do you mean?” I ask, although a part of me already senses the answer.

Lucifer moves, pacing the room with a restless energy. “Should you choose to be with Bax, to accept his possession, you would be eternally damned. You would become a resident of the Underworld. Forever.”

His words reverberate through the silence, their weight pressing down on me. I feel as though I’ve been plunged into icy water, my mind racing to process the gravity of what he’s just revealed.

“Forever...” I echo, my voice barely a whisper. Images of Tessa spring into my mind. She’s all I have...and I’m all she has. How could I ever think of leaving her for a life down here? All because one demon has made me feel more than I have ever felt in all my time living Aboveworld. Pain. Hurt. So much pain and hurt. But also the most pleasure. So much pleasure.

The whole time I’ve been working with Bax, it felt like I was fighting for my life. And that’s simply because, for the first time in a long while, I was actually living. Not just going through the motions, caught in the endless rat race, just trying to survive.

Lucifer’s voice pierces through my thoughts. “It’s a monumental choice for a mortal to make. You would be giving up your place in the Aboveworld, trading it for an eternity here, with us.”

His gaze meets mine, holding me captive. “You must ask yourself: is your love for Bax worth an eternity of damnation?”

As Lucifer raises his hand, a shimmering portal begins to materialize in the room. Its swirling energy paints surreal accents of light and shadow on the walls, a vivid reminder of the threshold between two worlds, two realities.

“I have opened the way back to the Aboveworld, Elara,” Lucifer says, his voice echoing in the suddenly too-small space. His gaze is calculating, yet beneath the cool exterior, I can see a glimmer of...respect? “The choice is yours.”

I swallow, my throat dry. The enormity of the decision looms before me, a mountain I must either climb or circumvent. It’s not just about choosing between my world and the Underworld, between a life of normalcy and an

eternity of damnation.

It's about choosing between my soul and my love for Bax.

"I understand," I say, although my voice barely rises above a whisper.

With a final, lingering glance at the room that had been my home for what feels like a lifetime, I step towards the portal. My heart pounds in my chest, a wild rhythm that echoes in my ears. I'm on the precipice of a life-altering decision, with the weight of two souls on my shoulders.

Yet, despite the fear, despite the uncertainty, there's a sense of resolve within me. I'm ready to face whatever lies ahead.

I know what I need to do. There's only one real choice here.

"I'm ready," I say, my voice steadier than I feel.

And with that, I step through the portal, leaving behind the world of Damnation and stepping into the unknown.

Chapter Sixteen



Bax

The pain is insurmountable. Pure, raw torment. Methods of my own devising. I'm strung up by chains, my body hanging limply as searing hot lashes cut across my bare skin. Each whip crack is a fiery serpent, tearing through flesh and sinking its venomous fangs deep. But the physical pain is a mere nuisance. Despite the torture, my mind is fixated on her. Elara.

Her face is etched into my mind, her voice a soft whisper that echoes in the silence between each wave of pain. When Asmodeus enters the room, the look on his face tells me everything I need to know.

"She's gone, Bax," he confirms. "Returned Aboveworld."

Numbness washes over me, far colder than any underworld chill. The pain of the whip fades into insignificance, replaced by a gaping void in my chest. She left me. Of course, she did. Who could willingly embrace an eternity of damnation? Who could love a monster enough to sacrifice their soul, especially one as pure as hers?

As the torture resumes, I don't resist. I don't fight back. My shoulders sag under the weight of my failure, my arms hanging heavily from the chains. In all my existence, nothing has cut me deeper than Elara's rejection.

And, at the same time, I know she chose what's best.

She is pure light...and I am the darkness that would have corrupted her.

A week later, I wake in my condo, the familiar heat of the Underworld a lacking substitute for the warmth Elara brought into my life. It's a Monday, another hell day. But the sting of the morning feels dull, every sensation muted by a numbing fog.

The alarm shrieks its dreadful wake-up call at 6:00 a.m., an unholy symphony that has me wondering if I've already descended into a new level of Hell. I swat at it half-heartedly, the effort feeling monumental. Lying there, staring at the bleak ceiling, I consider fashioning the alarm clock into a deadly weapon and doing us both a favor.

