

Fixated in Time

By : MichelleMyBelle

Stella wakes and sleeps with one hard fact swimming in her mind: she will never die. And with that blessing comes a lot of curses, one in particular that is tested time and time again. The temptation to fall in love. When Evan comes into Stella's life, he's everything she expected a 'dream guy' to be. Insanely hot, smart, funny, romantic....and did she mention hot? But when another man tries to stand in her way of happiness, Stella pushes the envelope, risking far more than she thought possible in an attempt to keep the man she truly loves in her life forever.



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Fixated in Time : Chapter 1

It's too bright.

I can feel the difference in temperature as the sun creeps onto my blankets, shooing away the cool and welcoming in the heat as it kisses my face. 'Good morning,' it seems to say. 'It's time to wake up.'

I groan and roll over, trying to maneuver my way back into the shadows. This is where I like it. This is where I belong.

I feel the wind as it enters my room and jostles the chimes hanging above my window. The tinkling sound is so soft and sweet. The random chords purr in my ears. No two mornings bring the same music, and that alone is why I love my chimes so much.

As groggy as I am I decide it's time to greet the day. I shuffle my feet off the bed, the cool tile meeting my warm feet in a blissful contrast. Despite my love for the cold I somehow ended up here - one of the warmest places on earth.

Perhaps I just wanted a change. Being anywhere for a long period of time can get boring and can begin to raise question. Especially when you never age.

I pull my thin robe over my naked body and goose bumps rise all across my arms and chest. It's similar to the touch of a lover if I remember correctly. But maybe not.

The breeze has picked up now, its speed ruffling my sheets and the papers on my desk. I secure them with my laptop and decide now is a better time than any to check my email.

I just started my new job last week using one of my many degrees collected over the years. This time I'll be using my medical degree (M.D) and will be taking on the role as a psychiatrist.

I know it's selfish, but my desire to do this job has little to do with helping others. When I hear people talk about their problems, mine seem smaller and less significant. And for a brief moment I forget about my own issues and get lost in someone else's. Plus, it exposes me to human contact. *That's a rarity in and of itself.*

I haven't had a job where I've been around people for quite a few decades. Before this I worked in a lab. Before that I was a newspaper columnist under an anonymous name. And before that I was in advertising. The list goes on and on.

Sometimes I'll switch it up and go back to school, adding another degree to my already long list. It helps pass the time anyway. And now that I've worked for all these years, I have more money than I can handle.

I see all these stars worth millions, hell, even billions. I sometimes wonder what they would do if they knew how much I was worth. The last time I calculated it was close to 95 billion. *And yes, I'm grossly aware that that is way too much money for any single person to have.* But I'm not your normal person either.

I have bank accounts in every state in the US as well as every country outside of it. I give to charities on a monthly basis but never reveal my name. I did that once about thirty years ago. *Big mistake.*

My painted nails click methodically against the keys as I type in my username and password. I see I have four new emails and open my inbox. The first three are junk mail but the last one is from work. My lips quirk up as

I read the subject line.

From: Grace Nantuck
Subject: Welcome aboard!
Date: August 16, 2013 09:46 UTC-10
To: Stella Hill

Warmest greetings, Dr. Hill! I hope your orientation went well last week. We are all so pleased to have you on board! We think you will be a great fit with our company.

I have a list of the clients you will be seeing on a daily and weekly basis. We will go over them first thing Monday morning. If you have any questions please don't hesitate to call.

Dr. Grace Nantuck
CEO of Allied Health and Mental Care

I hit reply.

From: Stella Hill
Subject: Re: Welcome Aboard!
Date: August 17, 2013 13:52 UCT-10

Dr. Nantuck,

I appreciate the kind words and the warm welcome! I am looking forward to seeing you and meeting my clients tomorrow!

Warmly,

Stella Hill

I pause for a moment before hitting send. I always have the newest and most high-tech equipment, and yet at times something as simple as sending an email can seem foreign to me.

I gaze out my window and see the white sandy beach and the clear blue water sparkling against the morning's sun. *Oh that water.* It's the most breathtaking sight imaginable. I refused to move here unless I found a place right along the ocean. And finally, after of months of searching, I did.

See? It pays to be patient. Then again, I have all the time in the world. *Being patient isn't so much a virtue as it is a way of life,* I think sourly.

I hear a knock at my front door and raise an eyebrow in surprise. I never get visitors. Caving in to my curiosity, I swiftly walk from my room and down my flight of stairs. I open the front door and the smell of fresh ocean air greets my senses.

Ahhh, how refreshing.

And then my gaze lands on my visitor and my eyes widen with shock.

"Hi!" the man says, extending a hand to me. "I'm Evan, your next door neighbor."

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His smile is kind and his eyes are bright. And *oh*, is he ever gorgeous. His hair is dark brown and cropped short around his beautiful face. His eyes are a bright green and they seem to sparkle, just like the scenery outside my bedroom window. His lean body moves toward me and my eyes travel down his muscular torso of their own accord.

I must say, he is quite the work of art.

But despite his kind introduction and flawless good looks, I am weary. I know I don't have a neighbor. The closest person to me lives about five miles away. *Or so I thought*. Evan sees my uncertainty and runs a hand across his cheek.

"Well, I'm your far-away neighbor, anyway," Evan explains as if reading my thoughts. "I live just a few miles down the beach in a little hut. It's not much but you're the closest person to me, and I to you. So I thought I'd introduce myself."

Well, that makes more sense anyway.

I extend my own hand this time and allow Evan to grab it in return. His eyes devour the length of my body, and when he's done a deep blush spreads across his cheeks. My silk robe leaves little to the imagination.

"Er, it was nice to meet you Evan," I murmur, my voice hushed with embarrassment.

I scuttle back inside and begin to close the door.

"Yea, you too," he responds slowly.

As if coming out of a trance, Evan's eyes snap back to my face and he stops the door with his hand. An easy smile spreads across his lips.

"Now hang on a sec'. I didn't catch your name."

Blood rushes through my veins as his heated gaze locks with mine. I take in a steadying breath, forcing myself to remember why I can't become attracted to anyone. I frown at his hand and push the door harder until it clicks shut. He doesn't need to know my name.

No one else needs to either.

Chapter 2

Chapter Two

I can't seem to shake this feeling of nervousness. I have done this hundreds of times before - new job, new faces, and new interactions. Perhaps Evan's visit from yesterday is still messing with my mind. If that's the case I should know better by now.

My heels click down the main hallway of the office. Everyone's eyes are trained on me and I wonder what they are thinking. I wonder if my outfit is appropriate. I try to go shopping as often as I can to stay up with the times and the current fashion.

Today I chose a fitting, knee-high length skirt, a ruffled white top, and black heels to match. I wore minimal makeup and tied my hair into a professional looking bun. I prefer for my hair to be down but when it's this long, I have a tendency to play with it. *Nervous habit, what can I say?*

The building is big and the first floor is styled in a modern way. The tiled floor is black and white with marble pillars coming up from the floor and touching the ceiling every hundred feet or so. There are twenty five cubicles on the first floor, and I'm only too relieved when I step onto the elevator, getting away from all the prying eyes. I hit the button that displays the number fifteen and feel my body ascending to the highest floor of the building.

Dr. Grace is waiting for me. She gives me the run-through of my tasks, my patients, their disorders, and her take on them. I listen quietly, nodding on occasion so she knows I'm listening. When she's done she hands me their charts and tells me that my first client will be here in ten minutes. She bristles from the room and leaves me to a large stack of files and quite a barren office.

So much for a warm welcome.

I know I won't have time to file all these away, so I take the pile and shove it under my desk. I look over the chart of my first client.

Name: Todd Ebony

DOB: 5/11/1982, 32 years

SSN: xxx-xx-9523

Diagnosis: OCD

Prognosis: Currently taking medication 2x daily. If possible, appointments should be made daily.

Additional Notes: Must be given access to cell phone number of Psychiatrist in case of emergency during weekends. Episodes tend to flare up before work. Strong dependency and heavy attachment to time and people.

I glance up just as my first client, Todd, knocks at the door. I set his chart to the side and gesture for him to come inside. I extend a hand and offer up a warm but guarded smile.

"I'm your new therapist, Todd. My name is Stella."

His expression is blank, but his eyes scan my face, relaxing a degree when he's finished. He walks right past me and takes a chair, ignoring my hand completely.

"I don't like to touch people," he murmurs without further explanation.

Fixated in Time

Well, this is going to be quite a morning.

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I walk to my car wondering how the day went by so fast and yet was so stressful. Work didn't used to be so mentally taxing a hundred years ago. Things were simpler then.

As I unlock my car, I notice a familiar face from across the lot. The person is smiling at me, his eyes bright and his smile masking some emotion I can't quite place. I raise a brow at him and he waves me over. A piece of me wants to just get in the car and leave. That's what I should do.

But I don't.

My feet whine in protest as I walk across the lot. They want to get out of these heels almost as badly as I want a stiff drink.

"Do you work here?" Evan asks when I'm only a few feet away from him.

I nod in response. He's leaning against a very expensive bike - a Harley, I believe. The color is so shiny and so bold the childish part of me wants to lean forward and touch it.

But I don't.

"You like motorcycles?" he asks, seeing that my attention is riveted on his fine piece of machinery.

"They're nice to look at, I guess."

But then again, so are you.

Evan smiles and pats his bike affectionately. His green eyes are tantalizing as they gaze back at me, his strong jaw a wonderful showcase to his heart stopping smile and his irresistible lips. Pulling my eyes away from his face, I glance down at his left hand. No ring.

Stella, don't you even think about it. Don't you dare.

Evan mounts his bike and holds out a helmet to me. "You wanna' take a ride?"

My face flushes at the thought of being so close to this man and my mind begins to swivel in all different directions.

"I - uhmâ !." *Oh, what the hell. Why not?* "Sure. I'll go."

Evan's smile widens as he thrusts the helmet into my hands. *Not like I really need one of these.* But I take it anyway and fasten it around my head and chin. It's a snug fit and very uncomfortable.

"That helmet suits you," Evan says as he puts on his own helmet.

I blush at his compliment and hoist myself onto the bike. My body screams at me to get closer to him, to wrap my arms around his waist and press my face against his back.

But I don't.

Fixated in Time

I keep a safe distance from him, allowing my hands to rest on his hips. They're so strong and lean and before I know it, little butterflies shake off the dust from years of hibernation and begin dancing around my stomach.

It's funny how living so long can make you feel dead.

As we cruise down the highway I begin to relax. The wind slaps at my skin, feeling warm and cool all at the same time. I forgot how exhilarating this could be. My eyes look out at the ocean, the sparkling blue water looking radiant under the sun's golden light.

Evan maneuvers the bike around a sharp turn and begins to slow the bike. His head tilts back and I hear him say, "So, you never did tell me your name."

I smile and lean forward. "It's Stella."

And as the last syllable leaves my lips, Evan's hold on the bike slackens. I feel the bike's tire catch on some gravel and my body becomes air born. Tears prick my eyes as my body prepares for the onslaught of pain that is soon to come. And just before I hit the pavement, I see Evan - his body landing a few feet ahead of mine - mangled and unmoving.

Chapter 3

Chapter Three

I've heard time and time again of people wishing they could live forever. Well, I'm living proof of a fool who once wished the same thing. And let me tell you, I wouldn't wish immortality on my worst enemy. Sure it's fun for the first hundred, maybe two hundred years. But after that it becomes unbearable.

Everyone wonders what will happen after they die. I can tell you from experience that what lies in the great beyond puts living on this earth to shame. Heaven is real, very real. And so is Hell.

I should know; I've been to both.

Seeing the splendor that Heaven has to offer makes my heart ache with sadness. If people knew what lay in store for them after they died, I guarantee no one would wish to live forever. That's a fact.

And yet I will never be able to experience Heaven again. *Or death either, for that matter.* This is what is in store for me now: an unending life, an undying body, and a soul fixated in time.

The sound of my house phone ringing startles me out of my thoughts.

"Hello?" I answer.

"Hello Miss Hill. This is Dr. Allen from Kindred Community Hospital. I was told to call you once Evan left the hospital as you are his -"

I hear Dr. Allen flip through papers as she tries to find who I am and what relation I have to Evan.

"I'm his psychiatrist," I interrupt. "And because he is mentally unstable, I needed to know the second he left your care. Thank you for calling."

There's a slight pause and I hesitate only briefly before asking, "How is he?"

I try to sound professional but I come off sounding childish. You'd think after being alive for so long I'd be able to exude maturity no matter the situation. Apparently it'll take another couple hundred decades to get the hang of that.

"He's doing fine, Miss Hill just a bit shaken up and bruised. His vitals all look good and he is on the mend. I see in his chart that he lives alone. Will you be stopping over to tend to his care or should we assign someone from our staff to do that?"

I bite my lip. "No, no I'll take him," I finally say.

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I make the long trek to Evan's house, not really knowing what to expect. *Not this dilapidated old hut, that's for sure.* This is outrageous. *How can he live in such a place?* There doesn't seem to be enough room to even put a bed inside.

Fixated in Time

I tentatively knock on his door and find myself holding my breath. After a few fleeting moments, Evan opens the door, his mouth agape. He is bruised and banged up, that's for sure. But for the tumble he took, he's not bad at all. That aside, he is still the beautiful man that whisked me away on his motorcycle only days ago.

And that's when I realize why he's staring at me. I look the same as I did before the accident. I have not even a single scratch to show for it.

"S-stella," Evan stutters. Relief washes over his face and despite everything, a silly grin is up on his beautiful face again. "You're alright!"

"Hello Evan, and yes I am thank you. How are you feeling?"

He leans against the door frame and gestures for me to come inside. I decide to enter his small dwelling and the second I'm inside I wish I hadn't. It's even smaller than I had imagined it would be.

"I'm good, thanks," Evan responds and closes the door.

Normally when I'm nervous I like to pace. Or move around. But in here that seems to be an impossible feat. *If I move around too much, I'll knock his whole hut over.* He watches me as I glance around his humble home.

He brings his hand up and scratches at the stubble on his chin.

"I know it's not much. But I don't need a lot."

He pauses and then blushes. "It must seem pathetic compared to your place."

I blink and bring my eyes to his. "It's lovely, Evan."

My voice is soft and timid. I don't know why I'm here. *Oh that's right. Because I decided to illegally take over his care from the hospital,* my subconscious reminds me in her snidest of voices. Stupid, stupid choice.

He must wonder why I'm here *too.* *If he knows I signed off on his care, he'll think I'm nuts.*

"I just wanted to see if you were doing alright," I sputter defensively, though he hasn't asked.

Evan nods and takes a seat on his bed.

"It's alright Stella. I know you signed off on my chart and took over my care from Dr. Allen," Evan says with that stupid Cheshire cat grin on his face.

But then he frowns. "And I also know you paid for my medical bill while I was there."

He searches my face for an answer, his mouth pressed into a mulish line as he tries to read my expression. I'm an expert with keeping a poker face though. I had to master it for my own funeral. Talk about depressing.

His gaze is too much, too smoldering. I look away from him and notice all the little knick-knacks he has lying around.

"Well, as the doctor that signed off on your chart, I wasn't allowed to take over your care until you had your bill paid for in full. Normally they aren't so strict but since you have no health insurance, I just took care of it."

Fixated in Time

Evan pulls out his check book from his back pocket and digs around at his night table for a pen.

"Well thanks doc.' How much do I owe ya?"

My brows furrow together at the preposterous thought. There is no way he could afford it. "You owe me nothing, Evan. Just please have a speedy recovery."

I start to leave but then turn to him once more. "Oh, and as yourpsychiatrist it is now my legal duty to tell you if you need any counseling, someone to talk to, etc, I am here to help. So if you ever want to schedule an appointment, let me know."

I say it with my professional voice so he knows I'm not trying to be flirtatious. Evan taps a slow rhythm on his thigh using his checkbook. He looks at me, his gazescrutinizing my every move. I feel those butterflies begin to yawn and spread their wings. When he winks at me, it seems to be their cue to fly amuck throughout my stomach. That's never a good sign.

"Well I appreciate the kind gesture, Stella. By the way is that short for something? Or is it just Stella?"

"It's just Stella."

"It's beautiful. Fitting though for a beautiful woman like yourself."

He has to know that his words are undoing me. I feel like I'm hanging on to my calmnessby a mere thread.

"Anyway, I would like to schedule a therapy session with you. How does Friday night sound? Say, eight o'clock?"

Now I am the one to stare with my mouth agape. Did he just ask me out on a date? No, no I can't do it.

"Sounds good," I hear myself say in response. *Oh Stella, what are you doing?!*

"Great. I'll call you with details," Evan says in his happiest of voices.

"Oh. Do you want my cell number?" I ask, now fumbling to get out my own pen and paper.

He reaches out to stop my hand, and I feel an electric charge coming from his fingertips.

"No need, Stella. I already have it."

He grins wickedly at me and winks again. I am stupefied at the exchange between us and back peddle away from him. Nobody has access to my cell phone. No one. To my house phone, sure. But my cell? There's no way. He's pulling my leg. He has to be.

And then he recites my cell phone number, making me reel even more. I am stunned and ok, I'll admit it, kind of freaked out.

"But how do you-" I start to question, but Evan interrupts me.

"Don't worry about it, Stella," he whispers as he closes his door and gives me a knowing grin. "We all have our own little secrets."

Chapter 4

Chapter Four

I remember the first time I died. It was the only time my soul left my body and went up to Heaven for the briefest of moments. Ironically, it's the best memory I've ever had in my long lifetime.

I want to write a book about it. Dying, I mean. That way people won't be so worried. They get so scared that it's going to hurt or be the end of their soul. But it's not. Death doesn't hurt. It's peaceful, if anything. Your body recognizes it's shutting down so it does what it can to protect and ease your mind.

Now the *reason* behind a person dying - yes, that can be painful. Once I realized I was immortal I was too skeptical to 'test it out,' so to speak. But after the first fifty years of immortality, I was in a bad accident. I should have broken my hips, my collar bone and my left wrist. But by the time I realized what had happened, I was healed.

My body still hurts when it is broken, yes. But the healing process is so fast, the pain is always very short-lived.

After that first incident, I got a bit carried away.

I jumped from mountain tops, drowned myself, hung myself - I even shot myself in the thigh one night after having one too many drinks. I guess a psychologist would call it suicide attempts. I call it curiosity, a need to find my immortal body's limitations. And after hundreds of years of testing, my conclusion is I have none. I cannot die and when I am injured, my body just snaps back to its original state.

I don't do that kind of stuff anymore though. Even though my body is just an elastic shell of what it used to be, I try to take care of it. Plus, with the medical help today, the less accidents I'm in the better. People start to wonder when I'm in a near-death accident and am healed in less than five minutes.

Evan is supposed to pick me up soon. I had to go shopping for a new outfit. I have no idea where he's taking me so I chose a cute summer dress. It's bright purple and contrasts well with my almond eyes and chocolate brown hair. It's tight against my slender curves and shows just enough cleavage to be enticing - but not slutty. That's a fine line now-a-days.

I've curled my hair into big banana curls and pinned a few strands up on my head to give it some height. Now some purple eyeliner, black mascara, a small bit of blush, and a touch of silver eye shadow.

I check myself in the mirror.

Well, I look the same as I did almost a thousand years ago, but at least the fashion has changed since then. *Thank goodness.*

I've been told time and time again I'm an attractive woman. I'm tall, slender, have seductive curves and a pretty face. After so many years of compliments, I truly believed I was 'hot stuff.'

But after looking at the same face for 989 years, I guess the appeal has diminished. *Oh what a millennium can do to an ego,* I think dryly.

Fixated in Time

I slip into my matching purple high heels and spray on a bit of perfume onto my wrists. The smell is intoxicating, even for me. I've had this perfume since the year 1055. There was a local 'artist' that lived close to me and she made bottles of perfume and potions.

The smells she could create were astounding. When I finally found one that I thought was irresistible, I bought out her entire collection and paid her to keep making more until the day she died. I started out with hundreds of thousands of bottles. Now I'm down to a mere 252.

I close my eyes and get lost in my own scent, my mind racing back to those days so long ago.

As I stand here alone, a weird sensation runs through my body. It's unsettling as it is exciting. My stomach lurches forward and I can feel my heartbeat picking up speed. My palms begin to sweat and my muscles clench against their own will.

Oh no!

I can hear the wind outside pick up speed, its power so strong it sounds like a dog's whine. And then it stills.

Silence.

I am frozen to where I stand and turn my gaze to the front door. I'm holding my breath, waiting for the inevitable to happen.

Knock, knock, knock.

Three loud knocks on my front door. It's not locked and I see the golden handle begin to turn. My heart is in my throat. I can't do this, not right now. Evan will be showing up any minute!

The door opens slowly, and a tall man walks through the doorway, his body language exuding confidence as if he owns the place.

His head lifts up and sees me in an instant. Our eyes lock and for a moment, and I feel breathless. His green eyes are bright, a shade lighter than Evan's I note. His wavy jet black hair is long, pulled back into a loose ponytail behind his head.

He stands at a massive six foot five inches tall and is chiseled muscle from head to toe. *He looks good. Really good.* I can't help staring at him.

He's wearing fancy black pants and a formal white shirt, an impressive black jacket over top of it. His shoes are black and shiny, and I wonder how much he must have spent on a suit this classy.

His masculine face is clean shaven, a look I haven't seen on him in quite some time. His lips part and he lets out a soft chuckle, shaking his head slightly.

"You look beautiful, Stella," he says. His voice is like honey to my ears but my brain keeps flashing me warning signs.

My mouth opens and closes but not a word comes out. How did he find me?

"It was easy," he replies to my thoughts. "You're easy to track when I want to find you."

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I can hear a rustling outside and a moment later I can see Evan's lean body walking up to my door. He sees that it's already open and pokes his head inside. When he sees me he smiles, but then frowns as he seems my intruder as well.

"Ahâ they Stella," Evan says, question in his voice.

