

The Demon Always Wins

Chapter 1

It was poker night in the Ninth Ring of Hell and the demon Belial was in trouble.

After ten thousand years of exposure to brimstone and heat, his skin had grown too leathery to sweat easily, but now he wiped his palms on his thighs. It was one thing to win a hand of poker. It was another to snatch victory away from the Lord of the Underworld in front of his peers. And Satan expected to win. The syncopated tap of his fore-talon on the table was a tell Belial had seen too many times to mistake.

Cuban cigars perfumed the air, obscuring the usual stench of sulfur. Overhead, Mick Jagger crooned his sympathy. Belial weighed his options. He could fold, throwing away the best hand he was likely to see all evening, or he could stay in and earn top billing on the boss's shit list. Satan was notorious for being a sore loser. If Belial called, it would show the other players he was his own man, not a sniveling coward afraid to win a hand of cards for fear of offending his short-fused boss.

"Are you in or out?" Loki's palm slammed the table, making his beer stein jump. Amber lager slopped onto the green baize.

Belial added some chips to the pile in the center of the table. "I'm in."

"All right, ladies, let's see what you've got." On his right, Zeus laid out his cards, a paltry two pair.

"*Jeg vinner!*" Loki slapped down three of a kind.

"Not so fast, reindeer-fucker." Satan fanned out three sixes and a pair of queens.

Loki's pale face reddened as Satan stretched out his skinny arms and dragged the pot toward him. Belial held up one finger. One card at a time, he laid down his hand—four jacks and an ace.

Satan dropped his hands, abandoning the pot.

Belial turned to the Enemy, the final player at the table. "What have you got?"

With a faint smile, his former employer pushed his cards, face down, toward the center. Cigar clamped between his teeth, Belial raked in his winnings.

Loki's gaze traveled from Satan to Belial and then back again. Beneath the Norse god's helmet, with its ridiculous twisting horns, his eyes gleamed. He nodded toward Belial.

"This is the guy you're promoting to chief executive demon?" he asked Satan.

Satan hissed like a steam locomotive. The surrounding air seemed to grow three degrees hotter. "I haven't decided."

Belial sucked in a breath. Surely the boss wouldn't withhold his coveted promotion over a hand of poker? No one was that bad a sport. He studied Satan's face. Smoke issued from his horns and his pupils had gone square as a goat's. Maybe he *was* that bad a sport.

Lilith, the highest-ranking she-demon in Hell, sidled up beside Belial on her signature stilettos. She leaned over to empty his ashtray and murmured in his ear, "You are so screwed."

He turned his head so the boss wouldn't hear. "I was screwed either way."

"Guess that's the price of playing with the big boys." She turned to sashay away, but before she could make her escape, Zeus slipped his hand beneath her skirt. Any demon that dared touch Lilith uninvited would draw back a stump, but the boss had given strict orders about the treatment of tonight's guests. Lilith froze, her crimson lips drawn back in a parody of a smile, her fingers twitching as the Greek's hairy hand crept up her thigh. Lilith was a pain in the ass, but this was bullshit.

"Heads up." Belial picked up his lighter and hurled it at the Greek's head. Reflexively, Zeus grabbed for it. By the time he set the lighter on the table and reached for Lilith again, she was already halfway across the room. The Greek's lower lip jutted out in an epic pout.

Belial risked a glance across the table. Satan had seen this by-play and wasn't happy. The smoke issuing from his horns was black as oil.

Something crept over Belial's limbs, taking control. He tried to move his jaw, but it was locked shut. He went to push back his chair, but his legs were frozen. Even his fingers refused to respond to his command. It was as though a spider web of steel filaments encased every muscle, every tendon, every joint in his body.

Satan smiled and the smoke thinned a little. "Something wrong, demon?"

It was thrall, Satan's ability to take over a demon and operate him like a puppet. Younger, weak-minded demons stayed enthralled until Satan released them, but veterans were another story.

Belial pushed against the thrall and felt it push back. He prodded at every corner, but there were no weak spots. Even his lungs refused to inflate. Satan couldn't kill him this way—as a fallen angel, he was immortal, or nearly so—but Satan could subject him to the humiliation of keeling over in front of everyone. Every eye at the table, every eye in the room, watched as he silently struggled. It took every bit of his strength, but with a loud grunt, he finally broke free. Satan smirked at him. Common sense said let it go, but pride was stronger.