With all the enthusiasm of a condemned man walking the gallows, I roll

out of bed and onto the icy-cold floor. The apartment is as silent as a tomb, the perfect setting for my current state of existence. I shuffle into the bathroom, meeting the mirror's harsh appraisal with a grimace. Dark circles under my eyes, pallor that would make a ghost jealous, and a general air of having been dragged through Hell backwards.

The shower offers a brief respite, the water hot and unfeeling against my skin. I stand under the spray, trying to wash away the memories of Elara. But hell, even the soap seems to be on her side.

Breakfast is as enticing as a plate of sawdust. Forget the blood sacrifice. I mechanically toast bread, slather it with butter, and wash it down with a cup of coffee as black as my current mood. If there's a flavor, it's lost on me. I imagine this is what despair tastes like.

Braving the outside world, I make my way to the office. The journey is a blur, my mind preoccupied with Elara. The charm of the Underworld has lost its luster, like a party where the music's died and all the alcohol's run out.

The office, once my stage, now feels like an elaborate joke with me as the punchline. I settle into my chair, eyeing the mountain of paperwork like it's my next opponent in this never-ending bout of cosmic wrestling.

I work for a while, not even bothering to fudge the numbers or inflate them even a bit, and when I'm done I rise to do my usual walkthrough of the office, grimacing as soon as I step out on the floor.

The office is a battlefield littered with memories of Elara.

It's not just the fact that these imps are eyeing me with a mix of concern and curiosity. It's the palpable sense of unease that fills the room, the sudden hush that falls over the office as I make my rounds. It's as if the entire place has been drenched in a heavy silence, a painful reminder of her absence.

Their gazes, once respectfully fearful, are now full of a knowing, sickening *sympathy*. My lips curl in disgust as I catch one of them peeking out at me from a corner.

They know why I'm brooding, why I'm walking around like a ghost haunting its own life. They know she's gone, and they know it's tearing me apart. Each glance, each pitiful look, is a stark reminder of my loss.

Every corner, every room, every desk, carries the imprint of her presence. The changes she made are bitter reminders of what I've lost, the emptiness she left behind a gaping wound that refuses to heal.

Drowning in paperwork offers a semblance of solace, the routine tasks a distraction from the relentless onslaught of my thoughts. So, I head to the

bowels of the Archives to distract myself and spend as many hours as I can in the pits. I don't know how long I spend down there before coming back up.

With a sigh, I head back to my office and I'm almost at my door before I sense it. Something impossible that snags my attention.

A pure soul.

Time ceases. There's only one person I know with a soul like that—Elara. A flurry of panic surges through me as I rush toward the source, flinging my door open so hard it slams into the other side of the wall and falls off the hinges.

I spot it immediately.

There, on my desk. A jar containing the ethereal glow.

I freeze, hoping what I'm seeing isn't true.

What happened? Did she die Aboveworld? So consumed by my grief, I'd forced myself not to spy on her, not to watch over her. A decision I regret at this very moment.

As I'm about to storm out and begin my search for her, my chair swivels around, revealing the last person I expected to see. Elara.

Silence stretches between us as all I can do is just stare.

There are mimics among us. Shapeshifting demons that can transform into whatever you wish to see. For a moment, I think that's exactly what I'm looking at. And yet...

"Bax," Elara smiles.

"Elara," I breathe out, my voice barely more than a whisper.

She flashes her familiar smirk and responds, "I remember you berating me about coming into your office uninvited. Are you going to punish me now?"

I lunge at her, crossing the distance in a millisecond as I pull her into my arms. There are questions burning on my tongue, issues that need addressing, but at this moment, all that matters is that she's here. But then, the reality of her rejection, the sight of her soul in a jar, resurfaces.

Elara looks up at me, her eyes filled with a mix of emotions. She takes a deep breath, steadying herself before she begins. "Bax...I didn't leave because I wanted to. I had to ensure my sister's safety, to say goodbye."

I stiffen, my grip on her tightening. Her younger sister. The one she was putting through college. The one she'd told me about after I'd pushed her too far. I remember the pain in her eyes, the helplessness. It was then that I'd decided to pay for her sister's tuition anonymously.