I don't have time for this now. *I just wanted to have dinner with Evan.* And of course, it blows up in my face.

Mustering up my confidence, I walk past the intruder and grab Evan's arm, pulling the both of us outside. I slam the door in my intruder's face and scurry down my front stairs.

"Who was that?" Evan whispers when we are out of ear shot.

I take a deep breath and shake my head, trying to erase the image of the man now standing in my living room.

"It's my ex-husband."

Chapter 5: Chapter Five

Chapter Five

The restaurant Evan has chosen is a cute little place called "Aloha Aloha." It's definitely a 'local's favorite' from the looks of it. It's small and set right on the beach's edge. He chooses an outdoor table, and I'm glad he did so the second I sit down. The sun is setting and is oh so beautiful. The pink and crimson colors overlap, the orange hue illuminating the entire sky. I get lost in the sight, my ears becoming lulled to the soft sound of waves lapping up against the shore. It has the most calming effect on my shaky nerves.

A short plump waitress approaches our table. She has a ring in her nose and lots of make up on her face. She pulls a pad of paper and a pen out of her large front pocket, tucking a strand of her long hair behind her ear. Her hair is the darkest and silkiest shade of black I've ever seen on a human before. How lovely.

She looks from Evan to me and then smiles.

"Hi my name's Tania! I'll be taking care of you folks this evening. Our specials for today are at the bottom of your menus and anything else you wanna know, just call me over and ask! Can I start you off with something to drink?"

Her voice is loud and her timbre is surprisingly low in pitch. I glance at her shoulders and notice how broad they are. My eyes move up to her thick neck and I do a double take as I realize that yes, she does have an adam's apple. Perhaps her name wasn't always Tania. Maybe it used to be Tanner. Or Trevor.

Evan doesn't seem to be phased by her appearance and points at the alcoholic drink list.

"I'll have the Captain's Remorse and - actually just make that two of them."

Did he just order my drink for me? I raise a brow at him and he does that smile that gets my butterflies stirred into a frenzy.

The waitress nods and scuttles back into the kitchen.

"It's their specialty drink here," Evan explains, not missing a beat. "They're known for it. And if you don't like it, I'll just have the rest of yours and we can get you something different."

I purse my lips but finally nod. My mom always told me to never let a man do something for you, unless indicated otherwise. If they got used to doing things for you, they'd start to become controlling. At least, that's what my mother said. I always believed it was a load of hogwash, but as I think of it now I wonder if there's any truth behind it.

The drinks arrive only moments later and as I take my first sip, I'm surprised by how tangy and tasty it is. My expression must be giving away my thoughts, because Evan cracks a smile and starts to laugh.

"You look surprised that something so visually unappealing tastes so good. Am I right?" he asks, his eyes warm and happy.

"Well, not entirely. I've seen drinks far less appealing than this before. But to say I'm surprised by its pleasant taste, yes, I'd say that is true."

Fixated in Time

Evan cocks his head to the side and his eyes scrutinize my face.

"You're different from most women around here, ya know that?"

Oh buddy, you have no idea. I shrug and take another sip. I'm shocked I can't taste much of the alcohol but there must be a lot in it. This is only sip two and already I can feel my insides becoming warm and swirly.

"I'll take that as a compliment," I say in response.

I sometimes wonder how I come off on a first date. I may look the part of a twenty-first century gal, but my mindset is far from normal.

"And I'm sorry I didn't mention it earlier, but you look positively radiant tonight," Evan adds.

He glances at me from across the table and I flush as his eyes trail the length of my chest and torso.

"Thanks," I respond and automatically grab for my drink to take another much needed sip of my Captain's Remorse.

â lâ lâ lâ lâ lâ lâ lâ lâ lâ lâ lâ lâ lâ lâ !..

As dinner winds down, I've found that I've been able to loosen up and relax. To my utter delight, Evan is very charming and very funny. Despite the alcohol, he has made me burst into a fit of laughter too many times to count. He is just so witty!

I wonder why he's single. And then it dawns on me. There's a chance he isn't.

My stomach drops to the bottom of the floor and I furtively glance up at him as he wipes his plate clean with his spoon.

"Evan, are you single?" I ask, the alcohol impeding my otherwise courteous form of questioning.

He frowns and then laughs as if my inquisition is preposterous.

"Yea I'm single Stella. You really think I'd ask you on a date if I wasn't?"

I shrug. Guys nowadays aren't the same as they used to be. They're shadier, not as reliable. Maybe I'm just too negative, too jaded. Nevertheless, I always like to be sureâ just in case. His face becomes serious and his eyes darken a degree.

"Are you single?" he fires back at me.

Whoa. Talk about a change in demeanor.

"Yes of course I am," I snap back.

I haven't even been on a date in over a hundred years! Evan holds up his hands in defense, shaking his head slowly. His eyes lighten back to their original state and he whistles low under his breath.

"Ok, ok. Jeez. I'm not trying to get you upset or step over any personal boundary here, Stella. But you *did* ask me first. And - in my defense - I showed up at your house to pick you up for our date and your ex-husband

Fixated in Time

was chillin' in your living room. That doesn't exactly scream 'I'm single.'"

His voice is layered with accusation and suddenly I feel like I'm on the defense again. Or maybe it's just the alcohol. My head feels like it's swimming. No more drinks for me, that's for sure. I should have stopped after two. I know that's my limit. But they tasted so goodâ€¦

"Do you want another?" Evan asks, tilting his head to the empty glass planted firmly within my hands.

I stare down at it, the cubes of ice looking naked without their proper liquid drink to cover them up.

"He really is my ex-husband," I mumble, ignoring his question about the drink. "And I haven't seen him in years."

"Until tonight?"

"Yes," I confirm. "Not until tonight."

Evan leans back in his chair, the bottom of his shirt lifting ever so slightly to show his lean hips and muscular stomach. He looks delectable. I feel a stirring within a region a bit below my stomach and I can't help but lick my lips.

He sees my reaction, and blushes himself.

"Do you think your ex is still at your place?" Evan asks as he waves the waitress over to give her his credit card.

I can't *feel* his presence like I could earlier, so my guess would be no. But he hides himself well nowadays, so I could be way off.

"I have no idea," I answer honestly.

Desire burns in Evan's eyes as I stand from the table. I haven't had a man look at me like that in quite some time. Well, at least not one that I *wanted* to look at me like that.

"Well, do you want to come back to my place?" Evan asks timidly.

Suddenly he looks far younger than his age - which I would guess to be around thirty or so. He looks vulnerable, innocent even.

A slow smile creeps onto my face but I shake my head.

"I appreciate the offer. But I have some things to do at my place tonight anyway, the first of which will be kicking out my ex."

Evan's shoulders sag but he nods in understanding.

"Alright. I'll take you back then."

I look at him, suppressing a childish giggle, and playfully run my fingers down his arm.

Fixated in Time

"I said I wouldn't stay at *your* place tonight Evan. But I have nothing against you staying at *mine*â€ . If you want to that is."

Chapter 6

Chapter Six

Evan offers me his jacket as we walk up to my house. Goosebumps reign all over my legs and arms and I'm surprised at how rapidly the temperature dropped from earlier today. Perhaps we'll be in for a storm later. I *always* love a good storm.

I accept Evan's jacket, and his body's warmth envelops my shoulders. I am touched by his chivalry and smile wistfully as he gives me one of his infamous winks. He allows me to move ahead of him as I put my key into the front door.

I try to suppress the anxious feeling that is now bubbling up to my throat. Is my ex here? Has he done anything to my house?

I walk inside and compulsively start to look around, scrutinizing every nook and cranny. Everything seems to be just as it was. *Good*. I'm very proud of my house and my decorating skills. Every time I move to a new house, I go with a different theme, a different style of decorating.

This time, I'm rolling with the times and am going modern. Every room has the most up to date furniture, state of the art technology, and fancy paintings by famous artists lining all the walls. The only difference between one room and the next is the color scheme. If I only had one or two colors in the entire house, I'd go nuts.

So I chose white and blue for the living room. I thought they were the softest colors and complimented the view of the ocean impeccably. Looking at it now with the sun setting in the background, I feel I've made the correct decision.

I sigh in relief and shrug off Evan's jacket, hanging it in my front closet.

"Would you like a tour?" I ask slipping out of my shoes.

Evan's runs a hand through his short hair, his eyes taking in every piece of furniture in my living room.

"Damn Stella, did you decorate this yourself?"

I blush and then nod, my sub-conscious clapping with delight.

"It's gorgeous. And it must have cost you a fortune," he murmurs under his breath.

Well it didn't. I could buy a million houses and decorate it exactly as I did in this one and it still wouldn't make a dent into my bank account.

But I nod anyway.

"It was worth it though," I say straightening the middle painting on the wall. "I like to always have my house feel like a home. And taking the time to decorate it myself always gives me that feeling."

Evan leans his head to the side, question burning in his eyes.

"Do you move often?"

Fixated in Time

"Yes, she does," a masculine voice responds.

My head whips around and I see my ex waltzing through the kitchen and entering into the living room. He stares at me, his eyes intense and refuses to look away. When he reaches me he leans forward, placing a kiss on my forehead and bringing his arms up to rest on my shoulders.

"Stella, we need to talk," he says, his voice firm and commanding.

I move away from his touch and steal a glance at Evan. He's looking at my ex, his eyes cold and full of anger.

"I-uhm," I sputter, trying to regain my composure. "Stephan, I think you should leave. We can talk later."

Stephan frowns, looking to Evan and then back at me. He seems to be contemplating something and eventually shakes his head.

"I'm sorry Stella, it has to be now."

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I stifle a scream as I watch Evan pull away from my house. I haven't had company in so long. And up until tonight, I'd forgotten how much I missed human interactions.

I turn on my heels and narrow my eyes on Stephan. "This better be good," I growl.

Stephan cocks his head to side, studying me as if I'm some strange caged animal in a zoo. He looks so handsome, stillâ 'after all these years. My subconscious whimpers and begs for me to touch him. She remembers how soft his skin was, how intoxicating his smell wasâ !

My eyes snap forward, brown eyes clashing against green. His hair is out of its ponytail now, it's full length cascading down his neck and shoulders. I never thought I'd be one of those girls that liked a man with long hair. Usually I don't. But when a guy has good hairâ !.I seem to crave it.

Stephan seems massive, his muscles larger and more toned than when I saw him last. He brings his hand up to his face, inspecting his neatly manicured nails. The thought of Stephan getting his nails done in a feminine salon makes me crack a smile. The thought is just so - odd.

Stephan raises his eyes to me and sucks in a breath. His eyes shift from their normal shade of green and begin to swirl into a beautifully dark mix of gold and black.

"That smileâ !" he murmurs, moving closer to me.

I bite my lip and my stomach quivers. It's times like these that I force myself to remember all the reasons I left him. *It surely wasn't from a lack physical attraction*, my subconscious snarls.

Well, that's true. Stephan and I never *could* seem to keep our hands off each other.

I close my eyes briefly and chant a mantra in my mind of all the reasons I can't be with him. *He's evil, he's poison, he hates all things good, and he wants to kill the human race.*

I feel Stephan's hands on my shoulders, his heady scent fighting its way to seduce my senses. It doesn't take much. When I finally look at him, my gaze locks with his, and I can feel my eyes begin to change as well,

Fixated in Time

their chocolate brown color swirling into a mix of silver and black. This is what happens when Stephan is around. This is what I become. A monster.

Chapter 7

Chapter Seven

Sulfur and smoke starts pumping through my lungs as the transformation continues. I try to hold on to the light, but my subconscious is running to the farthest corridor of my mind and cowering, too scared to do anything else. The evil within me purrs with delight. It has won and is basking in its triumph.

Mmm it feels so good.

My body temperature continues to rise and I'm acutely aware of the pleasurable pain now ripping apart the flesh on my back, making way for long, forgotten black wings. I can feel them growing bigger, longer until their tips reach the floor. I reach my hands to feel them and revel in their satin texture against my fingertips.

My wings.

They're the one and only thing that I miss when I am human. Because they are so very beautiful. Black as night, silky as churned butter, and more durable than a cement building. I stretch my wings out and crane my neck back to look at them. My eyes devour the sight. They sparkle now, I notice. Gorgeous.

I hear Stephan's deep voice, his timbre lower now that he has been transformed.

"Stellaâ!" his voice trails off.

My name sounds seductive as it rolls off his tongue and my lack of self control demands me to return his gaze. And as our eyes lock, I can feel my mind connecting with his. I try to fight it, but I can't. An influx of his thoughts enters my mind.

"I've missed you Stella. I need you, Stella. Come back home where you belong. Nothing is the same without you."

It's too much. The connection is so strong. I can practically feel our combined energy buzzing around our auras.

Stephan's wings expand, even longer and wider than mine. They are black too, with a few random red feathers throughout. I love the red.

Stephan extends his hand out to me, and I take it without thinking. But something is tugging at the back of my mind and I stay where I'm standing trying to rid the feeling before we continue.

My subconscious looks up tentatively from her corner and bravely shouts the name "Evan" through my mind. Evanâ! oh that's right. The handsome man that left. Why did he leave?

I shrug off the thought as I maneuver my wings through the front door. I feel the sea breeze as it rustles the feathers of my wings. It's soft, intimate, and glorious. My wings are so sensitive and it takes all my will power not to topple over with pleasure.

Stephan is next to me in an instant and smiles, his eyes glowing with a wicked gleam.

Fixated in Time

"*This is your most flattering form you know,*" Stephan murmurs mentally, engulfing my mind. "*You are irresistible.*"

Am I? That's news to me. Because the last time I looked in the mirror after a transformation I wanted to cry. Long brown hair, black beady eyes, a silvery swirling color just underneath my skin, and black sparkling wings jutting out from my back. I look like a majestic evil fairy. *Yea, that's real irresistible,* my subconscious snorts and rolls her eyes. I let my wings expand and I start gathering the energy around me - from the wind, the oceans, the waves, the moon and the stars. I command it into my body, and with it I can feel my feet lift off the ground, my wings preparing for flight.

Stephan hovers fifty feet above me, wings flapping. He looks down at me patiently and smiles. I know he wishes I would stay like this, this curse of a creature.

When I reach his height, he leads the way, taking me to a place I only visit now in nightmares. I follow close behind him and I allow myself the luxury of looking at the beautiful city, their night lights twinkling at a distance. My senses are heightened so even at this distance I can hear the occasional laugh or drunken shout passed from one stranger to another.

We fly on through the night, and when the time comes to eventually descend, my wings ache with fatigue. They are not used to this, not at all. I lower my body, trying to maintain the same level of grace and composure as Stephan does.

My feet hit the ground harder than I anticipated. A small whimper of pain escapes my lips and before I can take another step forward, Stephan is at my side. His eyes are glowing and his chest is puffed out with pride. He looks strong. Powerful.

Why am I here?!

Stephan snakes an arm around my waist, pulling me next to him. I feel my stomach quiver and my arms start to shake. I can't believe I'm scared. But I am.

"You're here because I need you with me. I can no longer accept your gifts as my own. Your followers worship you, Stella. They cannot handle you not being aroundâ it's too much on them," Stephan says, his face taut with determination.

I close my eyes and take deep breaths as Stephan leads me lower and lower into the ground. The temperature is rising, and the smell of smoke is all around me. The feeling of evil curls around my body, enticing me and taunting me. My dark side loves it, is so aroused by it. But my good side - the piece of me that longs to be free - is crying.

I can hear screams of agony and tortured voices, pleading for forgiveness. My evil side claps her hands and throws her head back with laughter. I am nearing my followers now. I can hear their thoughts and feel their emotions.

They are excited and have missed me so very much.

Stephan and I round the corner and as soon as we do, I take a final deep breath, trying to prepare myself for all the misery, all the pain. My evil side gets comfortable and relaxes, a sinister smile creeping onto her lips. This is where she feels most at ease. This is where she belongs. In Hell.

Chapter 8

Chapter Eight

My minions see me and squeal with delight. Their scaled bodies glitter against the flames and their forked tongues swivel out of their mouths with fervor. They draw closer to me, reaching out with their thin fingers and razor sharp claws to touch me.

I allow their affection, internally cringing at the way it feels against my smooth skin. I look over to Stephan, who is standing back from me, admiring me at a distance.

"I'm proud of you Stella. I know this isn't easy. But can't you see how much they've missed you?"

I turn back to my followers, disgusted with his thoughts. I don't care how much they missed me. In fact, I don't even think they're capable of feeling such a human emotion. They can only feel negative things like jealousy, obsession, hatred, and anger. So perhaps they're obsessed with me and feel a need to see me. But to miss me? I just don't think it's possible.

"Masssster," the minions start to chant, their forked tongues providing them all with an audible lisp.

I think if snakes could talk, this is what they'd sound like.

"Presssent, for massster," one of the bigger minions says, shoving his way through the crowd.

He is a taller minion, almost four foot nine, and clearly male. As he draws closer to me, I see an erection forming and a lustful desire burning in his beady eyes. I have to swallow down a mouthful of bile at the sight. I forgot how intrigued, how obsessed they are with me. To think I used to love this attention from these evil creatures makes me sick with embarrassment.

He kneels when he reaches my feet, bending down to kiss each of my toes. His erection grows bigger at the action. An unstoppable shiver shudders through my body and I'm only too glad when he moves away from me.

I can hear Stephan laughing in my mind and I throw him a scowl. There is nothing funny about this. He refuses to meet my gaze, but I see his lips quirk up with a devious smile. I loathe him right now.

The minions continue to stare at me, all of them reaching around my feet and calves just to feel a piece of my body. There was a time, long ago, that I used to let them ravish my body. When I first had become evil, I had this sexual desire that never seemed to be fulfilled.

Foolishly, I allowed my minions to please me, to take me on my command. And while it helped to stifle my ever growing lust for sex, it made their obsession grow too strong. Each of them wanted to be the *only* minion allowed to touch me. They became jealous of one another, turning against each other and killing their fellow minions left and right.

"Presssssent, for my masssster," the minion repeats, pointing his hand to the corner of the room and smiling with pride.

My eyes focus on the flickering flames, their yellow and orange hues ever consuming my mind. I see more minions entering the room, their eyes on me, but their attention focused elsewhere. And then I see why.

Fixated in Time

They are pulling a shackled man and a woman into the room. Both are human and both are naked. The humans fight against the minions, their bodies streaked with dirt and blood. I can see the terror in their face and eyes and my heart picks up speed.

My evil side sits up, licking her lips and leaning in to get a better look. This is what she thrives on - others' pain and fear.

The minions drag the human couple to the middle of the room, nailing their shackles to the floor and forming a circle around them. The tall, male minion looks to me for my reaction. I struggle with the excitement I'm feeling, not wanting to succumb to the evil that is so wanting and willing to go free.

I nod my head at him with approval. And he is so pleased with himself, so proud that I am accepting of his gift that he moves back into the crowd and begins to pleasure himself. His eyes stay trained on me though, and it's nearly impossible for me to look away.

The other minions start to circle around the humans in captivity, poking them and laughing at them. These humans, they are my gift, the minion's sacrifice to me. And it is now my duty to watch them die.

The human female looks up at me, fear and hatred etched all over face. Her eyes widen as she sees me, taking in my dark, silver splendor. My wings arch back with pride and before I know it, I am smiling down at her.

My evil side springs from her chair and attacks my mind, wrestling and pinning it into a submissive position. With my mind now under Evil's command, I summon one of my minions over, demanding a chair so I can enjoy the show.

He runs away and a moment later he is back, a cushiony chair in his outstretched arms. He sets it behind me, and I allow him to kiss my hand as a sign of my appreciation. Stephan comes to sit beside me, his hand reaching out for mine. I look at him, and I see him gasp as he focuses his attention on my eyes which are now glowing red.

I hear my prisoners start to cry and I revel in the sound. *Mmmmmmm*. My minions are staring at me with excitement, all of them pushing each other out of the way at a chance to be chosen. I point to two minions near the back. They have green scales and longer horns than the others. I can feel their desire to do this.

They bow to me in thanks and then approach my prisoners, rubbing their hands together with anticipation. As a pair, the minions each get behind one of my prisoners, hardening themselves before raping my victims. Both the male and female human cry out with pain, their behinds not used to such aggressive use.

As the minions sate their lust, they both bring their claws down on human flesh, scratching and digging at their backs. Blood pours from their bodies and their cries of pain increase in volume. They start to beg for freedom, for help.

My evil side throws her head back and laughs. I watch as the life drains from the human bodies and I drink in their souls, their energy. It feels so good I nearly orgasm. Their lifeless bodies slump to the ground and my evil side sighs in satisfaction.

Stephan is tugging at my arm, mentally telling me it is time to go. His wings flap open, and mine follow suit. I can hear my minions stifling their cries. They do not want to see me leave. They beg me to stay, their claws digging into my ankles and feet.

"Pleassssse Masssssster, don't leave usssss," they shout. "You jusssssst got here."

Fixated in Time

I refuse to acknowledge their weakness and follow Stephan through the dark corridors. Up, up, up we climb, the temperature dropping with every step we take. The further away I move from Hell, the clearer my mind becomes and the heavier my guilt weighs on my conscious.

Did I really just watch two innocent humans die?

When we reach land, Stephan turns to me and runs his fingers across my cheek. His eyes are filled with love and satisfaction.

"See?" his mind purrs to me, *"that wasn't so bad was it?"*

Chapter 9

Chapter Nine

My mind feels woozy, like I'm in the beginning stages of recovering from a hangover. I pry my eyes open, my body stiff with fatigue. I have not been in my Evil form for so long. I've forgotten what a toll it takes on my body and my mind.

I roll over and glance at my clock. It's already past eleven in the morning. I can't believe I've slept that long. Is Stephan still here? I really hope not. He brings the worst out of me. *And that's putting it mildly.*

Grudgingly, I push my body up and off the bed. I walk to the kitchen, enjoying the beautiful, albeit too bright, view of the ocean. It's a richly warm and sunny day and the waves are a dazzling blue. My mind thinks back to the month I spent underwater. I drowned over and over again, but eventually got to a point that my body seemed to relax and I could just enjoy the depths of the ocean.