"You're getting better at that." Belial managed to say the words without gasping, though his lungs ached for oxygen. "You should keep practicing."

Loki howled with laughter and beat his fists on the table. Zeus guffawed so hard ouzo snorted from his nose. Even the Enemy smiled, but Satan's horns smoked like a tire fire.

"Whose deal is it, anyway?" Satan snarled. For a moment, Belial thought the entire table might go up in flames.

"Mine." He gathered the cards and shuffled them.

Across the table, the boss's lips pinched tight and his eyes were mere slits. It was the face he wore when he was dreaming up punishments. If Belial didn't figure out a way to cool him down, and quick, the promotion he'd worked toward since Satan first lured him into joining his organization ten thousand years ago would be up in flames.

It wasn't Belial's interference with Lilith, or even his win in their little wrestling match, that had pissed Satan off. He'd worked with the Lord of the Underworld for too long to think that. Making Satan lose face in front of the Enemy—that was the problem. Satan didn't give a damn about these other yahoos, but he hated looking foolish in front of their old boss.

Fortunately, the old devil was easily distracted. All Belial had to do was come up with a diversion powerful enough to redirect Satan's attention. He shuffled the cards, his mind racing even faster than his fingers. What would best beguile Satan? That was easy. An opportunity to score points over the Enemy.

That was it.

Setting up the boss to win over the Enemy—that was how he'd get his balls out of this vise. The two already loathed one another. All Belial had to do was create an opportunity for them to go at it, diverting Satan's attention away from him to other, more profitable, matters.

"You know, the boss is right to keep a tight rein down here." He tried to sound casual as he divvied out the cards. The Enemy paused in the act of lighting his cigar to cast him a glance of amusement. Loki rolled his eyes.

Belial held up his hand. "I don't always like it, but a galley travels fastest when its crew rows as one."

"It's too late to start licking ass now, demon." Satan's voice was rich with the promise of torments to come.

Belial pretended he hadn't heard. Slouching back in his chair, he surveyed the Enemy through half-closed eyes. "One of your humans, operating on her own, wouldn't stand a chance against the boss."

The Enemy stared down his large, aquiline nose. "We tried that once. I won."

He was talking about Job, of course. It wasn't exactly Satan's finest moment—that human doormat stayed faithful through everything the boss threw at him. Satan hissed through his teeth, the very sound a threat. It was a fine line Belial was treading. This next bit was critical if he was to get any traction.

He took a deep breath. "I was talking about the time before that."

The Enemy didn't pretend to misunderstand. "You're speaking of Eve?"

Belial shrugged and straightened his cards. "I could argue that the boss is actually ahead by one, since he managed to compromise Adam in that round, too."

"That's true." Satan's horns sparked. "Those kids fell into my hands like a pair of ripe pomegranates."

The clench in Belial's gut relaxed a little. He picked up a remote and pressed a button. At the far end of the room, blood-red panels slid apart, revealing a billboard-sized screen. He pushed another button and the screen glowed silvery-gray with a tiny black dot in the middle. The dot grew larger, until it became a blue-and-green ball.

"Seven billion people on that planet." The floating ball drew closer, until mountains as well as oceans appeared on its slowly revolving surface. "Three and a half billion, just counting the women. Surely, out of three and a half billion women..." He focused on the Enemy and drew the phrase out to let the enormity of the number sink in. "There must be one you can trust with all that free will you've given her."

Satan went very still. It had been four thousand years since the Enemy had last agreed to pit one of his puny humans against the powers of Hell. The day-to-day work of enticing souls away from the light and into the darkness was ongoing, of course. And there had been that attempt to lure the Boy over to their side, but everyone knew that effort was doomed to failure from the start. The last time Heaven and Hell had gone head to head over a purely human soul was Job.

The boss was practically drooling at the idea, but the Enemy's brows drew together like storm clouds. Beneath the cavernous ceiling of the Ninth Ring, thunder rumbled and lightning crackled. Swallowing, Belial wondered if he'd pushed it too far. Satan might punish him for centuries, but the Enemy had eternity at his disposal. Then the Enemy smiled.