Elara smiles at me. “It was you, wasn’t it,” she whispers. “You paid her tuition, didn’t you?”

I shrug, trying to play it off with nonchalance, “I did what anyone would do.”

“But you’re not just anyone, Bax,” she says, her voice soft. She reaches up to cradle my face, her thumb brushing over my jaw. “You’re you. And I’m grateful, more than you could ever know.”

“But I didn’t come back just to thank you,” she continues, her voice firm, determined. “I’m here for a different reason.”

Her confession hangs in the air between us, a silent plea for understanding. I nod, urging her to continue, and brace myself for whatever comes next.

Elara moves her hand back, reaching for the soul jar.

“I made a deal with Lucifer,” she confesses, her voice trembling with the weight of her words. Her eyes never leave mine, holding my gaze with a desperate intensity. “I had to give up my soul...willingly, completely. There’s no chance of getting it back.”

I watch her, daring not to breathe. She’s giving up her soul? The very essence of who she is?

She holds the jar out to me, her hand shaking slightly. “I want you to have it, Bax,” she says, her voice barely above a whisper. “I want us to be together. I...I hope that you’ll accept it.”

Time stops.

For a moment, I’m frozen, staring at the jar in her trembling hand. She’s offering it to *me*, and I can barely comprehend it.

“Elara...” My voice is choked. “Do you...do you understand what you’re doing?”

Her eyes meet mine, filled with the same determination I’ve seen in it so many times before. “I do,” she says firmly. “And I want this, Bax. I want you.”

The jar feels heavy in my hand, heavier than any physical weight could possibly be. It’s the weight of her life. And she’s entrusting it to me.

And even though the thought of having something so dear in my possession thrills some inane part of me, I hesitate to accept it. Because this isn’t just any soul. This is Elara’s soul. The mortal who took me to my knees. The only mortal I’ve ever and will ever want with every fiber of my being.

I must warn her. Protect her.

“Elara, this is... this is a huge sacrifice,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper. “Your soul...it’s the most precious thing you have.”

She nods, tears glistening in her eyes. “I know,” she replies softly. “And I’m giving it to you, Bax. Because I...love you.”

I can hardly breathe, her words echoing in my head. *She loves me.* She’s willing to give up her soul for me. The realization is overwhelming.

The jar feels warm in my hand, pulsing with a life of its own. I look up at Elara, her eyes brimming with hope and fear. The decision lies with me now, the fate of our future hanging in the balance.

Before she can say more, I clutch her to me, cutting her off. Her sacrifice, her willingness to give up everything for me, leaves me speechless. I hold her close, hoping I’m not dreaming. Despite everything, she’s here. She’s chosen me. And for now, that’s all that matters.

I pull away from her slightly, just enough to look into her eyes. The intensity of her gaze is nearly too much to bear. I can see her love for me, her unwavering determination, and it leaves a lump in my throat.

I was wrong before.

I don’t want her hatred. I want this. The all-consuming fire in her eyes. Her love, so pure and fierce. It’s more potent than any hatred could ever be. It’s terrifying and beautiful, and I want it. I want her.

I swallow hard. How did I get so lucky? To have someone love me so much, they’d willingly offer up their soul for me?

“I was wrong, Elara,” I admit, my voice barely more than a whisper. “I don’t want your hatred. I don’t need it. What I want...what I need...is this. Is *you.*”

My gaze drops to the jar in my hand, her soul pulsing gently within. The weight of her decision is overwhelming, humbling.

I look back at her, my hand coming up to gently cup her face. “I’m not good with words, Elara,” I admit. “But I want you to know...I love you, too. More than I ever thought possible.”

Without waiting for a response, I lean in, capturing her lips with mine in a searing kiss. It’s a kiss filled with all the words I can’t say, all the emotions I can’t put into words. It’s desperate and needy, gentle and sweet.

Her lips are soft against mine, her taste sweet and intoxicating. I pull her closer, deepening the kiss, my free hand tangled in her hair. I pour everything I have into the kiss, every ounce of what I feel for her, every bit of my gratitude for her sacrifice.

When we finally pull apart, I rest my forehead against hers, my breaths ragged.