People really have no idea what creatures and beasts lie on the bottom of the ocean floor. Some of the things I saw made me squirm with fright. They are the things that you'd only think up in your nightmares. Freakishly large, massive eyes, and so powerful it makes you freeze with terror.

My train of thought stops with a jolt as a tingling sensation spreads over my body. It's as unnerving as it is calming. The feeling warms my insides. My mind focuses, my eyes on high alert.

I am being watched.

I can feel it.

I move with a quiet ease from room to room, my eyes scouring every inch of space. I call Stephan's name, but he is not here. His aura has staled; he must have left as soon as he dropped me off at home last night. I suppress the pang of sadness I feel at his absence. I know this is the way he is, the way he always has been. And yet a small piece of me hoped it could be different. Maybe one day.

I still my body, my eyes closing and my mind reaching out to whatever presence it can find in my house. My subconscious moves with ease, her stealth and knowledge far exceeding any humanly limit.

Then I feel it. A spirit. A mind. My subconscious moves to it, doing her damndest to grab a hold of it and see who or what it belongs to. It's hovering in my living room, fighting hard to stay hidden.

And then in a fleeting moment, it leaves.

"Arrgghhhh!" I shout, stomping my way back to the kitchen.

My subconscious stomps her foot in defeat and goes to pout in her corner. She still isn't real thrilled with me over last night's events.

Don't worry. Whatever spirit that was will be back. And when it does, next time I won't let it leave.

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Fixated in Time

Todd is early to his appointment Monday morning. He comes into my office, squirting a handful of sanitizer into his hand before he sits down. He always looks so squirrely and uncomfortable. Of course, that can be a nervous trait of his OCD. I need to get to know him a bit better before I can deduce that though.

"Good morning Todd. How was your weekend?"

Todd looks at me, his eyes scared and dark. This is not going to be a good session, I can already tell. My cell phone starts buzzing in my pocket and I jump at the action. No one ever uses my cell phone to contact me, so this is a surprise.

I take it out of my pocket to turn the volume to silent and quickly check my messages.

From: 9857052241

Message 1/2:

Hey Stella, it's Evan. Hope your weekend went OK. I had fun with you on Friday. Do you think maybe we could

I scroll over to read the second half of the message.

From: 9857052241

Message 2/2:

go out again this week? Or this weekend is fine too. Just let me know! :) Evan

I bite my lip with excitement. Despite all the evil, all the darkness of this weekend, Evan still wants to see me! But wait a minute. A red flag goes up in my mind. Evan still really doesn't know me all that well. He *did* ask me out rather fast. He got my cell phone number without me knowing (which I still have no idea how that was accomplished).

And *now* is texting me for another date, even though I had to kick him out of my house to talk to my ex-husband. If the roles were reversed I would have done all I could to get out - and fast. So why is he still pursuing me? Or am I just being too cynical?

It's times like these that I wish I had a good girlfriend to talk to. I'm in dire need of one.

"-and that's when he started raping me," Todd says, his unexpected words distracting me from my thoughts.

"Wait. Who did that to you, Todd?" I ask with genuine concern.

Todd pauses, studying my face ever-so-carefully. I think I make him nervous. Either that or he's wondering if this time I'll actually listen. I just have too much on my mind. I should have called off today. But no, I can't call off when I've only been here a week. That wouldn't go over well.

"Stella?" Todd asks, his eyes hard and cold.

"Yes, Todd. I'm sorry. I'm listening," I say, trying to comfort him.

I tune out my thoughts and force myself to focus on his words. Dissecting my love life can come later over a gallon of ice cream and a season of FRIENDS.

"Like I was saying," Todd continued, "after he raped me, I couldn't help but cry. And then after that he killed me."

Fixated in Time

"He killed you?" I repeated, frowning.

Todd sighed, his frustration evident.

"Stella I've only been describing my dream to you for the past five minutes!"

Ohhh! It was just a dream!

I nod my head, my body relaxing a degree. "Well, Todd. I think nightmares are normal when someone is under a lot of mental and emotional stress and -"

"No. It wasn't that. I've had nightmares before. This one was different. It was soâ.real. It was like I was watching it through someone else's eyes. I haven't had that type of dream since I was a little boy. I'll never forget it."

"And what was the nightmare you had as a little boy?"

I listen intently as Todd reiterates his nightmares to me once more, the one from his childhood and then the one from this weekend again. And the more I listen, the more my body becomes paralyzed with fear. No, no this can't be happening.

"-and then those damned creatures brought me down to Hell, raped me and clawed at my back. I don't know why they did it Stella, but as I died I watched this beautiful woman in front of me. Well I think she was a woman. She had long black wings and a body made of silver. She was scary, but beautiful. Does that make sense? But her eyes - they had so much hate in them," Todd finishes, his face pale and his voice shaky.

He looks to me in earnest, his features looking so much older than they did at the beginning of his session. He's not just having nightmares, I realize. He's seeing, mentally *livingâ* i. my journey into Hell.

Chapter 10

Chapter Ten

After my appointment with Todd, I make the smart decision to take the rest of the afternoon off from work. I don't know how such a thing is possible, but Todd, my own *patient*, mentally experiences my trips to Hell. He has *seen* me, in my Evil form. There *has* to be something more to the puzzle, something more about him that I haven't yet discovered or -

"Stella?"

My train of thought is interrupted, and I turn my attention away from the grape selection to seek out the female's voice who has just called my name. My eyes land on a younger woman a few feet away from me. She is mid-thirties, perhaps, with a pudgy face and a skinny body. Her fiery red hair is bobbed around her chubby face and bounces merrily as she walks towards me. Her face is bedazzled with freckles and she's wearing quite an expensive pants suit. Her green eyes look at me expectantly, a friendly smile spreading across her face.

I raise a brow at her. I don't know this woman.

She extends a hand to me and I shake it.

"Stella, I *knew* it was you. I just knew it! I told my boyfriend, I said 'That's Stella. THE Stella!' So I came over and here you are! Wow, and you are even *prettier* in person, you know that?"

Her excitement is overbearing, and I glance around and take note that others are intentionally slowing their grocery carts to better hear our conversation. Why is this woman fussing over me so?

"I'm so sorry. Where are my manners? I'm Connie. Connie Bryce," the woman informs me.

And then recognition dawns on me as soon as Connie says her last name. Bryce is an 'up and coming' company that advertises and sells interactive televisions. I don't know much about them - just that they're super expensive and can do a lot of cool things.

They are a huge hit in Europe right now; that I *do* know. They are selling like crazy to all the 'elite' and 'upper class' people of the country. They are all the rage. I wasn't aware that they were becoming popular here in the US now as well. Their company is still relatively new, so the fact they are growing this fast is quite an accomplishment.

Had I known their success would be this fast prior to my contract with them, I may have backed out. Alex Bryce, CEO of Bryce Company, approached me at a restaurant ten years ago and said he liked my look. He said I had the body, face, and voice that he had been looking for to promote his product. He asked me on the spot if he could hire me as a model for his company.

He was quite a smooth talker, and I remember being so excited at the prospect of being on TV or in a magazine for different advertisement commercials and ads. I modeled for him for a solid month and then was given a small contribution for my efforts.

Alex told me if the company 'made it big,' that I'd be receiving more compensation for my advertising skills. I shook hands with him and went on my way. I hadn't heard from Alex or the Bryce Company in yearsâ well,

Fixated in Time

"What do you think Stella?"

"I'm sorry, think of what?" I question, mentally scolding myself for not paying attention.

"To going out this weekend! Gavin and I will still be here and we'd love to take you out for a few drinks! What do ya' say?"

And just before I can politely decline her offer, I see Evan's sexy physique walking through the front door of the deli just across the street. Changing my mind, I turn to Connie and smile.

"Sure, Connie. That sounds great. Is it alright if I bring a date along?"

Chapter 11: A Face to Your Eyes...

Chapter Eleven

I can feel it again - those invisible eyes on me. I move through the house keeping my feet light and my mind clear. Despite my attempt to stay calm, my heartbeat picks up speed and I can hear it pounding through my ears.

Breaking the invisible tension, I hear my phone vibrating across the counter. It skids across the countertop a few times before I swipe it up and squint to see its screen. Evan's calling. I smack my dry lips together, idly wondering if I should grab a drink of water before I answer the call.

Oh Stella, pick up your big girl panties.

I open the phone and press the talk button.

"Hello?"

Evan's voice rings through brightly from the other end.

"Stella! Good to hear your voice. I got your text."

A piece of me is relieved. The other piece of me is nervous. I texted Evan over a day and a half ago to ask if he wanted to come out for drinks with me on Friday. And this is the first I've heard from him!

"Oh, good," I say, trying to contain my anxiety. How does this man make me so nervous from a simple phone call?

"Sorry it took me so long to get back to you. I was really busy."

"That's ok; there was no rush for a reply. I was just extending the invite to you because, well, you had said you wanted to go out again and - "

"-Stella, I'd love to go out for drinks with you and your friends," Evan interrupts, and I can hear him smiling through his voice.

My sub-conscious squeals with delight. Apparently she is much happier with my choice in Evan than she is with Stephan. Butterflies erupt in my stomach, their activity level higher in the past few days than it's been in the past hundred years.

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The rest of the week flies by in an uneventful haze. My mind is so consumed with Evan, with Stephan, and with Todd's outrageous ability to see into Hell that I don't have much time to think about anything else.

My last client for the day doesn't show, and I file my paperwork before grabbing my briefcase and heading to my car. It's beautiful out today, but much hotter than I'm used to. I decide rather than hiding away in my spacious house that today is the perfect day for a swim.

Fixated in Time

I pull into my driveway and rush into the house. I bought a new bathing suit when I first moved here, knowing that my suit from the 1960's just wasn't going to cut it. I rummage through my closet until I find what I'm looking for - a small, sparkling black string bikini.

I strip out of my work clothes and put the small amount of material over my body. If women in the 1800's saw what women wore now-a-days, their heads would be spinning. I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror and blanch as I realize my choice of swimsuit so closely resembles a part of me that I try to forget - my Evil side.

I move my body from side to side, looking at myself from all angles. I am lean but have seductive curves. I've come to realize I have a body most women would kill for.

My body has stayed the same since I made the transformation. On the one hand it's nice. I can eat and eat and never gain a pound. On the other hand, the possibility of me ever having a child is zilch. Zero. Nada. Not that I would actually want to bring a child into this world, but the possibility would still be nice.

Don't get me wrong. I love children. And when I see a baby smiling, a little piece of me sulks in the corner and cries fat crocodile tears in the knowledge I can never have that. But even if I could bring a child into this world, I'd have to see them die before me. From what I've heard, the pain of losing a child is one that is unmatched.

Needless to say, I think I'll steer clear of the baby making business. By choice *and* by force, I suppose.

My train of thought is halted when I feel those invisible eyes on me again, this time seeming to burn holes into my soul. The eyes are studying me, scrutinizing my every thought and movement. My soul, like my scantily clothed body, feel naked.

I move through my living room in silence, grabbing my aviators and my towel before leaving the house and closing the door behind me. Thankfully, the eyes don't follow me out here. Who could it be? Or *what* could it be? Someone is watching me, closely. I can't tell yet if it is evil or good. My Evil side is giving me no indication one way or another.

My feet automatically take me down the sandy trail that leads to the water's edge. The warm wind caresses my skin, a tantalizing combination with the sun's devouring heat. Like a child, I sink just my big toe into the water to get a feel for its temperature. It's a bit cooler than the smoldering heat around me. I wade into water, moving into the ocean until I am neck deep.

The water feels heavy against my body. I feel it weighing me down the deeper I move. I'm almost ear level now and my whole body becomes chilled. I'm used to Hell's fervent heat. I believe that's why being in a colder climate has always appealed to me. It makes me feel as far away as possible from my *l*other side.

"Hey stranger!"

I remain still, hoping that whoever is yelling will go away. I want to swim on my own. I hear the intruder moving closer, coming up behind me, splashing noisily as they draw near.

"Stella?"

The intruder moves around me, grasping my elbow and pulling my attention towards him. I look at his pseudo-familiar face and pull my arm out of his hold. He's one of my co-workers, but his name becomes lost to me as I stare up into his light brown eyes.

Fixated in Time

I've only ever talked to him once or twice at the vending machine. He must not work very hard, because I see him in the break room far more than at this cubicle. I look past him to see two other people wading in the water closer to the shore. Both are blonde and both are females. One is tall and thin, while the other is short and chubby.

My eyes narrow on him and he takes a step back.

"It's me, Stella. Your co-worker Kevin, remember?"

"I remember. What are you doing here?"

Kevin frowns and clears his throat with a nervous laugh.

"Yesterday at work you told me you lived right along the beach and that I could come by to swim whenever I wanted," Kevin states, his voice hesitant.

Oh that's right. I did. I had said it as a kind, passing gesture - a feeble attempt at making friends. I hadn't actually thought he'd take me up on the offer, let alone without contacting me first.

"That *is* what you said, right?" he asks.

"Yea that's fine. No, I remember saying that. I just figured you might call first or something," I say, slowly making my way back to shore.

"I would have if you'd given me your number," Kevin mumbles, walking a bit too close to me for my liking. "And we tried ringing the bell of your house first."

Kevin pauses and looks up at my home, whistling low under his breath.

"How the hell did you get this place anyway? It must be worth a couple million dollars, am I right?"

I ignore his questions. The answers are none of his business anyway. I feel the warm breeze dance across my skin as my body ascends from the ocean water. The droplets of water soak into my skin, moisturizing my body in the most natural way.

I can feel their eyes on me. The two blondes, Kevin's, and *those* eyes. The mystery eyes. I'm very aware that I am almost naked and I hastily grab for my towel and pull it across my body. My eyes dart to and fro, scanning the area for a sign. My heart is beating wildly in my chest and I force myself to take deep breathes so that I can focus on the changes in the air.

The air remains steady, even, steady, even, steadyâ!

STOP!

My mind refuses to move on, forcing my eyes to do a double take. There, about fifty feet away from me and high in the sky, is a shift. It's like an air pocket, a gap in the atmosphere. I can feel it, and I can see it. And through that air pocket is a smoldering pair of eyes staring back at me.

The eyes are light, sky blue, and ethereal. But they are deadly, so very deadly. I want to look away but I'm stuck, my eyes locked in this unending gaze. The mystery eyes never blink, staring back at me with such power and domination. I force a single thought through my mind, pleading the intruder to stop bothering me.

Fixated in Time

Why has he been following me?

To my surprise, the eyes lighten, their hard expression softening. The eyes grow bigger, bigger, until a face starts to form around them.

I suck in a breath as I sit and study the glorious face that is now forming in the sky. I immediately recognize this male's face, a face so strong and so masculine. His hair is as golden as the sun, curly tendrils framing his perfect cherubic face. He is an angel.

And unfortunately, whenever an angel draws near, it does not bode well for me.

I have only seen this face once before. It was the last face I saw, the face of this angel, before I was cast down to Hell for the very first timeâ€¦

Chapter 12: The Message From the Angel

Chapter Twelve

My feet stumble across the scorching sand and onto the pavement that leads up to my house. I can hear Kevin calling after me. He must think I'm nuts. But of course he cannot see those angel eyes in the sky. If he could, he would be running for his life, no doubt. With trembling hands, I open my front door and close it behind me.

The ocean water drying on my skin is now being replaced with a layer of sheen, slick sweat. I lock my front door and tiptoe to my bedroom. All I want to do is escape. I bite my lip, clearing my mind to see if the eyes are following me.

They are.

Oh, God. What does he want from me?

I crawl into bed like a child, hugging the covers up and over my head. The eyes are drawing nearer, coming closer and closer to my soul. I am shaking under my covers, my Evil side now succumbing to the fear as well. She is nowhere to be seen and is hiding for her dear life.

And then I hear light footsteps treading through my living room. My bedroom door slowly opens, and the footsteps come right to the edge of my bed.

I feel a hand touch my shoulder and the touch is so strong, so powerful that all I can do is whimper in response.

"I'm not here to hurt you, Demon," the booming voice says. "Please come out of hiding."

Despite my instinct to disobey, it seems my limbs are acting of their own accord. I push myself into a sitting position and pull the covers away from my face. My jaw drops as I see the angel, in human form, standing right in front of me.

I have never seen him human before. I've only seen him in the sky, mysterious, frightening and powerful. His chiseled face is masculine, yet the lines of his cheeks and jaw are soft. His eyes are so light, as if two squirts of fluffy clouds were injected into his irises. His hair is so golden and thick, its curliness giving him a boyish quality.

He is too beautiful to be real. His skin is pale and glowing. The demon inside me thinks this angel is filthy, disgusting, and undeserving of my attention. The human in me can't seem to get enough of him.

The angel continues to gaze at me, his face impassive. It's like he's looking into my soul, scanning all my sins and misdoings over the last millennium. I have neither felt more naked, nor more ashamed in my entire life.

"Demon, you surprise me," the angel says, his voice low and powerful.

I am too scared to respond. My eyes move away from his face and down his body. He is wearing a plain white robe, its length easily covering his arms and torso. I follow it down and see that it ends at his ankles. I can't help but take a moment to wonder what he looks like without his robe.

Fixated in Time

The angel cocks his head to the side, studying me. My eyes snap up to his face and I can feel my cheeks blistering from embarrassment. Did I just mentally undress an angel? My demon is a sexual being. Sex is like breathing to her. But even *she* would draw the line at an angel. So who is it having these thoughts about this angel standing before me? My Evil side? Or just plain Stella?

"You are frightenedâ yet you desire me, Demon?" the angel asks, genuine curiosity in his voice.

My mouth flops open and closed, my trembling nerves causing my body to begin shaking once again. Can he read my thoughts? Feel my emotions? I close my eyes and take a deep breath. I suddenly feel the overwhelming urge to cry. Tears bubble up inside me and pound against my shut lids. I blink them away. I refuse to let an angel see me cry.

"Demon, do you know why I'm here?" the angel asks, the hardness in his voice returning.

I shake my head.

The angel pulls out my desk chair, gracefully settling into it and resting his elbows on the arm rests. It's such a common action, but looks so absurd with someone so ethereal doing it. I just watch him wide-eyed, wondering what he will say next.

"The human man you are seeing. He is destined to be a warrior. An angelic warrior."

Is he talking about Evan?

"He is tempted by you, Demon. Much too tempted," the angel says.

He says it like it's a fact, not something to be negotiated. It's a flattering thought, though he makes it seem like this fact is a thorn in his side.

"You may not see him or tempt him anymore, Demon. That is why I am here, to keep an eye on you. To make sure you keep away from him. He needs to remain pure, unharmed and untouched. "

I try to muster up some confidence at his statement. I know how terrible I am, I know all of the evil that resides within me but stillâ I'm not a demon. I'm really not! I have so much good in me! Surely the angel can see that, right?

"Do not question my orders. You will let him be," the angel says.

The force behind his words are stifling and demanding. But I know there is no use in arguing. No one can win a battle against an angel. Period. My shoulders sag in defeat and I nod my head in compliance. This day just keeps getting worse and worse.

I feel so alone, so scared. I want to crawl in my bed and cuddle under the covers and sleep for hours. When is this angel leaving? My sub-conscious gets brave and wonders if I should ask him if he'd like a cup of tea. Do angels even drink tea? *Oh Stella, you're such a loon sometimes.*

I look at the angel but he remains in my computer chair, his eyes fixed on me, his face remaining emotionless. There is a change in his demeanor though, a shift that is ever so subtle. Maybe it's just the way he is sitting in my chair but he almost looks - relaxed.

Not knowing what else to do, I muster my courage and ask, "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

Fixated in Time

The sooner he leaves the better. God knows the angel is a beautiful being to look at, but he makes me feel like a child. I feel undeserving just being in his presence.

The angel looks at me and his passive face changes for just a slight moment. He frowns and then looks at me, confusion in his face.

"Watching over you is outside of my normal duties. I was put on this task for a specific reason, I just do not know what it is yet. Until I am honored with that answer, please do not prove problematic to me. This is my one and only warning to you, Demon."

Chapter 13: Disregard that Last Message...

Chapter Thirteen

I check my watch before opening the door to the bar. I'm a bit early. Connie chose a classy little place on the outskirts of town. I've never been here before, but always pass it by thinking that sometime I should. *No better time than the present*, I muse.

Bells clang above my head as I move through the entry door. Indistinct chatter fills my ears and my eyes scan the area for an empty table. I find one near the back and walk over to it, trying my best not to look clumsy in my four inch heels. I set my hand bag on the table's surface and glance around for a waitress. I need a drink - and pronto.

Twinkling lights cascade down the high ceilings and walls of the interior of the bar. White tablecloths trimmed with gold reside on every table, a cylinder vase in their centers containing a single red rose. Dozens of fancy wine bottles line the shelves all along the back wall. It is quite a lovely set-up, I must say.

A tall blonde waitress greets me at the table. Her hair is tied back in a professional bun, her makeup thick and bold. Her lipstick is a matching red to the rose on my table and I can't help but stare at her lips, thinking they look far too big for her face. They look too puffy, as if they've been stung by bees.

"Can I get you something to drink?" she asks, her voice sugary and sweet.

"I'll take a vodka and cream soda, please."

I can hear Connie's loud voice filtering through the front door, and I can already tell it's going to be a long night. I reach my arm out and stop the waitress.

"Can you make that a double?" I ask, sounding like a complete alcoholic.

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Connie embraces me, her eyes glossed over with inebriation. It appears she has had one too many. *Like I should talk*.

"Stellllaa. You are such. A. Cool. Chick. I've got your number. We're chillin.' Soon. Gotit?" Connie says, her words staccato and unsteady.

I smile at her sloppy question and nod my head, giggling. Gavin pulls her away from me, offering me an awkward handshake.

"Do you need a ride, Stella?" Gavin asks, his face etched with concern.