"Well played," he said, shaking his finger at Belial. "Well played. As it happens, I do have a woman I trust."

Ignoring the remote, the Enemy pointed at the screen. The image zoomed in on North America, narrowing in on the Florida-Georgia border. The landscape grew more detailed, until the streets of a small town dotted with sand pines and moss-laden oaks filled the screen. A sign whizzed by—"Welcome to Alexandria, Florida." Still the zoom continued, until it focused on a flat-roofed cinder-block building. The building was cream-colored, with flamingo-pink awnings over the windows. Over the handicapped-accessible door hung a sign that read, "Matthew A. Strong Memorial Clinic."

The view melted through the walls, coming to rest on a woman in her mid-thirties, seated at a desk stacked with medical charts. Involuntarily, Belial leaned forward, inexplicably drawn to the image on the screen. Across the table, Satan shot him a sharp look. Belial hunched his shoulders and narrowed his eyes to show he was merely sizing up his adversary.

And what an adversary. She lit up the screen like a torch flaring in the darkness. Her face, with its wide-spaced gray eyes, had the luminous beauty of a pre-Raphaelite Madonna. Her hair hung

down her back in a honey-colored braid so long he doubted she had ever cut it. A stethoscope around her neck drew his eyes to burn scars at the base of her throat. They were strangely alluring, with their hint of fire and death. Her hands, with their long, tapered fingers, should have been beautiful, but more scar tissue disfigured the backs. The third finger of her left hand bore a plain gold band.

"A doctor?" asked Zeus.

"A nurse," the Enemy corrected. Then he added, softly, "She is my daughter, with whom I am well pleased."

For an instant, Belial felt something akin to pity for the woman on the screen. If history was anything to go by, he was better off in Satan's doghouse than she was as the Enemy's favorite.

"Her name is Dara Strong," the Enemy said.

The boss eyed the image on the screen, licking his lips with both forks of his tongue. The Enemy watched him, his lip curling with distaste.

"Let's agree on terms," Belial said, before the Enemy could change his mind. "A win for us consists of getting her to curse you, aloud and in public."

"Agreed."

"Time frame?"

"Seven days."

If the woman were that easy, the Enemy would never have chosen her.

"Seven times that," Belial countered. To his surprise, the Enemy inclined his head in agreement.

Seven weeks would be more than sufficient. Belial held out his hand to seal the wager, but the Enemy shook his head. "First, let's discuss the rules."

"Rules?" Belial couldn't remember the Enemy setting any boundaries on past wagers.

"You may not kill her."

"Of course not." Why would he even bring that up? Killing her would be counterproductive.

"Also, you may not kill anyone close to her before their time."

That was tougher. Without the ability to take away those closest to her, it would be impossible to push the woman to her limit.

Satan hissed. "What are you trying to do, demon—set me up to lose?"

"That's not how we've played this game in the past." Belial directed his words to the Enemy. He was pleased with how cool he sounded, not at all like a demon facing a century in a larvae pit.

"It's not necessary." The Enemy pointed his finger at the screen and the focus relocated to a hinged picture frame on Dara's desk. The frame held two photographs. On the left was a faded picture of a little girl in a frilly dress and patent-leather shoes, flanked by smiling parents. Although the child couldn't have been more than three or four, she was already recognizable as the woman at the desk. The other photo showed an unscarred, twenty-something Dara in white lace, radiant beside her young groom.

"She's already lost them." Sadness weighed in the Enemy's voice. He was far too attached to those billions of disposable souls.

"The usual stakes?" Satan's tone was brisk.

The Enemy nodded. One human soul.

The taut muscles in Belial's belly relaxed. His distraction had worked. On screen, the woman typed something into a computer, her brows drawn together in concentration. The scars on her throat rippled each time she swallowed.

"Since this was Belial's idea," Satan said, "he will be my principal, as the Strong woman is yours. Win this, Belial, and you'll have that chief executive demon job you've been after."

It was all Belial could do not to give a fist pump. Finally, the other C-level demons—Abaddon, Mammon and Asmodeus—would have to acknowledge his superiority.

"What's your strategy?" asked Loki. "Will you tempt her like Eve? Or try her like Job?"