“Bax,” Elara whispers, and I freeze against her, wondering what more there could be. A part of me thinking this is just some elaborate prank. More torture as if I haven’t been tormented the moment she left my life.

“Yes, angel?”

“Close the door.”

I glance over my shoulder to see the entire office looking in at once. With a low chuckle, I flash a hand and the door slams shut, held only in place by my magic.

“And the frosted glass...” Elara whispers again.

I frown, but do as she commands. As soon as the glass goes opaque, Elara shuffles against me, hand snaking down my chest in a way that makes a rumble go through me.

I’m instantly hard. Have been hard the moment I took her into my arms.

As her little fingers fidget with the fly of my slacks, realization dawns and a deep chuckle bubbles in my chest.

A little smile quirks her lips, and she waggles her eyebrows.

“Problems with spatial relations here,” she says, her fingers still tinkering with the button.

“So impatient,” I murmur.

Elara looks up, a devilish look in her eyes as she leans back on my desk, spreading her legs enough that I see what’s up her skirt.

Her pure uncovered flesh peeks back at me, her pussy lips glistening in the light that hits her perfect skin.

“I made you wait,” she whispers.

“The worst week of my existence,” I say, leaning forward to bring my nose to her cunt, taking a moment to inhale her sweet scent through my nose.

“You know, having a relationship with your boss is frowned upon greatly where I come from.”

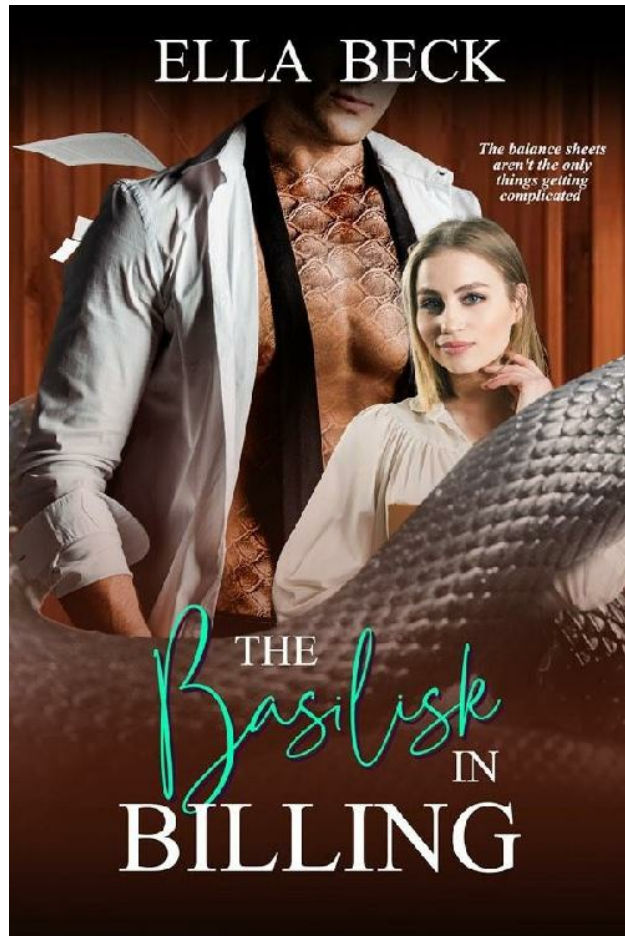
“Well, it’s a good thing creatures like me exist—”

“To break the rules.”

I can’t help but smirk at that. Turns out, even for a demon, Hell isn’t too bad with the right company.

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The Basilisk in Billing (Monsters in Management 2)



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About the Author

Ella Beck grew up devouring steamy romances and tales of the supernatural. After working soul-crushing office jobs for years, she finally indulged her overactive imagination and wrote the manuscript for *The Archdemon in Auditing*.

When she's not bringing compelling new characters and tantalizing forbidden romances to life, you can find her trying to resurrect her neglected houseplants, bingeing paranormal TV shows, and taste-testing any new beverage with pumpkin spice.

Ella currently resides in a cozy cottage surrounded by lush, verdant woods that fuel her inspiration daily. But she still dreams of someday retiring to a haunted castle in Scotland with her rescue cats.



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