He knows I've had too much to drink. I should have stopped after my fourth, or even my fifth. But no, I had to push the limits. And look at me now. I can barely stand up on my own.

"No I'vegota ride cummin," I slur in response.

"You sure?"

Fixated in Time

I nod and nudge them towards the door.

"Have a good night!" I scream from behind them as they leave.

Gavin gives me a final wave and then wraps his arms around Connie, scooping her up like a baby. He steadies her weight in his arms and walks toward their car. Connie is so wasted; I'd be surprised if she remembers any of this tomorrow.

If it weren't for Gavin, that girl would be lost. Then again, after seeing the way Gavin was with *her* tonight, it's a fair assessment to say he'd be lost without her too. The two of them are like night and day and yet need each other like a fish needs water. *I wish I had that.*

I stumble through the fancy bar doors and I hear those bells ring above my head again. I stop walking when I reach the end of the sidewalk and begin digging through my clutch until I hear my keys jangling at the bottom. I pull them out and start chuckling. Who would have thought something as little as a key could open *and* maneuver something as big as a car? This same thought repeats over and over again in my head and before I know it, I have tears rolling down my face from uncontrollable laughter.

I am so drunk.

I wish I'd just taken Gavin up on his offer of taking me home. I'm really in no condition to be driving. *Well, time to find a ride I suppose.* I grab my cell phone from my bag and see that I have a missed phone call and two texts. They are all from Evan.

Oh shit, EVAN!

I was supposed to call him to cancel, but I never did! Who knows how long he's been sitting around waiting for my call. I try to feel guilty but it seems like the alcohol is preventing me from feeling much of anything. I dial in a call to Evan and press the phone firmly against my ear, my body swaying to and fro.

He answers after the fourth ring, his voice tired and soft.

"Hello?"

"Evan? It's Stella. I'm so soooooorry about tonight. Now can you be a good boy and picked me up?"

I try to sound sober, but my slurred words put my current state on display. Evan is quiet for a moment and I check my phone to make sure he hasn't hung up.

Finally I hear him sigh on the other end. "Sure Stells, where are you?"

"I'm at that one fancy bar right by the beach. Ya knowwww, the one with the bells on the door?"

Evan lets out another big 'huff' and his voice gets louder. "Stella, please stay put. I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

It seems like only thirty seconds have elapsed before I see Evan's motorcycle pulling up into full view. His bike looks even better at night than in the daytime. Sexier. More mysterious. He parks the bike right in front of me and hands me his helmet. I just stare at him, my hormones in overdrive.

Fixated in Time

His dark hair is messy and tousled, giving off that sexy 'bed-head' look that not many can pull off. His eyes are green and smoldering, their focus on me and my every movement. His face is ever-so-handsome and his expression is hard, like a warrior.

Warrior. Angelic warrior. The angel!

My mind starts whirling as I think about my visit from the angel. In my inebriated state I start to question if that really happened. Perhaps I dreamt it? No, no it felt too real. And the angel had given me a clear and unyielding warning - to stay away, far away, from Evan. After all, he was destined to be an angelic warrior and creatures like that weren't allowed to be with creatures like me.

"Stella," Evan says, his voice stern. "Put the helmet on and get on the bike please. I need to take you home."

I do as he says, all thoughts of the angel being pushed to the back of my mind. Damn that angel. Damn his eyes from the clouds. Damn his warning. And damn the consequences! *Evan is a great guy and if I want to be with him, then I will be! And no one, not even that stupid angel, will stop me!*

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Evan helps me inside my house, though by now I am a bit more put together than I was at the bar. Alcohol works its way out of my system much faster than a human's. Most of the time that fact is a large annoyance.

Tonight, however, I'm only too glad to be walking into my house semi-sober as opposed to completely hammered. Evan hasn't spoken a word since we left the bar, and I'm starting to wonder if he's done with me. I can't say I'd blame him after my behavior tonight. Blowing him off directly followed by a drunken phone call for a ride home.

Way to blow it, Stella.

Once I get to my bedroom, I expect Evan to turn around and leave. But he doesn't. He takes a single step into my bedroom and peers around, as if inspecting a crime scene. His eyes are curious and I can tell he is memorizing every detail.

"Thanks for the ride, Evan," I mumble.

With my statement, I can vaguely detect the lingering smell of stall alcohol on my breath. *Gross.* I kick off my shoes and walk over to my desk, opening and closing the various drawers until I find a pack of gum. I pop a piece into my mouth and chew it with fervor. Is it just me or does this gum feel like cement in my mouth? The more I chew it, the more my jaw begins to ache with fatigue. Chewing gum has never proven this difficult before.

I roll my eyes. I guess I'm not as sober as I thought I was.

Evan approaches me from behind and lightly touches my shoulder. I flinch at his touch, completely startled.

"Stella, will you look at me please?" Evan says, his tone much lighter now.

I turn towards him and force myself to look into his beautiful green eyes. Small tingles of pleasure shoot through my body as we make eye contact. Evan brings his hand up to my face and gently strokes my cheek with the back of his knuckles. I practically double over with pleasure from just this simple touch. No one has ever touched me like this before. So tender. So pure.

Fixated in Time

Evan takes a step closer to me and wraps his arms around my waist. I feel my cheeks heat at the prospect of being so close to this delectable man. Unsure of what to do with my own arms, I cross them over my chest.

"Stella, how drunk are you?" Evan whispers, his eyes never leaving mine.

"I dunno," I mumble. "Not sober enough to have sex with you if that's what you're asking."

Evan's eyes widen and even *I'm* taken aback with my words. I didn't mean for it to come out so harsh. Maybe I said it because I'm scared. After all, I *have* been out of practice with this whole 'sex thing' for quite some time. But in all honesty, I do want to have sex with Evan. Badly.

"I'm sorry, Evan. I didn't mean for it to come out like that."

Evan smiles and brings his face closer to mine. "Stella, I wasn't planning on having sex with you. I just wanted to make sure you were sober enough for our first kiss."

And with that, Evan dips his head down and delicately places his lips against mine. I immediately begin to relax in his arms, wrapping my hands around his neck and drawing him closer. His lips are warm and soft, his tongue wet and enticing.

I become lost in our kiss, every second becoming deeper and more passionate. I feel his body against mine, his toned muscles against my soft curves. There is no way I'm going to be the one to end this kiss. It's just too good to be stopped.

And then I feel it, and my body begins to tense. Those invisible eyes. Those *angel* eyes. I can feel them penetrating into my house and moving closer and closer until they reach my room. Those eyes are on me, accusing and hard. I can feel how angry the angel is, and yet I'm doing nothing to stop it.

No, pleaseâ I beg internally. *Don't stop the best thing that's happened to me in over a hundred years.*

I know the angel can hear me because as soon as I finish my thought, his eyes become angrier. It's like they are pinning down my soul into an uncomfortable, submissive state. I pull Evan closer to me, trying once again to get lost in his kiss. I want to hold on to him while I can because I know once it's over, I am in for a world of troubleâ

Chapter 14: What's in a Name?

Chapter Fourteen

I tug at Evan's arm, lowering my body into bed and pulling him with me. He remains standing, his hand moving down my arm until his fingers interlock with my own. His face is tense and his eyes are lit with passion. I can practically see the wheels turning inside his mind, indecision skipping across his features.

"Listen, Stella!" Evan starts, looking away from me and running his hands through his hair.

I can feel those angel eyes still on me, attempting to penetrate my mind. If I were one hundred percent demon, that angel would be able to control my thoughts, my actions and my decisions. But I'm not fully demon. I'm only half. The other half of me is human and therefore, the angel's tactics can do very little to me - except perhaps frighten me, of course. Maybe now the angel will stop referring to me as 'demon.' He has to realize by now there is more to me than my Evil side. Probably not though. Angels are stubborn beings.

Evan shakes his head, looking around my room.

"Stella, I want to stay. You know I do. I just don't want our relationship to start out like this."

Those angel eyes lighten a degree, pleased with Evan's obvious rejection of me. Hiding my hurt, I nod my head at Evan, gesturing him to my bedroom door.

"Ok then. I trust you know your way out," I mumble.

Evan grabs his jacket and tucks it under his arm. He leans forward and presses a soft kiss on my forehead, tipping my chin up with his fingers.

"I'm doing this because I want to see where things go with us. You intrigue me. You entice me. I like you, Stella. A lot. I just don't want to rush things."

A small glimmer of hope blooms inside my chest. Perhaps Evan isn't trying to reject me. He's just trying to be a real gentleman. He is, after all, destined to be an angelic warrior one day. If anything, his behavior now is a testimony to his pure heart and selfless mind - two qualities an angel must possess.

I offer up a weak smile and nod my head in understanding.

"Probably for the best anyway," I say. "Goodnight Evan. Thanks for driving me home."

"It was my pleasure, Stella."

Evan smiles and heads for the door. I hear his boots clicking down my living room hallway until he reaches the front door, opens it and then closes it behind him quietly. A certain stillness resides over my house the second he is gone. Goose bumps rise on my arms in trepidation of what's to come.

I can feel those angel eyes emerging, coming closer and closer to me. I hurry under my covers, wrapping them around me tightly. I chew on my lip as I feel his presence drawing nearer. He has a powerful presence - warm, strong, unbending, but kind. Unfortunately, I fear I will never be on the receiving end of his kindness.

Fixated in Time

From thin air, I see him appearing. First his face, then his torso, and finally his legs and arms. When he has fully emerged, he stands erect and walks over to my bed. Without saying a word, he pulls out a bag from his robe, sets it on my bed, and then steps away.

I keep my eyes down, avoiding his face. But as he moves away from my bed, I get a whiff of his scent and, *oh myâ!*

My body feels like it is being transcended into a field full of wild flowers and daises. The smell of earth, flowers and trees are everywhere, lulling my senses into a state of peaceful bliss. I remember this smellâ! it's the scent of Heaven. It clings to the angel and I take in another deep breath, this time detecting something more.

Intermixed with Heaven's scent, there is a certain distinctive smell that I know in my heart sets this angel apart from all others. It's a spice, a powerful one, yet has the gentleness of a lover's caress.

It's mint, I recognize. Mmmmm, mint.

I wonder if all angels smell this good, this inviting. My guard down, I look up at the angel and suck in a breath. He is even more beautiful than I remembered him being. His golden hair is in slight disarray, his blue eyes sparkling with fury. His skin is pale though his cheeks are stained a light pink. He is glowing with light and I have the urge to reach out and touch him. *What must a creature of the sky feel like?* I wonder.

"Stop your thoughts demon!" the angel booms at me.

My thoughtsâ!?!? But I'm not even thinking anything!

"Yes. You are," the angel replies to my mind's unasked question. "And it is distracting me from my duties."

The last sentence the angel speaks falters, and there's an almost human-like quality about his voice. I wonder what I have done to distract such a powerful warrior but I say nothing and do my best to silence my thoughts.

My body feels unbearably warm and I allow my covers to fall from my shoulders. The angel, who has been so intently staring at my face, allows his eyes to trail down the length of my body. I have never been so proud or more afraid of being looked at before.

Immediately the angel snaps his eyes back to my eyes and his normally stoic face scrunches up into a menacing scowl.

"Cover yourself back up, demon!" the angel commands in disgust.

I look down at myself, wondering what is wrong with my attire. I am wearing a skin tight black cocktail dress. There's nothing special or fancy about it. It's flattering, but not overly 'showy.' I frown and try to find just cause for the angel's misplaced anger. I can feel my demon roaring her ugly head at the angel's insult.

Normally I have very good control over my demon. But when it comes to my appearance, my demon is quite the narcissist. She is used to being pampered by men and minions alike. So when an insult is passed our way, my Evil side tends to take over.

I take a few deep breaths but my demon is driving herself into a heated frenzy inside my mind. She is squawking at me, insisting I kill this awful angel. I glare at him, my human side and demon side joining forces in outrage.

Fixated in Time

"I will NOT cover myself back up, angel," I snarl at him in return.

My voice has not fully changed over to demon, so there is a double timbre quaking through my vocal folds. The angel's eyes widen at my response, his face registering complete surprise.

"And my name is not demon, you ass hole. It's STELLA."

I can feel my eyes swirling to their demon color and the angel watches in awe as my transformation starts to unfold. I can feel the slits in my back starting to form, waiting to make way for my illustrious dark wings. The angel's features soften and he points in my direction, closing his eyes and muttering a prayer under his breath.

My demon screams and wails in agony against my temples. The angel is shooting some type of peaceful, Godliness into my body and my demon retreats further and further into the back of my mind. My body flops back onto the bed, twisting and contorting as the two forces fight against one another.

I go still as my human side, my good side, finally wins the battle. Sweat clings to my cocktail dress and to my body, my aching muscles refusing to move. The angel drawers near to my bed, his Heavenly scent engulfing my senses once again.

"I did not realize you had humanly beauty inside you, Dem-â !. Stella," the angel corrects himself. "I was told you were solely demon. Most evil beings, especially ones of your nature, are purely evil. I apologize for my mistake and my injustice to you."

The angel's voice is softer now, like the wind whispering an echo behind the whistling leaves. His voice matches his scent now - earthy, manly, peaceful and kind. I wonder if this angel has a name. He must. Even demons have names.

And then my mind starts to wander as I imagine this angel as a human. What must have he been like? Was he like Evan? Or completely different? Does he still remember life on earth? What was his human name?

"Jeremy," the angel says, cutting off my train of thought. His voice is just a mere whisper, sending shivers down my spine. "That was my human name."

Chapter 15: The Black Box

My eyes lift to the angel's face and even through all his beauty, I can see some unnamed masked emotion behind his lovely features. He is not used to such an intimate conversation. He probably has not thought back to his days as a human for many a years.

"But my angelic name is Tobiah," he says directly after, his voice stronger and more confident. "So you will refer to me as such."

I think back to my bible lessons as a child. Tobiah roughly translates to "God is good," and was given as such to a hero who helped defeat a demon. *Fitting, I suppose, given the circumstances.*

"Tobiah," I repeat, feeling the name across my tongue and lips. "I like it."

Tobiah looks at me again, clearly uncomfortable with the way this conversation has turned. He brings his eyes to the small box on my bed and gives his head a hesitant nod.

"You disobeyed me, Stella."

All kindness, all gentleness in his voice has vanished. The menacing angel in the sky has returned and is glaring down at me. Tobiah moves another step away from me and crosses his arms over his massive chest. His golden hair moves softly against his forehead as a warm ocean breeze enters through my bedroom window.

I don't know what it is about this angel but I can't seem to keep my eyes off of him. Tobiah closes his eyes in concentration and right before my eyes, his wings start to emerge. His wings are pearled, gossamer, and thick. They put my wings to shame.

And yet again my confidence is grated down like a block of cheese into just shreds of what it used to be. I feel I don't deserve to be in his presence. He is a man of Heaven, a man of God. And I am a demon-halfing, doomed to spend an eternity in Hell, an eternity of entrapment, an eternity of Evil.

"I will leave you be now Stella, to open your box and allow you to mourn. I warned you I would not take this duty lightly. My command to you remains: stay away from Evan."

At that the angel claps his hands and in a burst of sparkling bright light, he evaporates into thin air. The remnants of his smell cling to my room and the air around me. I inhale deeply, just once, to give my mind some peace.

My focus turns to the black box the angel has left on my bed. It's a small box, perhaps only six inches long and four inches wide. It has no fancy markings or trimmings, but has a sleek look to it. I scoot closer to it and my nose scrunches in disgust. Sulfur, pain, agony, and burning. It smells like Hell.

I move my hands to the side of the box, my heart hammering inside my chest. The angel said he 'left me to mourn.' What on earth did he mean? I tip the lid of the box open, my head leaning forward to get a better look.

The box's lid feels like fire in my hands and I push it off entirely. I look into the box and there's a sinking feeling deep within my chest. Molten lava fills up the bottom two inches of the box, moving in a steady, unbending pattern. Atop the lava is a demon, so charred and so small it could easily fit in the palm of my hand.

Fixated in Time

Tears cascade down my cheeks as I reach into the box to touch the tiny hand of the demon. It disintegrates at my touch and falls into the molten lava below. The demon inside me is livid, running rampant in my mind. She is clawing at me to get out, to seek vengeance for this injustice.

I look at the tiny demon again, so very much like the one that resides within me now. This demon is not just any ordinary demon. It is *my* demon's soul mate. And with demons like these, like mine, they must have a human host to live in for an eternity. When demon and human are split apart, both die immediately. The process is painful, cruel, and very difficult. But it can be done.

And it has been done. To Stephan.

It is Stephan's demon that is now burnt and dead in that box. And that means Stephan is dead as well. I close the box and scream, my sadness and agony more powerful than I'd ever imagined it would be. My demon is wailing inside my head at the loss of her male counterpart. And while my human side isn't as sad as my demon side, I still feel a growing surge of loneliness and misery that I have not felt in a very long time.

Stephan may not have been the greatest guy in the world. No, he was more like the worst. But he was mine. He was my demon's soul mate. And now he was gone. Forever.

Chapter 16: A Special Dinner

The next two weeks of work are brutal. I purposely do what I need to do to avoid Evan. I ignore his calls, don't respond to his texts, and come straight home every day after work. But my reason for avoiding him isn't because I don't want to see him anymore. Because of course I do.

I just want that stupid angel to stay away from me. This is all his - *Tobiah's* - fault. If it weren't for him, Stephan would still be alive and I would still be allowed to date Evan. And I miss Evan, so much. But I refuse to see him at the risk of those angel eyes following my every movement. I just cannot handle it.

I file away my last bit of paperwork and look over my schedule for next week. After a brief meeting with my boss this morning, I agreed to take on a few more clients for next week. *No harm in being a driven employee, right?* I pull out the piece of paper containing the names of my new patients. I still have to study their cases and put together their charts before Monday. I glance at the clock and see I have another hour left. I let out an irritated sigh and reluctantly begin to make their files.

To staunch the heavy silence, I browse the web to find some music I can play softly in the background. Nothing drives me crazier than silence. My eyes scan my new clients' history information, and I jot a few notes here and there before filing them all away in their prospective folders. I grimace at the thought of shoving more folders into my overly stuffed drawer. I think it's high time I start moving my paper work into a larger holding unit.

"Knock, knock. Special delivery."

My head snaps up in hearing that familiar voice that has a way of making my heart skip a beat. I lift my eyes to see Evan standing in the door frame of my office, holding a big bouquet of multi-colored flowers. His dark hair shines against my office lights and his green eyes glow as they look down at me. He's dressed casually, in jeans and a light sweater. Just his presence alone makes my gloomy office brighten to life.

My sub conscious kicks away the many tear-streaked tissues scattered around her feet and skips into the fore front of my mind. She has a big smile on her face and is reaching out desperately to get a hold of this hunk in denim.

Evan glances to the floor and then back at me, hesitation playing across his features. He takes a cautious step into my office, and then another, his eyes never leaving mine. He sets the flowers on my desk in a gentle manner and clears his throat.

"Stells, I'm sorry for barging in like this at your workplace. I was in the neighborhood and thought I might drop by to see youâto see how you are. "

I pull the flowers up to my face and inhale their sweet scent. I push my nose in deeper, trying to consume my senses. And then I feel my stomach tighten as I remember how similar the angel smelled to these flowers. I keep my face neutral as I set them back on my desk.

"Thank you for the flowers," I say weakly and give Evan a small smile.

He nods, stuffing his hands into his side pockets. I can tell he wants to say more, but he just stands there.

"Is there something else you needed?" I venture to ask.

Chapter 17: My New Roomate

I drive home in a euphoric state. The wind laps against my bare arm as I cruise down the road. The traffic is minimal and I pick up my speed, not caring if my driving is hazardous or not. I look in my rear view mirror and am pleased that I have no one behind me. I crank my music to an almost-intolerable level and bob my head as if I know the song. Which of course I don't.

The last remnant of the sun dips below the horizon, turning the ocean from its radiant blue sparkles into an ominous shade of black. The moon is already peeking out from behind the clouds to get a better look at the earth below.

Out of habit, I again look in my rear view mirror and headlights are staring back at me. I try to squint beyond them to see the driver but it's useless. I make the winding twists and turns that lead up to my house and my stomach clenches as I realize the headlights are still behind me. I am being followed.

I purse my lips in irritation, reaching to my stereo to hush its blaring tones. I hone in on the car behind me. Its engine is quiet, like the purr of a small kitten. I make the final turn to my house and see that this mystery car is pulling up right behind me.

I keep my car running, thinking that's the safest plan of action in case I need to make a quick getaway. I shift my body slightly, tipping my head back to get a closer look at the trespasser. The car is sleek and white, its shine so slick that the air must glide right off it. It's a nice car no doubt and must have cost a fortune. The driver's side door opens, and the first thing I see are men's white dress shoes stepping from the car. They seem to match the car itself - lustrous, glossy, and expensive.

The man fully emerges himself and I move my gaze from his white shoes, to his white pants, to his pin striped white jacket. And then I look to his face my heart seems to fold into itself. It's Tobiah.

â lâ lâ lâ lâ lâ lâ lâ lâ lâ lâ lâ lâ lâ lâ lâ !.

I stomp into my house, slamming the door behind me and cursing under my breath. *Why the hell is he here? In human form! .and driving a car! .that is now parked right behind mine!?*

I peer through my front curtains and see Tobiah lifting out a piece of luggage from his trunk. It too is a pristine white, with matching polished handles. *How quaint.* I try to hold onto my anger but the childish side of me is squirming in fear. The last time the angel brought in a package for me it was the remains of my dead husband. I can't possibly imagine what he has in store for me now.

No sooner have I pried myself away from the window and I hear a soft knock on my front. I can't imagine why the angel is using my front door now, when every other time he has chosen to just appear out of nowhere.

My feet seem to move of their own accord and when I open the front door I am filled with mixed emotions. *I mustn't look weak.* I bring my eyes to stare confidently into his. My stomach flip-flops as his smoldering blue eyes burn into mine. Who knew angels were so drop dead gorgeous? *He killed your husband Stella - or have you already forgotten?* My demon squawks at the thought, her evil mind still wanting revenge on the man that now stands before me.