Belial nodded toward the photographs of the woman's dead loved ones. "It appears that she's already been tried. I think it's time for her to experience pleasure." He infused the word with a garden of earthly delights.

The Enemy's lip curled again, and his gaze seemed to drill straight through Belial. Belial's shoulder blades throbbed like his wings were being torn away, though they'd been gone for a hundred centuries.

He shrugged off the discomfort. It would be amusing to go Above-world again. He'd confined himself below for far too long. Earth was a demon's playground.

"Remember," the Enemy said, "this contest is about free will. If you usurp her will in any way, make any choices for her, I will consider it a forfeit and I will claim one soul that would otherwise have been yours. You have seven weeks to get Dara Strong to curse my name. Agreed?"

Satan rubbed his hands together, his triangular smile gleeful. "This will demonstrate, once and for all, that giving humans free will was a mistake."

"What if he loses?" asked Loki.

"He won't lose," said Satan.

"In ten thousand years, I've never bedded a woman and failed to corrupt her." Belial smirked at the thought of his unbroken string of successes.

Loki ignored him. "He's screwed up before."

Belial's smile froze. Hundreds of years had passed since that incident. Would his single failure never be forgotten?

"I didn't bed that one." He hadn't gotten even that far.

Satan continued to smile, but his eyes glittered. "If he loses, he'll restart his career as our newest greeter at the entrance to Hell."

Belial pictured himself dressed in red polyester pants and matching vest, sporting a name badge. His mouth went as dry as the Negev. That was worse than the maggot pit.

He had to win this wager.

Chapter 2

Dara Strong slid her credit card through the reader and waited for the gas pump to authorize her purchase. In the darkness beyond the concrete apron, crickets called sleepily from the grass.

The air was heavy with moisture and mid-September pollen. Her hay fever had gotten so bad earlier she'd taken an antihistamine, leaving her a little fuzzy-headed. On the plus side, she could smell ocean in the warm, damp air tonight.

She tilted her head left and then right, trying to stretch out her trapezius muscles. Her late husband, Matt, used to say he could bounce a quarter off her shoulders when she was stressed. Tonight that coin would have shot halfway across the gas station.

The evening clinic had been unusually busy for a Monday night. It was after nine when Dr. Bell walked out the door. He wasn't happy, and she couldn't blame him. Such a long evening of volunteer work after a full day of work was a lot to ask. She hoped his frustration wouldn't translate into a lost volunteer.

The gas pump dinged, almost drowned out by the thunder of an approaching motorcycle. The little window above the credit card slot read, "Declined." Drat. She must be maxed out.

She leaned in through the passenger window and stuffed the useless card back into her wallet. She dug to the bottom of her purse, scrounging for cash to fill her tank, at least enough to

put in fuel to last till payday. A few minutes' fishing netted her only a handful of ones. She grimaced. She'd have to fall back on the high-interest card she tried never to use. The motorcycle glided up to the pump behind her.

It was a Ducati, all black except for the gleaming chrome. The rider, too, was dressed in black—black t-shirt, black jeans, black boots with chains around the heels, black helmet. Even though it was night, he wore his tinted visor down. She didn't usually feel threatened by bikers—most people who owned machines as expensive as this one were lawyers or accountants—but something about the shadowy figure sent a shiver down her spine.

His t-shirt outlined every muscle in his torso. He kicked the stand down and leaned the bike on it, slinging his leg over the saddle in a move that was almost balletic in its grace. His body was so flawless it didn't seem quite human. Without raising his visor, he tugged a leather wallet from his back pocket—no mean feat, given how snug his jeans were—and slid his credit card through the reader. It was accepted. No surprise there.

He unscrewed the gas cap and pushed the button for high-octane fuel. Black fingerless gloves covered his hands, but his forearms were muscular and scattered with dark hair. He lifted the nozzle from its holder and thrust it into the gas tank. Low in her belly, something clenched.

She stared at his hands. The tautness in her belly intensified and a languor swept over her limbs. What would it be like to share a night of love with a handsome stranger, a night without responsibility or regret?

She gave herself a shake. She didn't know what that would be like, but she knew what it wasn't like: her. She didn't even date, much less share nights of passion with anonymous strangers.

It was impossible to see through his visor to tell what he was thinking, or even what he was looking at, but she knew his gaze was trained on her. Beneath his helmet, his throat was like a bronze column. He might have been an alien, come to Earth as a scout for an aggressive race.

The featureless visor remained fixed on her, and, although he didn't move, she felt him willing her closer. *Come to me*, he seemed to say. *Let me show you pleasure beyond your wildest fantasies.*

She shook her head, trying to clear it. He might be gorgeous, all mystery and metal and leather and danger, but she was a thirty-five-year-old nurse in pink scrubs and rubber Crocs, hardly a figure ripe for seduction. What she needed to do was pay for her gas and go home—alone.

With that resolve, she took a step, but for some reason, her feet didn't carry her toward the pump. Instead, she moved toward him. He stilled, like a hawk sighting a mouse far below. She quivered. His broad, muscular chest seemed to beckon her closer. She took another step.

What are you doing? Her rational mind was horrified. *This is not who you are. This is not how you live your life.* With an effort of will, she angled her foot toward the pump and set it down, but she couldn't pull her eyes away from the figure in black.

He held out a black-gloved hand and flexed his fingers. *Come to me.* This time, the command was unmistakable. She took another step toward him. The smell of gasoline and ocean faded away, replaced by the fragrance of petrichor—the smell of rain as it strikes hot cement—fresh and sweet, but with a faint undertone of sulfur. In the back of her mind, an alarm clanged. That smell meant something, something perilous, but she couldn't recall just what. His scent wound around her like the tendrils of a vine, drawing her to him. She took another step.

Another ding sounded. Without turning his head, he removed the nozzle and slotted it back into the pump with a smooth thrust that made her mouth go dry. The image of those black-gloved hands on her body returned. She wanted to stroke the wall of muscle that made up his chest, to lick his throat and taste his flesh. Like a robot, she took another step.

What was behind that visor? Was his face as flawless as his body? That was why she was moving toward him. Not to avail herself of the pleasure he offered, but to discover the man behind

the mask. As though in answer to her unspoken question, he pushed back his visor with one black-gloved hand.

He had swooping, dark brows above eyes so dark they looked black, and a jaw Michelangelo might have chiseled. His full lower lip promised sensuality, but the upper one was thinner, hinting of cruelty. His nose brought back the image of a hawk once more. He didn't smile, just watched her with hooded eyes, silently commanding her to close the distance between them.

From some deep well of self-preservation, she managed to drag her eyes away and walk back to her own pump on shaky legs. It took two tries, but she swiped her card through the slot. It was accepted. She turned to jam the nozzle into her tank, but her hands were shaking so badly the spigot banged into the Toyota's rust-speckled fender instead.

She hadn't heard him move, but his hand closed over hers, guiding the nozzle into the opening. The scent of petrichor and vanilla enveloped her, so delicious that saliva flooded her mouth. What would he do if she ran her tongue up his throat? He had removed his helmet, and his profile reminded her of heads she'd seen on coins from ancient Rome. His short hair was as black as his eyebrows. He was so beautiful it was almost otherworldly.

He still wore his gloves, so his palm didn't touch her hand, but as he guided the nozzle into the tank, his fingers brushed hers. The instant their skin made contact, intoxicating images filled her mind, images of things she had never done with Matt. Her eyes flew to his. His shark-like smile said he knew exactly what was going through her head. Her blood raced.

"Get your hands off me." She attempted to speak firmly, but the words came out as a strangled whisper. She tried to drag her hand from beneath his, but her pitiful effort gained her nothing.

"Is that really what you want?" His voice was as melodious as the strum of a guitar, and his words caressed her like a silken scarf drawn across her naked body. The movement of his lips drew

her eyes and her vision tunneled in, until all she could see, all that seemed to exist in the world, was his mouth. His scent wrapped itself around her, and the very air seemed to buzz, like a thousand bees drawn into one nectar-filled flower. Heat unfurled low in her belly. Inside her scrub pants, the crotch of her cotton panties grew damp.

His gloved hand slipped behind her head and twined itself in her braid, holding her head immobile as his lips descended toward hers like a hawk dropping from the sky. She thought he would kiss her—she wanted him to kiss her—but his mouth moved past her lips without touching them.