"Hello, Stella," Tobiah says calmly.

Fixated in Time

I frown as I hear his voice. It is the same pitch and volume as before, but without the reverberation of 'heavenly power' behind it. In fact, the more I look at him the more I realize his physique has become more *human* than angelic. Of course he is still the most handsome man I have ever seen in my life, but the glow around him has faded.

"Tobiahâ!" I say hesitantly and the angel holds his hand up to stop me.

"Please - for the time being, just call me Jeremy."

He smiles and I wait to get some sort of mental message from him. But I don't.

"Oh-kay? Jeremy then. Is there, uhm, something I can do for you?" I ask as I lean against the frame of the door.

Jeremy looks behind him and then reaches into his pocket. He pulls out his set of keys and presses the top button, locking his car with a soft and muted "beep" sound. When he turns back to me he takes a step forward.

"May I come in?"

He shoulders his way through the doorway, setting his luggage to the floor, and then standing erect as his eyes dart around the interior of my house. I can't help but gape at this man in white standing before me. He has such confidence and such power, even as a human.

"Stella, I'm going to be staying with you for a while," Jeremy murmurs as he focuses his eyes once again on my face. "You can't seem to listen to my instructions, so now I have theâ unpleasantâ task of enforcing the rule myself. Please understand, I will not interfere with your life or your work. I'm simply here to make sure you stay away from Evan."

Ugh. Again with the Evan thing.

"Would you like to show me to my living chambers?" Jeremy asks, his face serious but kind.

I pinch the bridge of my nose and inhale sharply. How on earth is one supposed to dispose of an angel?!

"Tobiah - I mean, Jeremy. Forgive me but - there's no way in hell you're staying in my house. First of all, you murdered my husband. And second of all, *I did* do what you asked. I stayed away from your friend. But Evan came to ME. I like the guy so I'm going to keep seeing him whether you like it or not. And just as an FYI, I'm not as bad as the Big Man upstairs says I am, so I definitely don't need you sticking around to check up on me."

There, that's a start anyway.

Jeremy frowns at me, the corners of his lips creasing downward. His eyes narrow and his cheeks redden a shade or two. I grin at how harmless he seems now as a mere human. I would bet I have many more powers than he does now. The thought is comforting.

"Stella. I am staying here whether you like it or not."

As he says this, my front door slams closed and locks on its own. *Bummer. Ok, maybe he does still have a magic power or two up his sleeve.*

Fixated in Time

"I didn't want to interfere in your life Stella, believe me. I am much more useful as an angel, rather than a permanent babysitter to a demon. But because of your mistakes, I was assigned to stay with you until either Evan is over you, or until he is in our heavenly chamber. And the "Big Man" you so carelessly refer to is your Lord and Savior. If anyone has been on your side through this whole ordeal, it's been Him. You should be graveling for forgiveness, not shrugging it off as a big joke."

I roll my eyes at Jeremy's speech and walk to the kitchen. Despite my earlier dinner with Evan my stomach is grumbling for more. I bring down my sweet Hawaiian rolls and grab two out from the packaging. Their pseudo-sweet smell and soft texture makes my mouth water in anticipation of their taste. I tear off a piece of paper towel and toss the rolls on it before heating them in the microwave for ten seconds.

By the time they're ready, I see that Jeremy is now standing just inside the kitchen, his eyes following my every movement. I balance the warm bread in my hand and reach for a glass from the cabinet. I bump the faucet on with my elbow and fill my cup up with water. I do my best to ignore the angel as I sit at my table and take my first bite into the roll.

"Mmmm," I groan as the first bite of buttery sweet roll slides down my throat.

Jeremy walks up beside me and stares at my hand. His eyes are alit with wonder and he licks his lips as I move the roll back down to the table. I lift my leg and shove out the chair next to me.

I nod to the empty chair. "Have a seat."

He obediently follows my command and sits down without a word. I stifle a giggle as I watch him gawk at me. *I guess I never realized that angels have no need to eat.* Now that Jeremy was a human, he was probably famished. I don't know what I'd do if I couldn't eat for centuries at a time.

"Do you want the other one, Jeremy?"

I push the roll towards him and his eyes follow the roll as it inches closer to him. He looks at me in wonder and frowns in confusion.

"Why would you share your food with me, demon?"

I scoff at his question but for some reason it doesn't upset me. His voice is full of marvel and innocence when he asks. It's as if he's a child learning the world anew.

"Well Jeremy like I've told you before, I'm not fully demon. I have a kind, human side that - believe it or not - is the portion of me that is interacting with the living population ninety nine point nine percent of the time. I know how to love, how to share, and how to behave. Now, I know you have to be hungry. You haven't eaten in what - a couple thousand years?"

Jeremy raises an eyebrow at my statement, mentally calculating the validity of my words. When I hear his stomach grumble, he caves in to his human needs and grabs for the roll. He takes a big bite and swallows it down whole. A moment later he is coughing it up, his eyes watering and his hand smacking his chest in a fit of panic.

I tip my head back and howl with laughter. I like him much better as a human than an angel, I decide. He's more awkward, more real. As Jeremy gets the piece of roll down his esophagus, he looks at me in frustration.

"I knew I shouldn't have trusted you demon," he spats at me.

Fixated in Time

"Oh stop," I say playfully. "It's not my fault you forgot how to chew."

Jeremy flushes a deep shade of scarlet and moves his eyes to the floor.

"I'm sorry I misjudged you," he says under his breath. "And you're right; I did forget I'm supposed to chew."

I shake my head at him and continue to laugh. As upset as I am at Jeremy for killing Stephan, my anger seems to fade with every passing minute. Whether it's a side effect of spending time with an angel or the fact that - *in all honesty* - I had fallen out of love with Stephan eons ago, I don't really know. But maybe it won't be so bad with him living here for a few days.

I get up from my seat and make my way to the fridge. When I swing open the door, I'm sorely disappointed at my lack of food selection. Cooking for one usually means a barren kitchen. I am no exception to this rule. I hear the angel chewing behind me and I know one roll won't fill him up. I don't like to toot my own horn, but I'm a pretty good cook when I have all the fixings to do so.

"What do you think, Jeremy? Could you go for more food?"

He eagerly nods his head and smiles back at me. My stomach tightens in excitement when he looks at me, and I quickly turn back to the refrigerator. *Stella don't you dare soften towards an angel.* I wipe the feeling from my mind and focus on the task ahead. Food.

I close the door and walk from the kitchen. I hear Jeremy pushing our chairs back into the table and throwing my paper towel in the garbage. *Whata boyscout.*

"Is there somewhere I can put my personal belongings, Stella?" Jeremy calls from behind me.

I start jogging up my staircase and think about which guest room I want to give him. My house has five bedrooms - four upstairs and one downstairs. I want him to be within range to keep an eye on him, but not so close where he can hear my every movement.

"Yea, follow me up Jeremy. I sure hope you have a change of clothes in that pristine suitcase of yours. As soon as you get settled we're going grocery shopping. And if I were you, I'd wear something different.

Jeremy bounds up behind me, climbing two stairs with every stride.

"What's wrong with my suit?" he asks a touch wounded.

I point my finger to the first guestroom on the right. I think it will suit him well. It's decorated in light colors, mostly white and a pastel blue. The bed is large and the sheets are silk. And all of a sudden, the image of a Jeremy pops in my head - naked and swimming in my gossamer silk sheets. I slap the thought away and take a deep breath.

"That'll be your room," I say. "And as for your suit? It makes you look like a schmuck."

Chapter 18: A Haunting Memory

Jeremy stays close to me as we walk into the grocery store, like a child who refuses to leave his mother's side. His face is tense in concentration, his eyes darting to and fro as to not miss a single sight. I can't imagine what is going through his mind right now. The sliding glass doors open automatically before us and I grab the first cart I see. I push it down the aisle and grunt as I realize I have once again chosen the one with a broken wheel.

"What's wrong?" Jeremy asks.

"Oh nothing. Just this stupid cart. I always manage to choose the broken ones," I say with a shrug.

Jeremy glances down at the cart, fixing his gaze on the broken, wiggly wheel. As I struggle to push it forward, I notice that an instant later my struggle has ceased. My head snaps down and I see all four wheels gliding along in a straight line. I shoot the angel a quizzical look and think, *Using your magic powers in public - really?*

Jeremy shrugs. "I guess I always manage to *fix* the broken ones."

I roll my eyes at his comment, trying not to take offense at the double meaning behind the phrase "fixing the broken ones." I haven't been shopping for anyone but myself in quite a while. I am so set in my ways that my hand moves reflexively to the Raisin Bran - a constant breakfast staple in my household.

"Do you mind cereal for breakfast?" I ask Jeremy over my shoulder.

Jeremy is standing still, staring at all the boxes of cereal with their elaborate labels and colorful designs. He moves his fingers across the boxes, each of them tilting back slightly at his touch. He seems so mesmerized.

"Ohmygawd, Stella?!" a feminine voice squeaks from the end of the aisle.

I glance upward and see Connie practically skipping down the aisle to get to me. Gavin is a few feet behind her, pushing a full cart load of groceries with a serene look on his face. I still wonder how the two of them get along so well.

Connie barrels into me, hugging me tightly. Her light pink shawl slips off her shoulders and I see Jeremy lean over to grab it just before it hits the ground. Connie's arms are still around me, her words just a blur as she babbles into my ear. I can't help but smile as I hug her back. One night out with the girl and already she treats me like her best friend. Of course, I'm not complaining. The feel of human attention and affection is something I crave on a daily basis.

Gavin tips his head to me and an impish grin spreads across his lips. I think he 'gets a kick' out of seeing how overwhelmed people can get with Connie's colorful personality. I know if I had to spend all my time with her, I would be counting down the minutes until she went to bed every night.

Connie grips my shoulders, pulling her body away from me.

"-and I cannot TELL you how happy I am that I ran into you today! Gavin and I were just talking about how we wanted to see you again! I think we should plan to do a dinner or something this weekend. Invite your boyfriend!"

Connie frowns and leans in closer to me. "You're still seeing him, right?"

Fixated in Time

My tongue feels like drying glue as I try to focus my attention on her words. *She's just so hard to keep up with!* I let out an uncomfortable laugh and take a step back from her.

"Ah, the man you're referring to is not my boyfriend, Connie. And his name is Evan."

"Ok, but you're still going on dates with him and such, correct?"

Jeremy steps into the middle of the conversation then, handing Connie's pink shawl back to her and offering up a winning smile. Connie inhales sharply, her eyes glazing down Jeremy's body as if she were an underfed child looking at a freshly cooked ham.

"And who is this?" Connie asks, a hint of flirtation in her voice. "Evan, is it?"

She reaches out her hand and grabs her shawl, wrapping it around her shoulders in a slow, meticulous manner. Jeremy shakes his head and offers up his hand in introduction.

"I'm Jeremy."

Connie looks between the two of us, wishing that Jeremy was out of the way so she could gossip with me about him behind his back. I know that brain of hers must be filled with a million questions.

"Ah, nice to meet you, Jeremy. I'm Connie - Stella's good friend."

I bite back a grin. *Good friend?*

Connie gestures behind her to Gavin. "And this is my boyfriend, Gavin. So, how do you two know each other? This is the guy that replaced Evan, I'm assuming?"

Jeremy's grin fades with Connie's words and I shoot him a warning glance.

"No, no," I reassure Connie. "Jeremy is just, an acquaintance. Evan is very much still in the picture. We're seeing each tomorrow actually!"

"No, you will not be seeing him tomorrow," Jeremy interjects. "If I have anything to do with it, you won't be seeing him ever again."

His bright blue eyes have darkened, all traces of kindness leaving his face. Connie's mouth flops open and flounders at Jeremy's comment. *Ugh. And this is why I hate grocery shopping.* I scold myself for not giving Jeremy a brief lesson on how to mingle with nowadays humans. Because clearly he's out of practice.

I give Connie a warm and reassuring smile and loop my arm around Jeremy's. At my touch he stiffens, his eyes staring at my arm that is now gently touching against his. His lips part in - wonder? Confusion? I can't quite place the unnamed emotion that is now showing on his face.

"Connie, Jeremy is my new - er, roommate. For the time being. We're just friends, but he's just super protective of me. Aren't you, Jer?"

I look to Jeremy for confirmation and his gaze is still fixed on my arm. I sigh and move away from him, raising my eyebrows. *A little help here please?* Jeremy's face relaxes and he puts a smooth grin back on his face.

Fixated in Time

â I can feel myself transforming into my Evil side. It hurts me and I whimper in pain as my wings stab through my skin. My demon is furious that I'm the chosen body, the chosen soul she must now be paired with for centuries to come. I can feel her disgust and hatred of me. She sees me as weak. And she's right. I am weak.

My trembling feet move forward, the pieces of gravel cutting through the soft flesh of my feet. I stand on my tip-toes and peer through the window. There is a single candle lit at the end of the room, its color illuminating the wooden table directly below it. My demon squawks at me that I'm taking too long. I need to make a kill, and fast. My minions are hungry.

I press my face against the window and look upon the grown man I am supposed to murder. He is a handsome gentleman, no older than thirty. His face is masculine, dark hair etched all over his cheeks and chin. I look to the space next to him in search of a woman, but I see it is empty.

My focus shifts when I notice a slight movement from the other side of the room. My eyes sweep the area and land on a tiny bassinette where a tiny fist is swaying to and fro, unbeknownst to the nearby danger. I slowly descend into the house, invisible and silent.

My demon pulls me to look at the man once more. He really is quite handsome. His muscular arms and torso are bare, showing off his delectable body. I tilt my head to look at his face and see there are dried tears at the edges of his sunken eyes. My demon cuts through my thoughts, urging me to rape the man. She finds him attractive too. And then afterward she wants to eat him.

I take a step back from the man, my body shaking from the internal battle I am now fighting. I'm scared to give my Evil side control. She is ruthless. But I fear I am too weak to hold on to who I am.

Making a bold movement, I leave the man's side and slowly start making my way toward the crib. The wooden floor creaks beneath my weight, warning me to stay away. When I am by the crib's edge, I bend down and smile with content, inhaling the familiar scent of cloth diapers and innocence. It is a baby boy, I realize, his eyes big and full of wonder as he stares back at me. I want to pick him up and hold him, to soothe him back to sleep. But I fear I have forgotten how.

My demon gags at this repulsive sight and stalks the corridors of my mind in a seething rage. "Kill Kill Kill!" she chants in my mind and pulls me back to the bed, where my minion's dinner awaitsâ 1..

"-and I just have to ask, do you always cook such splendid meals like this?" Jeremy asks, pulling me out of my inner thoughts.

I shake my head and blink, shuddering away the vividness of my memory. Where on earth did that come from?

"Iâ 1uhm. I'm sorry Jeremy, I'm really tired. I don't mean to be rude but I think I need to head to bed," I say rubbing my temples.

Jeremy gives me a troubled look and then nods. "I understand Stella. It must be a hard struggle, what with your demon at all."

I roll my eyes. He would not survive a day in my shoes, I think sullenly. And who is he to be so high and mighty anyway? All he does on any given day is float among the clouds and play in the heavenly flowers. Must be nice.

Fixated in Time

"Er, help yourself to whatever if you get hungry in the night. I'll see you tomorrow morning."

"Ok, goodnight Stella."

"Night."

Chapter 19: My Knightly Visitor

My dreams are filled with haunting images; killing, blood, vengeance, rape, and terror. I eventually kick myself awake and feel a sticky sheet of sweat slicked against my body. I clap my hands to turn on my bedroom light and kick my feet off the bed. I go to my bedroom window and unclasp the lock. A cool breeze kisses my face in greeting and I take a deep breath to calm my wavering nerves.

I can't say that I'm not used to nightmares. A good majority of my life *has* been a nightmare, after all. But last night they were worse than they've ever been before. And deep down I know why. It's been almost a month since I last visited Hell. My minions are missing me, wondering where I've gone, where Stephan has goneâ.

My stomach tightens in the realization that I am gradually being pulled to Hell. I hate going there, but after a while, I am always drawn back down. It must be the demon in me because right now, the pull is worse than ever before.

I mindlessly bite my lip and sit on my window sill, thinking of ways to push back (*or entirely avoid*) my next trip to Hell. My minions will want to know where Stephan has been. But if I tell them he was killed they'll never stop seeking retribution for his death.

My door creaks open from the far side of my room, and when I look up I see the heels of feet leaving my bedroom. Jeremy was in my room?

I clear my throat and lean over to the side. "Ahâ. Jeremy?" I call out tentatively.

I see Jeremy's golden blonde curls bouncing as he walks back into my room. *Oh Heaven have mercyâ!* Jeremy stands before me with nothing more than a low riding pair of white boxers to cover his skin. I gulp down a nervous mouthful of saliva and stare bashfully at his lean and muscular torso.

"W-w-what were you doing in here?" I stammer finally.

Jeremy shrugs and gazes at me from across the room. His blue eyes are nearly translucent in the moonlight and from this far away, it's easy to see that he's much more than a mere human.

"I heard you crying," Jeremy says, his voice divulging the degree of concern his face fails to show. "I came in to see if you were OK. You were thrashing around in your bed and when I got closer to you, I knew it was your demon who was taunting you in your sleep. So I said a prayer for you. That's when you started to wake up and I decided it was best if I left. I'm sorry if I disturbed your slumber."

I can feel the last remnants of sweat absorbing into my tank top. I glance at the clock and see that it's only a quarter past three. The blankets and pillows on my bed are all askew, visual proof of my troubled sleep.

"You didn't disturb me," I say, forcing myself to focus on Jeremy's face. "But - I am glad you're here. I wanted to let you know I spoke with Evan tonight, just before I went to bed. He'll be joining us for dinner tomorrow."

I look away as I finish the sentence, not wanting to see his reaction. I don't know why I'm still intimidated of him. But I am. And the last thing I need right now is for Jeremy to pick a fight with me. As it is, I'm having a hard time keeping my demon tethered down. All it will take is a few offensive words from Jeremy's end and my demon will be on the loose.

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A few beats of silence travel through the room and my body is tense with anticipation. I can hear Jeremy walking toward me, his scent growing stronger with every step he takes. He still smells of heaven - wildflowers, daises, grass and nature. But he smells less of heaven now than he did the first time I met him. The scent that makes him stand apart from others -mint - is the stronger scent I smell. It's as if the longer he's on earth, the less he smells of heaven and the more he smells like the *human* version of himself.

"Stella, I don't want him coming over here," Jeremy says.

His voice is calm and soft. I think he can tell I'm at my wits end, because under different circumstances, he'd be talking down to me like a child. Just the thought of him scolding me, yelling at me and making me feel unworthy of another man's affection gets my heart beating into a wild frenzy. My demon squawks and gets her daggers out, all of them pointed at the angel's heart. My eyes begin to swirl, their beautiful brown transforming to a sparkly, eerie black.

No, no, no. Please don't do this now. Not in front of the angel, I plead to my demon. Even after all this time, I still have to stoop to begging and pleading to get my way with her.

I sneak a look at Jeremy and see he is staring back at me, wonder and worry streaking across his face.

"Please understand Stella, I'm not here to hurt you. I'm only here to fulfill my duty. I don't pick my assignments, they're given to me. You can have any other guy Stella. Any. Just not Evan," Jeremy says and lowers his eyes in sadness.

It's the first time the angel has seemed semi-remorseful for the pain he's caused me. But what Jeremy doesn't understand is that without Evan, I have no one. It's hard for me to find people who understand me, who appreciate the human side I have to offer. Evan is special, so understanding and so kind. *Well of course he is. He's a soon-to-be angelic warrior for Christ's sake.* And that's why I can't have him. I'm just not good enough.

I move away from the window sill and slip my body back into bed feeling exhausted and defeated. "I'm done arguing about his for the night," I say to Jeremy.

Hot tears prick the corners of my eyes and begin to cascade down my cheeks. I don't know why I'm being so emotional. I've been living long enough that I should be able to hold onto my tears until I am left alone. And yet the tears continue to fall, their steady stream like that of a leaky faucet.

Jeremy walks over to my bed, kneeling down on the carpeted floor and leaning his body closer to mine. My stomach flutters when his warm breath treks over my face. I look up to see he is only mere inches away from me. *What the hell is he doing?*

"You're crying Stella," Jeremy whispers, his voice filled with bewilderment. "Did I cause your sadness?"

"You should spit in that bastard's eye," my demon barks at me. Yes, I really should. He killed my husband and is now preventing me from being with the man that has made me happier than I've been in decades.

And yetâ ;

All I really want him to do is climb in bed with me, to hold me and stroke my hair until I fall asleep.

"No, you're fine," my unsteady voice responds. "But like I said, I'm not arguing about this tonight. Evan is coming tomorrow whether you like it or not. Got it?"

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Jeremy gives me a faint smile and his cheeks redden to a deep shade of scarlet. He reaches out tentatively, bringing his hand up and lightly stroking his knuckles down my cheek. My tears immediately absorb into his soft, warm skin. The touch is so sensual and so soft that I become frozen in place. I'm too scared to move, too scared to breath. Jeremy looks at me with his deep blue eyes, his gaze searching for something I can't quite possibly fathom.

With a clear of his throat, Jeremy moves his hand back to his side and pushes his body away from my bed. He shuffles his feet across the floor and pauses just before he leaves my room.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Stella," Jeremy says, flicking off my light switch. "Please know that you cannot continue to see Evan. But I will allow it just this once. IâI look forward to meeting him."

And then he closes my door, leaving no room for a response or a rebuttal from my end. My stomach is in knots and my brain feels muddled with everything that has happened in the last twenty-four hours. I am completely drained. And confused. I close my eyes and take a deep breath, refusing to acknowledge that I just got my way (*for the first time!*) against the angel, refusing to acknowledge that he tried to console me when I cried, and - worst of all - refusing to acknowledge that somewhere deep inside meâI think I liked it.