"Because I'm not sure it is." His breath was warm and moist on her ear. Gooseflesh dimpled the entire left side of her body. Inside her bra, her breasts felt heavy, the nipples painfully sensitive to the rasp of the fabric.

"Let me show you your true nature." His hand wound deeper into her braid, dragging her head back till she had no choice but to look into his face again. His irises were as black as his pupils. Tiny demons seemed to dance there.

She tried to summon an image of Matt's face, but all she could see were black gloves stroking her bare flesh. She'd never wanted anything as badly as she wanted to have this man's mouth on hers, to feel their bodies slide together, skin on skin. The crazy urge to lick his throat returned.

As if he knew what she was thinking, he angled his jaw away, offering her access, as though she were a vampire and he an uncorrupted innocent, although she knew the opposite to be true. Unable to resist, she stroked her tongue up the column of his throat. His flesh tasted as delicious as it smelled, but beard stubble scraped her tongue like a thousand peppery needles. It was a warning. Any pleasure found with this man would yield full measure of accompanying pain.

She tried to heed that warning, to drag herself away, knowing she would not be successful, that his pull was just too powerful, when a nasal voice called, "Hey, Dara—are you okay?"

She jerked. The voice was like a bucket of ice water. On the other side of the gas pump, a patrol car had pulled up, the driver's-side window rolled down. She yanked herself free of the stranger's grip. The images in her head melted away like they'd never been.

"Yes, thanks, I'm fine," she called, trying to catch her breath. She felt as though she'd just sprinted the length of a football field. Donnie Benson, an old classmate from Alexandria High, got out of the patrol car. He stared curiously from her to the mysterious stranger and back.

"This gentleman was helping me pump gas." The words tumbled out in a breathless rush.

For the first time, the stranger's beautiful lips lifted in a smile. "Is that what I was doing?"

Hands on his chubby hips, Donnie glared at the stranger, who sauntered back to his bike and climbed on board. He gave her one last look, holding her gaze captive.

"Until we meet again." He revved the engine and roared off into the darkness.

Donnie stared after him, frowning. Then he turned to inspect Dara. "You sure you're okay? Do you want me to chase him down and get some ID?"

She swallowed. She had been that close to zooming off into the darkness with a total stranger. Even now, the scent of petrichor clung to her like a threat. *Until we meet again*, he'd said. It would be good to know who he was, what his purpose was in coming here. In a town the size of Alexandria, though, gossip could hurt her reputation and, by extension, the clinic.

"I'm good." A stray breeze picked up a few strands of her hair and set them fluttering. Her cheeks burned as she realized that her braid had come undone. Swiftly, she re-braided it, banishing the memory of the stranger's fingers winding through her hair. Donnie still looked doubtful.

"I'm fine, really." The last thing she wanted was to start rumors.

"If you say so," he said, and turned to gas up his squad car. She finished filling her tank and got into the Toyota.

The scent of vanilla and petrichor got in with her.

Chapter 3

Dara paused outside the door of her grandmother's room at the Mercy Care Assisted Living Center and checked her watch. It was after eleven, late for a visit, but she hadn't made it by before work this morning. She was willing to bet Nana was still up, hoping she'd drop by. She reached for the doorknob and the faint scent of petrichor rose from her scrubs. After that bizarre encounter at the gas station, she might find comfort in a visit herself.

As expected, Nana was curled up in a corduroy recliner, facing the television. On screen, a televangelist exhorted his audience to send money, but Nana didn't hear him. She was fast asleep, her chin resting on her chest. Her face was a future version of Dara's own—widely spaced eyes, cheekbones middling high, stubborn chin. Her life hadn't been easy. She'd buried her only child, Dara's father, as well as her husband. All she and Dara had left were each other.

Dara leaned over to press a kiss on top of her gray head. Nana shifted in her sleep, and the tattered scrapbook on her lap fell to the floor with a bang. Her gray eyes sprang open. She clutched at the ruby-encrusted cross that had hung around her neck for as long as Dara could remember.

"Lord save us," she said.

Dara bent to pick up the book. It was so worn that she worried the spine had split from the impact, though maybe that wouldn't be such a bad thing. A quick inspection revealed it was intact. She set it on the end table beside Nana's chair. "Sorry, Nana, it's just me."

Nana sneezed into a handkerchief retrieved from the cuff of her robe. All hint of drowsiness had fled from her face, replaced by wide-eyed vigilance. She sniffed the air like a bloodhound.

"What's that smell?"

Argh. Dara should have seen this coming and skipped tonight's visit. The last thing she wanted was to tell Nana about the handsome stranger at the gas station. She knew exactly where that conversation would lead.

"I showered this morning." She made a show of sniffing at her armpits, trying to pass it off as a joke. "I guess that was a long time ago."

She crossed the room and perched on edge of the bed, putting herself out of range. Nana took another long sniff. Only when her thin shoulders relaxed did Dara's do the same.

"How are you feeling?" she asked, trying to catch a glimpse of Nana's ankles to check for water retention.

"Better than I have a right to." Nana tucked the pink-and-yellow afghan tighter around her legs, hiding her ankles. That was the most Dara ever got out of her on the subject of her health.

"How did your presentation go today?" Nana might be ninety-four, but she was still as sharp as ever. "Will the county commission give you your money?"

"They said they'll be able to renew our contract at the current level, maybe even give us an increase." With relief, Dara turned her attention away from the handsome stranger to her real life.

"That still leaves us a little short for our drug costs. By the next board meeting, my trustees will want to hear I've got that covered."

"If you were still at Deliverance, you could ask Pastor Bodine to take up a love offering."

The pastor who took over the pulpit at Deliverance Mission Church when Granddad retired would probably have let Dara request a donation for the clinic in honor of Nana and Granddad's

lifetime of service, but she couldn't very well ask for money from a church she hadn't attended in five years.

"It wasn't the same after Granddad retired," she said, but they both knew that wasn't the real reason. The last service she went to was Matt's funeral. She waited for a homily on her non-attendance, but Nana moved on to a new topic, one even less welcome than a lecture on skipping church.

"That nice Dr. Stevens was in yesterday."

"What did he say about your edema?"

"He asked about you. I think he's sweet on you."

"Jeremy is a volunteer at the clinic, Nana."

"That shows what a nice man he is. And he's a good doctor."

"He is. Did the good doctor say anything about changing your diuretic?"

"With a little encouragement, I believe he'd ask you out to dinner."

Dara stifled a groan. "I don't want him to ask me out to dinner. Dating volunteers is a bad idea." She had no interest in men, except as clinic volunteers. At least, that was what she'd thought before tonight.

Nana snorted. "Where else are you going to meet anyone, working ninety hours a week? Trying to keep a clinic going that barely manages to survive in spite of everything you do? A woman your age needs a man."

The image of the handsome stranger at the gas pump took front and center in Dara's brain. He smiled down at her, enticing her to...

She touched the seed pearl necklace Matt had given her as a wedding gift, and Matt's freckled face replaced the olive-skinned stranger's.

"I had a man," she said.

Nana's voice softened. "And he was a good one, honey, but he's not coming back."

She knew that. She'd had five years since the car accident that took her husband and unborn child to come to terms with that fact. Familiar anger roiled in her chest. Why had God taken them?

"Matt wouldn't expect you to spend the rest of your life alone," Nana said.

Make that every person but one. "I'm not alone. I have you," Dara said.

"I won't always be here. You need a family."

"My team at the clinic is my family."

With a grunt that made her opinion clear, Nana picked up the scrapbook and opened it.

Dara swallowed a sigh. They'd been through that book so many times she could describe the contents from memory. Black-and-white newspaper clippings and full-color magazine articles filled its pages. Lonnie Perdue had been famous, back in the day. Nana leafed past a photograph of him preaching, and another where he was leading his congregation in praise. She paused at a picture of him kneeling and ministering to a woman as she writhed on the floor.

Dara's grandparents believed in demons as a real and present danger to human beings. They thought demons came to Earth on missions to corrupt and destroy, and that much of the evil on Earth was because humans were in a constant state of siege. Granddad had claimed skill, both at freeing people possessed by demons and at driving off demons that came in their own forms.

"That man could cast out demons like no one I've ever seen." Nana snuck a look at Dara out of the corner of her eye. "You could have been as good, if you'd stuck with it."