Chapter 20: The New Hair Cut

"Can I help with anything?" Jeremy asks as he bounds into the kitchen.

He is clean shaven, washed, and -

"You cut your hair!?" I exclaim.

Jeremy blushes at my words, bringing his hand up to touch his now - short hair. It's still long enough to be styled, the tips gelled and meshed in different directions. The blonde color of his hair is still gorgeous, but he looks like a completely different person without his long, curly hair. He looks even better than before, as if that were possible. But now he isâ Drop. Dead. Gorgeous.

"I did," Jeremy says. "While you were cooking I went to cut it. I wanted to look presentable when your friends came over tonight. Do you like it?"

Jeremy steps over to see his reflection in the refrigerator and rubs the shorter portion of his hair in the back. I notice he has bought new clothes as well. He's wearing dark faded jeans, a white striped collared shirt, and a navy blue sweater over top of it. He looks like he's getting ready to shoot for GQ magazine.

Jeremy looks back at me, stuffing his hands in his pockets. "So?" he prompts. "What do you think?"

"It looks good, Jeremy," I say without much enthusiasm.

I *want* to say more but I have this gnawing feeling in the back of my head that the dynamic between us is rapidly changing. Instead of a high-class warrior angel babysitting a misbehaving demon, our interaction is becomingâ real. Two humans living under one roof - eating, breathing, thinking, and feeling.

And last night - *what was all that about?* I still haven't had time to sort it out. What I *do* know is that every moment I spend with Jeremy is just confusing me more and more. I hate him, and yet I find him irresistibly attractive. I want him to leave me alone, and yet I enjoy being in his company.

Pulling the last tray of rolls from the oven, I set them atop the stove and take off my oven mitts.

"Well, the table is set and dinner is just about ready. I'm going to go up and change. Evan, Connie and Gavin should be here in a minute so will you let them in when they ring the bell?" I ask pulling the apron up and over my head.

Jeremy's face falls, but whatever he's thinking he keeps to himself. He nods once.

"Of course, Stella."

"Oh and Jeremy - *please* be nice to Evan. Just introduce yourself as my friend who's crashing at my house for a few days. And don't be all weird like you were at the grocery store, ok?"

Chapter 21: My Walk along the Beach

I study myself at all angles, making deliberate slow circles in front of my full length mirror. My dress is black and short, fitted to my body like an adhesive. Although the dress looks simple, it really is quite complex. There are different cuts in the cloth so that when it's put on, certain sections of skin are showing. My shoulders are bare and there is a small diamond opening in the front of my dress to show off my tan and slender stomach. It's nothing too outrageous, and at a quick glance it might not even be noticeable. *It's just enough to show Evan a little skin*, I think seductively.

What little cleavage I have is put on display in a respectful manner using the ever popular Push-up bra. I have always been mildly insecure about my chest. I've thought about getting breast implants a time or two but I just can't seem to push myself to do it.

I slip on my three inch black stilettos and add a final touch to my make-up. I have curled my hair tonight and kept it down, allowing it to cascade over my shoulders and down my back. I can't believe I have butterflies in my stomach. I've already been on multiple dates with Evan. And yet I'm getting the 'first date jitters.'

And then I realize perhaps the reason I'm so nervous is not to see Evan's reaction to my dress, but rather to see Jeremy's

Connie's shrill laughter breaks me from my thoughts and I kick myself into gear. I click off my bathroom light and take my time walking down the hall, getting a better feel for my shoes. As I start walking down the staircase, my cheeks heat and my stomach squirms with anxiety. *Stella, get a grip of yourself.*

When I hit the bottom stair, I smile at my guests and welcome them into my home. Evan and Jeremy are sitting next to each other on the couch, both of them staring at me like I might vanish into thin air. My heart beat thrums in my ears as I move closer to them. Evan smiles and allows me to see his eyes lingering up and down my body. I can't help but feel proud when he does it.

Jeremy, on the other hand, sucks in a sharp breath and forces himself to look away. And yet for some reason, it's *Jeremy's* reaction that puts a crimson blush in my cheeks, making my hands turn both cold and clammy.

"Good Lord above Stells, you look phenomenal," Evan says, standing to greet me.

He gives me a warm hug, kissing my cheek softly before pulling away. He moves to my side, allowing his hand to trail down my back and loosely drape around my waist. He's never done this before and my subconscious is jumping for joy inside my head. She loves this type of attention.

"For realsies! Girl you are *wearing* that dress!" Connie adds, coming over to give me a quick hug before returning to Gavin's side.

"Well thanks you guys," I say with a sheepish smile. "Have you all had a chance to meet one other?"

I look to Jeremy, doing my best to gauge his reaction. He refuses to make eye contact with me and his face reveals nothing. That's never a good sign.

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As dinner winds down, I crack open another bottle of wine and start passing it around the table. In my opinion, the night was a success. Everyone seemed to enjoy the food and finished their plates with

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satisfaction. And thanks to Connie's brazen personality and Evan's witty humor, the laughter and flow of conversation was unwavering the entire evening.

"Is everyone ready for dessert?" I ask.

My insides are warm and my brain feels a bit fuzzy after all the wine I've drunk tonight. *Ok, this will be my last glass*, I promise myself.

"None for me Stelllllll-uhhhhh," Connie slurs with a hiccup. "I'm stuffed like a turkey on thanksgivin."

Gavin looks at his watch and gives Connie the look that means "it's time to be going," but Connie is oblivious to his signal. Her insides must be even warmer than mine. Her face is deeply flushed and her movements are slow and choppy. Evan passes her the wine bottle, but before she has the chance to take it, Gavin snatches it up.

"Stella I don't mean to be rude, but my parents are coming from out of town tomorrow to have breakfast with us. I'm afraid if we don't leave now, I'm going to regret it in the morning," Gavin says, passing the wine bottle over Connie's outstretched hands and setting it down in front of Jeremy.

I giggle and nod in full understanding. "Of course Gavin. I'll walk you guys out."

Evan stands when I do, helping me out of my chair and guiding me to the front door. Jeremy stays behind, collecting up the dinner plates and moving them into the kitchen. Gavin and Connie take a few minutes to walk to the door, Connie's footsteps a bit fumbled and out of sync with her normal walking pattern.

"Stelllll-uh, I had a fantaaaabulous time tonight!" Connie says with a slap-happy grin on her face.

"Yes, I had a really good time too Stella," Gavin adds, holding Connie protectively against his side. "In fact, what are you all doing tomorrow night?"

Evan shakes his head. "Nothing on my end."

"Nope, me either. And Jeremy is free too," I add for good measure.

"Great," Gavin says. "We're thinking about having a night on Connie's boat tomorrow. We can sail a bit, swim, have a late dinner, maybe have a few drinks. How does that sound?"

"Wow, amazing!" Evan exclaims.

"Sounds good to me!" I say.

"Good. If you want, we'll meet here at your house, Stella. We'll take two cars and you can just follow us from here."

"Sounds good, Gavin!" I say, my excitement already growing.

Gavin nods good-bye to us both, thanking me again for the evening. Evan brings his arm up to drape it over my shoulder. He pulls my body in closer to his, resting his head on top of my own.

"Your hair smells amazing," he murmurs.

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Gavin has successfully buckled Connie into the front passenger seat. When he opens the driver's side door, I can hear Connie's booming voice singing some teeny-bopper song. She's snapping her fingers and swiveling her head left and right. I can just make out Gavin's faint laughter as he gets into the car with her, waving good bye to us, and pulling out of my driveway.

"You have nice friends, Stella," Evan says.

He turns me around so I'm facing him now. He gently brushes a loose strand of hair from my face and kisses the tip of my nose. My sub conscious is on the edge of her seat, begging me to stay here to see what Evan will do next.

But I can't, especially with Jeremy's prying eyes in just the next room over.

"Thank you," I respond, tilting my head to the side. "They're an odd pair, the two of them. But they're obviously a lot of fun to be around."

"Yea. I would not be opposed to more double dates with them in the future."

He smiles at me, his eyes bright, and his face flawless. *Evan, you have no idea how badly I want a future with you.* I can feel tears welling up in my throat at the thought of losing this wonderful man in front of me. I've only just started to get to know him and already I'm being forced to let him go.

Damn that angel and the fulfillment of his stupid 'assignment.'

Evan glances towards the kitchen where Jeremy is still cleaning up dinner. He leans in just slightly and lowers his voice. "You want to go for a short walk?"

"Yes," I respond without hesitation.

Grabbing his hand, I lead Evan out my front door. I don't bother to tell Jeremy where I'm going or when I'll be back. Of course, with his heavenly powers, I'm sure he knows anyway. Evan and I make our way down to the beach, slowing our walk when we reach the shoreline.

Evan rubs his thumb along the top of my hand, his touch so soothing and warm. I slip off my shoes and leave them in the sand, memorizing their location so I won't forget them on my back to the house.

"I like those shoes," Evan says with a smile. "I've got to hand it to you Stells, you looked insanely hot tonight."

I suppress a girlish giggle and squeeze his hand. "Thank you Evan. You're not too shabby yourself."

Evan laughs at my statement and pauses for a moment to stare up at the night sky.

"I had a lot of fun tonight," Evan says quietly. "Ok. And I know it's not my place, but I have to ask. It's kind of been driving me crazy all night, actually. That Jeremy guy -"

Oh jeez, here we goâ!

"-he's your new roommate for a while, right?"

"Yes," I say.

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My stomach is clenching and I am prepared for the worst.

"Does he have feelings for you?" Evan asks, his eyebrows furrowed together with concern.

I'm so taken aback by his question that my mouth just flounders open and close, no words forming no matter how hard I try.

"I know it's none of my business," he says again. "I mean, you and I haven't said we're exclusive or anything. I just don't want to get too attached if I think some other guy is already in the picture. Does that make sense?"

I nod my head slowly, absorbing his words. The sand squishes beneath my feet and through my toes as we continue to walk along the beach. The sound of the ocean is all around me, its calming noise like background music at a fancy restaurant.

"Evan," I say, finally finding my voice, "I assure you there is nothing going on between Jeremy and I. And I can *guarantee* he doesn't have feelings for me. I'm honestly at a loss for words on how he gave that impression to you."

Evan shrugs his shoulders in the same off-handed way Jeremy does and pulls me in closer to him.

"Well, maybe I'm just reading into it too much. I have that tendency, I suppose. But before Connie and Gavin came over, it just seemed like all he could talk about was you. And the way he kept looking at you during dinnerâ I don't know. It was just the vibe I got."

He kept looking at me during dinner? Little tingles of excitement pulse through my body. Somewhere in the depths of my brain, my demon sneers in displeasure, reminding me yet again that angels can't have feelings for demons. If anything, Jeremy was just *acting* like he had feelings for me as an attempt to dissuade Evan in pursuing me further.

The more I think on that idea, the more I start to believe it. Of *course* Jeremy would act smitten with me in front of Evan. He's obviously willing to do anything in his power to split Evan and I apart. Acting like the third man in a love triangle would certainly do the trick.

Why, that no good little -

"So Stella, if you neither of you have feelings for each other, can I ask you another question?"

I take a deep breath, trying to calm my anger down to a mere simmer. Oh, that angel must think I was born yesterday if he thinks I'll let his tactics work on Evan. *I'm one step ahead of you, Jeremy.*

"Of course, Evan," I say, nuzzling into his body.

Evan pulls our walking to a stop, gently tugging me forward until I am standing face to face with him. I can tell he's nervous as he looks into my eyes, and I am once again baffled by how handsome he is. His dark hair is so thick, his face so chiseled and masculine.

"*Can* we make this exclusive?" Evan asks, a small smile forming on his lips. "Because Stella, I want nothing more than to be the guy that gets to call you my girlfriend."

Chapter 22: The Inevitable Trip to Hell

My wings flutter in the wind, their durable strength never faltering. I can see them sparkling out of the corners of my eyes, and I'm once again dazzled by their beauty. My demon sighs with content, her Evil ways leaking from my mind and oozing into my veins and extremities.

After my intimate walk with Evan, I knew that I could not hold out any longer in seeing my minions. My human side wanted to stay with him forever, to walk along the shore and let his fingers stroke my hand as the minutes flew by as carelessly as the wind. And when he asked me to be his, *just* his, I nearly bubbled over with joy in accepting his offer.

But all the while my demon clawed at the back of my mind, insisting that I bestow upon her the attention she deserved. I kissed Evan a sweet good-bye, his decadent lips tantalizing my senses into a blissful peace. And after he drove away, the pull of my demon assailed me full force. No more delay; it was time to go to Hell.

My heart hardens to the ache of missing Stephan while I make this journey alone. He was always my Hellish calendar, his visits my only physical reminder that my presence was needed down below. And now the duty falls solely on my shoulders.

At my last turn, I plunge down towards the ground, spiraling and twisting as I make my descent into the fiery gates of Hell. *Thank God my wings are fire-proof*, I think as a burning ball of flames slams into the right side of my feathery wing. Cries of agony and moans of pain assault my ears and my demon claps her hands with glee. This is her welcome home.

Just make this quick, I tell myself. *Announce that Stephan is no longer with us, and head back home. It'll all be over before you know it.*

My feet hit the hard dirt floor and I quickly descend the staircases that lead me to my minions. They are waiting for me; I can feel it. I go to the end of the hall and turn the last corner, overwhelmed with the sight that meets my eyes.

I've only been away for a month and yet number of my minions has seemed to grow ten-fold. Their forked tongues slap out of their mouths, drool trickling down their charred lips and scaled skin. Their bright eyes stare back at me full of devotion and pride. I am their leader.

Ok, demon. Do your thing.

"Took you long enough you stupid bitch," my demon scoffs in return.

Her sinful soul encapsulates my vocal folds, my words now under her control.

"My minions," I say, my voice scratchy and low. "It has been too long."

"Masssster," the minions chant, each bowing and inching closer to me.

"I have news from above. I have disposed of my counterpart, his evil soul not strong enough to keep up with my deadly ways," I say, deftly explaining Stephan's disappearance in a way that would be acceptable to my followers.

"Kill him masssster, kill him!" a few minions shout from the back.

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"He has been killed," I reply, trying to fulfill their vengeful desires.

And my demon, despite being in her warm home and amongst her loving followers, struggles to keep her sadness at bay. Of course she had no attachment to Stephan as a human, except with his physical attributes which she found sexually irresistible. No, it was Stephan's demon, her true sinful soul mate that she was still mourning.

"There is much work to do on earth," I say.

My minions wait with bated breath, hanging on my every word. Their devotion and attraction for me practically pulsates through the room. My demon whines at me, demanding that we stay longer to give her ego a proper feed.

No!

"I need to leave now," I say, my voice steady and firm with command.

My minions wail in protest, their arms flinging forward to scratch at my ankles and feet. I turn to leave but before I do, I grab the bag I have been carrying with me since before I entered Hell. It is both my food and my gift to them: two humans - both of them scared and in need of proper punishment.

I had selected them carefully as I flew through the air. I heard their thoughts, watched their violent actions as they molested and robbed an older woman in the alley. After watching for a short time from above, I descended upon them, snatching them up and holding them hostage for the last few hours of their lives.

I look at the men now, both in their late twenties. They are scruffy men, their mangy hair falling haphazardly across their face and into their eyes. They are leaning against one another and I notice a small trickle of urine escaping onto the floor. I follow the trail, seeing the darkened spot on the crotch of the man on the left.

I mentally pull the two men from behind me and set them on the floor in front of my minions. Their legs kick and flail as they try to make a feeble escape. Tears of worry stream down their faces and screams of fear escape their lips. But they should know by now that they are doomed.

My minions are inching closer to the men, shooting me furtive glances and obediently waiting for my permission to attack. They are like dogs, I realize. Just simple-minded pets waiting to be fed and awarded their treat.

"Until next time," I whisper. "Enjoy my gift."

"Thank you massster, thank you!" the minions squeal, pouncing on the two men and sacrificing their bodies to the sinful ways of Hell.

Ok, I say with a guilt-ridden heart. It's time to go home.

Chapter 23: Feelings of Confusion

Because my demon is still feeding off her trip to Hell, she gives my mind a glimpse of peace, allowing me to catch up on some much-needed sleep. When I finally pull my eyes open and look at the clock, it's already well past noon. My soft and supple bed molds to my every movement, a gentle caress in response to my resting needs.

I take my time getting ready for the day, enjoying a long shower and spending over an hour in my closet looking through my new clothes. I decide on a full-length, strapless summer dress. Its colors are beautiful- a vibrant mix of gold, orange and red. Its silky thin material hugs my curves delicately and I look in the mirror, fully satisfied with my choice for today. I select a matching pair of gold sandals and pad out of my bedroom.

Jeremy is waiting for me in the kitchen, an empty bowl of cereal in his hands, and a distant look etched onto his face. He has on khaki shorts and a solid blue polo, a wonderful choice in bringing out his smoldering blue eyes.

"That shirt looks good on you," I say with a half-hearted smile. "And good morning - er, afternoon. Did you sleep well?"

I walk over to my coffee maker and start inserting a packet of rich, dark Sumatra. I pull out a handful of grapes from the fridge and start popping them in my mouth one by one. My stomach grumbles in appreciation.

"I did not," Jeremy responds coolly. "You left with Evan at eleven at night and I didn't hear you come in until close to five o'clock this morning."

I turn to face him slowly and cock my hand on my hip.

"Don't get all high and mighty with me angel. I was with Evan for less than an hour. The rest of the night I was elsewhere."

Jeremy raises his eyebrows to me, thoroughly unconvinced. I try to change tactics.

"So, I told Gavin that we'd join him and Connie on their boat for dinner and drinks tonight. Is that cool?"

Jeremy sighs and sits back in his chair. I look at his face, noticing the dark, puffy bags now residing under his eyes. The man must have not slept more than twenty minutes last night. I feel a twinge of guilt thinking I'm responsible for this, but I wipe it away. *He was probably up all night worrying that I was going to molest Evan or something ridiculous like that.*

"Just the four of us?" Jeremy asks.

"Evan too," I whisper under my breath.

Jeremy runs his hands through his hair and down the back of his neck. I can see he is trying to keep his frustration under control.

"Stella, I- I just don't know what you're expecting me to say. You know you're not supposed to be seeing him anymore. You can't taint him. He needs to be untouched by a demon before he is asked to be an angelic warrior."

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I grab my cup of coffee and take a seat across from him. The steam transcends from the coffee's surface, floating and dispersing into the air above. Its rich and sultry scent sneaks into my nose and warms my body without me even taking the first sip.

"What'd you think of Evan?" I ask, avoiding Jeremy's comment completely. "I mean after all, you're doing all this work for his well being in the long run."

"He has love in his heart and confidence in his soul. He is everything I thought he would be."

Jeremy's response is sullen, his voice tired and on the edge of irritation. I know he must miss his home in the clouds. I can't imagine it's very easy for him leaving heaven, having to adjust to the world once again after all these years. *Yea and all I've done is made it worse for him.*

I bite my lip and study him from across the table. From this angle he looks nothing more than a harmless human. His eyes are still bright but filled with irritation and a lack of sleep. His face is not shaven, little tufts of hair blooming under his lips and along his jaw line. In a word, he looks miserable. And even though our ending goals are on polar ends of the spectrum, he nonetheless is a guest in my house. And as his host I need to step it up in the hospitality department.

I take a few sips of my coffee and then walk it over to the sink.

"Well, dinner isn't until tonight. We still have time to cancel I suppose. But hey, I have an idea," I say, smiling broadly from across the room. "Let's say you and I get out of the house. We can go have a nice lunch - I know a great little place - and I can show you around town. Maybe even show you where I work?"

Jeremy looks at me, his eyes brightening with every second that passes. The corners of his mouth turn up into a smile.

"Sounds good," he confirms. And then he pauses before getting up from his kitchen seat. "It'll be just the two of us, right?"

His expression seems pained, making me wonder if he is uncomfortable in spending time with *just* me. Of course, the other alternative is for me to invite Evan along. But I don't think that'd go over all too well either. I sigh and give him a light pat on the shoulder.

"Yes, Jeremy. Just us."

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My day with Jeremy goes by in a blur. And believe it or not, it was a blast. As soon as we were out of the house and driving into town, his bad mood seemed to evaporate. I told him about the world, all that had changed since the last time he was here. I told him stories of my past, some of them making him laugh, while others leading us both into more serious conversations. But what surprised me most of all was that Evan's name wasn't mentioned a single time - by either of us. It was like Jeremy and I were old friends catching up, getting lost in the sunny day and enjoying each other's company.

Jeremy and I are just finishing our meal at a nice little Italian restaurant called 'La Belle,' when I hear my phone vibrating in the empty seat next to me. I grab for it and see its Evan calling.

"Hello?" I say, answering the phone.

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"Stella! Hi sweetie, it's Evan!"

Jeremy looks up from his plate of buttery noodles, a dark shadow of anger unraveling down his face. His eyes stare at my phone and then after a brief moment, come fluttering back to me.

I thought I had made him happy today. But now seeing his face, I wonder what went wrong. Evan's voice triggered his reaction. Was he reminded that I shouldn't be talking to him and that he has a job to do? Or perhaps *is he jealous?*

"Hi Evan," I say, forcing my eyes on anywhere but Jeremy.

"Are you home? I just got a call from Gavin and he said they'll be heading to your house in the next twenty minutes or so."

I check my watch as we're talking, surprised that it's already going on eight o'clock. I spent almost seven straight hours with Jeremy and it felt like mere minutes.

"No, no we're not home yet Evan. We'll start heading there now and we'll see you in a bit, ok?"

"Ok, Stella sounds good. I can't wait to see you!"

I smile, tickled pink that my boyfriend is excited to see me.

"You too, Evan. Bye now."

I hang up the phone and start reaching for my purse so I can pay the bill. Jeremy is frozen in his chair, his fork still in his hand, motionless.

"Well, I guess we better get going," I say. "We won't have much time to freshen up before we leave again."