Dara remembered kneeling on the floor between rows of pews when she was about twelve. She breathed in, drawing putrid green smoke from between the lips of an unconscious man. Then she blew out the smoke, sending it spiraling through the open pane of a stained-glass window. The man awoke, freed of the interloper that had tormented him.

"Lonnie said he never saw another young 'un with as much promise as a healer as you had," said Nana.

"I'm still a healer," Dara said. "I heal bodies."

Nana pursed her lips disapprovingly. "You can't take your body into the next world."

"And you can't get along without it while you're in this one."

"It's not too late to get back to it."

Another memory. Dara was sixteen. Her best friend Sarah lay in that very same aisle. Dara tried pulling Sarah's breath into her lungs, but nothing came forth. Her friend didn't wake.

Dara locked eyes with Nana's. "I'm a nurse now. I use science to heal."

Nana was first to look away. She pointed at a clipping in the book with one age-thickened fingernail. The photo showed a clearly skeptical Mike Wallace interviewing Granddad. "This is when he was on *60 Minutes*."

As Nana launched into the oft-told tale, Dara let her mind drift. *Until we meet again*, the stranger had said. Heat rose in her body, and the warmth evoked the smell of petrichor and vanilla again. She could feel his fingers weaving themselves into her hair and see his lips descending toward hers. Fear and desire mingled in equal parts.

She squeezed her thighs together, shocked by the strength of her yearning. She'd all but forgotten what desire felt like. What had gotten into her? She touched her pearls, but the talisman effect didn't work this time.

"Did I ever tell you about this she-demon?" Nana's question was a welcome interruption, even if the subject wasn't. She had reached the last page of the scrapbook, a hand-drawn portrait of a young woman. At first glance, it appeared to be an inexpert rendering of a beautiful female. It was doubtful anyone could have identified the woman from the picture, except for one thing. Her eyes had rectangular pupils.

A hundred times. Dara bit back the harsh response, restricting herself to a nod.

Nana traced her crooked forefinger over the drawing. "When they get mad, their eyes go goat, you know."

Nana had shown Matt the scrapbook once. When she came to that picture, he admired it politely, but on the way home, he said, "You don't really believe any of that stuff, do you?" Then he went on to lecture Dara on how evolution meant human pupils couldn't be rectangular. She hadn't responded. There was nothing to be gained from debating the subject.

Matt had never stopped trying to convince her that her grandparents were crazy, and Nana never stopped trying to bring her back into the fold. These days, Dara viewed herself as a demon agnostic. Maybe if she'd ever seen a demon's pupils turn rectangular she'd feel differently.

"So I hear." She crossed the room to plant a goodbye kiss on Nana's head. Nana pulled her close for a hug. In spite of their disagreements, the bond between them remained strong.

Before Dara could straighten, Nana sneezed again. Her eyes went wide, and she clutched Dara's arm. "That's demon I smell."

Dara stifled a groan. This was exactly what she was trying to avoid. She patted Nana's hand. "It's not demon scent. It's aftershave." Particularly delicious aftershave.

The old woman's gaze sharpened. "When were you rubbed up against a man to where he'd leave his scent all over you?"

Heat flooded Dara's face at the memory of the stranger's muscled chest pressed against her breasts, his melodic voice in her ear. If she told Nana how he'd roared up out of the darkness to beguile her, Nana would insist he was a demon, sent from Hell to corrupt her. Which, in turn, would send Nana's blood pressure soaring.

Dara hated lying to her grandmother, but she couldn't have her upset. What would calm her down? Dara needed to account for the smell in a believable way.

"He's a doctor," she said, "a friend of Matt's from college."

Nana's gaze raked her up and down. "He took you out to dinner in your scrubs?"

Maybe if Dara lied more, she'd be better at it. "It was casual. We're just friends."

"That's a lot of smell for just friends."

Before Nana could take another sniff, Dara retreated to the doorway. "He gave me a hug."

Behind Nana's bifocals, her eyes were so narrowed Dara could barely see their pale blue.

"What made you decide to go out with him?"

"I was trying to convince him to volunteer."

Nana threw up her hands. "That clinic is all you ever think about."

"Mostly." Dara turned the door handle. "And right now, it needs money. Let me know if you come up with any ideas."

"Don't ask me," Nana said. "Ask God."

Unfortunately, Dara couldn't do that. She and God weren't on speaking terms.