I leave the table to pay the bill, bringing back with me a box for Jeremy's leftover food. I scoop the contents from his plate into the Styrofoam box and close it with a snap. When I hand it back to him, he is staring at me as if expecting for me to say something more.

"You ready?" I ask tentatively.

In response, Jeremy unexpectedly gets up from his chair, moving so close to my face I think he's going to kiss me. But when I look into his eyes, I see he is searching my face, studying my every feature in great measure. He brings his hand up to my face and gently strokes the curve of my cheek with the back of his fingers.

It reminds me of just two nights ago, when Jeremy knelt beside my bed and brushed away my tears.

"Stella," Jeremy whispers, his lips just a breath away from mine. "Why are you doing this to me?"

My phone begins to vibrate in my hand, and Jeremy stops touching my face, his eyes snapping back to normal as if coming out of a trance. He grabs his to-go box and heads for the door. I open my phone and see Evan is calling me again.

I press the talk button and press the phone to my ear. My emotions are running rampant through my body and I curse the timing of Evan's phone call. Jeremy asked me why I was doing this to him *but doing what?*

Fixated in Time

"Hello, Evan," I say into the phone.

"Hey, sorry to call again but I was just wondering if you needed me to bring anything for tonight. Like wine or beer or something?"

I pinch the bridge of my nose, grab my keys off the table and start walking to my car. Why am I all of a sudden so irritated with Evan? He's not doing anything wrong. And yet I feel like he ruined my moment with Jeremy. *My moment? What the hell am I saying?*

Did I even *want* a moment with Jeremy? Because if I did that would mean I had feelings for him. *Which I most certainly DO NOT.*

I sigh in frustration. My internal argument is getting me nowhere.

"No Evan, but thank you. I think I've got it covered."

"Ok great, see you in a bit!"

"Alright, bye," I finish and hang up the phone feeling more confused than ever before.

Chapter 24: The Contract

"Ok, so spill," Connie says taking a seat next to me.

I lean back in my chair, observing the sky and taking deliberately slow sips of my apple cinnamon wine. The night is so clear. The stars twinkle back at me, unmoving and breathtaking.

"Your boat is beautiful," I murmur to Connie. "And what a view."

Connie looks up at the sky and then back at me. She adjusts her denim jacket and settles into a more comfortable position in her chair.

"I really hope you're not talking about the weather to get out of boy talk," Connie says as she downs the rest of her beer.

She reaches over to her six pack and cracks open another one. She throws me a grin and lifts the can in my direction. "Bottoms up!"

I watch as Connie guzzles down almost an entire beer. She wipes at her mouth with her sleeve, effectively removing all of the beer foam from around her mouth. I take another sip of my wine.

"So, word on the street is you and Evan are official. True or false?"

"True."

Connie bounces up and down in her seat and squeals like a little girl. "Ohhhhh, Stella I'm so happy for you! But I mean, it *was* so obvious. He's been practically glued to your side for the past three hours."

Connie composes her excitement and gives me a devious smile. "You gonna let him get it in tonight?"

I raise a brow. "Let him do *what*?"

Connie tips her head back and laughs, her beer slipping out of her hand and dropping onto the deck floor. She scoops it back up and downs the remainder of it. She sets the empty beer can next to the first and reaches for another.

"Oh Stella you crack me up. All I'm asking is if you're gonna let him sleep with you. You know, as in sex?"

The image of Evan in my bed, naked and wanting me makes my face flush with desire. I haven't had sex in years. I idly wonder how much it has changed. Of course the thought has crossed my mind a time or two—*like* for ten. But what would Jeremy do if he found out? How could I get away with it now that he was *living* with me?

"No. I just *hate* I just don't see it in the cards for tonight."

Connie nods her head. Her eyes are full of understanding. "Because of Jeremy, right?"

I know she is staring at me so I do my best not to react to her question.

Fixated in Time

"I just think it'd be weird to have him over with the expectation of sex when Jeremy is sleeping in the next room."

Connie takes a long drag of her beer and lets out a loud belch. I shake my head and suppress a giggle. I just never know what to expect from this girl. I like her company though. I wouldn't mind spending more time with her, especially on the weekends. *But if I don't have a boyfriend, I'll just end up being the third wheel*, I remind myself with a pout.

"He likes you, you know," Connie says matter-of-factly.

"Who?"

"Jeremy, duh!"

I let out a bitter laugh and take the last big gulp of my wine. It burns as it travels down my throat and instinctively my eyes start to water.

"No Connie. Jeremy is - well, he's just a friend. Trust me, I'm the last person on earth he'd want to date."

Connie is staring at me, unblinking. She opens her mouth to say something more but shuts it again when we hear Evan and Gavin barge through the boat deck doors.

"There's my lady," Evan bellows, grabbing a patio chair and dragging it next to me.

He plops his body down and gives me a wink. Connie's focus diverts to Gavin while she lists off all the things she needs to do before work on Monday. Evan seizes the opportunity and sneaks his hand over to me, gently caressing my bare arm. The mix of his rough fingers and soft touch sends tingles down my spine. Connie's question unexpectedly pops into my head and I can't stop wondering what it would be like to share my bed with Evan for the night.

I gaze into his bright green eyes and see a hint of lust lurking behind them. I lick my lips and his eyes follow the action. His breath hitches and his fingers begin to travel up my arm, across my shoulder, and all the way down to the small of my back.

Evan leans forward to whisper something to me, his short facial hair tickling my ear. "I can't seem to keep my hands off you, Stella."

I shiver at his closeness and my body breaks out in goose bumps. *God, I want him*. Evan rubs my back softly, nuzzling his nose against my ear.

"Will you stay with me tonight?" he whispers, his voice husky and seductive.

Even his voice is tempting. I can hear the want and desire with every syllable that leaves his lips. I look into his eyes and happily note they are bright and lit with passion. I take a deep breath to try and clear my head. I am becoming intoxicated - both with alcohol and unadulterated desire.

"She will not be staying with you tonight."

The masculine voice breaks whatever hold Evan has on me and I turn to see Jeremy standing just a foot away from us. His eyes are dark and he is staring at me with ruthless anger. Connie swivels her head around to see my face.

Fixated in Time

"Ahhh, well, I think it's about time Connie and I start straightening up inside," Gavin interjects hesitantly.

"But, but - I have to stay here and help Stella!" Connie protests with an audible slur.

Gavin hoists her up and starts moving her towards the door. Connie cranes her head back, her eyes wide with question.

"Ok b-but, Stella if you need anything I'll be right in here, ok?" Connie says.

Her feet wobble unsteadily and Gavin ushers her through the door. He looks behind and gives me a nod, his eyes giving me a signal that I can't quite decipher. The door closes behind them and Evan whips his head to Jeremy.

"What's your problem man?" Evan asks, standing up from his chair and coming face to face with Jeremy.

Jeremy looks between the two of us, a multitude of emotions sweeping across his face. Evan's body is so tense I can see a vein in his neck protruding and pulsating with anger. I set my wine glass aside and stand as well. I move between the two of them and turn my focus to Evan.

"Evan, it's not what you think, I promise," I say.

My mind is fuzzy again and I try to sober it up by taking deep breaths of fresh air. It doesn't work. I place my hands against Evan's chest and turn his face so that his focus is on me. When his eyes meet mine they soften and his chest begins to deflate.

"Please, can I have a word with Jeremy?" I ask Evan.

Evan shoots Jeremy a nasty glare and then looks back at me and nods. He brings his arms up and takes my face in his hands, pulling his lips to mine. His lips are so soft and gentle as he kisses me. Only when Jeremy gives out a low growl in his throat does Evan pull away completely. He tells me he'll give us five minutes and gives my hand a reassuring squeeze.

Jeremy and I both watch Evan leave and as soon as he clears the door, Jeremy gives me a piercing scowl.

"I'm growing tired of this," he says.

I search his eyes in disbelief. Normally they are so light that I can practically see right through them. But right now they're as dark as the ocean. A muscle ticks just below his jaw.

"Jeremy, I don't know what you want me to say. I like Evan, a lot. As long as I promise not to have sex with him, what's the harm?"

Just then the wind picks up and dances through my hair. A few tendrils fall out of place and brush across my face. I tuck them back behind my ear and cross my arms across my chest. Jeremy is still staring at me. He must be thinking about my proposition so I decide to try harder.

"Listen, Evan's feelings for me won't last. Without a physical connection involved, our relationship will eventually evolve into a friendship. And that's best case scenario. But Jeremy - I am crazy about the guy. And I don't think I need to remind you that you murdered the only remaining man in my life prior to Evan."

Fixated in Time

Guilt flashes across Jeremy's face and he lowers his eyes to the ground. I lower my voice and take a confident step in his direction.

"Jeremy, please. You can stay here the entire time Evan is in my life. I won't make him 'impure.' I'll keep my hands to myself. I just can't be all alone again. Please, let me keep him."

My voice tapers off when a large burst of tears lodges in my throat. I can't lose another person in my life. I've outlived everyone I've cared about and have suffered through the grieving process more times than I can count. I know Evan will be no different in the long run. One day he'll be gone and I'll have to accept it. But not now. Not today, especially with Stephan's death occurring only a few short weeks ago.

I reach my hand to his and squeeze it lightly. I try to ignore the shot of electricity that shoots through my hand when my skin touches his. I wonder if he feels it too. Jeremy looks at me and I see shadowed pain behind his eyes.

"Ok Stella. I will agree to your deal. I will continue to live at your house while Evan is in your life. But in return, you may not taint his purity. Or as you so delicately put it, no sex. If you do, the deal is void and I will be taking matters into my own hands."

I drop his hand and frown. "And what do you mean exactly by 'taking matters into your own hands'?"

Jeremy extends his hand out to me and waits a beat for me to shake it. His face is so serious and a rumble of fear courses through me.

"W-what happens if I break the deal?" I ask timidly.

"Your human soul will wither away to nothing. And as for your demon? It will take control of your body. You will be cast down to Hell just like you were thousands of years ago. But without your soul you will be bound to Hell forever. Do you understand what I'm saying, Stella?"

I nod my head and whimper. I know only too well what he's saying. The only 'break' I was given the first time I was cast down to Hell was that my demon was strong enough to come to earth. Without my human soul, my demon won't ever be able to escape Hell again. The place I hate so very much will become my reality. For eternity.

"Do you accept the terms?" Jeremy asks.

His hand is still extended toward me but his face is blank of all emotion. I swallow down a mouthful of saliva and smack my dry lips together.

"So let me get this straight. You're going to stay living with me and as long as I don't *have sex* with my boyfriend - er, Evan - I can keep him in my life for as long as I want?"

Jeremy nods. "Correct. But if you break our agreement, you will be damned to Hell. And this time Stella, you won't have the earth above you to hide from your misery."

More fear bubbles up inside of me. I shudder at the thought of an eternity of Hell.

"And when Evan is out of my life - whenever that may be - you'll leave me alone and never bother me again. Right?"

Fixated in Time

Jeremy gives me a saddened expression and the blank look on his face falters for a brief moment. He wipes it away a second later and his hard, unforgiving expression is back.

"Right."

I give him a nervous look before extending my own hand and clasping it with his. A pulse of energy forms between us and I can feel the unbinding contract attach to my soul. The agreement is a part of me now, just as it is a part of him.

Neither of us can break it without consequences.

Neither of us can go back.

The deal has been done.

Chapter 25: A Hint of Jealousy

In my mind, the next few weeks pass by in a matter of minutes. I settle into my own groove at work and feel like I'm making tremendous progress with all of my patients. My weeknights and weekends are spent with Evan or Jeremy, Connie and Gavin joining us when they have the time.

Now that Jeremy and I have made our deal, the 'Evan issue' hasn't been discussed a single time. He neither questions me about Evan nor shows emphatic enthusiasm towards our relationship either. But that's the thing with "Angelic agreements." If Evan and I *were* to have sex, Jeremy would feel it. He'd know in an instant that I had broken the rules and there would be no denying it from my end.

Although I know I can't avoid the 'sex talk' with Evan forever, he's been the perfect gentleman these past few weeks. Admittedly, a few of our evenings have gotten pretty hot and steamy. But I always stop it before it gets too carried away and tell him the timing isn't right. Not once has he questioned me about it.

My heart tightens at the thought of one day losing him. I can't make Evan wait forever. After all, he's only human. He has desires and sexual needs like everyone else. But I'm realizing the more time I spend with him the more I'm becoming attached to him.

And then of course there's Jeremy. Even though I keep denying it, the two of us are forming a bond of our own. It's not friendship exactly; it's something more. But to try and put it into words sends me into a fit of confusion every single time. Instead of simply tolerating him I *look forward* to seeing him at each day's end. And a piece of me is starting to wonder if one of the reasons I am keeping Evan around is because that'll mean I get to keep Jeremy around too.

"And did I mention my nightmares are coming back?"

My knuckles have turned white from holding onto my pen so tightly. My notepad sits on my lap, the blank page staring back at me. I don't usually get distracted from my patients but today my mind seems to be in the clouds.

I give Todd a concerned look and pretend to take notes.

"Nightmares, hmm? Are you having any added stress or outside concerns lately?"

Todd shifts his weight in his chair and lets out an irritated sigh.

"I already told you doc, my life has been pretty good lately. Even my repetitive tendencies, as you call them, have cooled down some. But these nightmares are so vivid. It's like I'm there. And then I wake up and I'm just beside myself. I mean, I'm a man and don't get scared easily. But those nightmares scare me shitless."

I frown at his profanity and click my pen a few times. The last time Todd told me about his nightmare, he reiterated my trip to Hell. *I still haven't figured that one out.* But I haven't been to Hell in over a month so his nightmare couldn't possibly involve me. The realization peaks my curiosity.

"Todd, would you like to tell me about your nightmares? I don't know that I'm too practiced with dream interpretation, but perhaps I can find a pattern that might lead us as to why you're having them in the first place."

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Todd lifts the heel of his foot and rapidly taps it against the tiled floor of my office. I know I'm making him anxious. I lean forward and give him a reassuring smile.

"You may as well tell me, Todd. I can't help you get better if you're not completely honest with me."

I don't force information out of my patients often. But Todd seems to be the exception that makes the rule. Todd nods his head and takes a few deep breaths. He reaches into his coat pocket and pulls out a small plastic bottle of Germ-X. He flips up the cap and douses his hands in it. A few drops dribble off his hand and splatter onto the arms of his chair. He doesn't seem to notice.

"Well. The dreams are different now. They're more involved I guess. My mind shows me all these horrible things. Like rape, murder, suicideâstuff like that. That's the normal part. But now there's this added element. I can't put my finger on who it is or what it is. All I can feel in my dreams are his emotions -"

"*His* emotions?"

"Yea I assume it's a him. Just by the way he thinks. He's not evil or bad though. In fact, I'd go so far as to say I think he's good. But he's struggling. And his emotions are so intense."

"Mhmm, what kind of emotions?" I ask, encouraging Todd to continue.

"I can't really tell. Like I said doc, I can't pinpoint what or who this guy is. But he's a damn mess. His emotions are always flopping around from anger, to sadness, to confusion, to love. It's weird."

I nod my head and take notes.

"I know it sounds crazy, but for some reason I think he's an angel."

My pen freezes. I can feel my breathing pick up speed and my hands begin to quiver.

"And what makes you think that, Todd?"

My voice is shaky and I lower my pen so he won't notice my trembling hands.

"I dunno. Just a feeling I guess. But no matter what emotion he shows me, it's always directed towards this female. That's why I think it's a guy anyway."

My lips are pressed into a firm line and my mind is racing with the possibility that Jeremy is the one being channeled through Todd's dreams. *I guess there's only one way to find out.*

"Todd - are you able to tell which female all his emotions are being directed towards?"

Todd looks at me and shrugs his shoulders. "From what I can tell it's just some random girl. The only finite image I've seen of her is from a great distance. Like I'm looking at her from the sky. But I do know that she's not into him."

"Oh? And how do you know that?"

"Because he's showed me that she's falling in love with someone else."

Fixated in Time

My mouth hangs open and I snap it shut in a hurry. Maybe I'm getting too ahead of myself. But from the sounds of it, Todd is - in some way - channeling Jeremy.

"Will you do me a favor?" I ask Todd as I tuck the few notes I took into his file.

He douses his hands with Germ-X again before giving a nod.

"Next time you have a dream, the second you wake up I want you to write it down. Every detail you can remember I want you to put it into words. Can you do that for me?"

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My boss catches me right before I leave work and I stand at the door to wait for her. Her thick framed glasses have been replaced with contacts and I notice, for the first time, how pretty her eyes are. She's dressed more casually today, her normal business attire considerably altered by dark blue jeans, black knee-high boots and a frilly black top. She's a curvier woman but the outfit compliments her body type just right.

"You look nice, Grace," I say once she's reached me.

"Oh thank you Ms. Hill. Truth be told, I have a date tonight."

I see the tips of her cheeks turn a light pink at the admittance of her evening plans. I glance down at her ring finger and see that it's bare. I raise my brows in surprise. I'd always assumed she was married.

"Well, I'd stay with that outfit. It suits you," I say and open the door for her.

The warm sun beats down on me as soon as I step outside. There's not much of a breeze today and I decide that as soon as I get home I'm going for a swim. Grace continues to follow me to my car, her stride even with mine.

"Well thank you. I feel a bit silly I suppose. I haven't been on a first date in what feels like eons and I just don't want to mess it up."

I turn to Grace and for a second I see the awkward teenage girl inside of her. She looks back at me and smiles sheepishly.

"I don't want to bother you with my personal life Stella, I just - "

Grace pauses mid-sentence and her eyes widen as we approach my car. I follow her gaze and see a shirtless Jeremy leaning against my car door. *What on earth is he doing here?* Jeremy gives me a lopsided grin and offers up a wave. His golden hair shimmers in the sunlight and his blue eyes sparkle back at me. He pushes himself off my car and my eyes - of their own accord - travel down his muscular torso.

"Oh myâ !" I hear Grace whisper under her breath.

I don't know why, but the comment irritates me.

"Hello Stella," Jeremy says.

His eyes never leave my face and my sub conscious sticks up her nose in greedy satisfaction. Grace extends her hand and bats her eyelashes in a flirtatious manner.

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"Hello there," she says sweetly. "I don't believe we've met. I'm Grace - Stella's boss."

Jeremy glances in her direction and gives her a friendly handshake.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Jeremy."

"Oh. So you're not the boyfriend?"

Jeremy's smile wanes and he glances at me before shaking his head no.

"No. I'm just the roommate."

Grace turns to me and the excitement on her face is nearly bursting at the seams.

"Stella! You never told me you had a roommate before. So Jeremy, are you new in town?"

Jeremy and I exchange a look and I suppress a giggle at her question. It seems to go unnoticed by Grace. I feel my phone vibrate in my pocket and excuse myself from the conversation when I see it's Connie calling.

Grace's loud laughter fills my ears just as I pick up the call.

"Hello?"

"Oh Stella thank God you picked up. What are you doing right now?"

"I'm just leaving work. Why?"

"Gavin just got home from playing golf with Evan."

"Ok.?"

Connie sighs in frustration. She lowers her voice to an almost inaudible whisper. I can hear Gavin in the background and know that whatever she's about to tell me is supposed to be a secret.

"Well, Gavin said he and Evan did a *lot* of talking today and it all revolved around Y-O-U."

Connie spells out the word 'you' and I roll my eyes. *Why do I all of a sudden feel like I'm fourteen again?* I look behind me and see that Grace has moved in closer to Jeremy, her elbow resting against the side of my car. She is clearly flirting with him and as Jeremy smiles back at her I can't help but feel jealous. I shouldn't care that the two of them are getting along. Hell, if Grace started taking an interest in Jeremy maybe he'd lay off the 'Evan issue' a little bit more.

Grace throws her head back and laughs, playfully pushing Jeremy as she does so. Jeremy looks up at me and blushes, an innocent smile creeping onto his lips. I feel like I just got caught with my hand in the cookie jar so I look away and turn my attention back to Connie.

"What? Stella did you hear me?"

"Yes, I heard you."

Fixated in Time

"Ok, so are you free in the next couple of days to have lunch or something? The stuff Gavin told me is juic-cey. You're gonna flip!"

"Sure Connie that's fine. Just let me know when you're in town."

"Sounds good!"

I hear Gavin's voice growing louder in the background. Connie rushes out a goodbye and disconnects from the phone call. I snap my phone closed and walk back to my car. Grace and Jeremy seem to be in deep conversation but as I approach, their voices taper off.

"Well, I better be going," Grace says with a big grin. "It was *so* nice meeting you, Jeremy. And I'm serious - come by the office *anytime*!"

Jeremy gives her a polite nod and starts walking to the passenger side of the car. Grace leans into me and when she sees Jeremy is out of ear shot she starts whispering into my ear.

"Is he single?"

I give a single nod.

"Is he straight?"

I jerk my head back at the question and frown. "Yes, Grace he's single. And yes, he's straight. Why? I thought you had a date tonight anyway."

I try not to sound irritated but my voice comes off short and cold. Grace gives me a pat on the shoulder and steals another glance at Jeremy.

"You're right. I was just curious. A girl has to keep her options open, right?"

"Sure," I murmur. "And hey, good luck on your date tonight."

I plaster a fake smile onto my face as Grace and I say our good-byes. When she leaves I slip into the car and Jeremy gives me a look that makes my heart skip a beat. I think back to Grace's flirtatious manner with him and can't wipe the scowl off my face. I hope her date goes well. *Really* well. Maybe then she'll keep her eyes off Jeremy.

â*Not like I care of course.*

Chapter 26: An Unfolding Truth

I nestle into Evan and he wraps his arms around me, drawing me closer to his body. His skin is so warm and he smells so decadent. I know we shouldn't be in my bed. Every time we're here together the envelope is pushed farther and farther. If his desire for me is anywhere close to where mine is for him, then we're in for a world of trouble.

Evan pulls away from me slightly and grabs for the remote. At the touch of a few buttons he switches the input from 'movie mode' back to regular TV. Whistles and cheers erupt from the surround sound system and I shake my head. Men and their sports.

"Well that was a piss poor call," Evan mutters under his breath as he watches the television.

I sit up in bed and feel that my face is still flushed from our prior make out session. *All this foreplay is going to make me combust, I swear.* Evan tilts his head up, his emerald eyes devouring me. He hasn't shaved in a few days and he has a defined strip of facial hair along his chin and jaw line. He looks like a sexy lumber jack.

I pick up my fingers and trace them along the contours of his face. The rough texture of his facial hair pricks my finger tips. He watches me as I touch him. There's no smile on his face but his eyes are full of passion. I can read every emotion that passes through his mind as he gazes into my eyes; happiness, confusion, loyalty, lust â *and dare I hope a hint of love?*

"What are you thinking?" Evan asks me in a whisper.

I shrug and let my hands fall to my lap.

"How sexy you are."

I grin mischievously at him and wiggle my eye brows. Evan huffs out a deep breath and rolls his eyes.

"Next to you Stella, I'm nothing."

I blush at his indirect compliment and he reaches his hand up to brush his knuckles against my cheek. I swallow down a gulp of saliva and my palms start to sweat. *Will this man ever stop making me nervous?*

"Evan - before I forget. I have a question for you that's beenâ well, gnawing at me for quite some time now."

My breathing is uneven and my voice comes out weak and staggered. Evan pulls his body into a sitting position, clicking the OFF button on the remote. The room becomes silent.

"Shoot, Stells. I'm all ears."

My fingers knot together in my lap as I try to find the right words to say.

"Well - uhm. Ok. You know how we met in the very beginning?"

Evan nods slowly, scrunching together his eyebrows in concentration. He's searching my face to figure out where I'm going with this.

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"I mean, you bombarded me at my house, just randomly showed up at my work, and then when you asked me out on our first date you already had my cell phone number. I didn't ask about it then because I was just so excited to get the chance to date you. But now that some time has passed, I wonder why you pursued me as hard as you did. And more importantly, how you got my number in the first place?"

My voice trails off when I notice his look of concentration is transforming into one of guilt. His eyes cast downward and it's the first time he's ever looked away from me. A knot forms in the pit of my stomach and I know that Evan is keeping something from me.

"Stella - Iâ."

Evan looks so uncomfortable. His face contorts and his mouth moves but no words emit from his lips. My excitement and lust for him cools instantly. I can't possibly imagine what he's hiding from me. *He's lined up to be an angelic warrior*, I remind myself. *So whatever it is, it can't be too bad, right?* My sub-conscious stays in Evan's corner, her boxing gloves on and her fists at-the-ready to take me down. She has grown so attached to him that no matter what he's hiding, she'll refuse to let him go.

"I can't lie to you anymore Stella," Evan says with genuine sorrow in his voice. "I was paid to find you and take you out."

Except that.

Chapter 27: Arguing with an Angel

Tears stream down my face like a rapid current after a falling rain. The chest heaves have run their course and now I am curled up in a ball, motionless and torn. After Evan's confession, my sub-conscious back peddled to her corner, holding up a white flag in helpless surrender. In return my demon took center stage, squawking and clawing inside my mind to 'have a go' at him. I've never seen my demon get so upset over *me*. Perhaps she cares about me after all.

My demon snorts and rolls her eyes. "*You wish,*" she snarls in her low, serpent-like voice. But the harshness in her voice has lessened a degree. And I can feel that she *does* care for me in her own very sick and demented way.

Knock, knock, knock.

I remain still in my bed. Tears continue to roll down my cheeks and I nestle further under my blankets.

"Stella?"

It's Jeremy. I can hear the kindness in his voice. Thank God he wasn't around during Evan's exit tonight. That would have opened up another can of worms.

"Stella, are you awake?"

Jeremy walks into my room and I hear the door closing behind me. He shuts off my TV and comes around to my side of the bed. When he sees my tears he rushes to my side.

"What happened?"

His blue eyes deepen with concern. I glance down his body and once again am in utter shock with his outfit selection. He's wearing black slacks and dress shoes, with a dark blue dress shirt and a blue and yellow striped tie on top. His hair is parted to the side, the rest of it jelled into a messy masterpiece around his head. He looks so handsome.

"Are you going somewhere?"

Jeremy stuffs his hands in his pockets. "Mmhhh. I'm meeting someone for dinner."

My eyes feel like they're going to bug out of my head. I grab for my box of tissues and wipe free the tears matted to my cheeks and chin. I blow my nose and take in a few shaky breaths.

"In other words, you have a date?"

He grimaces at the suggestion and shrugs. He's uncomfortable.

"With who?" I press.

"Grace."

Hearing my boss's name on Jeremy's lips lights my vapid face into action. I try to suppress the scowl that is crawling onto my features and close my eyes for a second of relaxation. I have so many questions I want to

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ask him. All of them fire through my mind like a loose cannon on a battlefield.

"I should have asked you first," Jeremy adds. "With her being your supervisor and allâ it won't be weird for you at work, will it?"

"Isn't it outside of your *heavenly duties* to prance around the town with single women?" I snap.

Jeremy straightens his stance and tilts his head to the side.

"I didn't realize this would upset you Stella."

"It doesn't upset me," I lie, "I just think it's ridiculous that you're here because you're some powerful angelic warrior trying to slay a demon -"

"-I'm not here to 'slay' you at all. Or your demon. I'm merely -"

"-Whatever! You're here to do a job. And why do you want to go on a date with Grace anyway!?"

My voice starts to rise and a whole new batch of tears are ready to give way at any moment. I clench my fists closed, my nails digging into my palms so hard they start to draw blood. Jeremy lets out a tired sigh and scrapes a masculine hand down his cleanly shaven face.

"Our deal is still intact Stella, so until Evan is out of the picture, I am required to stay here. With you. And as much fun as it is for me to see you go out on dates almost every single night while I sit here by myself, I think I'm going to opt for plan B and get out of the house whenever I get the chance."

I flinch at his words, remembering how I shoved Evan out of my bedroom and scolded him to never come back. I was a *bit* dramatic I suppose. And now that my initial anger has tapered off I realize I didn't even give Evan a chance to explain himself. Not that he necessarily deserved one.

"-And I do not believe there's anything wrong with me enjoying my time on earth in a healthy way when I have to be here regardless."

He pauses to see if I'll say anything in rebuttal.

"âUnless you're so selfish that you'd prefer me to stay locked in this house until you're done playing with Evan."

His comment is like a slap in the face and I laugh sarcastically under my breath.

"No, no. By all means, go on your date Jeremy. I really could care less."

I can feel the storm rise within me.

"But don't think for ONE SECOND that I'm going to take the blame for you being bored or lonely or whatever. Let's not forget who came into who's life and turned it upside down. Because if I remember correctly, YOU were the one that stampeded into my life, throwing out threats and demands, and then killing my loved one when I disobeyed-"

"-I didn't have a choice, Stella! I was *forced* into this duty. This isn't like some volunteer project I signed up for. When any of the Elite Warriors are given an assignment, it needs to be done. Period."

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Jeremy's voice has risen to a shout but his eyes are pleading with me to see reason through his words. I'm so angry with him that my face feels blistered with heat. One minute I'm crying about Evan and the next I'm yelling at Jeremy. It's been an emotional night from Hell. *No pun intended.*

"But it *was your* choice to make that deal with me," I say, my words calculated and dripping with disdain. "And you shook on it without any hesitation. Now you have to live with it."

Jeremy looks hurt but instead of arguing further, he throws up his hands in defeat.

"I guess I'm the one at fault here then, Stella. The fact that I made that deal with you to try and be kind has no bearing effect on the situation. Does it?"

I meet his eyes and see that they have softened. His voice has lowered and all I can think is that he looks like a boy in need of a hug. My hardened hearts melts under his gaze and I turn my lips up into the semblance of a smile. Jeremy runs his hand down his face again and takes a seat at the foot of my bed.

"Stella, I'm really struggling here. I'm confronted with all these emotions that I haven't felt in thousands of years. In Heaven there's no such thing as hatred or anger or fear or jealousy. Experiencing those emotions now is just an overload for me. Does that make sense?"

I nod and scoot an inch closer to him. I want to console him but my stubbornness keeps me at a safe distance.

"I didn't realize you were struggling so much. Can I ask - how are those negative emotions coming in contact with you in the first place?"

"What do you mean?"

"Ok, for example. You said you're feeling jealousy. What is going on that is making you feel that way?"

I know I could have questioned him about any other emotion but of course I don't. Jeremy gives me a look of longing and my stomach clenches. *Oh God, he's jealous of Evan.* He doesn't have to verbally say it for the statement to be confirmed. I can feel it. My cheeks blossom with pink and for the first time in my entire life, I'm tempted to kiss an angel.

My demon makes gagging noises in my head and begs me to stop this insanity. I give Jeremy a comforting pat on the shoulder.

"Never mind," I say in a soft voice. "Go have fun on your date, Jeremy. You deserve it."

"You want to come with?"

His voice sounds so hopeful and I can't help but smile. Seeing the look on Grace's face when I showed up on her date *would* be priceless. But I refuse to become more attached to Jeremy than I already am. Trying to get over Evan will be hard enough. Adding Jeremy to the mix will make it unbearable.

Beginning the process of distancing myself from my beautiful angel, I shake my head no.

"You go have fun, Jeremy. Give me all the juicy details when you get home, ok?"

His hands rub down the legs of his pants, a nervous habit I've noticed him doing lately. His eyes meet mine and I can practically feel him begging for me to change my mind. A minute of silence passes. Jeremy's

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shoulders slump forward and he gets up to leave my room.

"If you change your mind, we'll be at some restaurant called 'Aloha, Aloha,'" he says under his breath.

The name rings a bell and I have to fight down another wave of tears. That was the place Evan took me on our first date. Jeremy leaves my room and I hear his light feet treading down the stairs and out the front door.

The tears that I have barely kept tethered spring from my eyes. The chest heaves are back and my body rocks to and fro. I don't know where to go from here, or who to turn to for help. And yet again I'm reminded of the fool I am. Love never lasts. Heartbreak is always inevitable. I've been reminded of this time and time again and yet I always come back wanting more. *Never again*, I promise myself for what feels like the hundredth time.

Never again !.

Chapter 28: A Web of Lies

Grace is late. My eyes have been trained on the clock above my desk since I arrived here at 8 am. Normally I don't pay attention to when she comes in or when she leaves work. But I know last night she was with Jeremy. Again. I didn't hear him come in so I have a sinking feeling they were out late.

The thought of them having sex hacks into my brain and I curse aloud.

"Bad morning?" Grace asks as she waltzes into my office.

She has a larger-than-life grin on her face and her cheeks are flushed. She is practically glowing. Just looking at her makes me upset. Her hair is out of its bun and is hanging casually around her neck and shoulders. She is still wearing her contacts and her clothes are still as casual as they were the last time I saw her. She looks more like a friend stopping by to see me than the boss that she's supposed to be.

"No just having computer problems," I lie with a grumble.

"Oh ok. So how was your weekend?"

I pinch the bridge of my nose and give an audible sigh.

"Grace, to be honest with you it wasn't so great."

"Oh Stella, I'm sorry to hear that."

Grace leans her bottom against the edge of my desk, crossing her legs at the ankles and studying me from over her shoulder.

"Aren't you going to ask me how my date went?" she pushes.

And hear about how you fucked my angel? I don't think so Gracey-poo. Not today. My demon guffaws at my sinister sarcasm and claps her hands in anticipation for more. My phone starts skidding across my office desk. My breath catches in my throat when I see it's another text from Evan. He's been texting and calling me all weekend. He hasn't had the courage to come by the house but that was probably smart of him. I would have shred him to pieces. Literally.

But if Jeremy thinks we broke up, he'll be forced to leave and I'm just not ready for that. So I guess a meeting with Evan is inevitable. Ignoring Grace's imploring stare, I open my phone and read Evan's text. He apologizes to me and begs me to meet him somewhere for lunch. I send him the one word reply of "Fine," and put my phone on silent.

I turn my attention back to Grace and clear my throat. "Ask you how which date went, Grace? The one from Friday night? Or the multiple ones you went on with Jeremy over the weekend?"

My face is blank of emotion but I am screaming at her through my eyes. Every scathing insult I can think about her tumbles through my head and it takes all my willpower to keep them from spilling out into the open.

But to my surprise, Grace looks utterly bewildered at my question. She moves away from my desk and cocks her hands on her hips.

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"Is that supposed to be some sort of joke, Stella?"

Now *I'm* the one that is feeling utterly bewildered.

"Noâ I - uh. Didn't you go out with Jeremy on Saturday? And then again on Sunday?"

Grace rolls her eyes and reaches down for her briefcase.

"Don't be ridiculous Stella. I've only met the man once. I mean don't get me wrong, I'd say yes to a date with that man in a heartbeat. But since Mr. Gorgeous seemed to have zero interest in me when we met by your car, I have a feeling I'll leave that little fantasy to my dreams."

Grace flushes and her happy grin has long but vanished. I have offended her deeply.

"Wait. So you didn't see Jeremy at all this weekend?" I ask once more to clarify.

The scowl on Grace's face falters. She can see how genuine my question is for her. She raises a brow at me and shakes her head no.

"No Stella I really didn't. I don't know who told you that, but the information is inaccurate. And just as an FYI, my date with Richard went well. We're going out again Wednesday."

And with that final word, Grace moves swiftly out of my office and I hear the door to her own office close with a bang. I reach for my phone and see that Evan has texted me a time and a location to meet for lunch. My fingers are trembling and all I can think about are the multitude of lies being webbed from all around me.

First Evan. Now Jeremy.

I feel like everyone is in on some big secretâ !..

â !â !â ! *I just hope the joke isn't on me.*

Chapter 29: The Unknown Sender

I end up canceling my lunch date with Evan. I still don't want to see him. Plus, I couldn't see him even if I wanted to since my morning patients end up running over their time limit anyway. Grace pops her head in and grudgingly asks if I want a sandwich from the deli. I give her money and tell her to get something for herself as well. It's the least I can do after my terrible faux pas this morning.

I finally have time to check my phone and see that I have three missed calls and four new text messages. Two of the missed calls are from Connie and the third is from Evan. Then I look at my texts. Two are from Connie asking me when we can meet for lunch. The third is from Evan pleading with me for a chance to explain himself. And the last text ends up being an email. I click the closed envelope icon and the email pops up.

From: Unknown Sender

Subject: An Ending

Date: October 21, 2013 12:32 UCT-10

A past of sinful hiding, to a present that's unknown.

Someone is intently watching you and their presence will be shown.

Tread lightly and take cover, for my plan will soon be in place.

Say good-bye and prepare your mind - your time has ended with the human race.

The blood drains from my face and my knuckles turn white as they clutch the edges of my cell phone. I read through the email again and again trying to make heads or tails of it. Who could have sent it? And why are they threatening me?

Grace comes into my office and plops my turkey (hold the mayo) sandwich on top of my desk. Her face is pinched with irritation but when she sees me, her expression softens.

"Stella?"

"Hmm?"

"Are you ok?"

Grace moves around my desk and comes to stand in front of me. She puts the back of her hand against my forehead and frowns.

"You're all clammy Stella. And you definitely have a fever. Do you want to go home? I'll cover your patients for this afternoon if you need me to."

I numbly nod my head in agreement and give her a mumbled 'thanks' under my breath. I grab my jacket and purse and start moving towards the door. I stop just before walking out and look back at Grace. She returns my gaze and there's something in my stomach that is telling me she's hiding something from me. The only problem is, I don't know what that would be.

"What is it, Stella?" she asks and her brows knit together with concern.

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I shake my head. "Nothing," I say and head to my car.

By the time I pull into my driveway, my mind has cleared and my blood pressure has returned to normal. The notion that my own boss is trying to hurt me or hide something from me has been dismissed. If she wanted me dead she would have tried to do it by now. And PhD or not, Grace is not the brightest person I've ever come across.

I lock my car and take a few calming breaths. In a matter of days I feel like every person on this earth that I could lean on, that I could trust, has been taken from me. It's ironic really. This is the first time I have multiple people on earth that I care about and that I want to share my life with and yet I have never felt more scared and alone.

I climb into my shower and turn the nozzle to its hottest level. The scorching water runs along my body making my skin red and turning the air around me into a thick haze of heat. The pressure of the water works its way into my muscles, loosening the stress and worry from my morning. Evan, Jeremy, Grace, and the unknown email all are pushed to the back of my brain.

Chapter 30: Confronting the 'Enemy'

"Stella?"

Jeremy's familiar voice jolts me from my peaceful trance and I stick my head out from around the shower curtain. He's standing just inside my bathroom door, his fingers fumbling around to try and find the switch for the vent.

"It's the one farthest to the left," I say.

Jeremy flips on the switch and the low hum of the vent rumbles through my bathroom.

"Why are you home so early?" Jeremy asks taking another step into the bathroom.

My eyes dance down his body. He's wearing a fitted white t-shirt and swim trunks. His light skin has darkened and I'm mesmerized by his sun-kissed skin. His blonde hair shines against his blue eyes and I gulp down my desire for him.

I move back into the shower and turn the water to cold. Hopefully it will put a damper on my sexual needs for the time being. Just looking at Jeremy is making my stomach clench and my knees weaken. *He lied to you, don't forget that.*

Oh right.

"I wasn't feeling well," I finally say.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Can I get you anything?"

"No."

When I don't hear Jeremy leave the bathroom, I poke my head out again. He's leaning against the marble tile of the sink, his legs crossed at the ankles and his arms crossed over his chest. He draws up one hand to mindlessly rub the back of his neck and continues to stare at the floor.

I clear my throat to get his attention and his eyes snap up to meet mine. His gaze smolders me and despite the cold water my body heats a degree. He's just too beautiful for his own good. His long black eyelashes flutter up and down as he blinks back at me. I can see lust in his eyes and wonder where it's coming from.

He takes a tentative step toward me and when I don't move, he slowly peels off his shirt. Ropes of tanned, lean muscle stare back at me. His face shows no trace of a smile and when he takes another step closer to me, I see him harden from underneath his swim trunks. My lips part in wonder.

Oh God, oh God, oh God. What do I do?

Jeremy moves in so he's only inches away from my face. His warm, minty breath tickles my skin and my eyes sag as if I'm being hypnotized. He reaches his hand into the shower and turns off the water, leaving me shivering and dripping wet. Without breaking my gaze he grabs my towel from the rack and holds it out to me. I clumsily wrap it around my body and then accept his extended hand in helping me out of the shower.

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He slides one of his arms around my waist and pulls me in so his naked torso is rubbing against my fuzzy white towel. His other hand moves to my face, tracing my jaw and cheek bone with his fingertips. When he lightly treks over my lips my breath hitches inside my throat. My insides are turning warm with excitement but bright neon warning signs are shooting through my brain.

âWhat about Evan!?

Jeremy lied to you, rememberâ

âStella, why are you doing this to me?

If you kiss Jeremy, it's over with Evanâ

âIf it's over with Evan, Jeremy won't stay with you anymore.

He's seducing you so he can leave fasterâ

The last thought screams the loudest and my body tenses. Jeremy sees the change in my reaction and his hand falters.

"What are you trying to do here Jeremy?" I whisper.

Jeremy keeps me close to him and blushes deeply. "I think I'm trying to kiss you, Stella."

"But why?"

When he sees the confusion on my face his blush deepens. "I-I can't really put it into words."

I push him away from me and shake my head in frustration.

"You are trying to kiss me because that will effectively end Evan and me. That way you can march off to Heaven and go back to living your life instead of wasting your days with a demon. Am I right?"

Tears sting my eyes and start running down my cheeks. I don't know why I feel so betrayed by Jeremy - by this angel that I'm supposed to hate. The feelings I have for him are becoming so strong it's scaring me.

Jeremy tilts his head to the side and I see a spark of anger light his blue eyes. He grabs his shirt off the floor and throws it over his shoulder.

"Believe it or not, Stella, I don't have some hidden agenda to trick you into stop seeing Evan. That is something a demon would do. There are no angles to our agreement and I am in no way trying to speed up the process."

Jeremy looks away from me and his voice drops to a whisper. "If anything, I'm trying to slow it down."

God he looks so good.

"Why did you lie to me about Grace?"

The question slips out of my mouth before I have time to stop it. Jeremy's look of surprise gives me just a hint of satisfaction.

Fixated in Time

"I'm sorry I lied to you Stella. Because I'm part human now, I am capable of sin. Just like you. I didn't lie to you to hurt you though. I promise."

"Who did you go out with this weekend?"

Jeremy presses his lips together and shakes his head.

"I can't tell you that."

"Why?"

"I can't tell you that either."

I sigh in frustration and grab for another clean towel to start drying my hair.

"You can leave now," I snap. "I need to finish drying off and I'd prefer it if you weren't in here."

When Jeremy gives no indication that he'll move, I take a step towards him and reach for the door handle. He catches my wrist and pulls me into him. My towel falls and before I can catch it, his muscular torso presses up against my naked body. My heart hammers in my chest and my hands start trembling at my sides.

"Stellaâ!", Jeremy whispers, sending a shiver down my spine.

My eyes lock with his and this time when he brings his lips to mineâ I don't back away.

Chapter 31: Have a Drink on Me

"Shut the 'eff up!" Connie shrieks. "You kissed him!?"

My face falls into my hands, mortified. I try to hide from all the prying eyes around us and curse myself for picking the restaurant with the smallest menus imaginable. Her question hangs stagnant in the room and the silence afterward echoes through my ears.

I focus my attention on my iced tea, refusing to respond to her until the chatter has picked up again. My glass begins to condensate, little dribbles of water running along the sides of the smooth glass and melting into the paper tablecloth below it.

I pick at the remainder of my roll and throw a piece in my mouth. It feels like cement as it rolls along my tongue and against my teeth.

Our waiter returns to the table, placing a colorful and exotic looking martini in front of me.

"I- uh - I didn't order a drink," I begin to say.

"Compliments of the gentleman at the bar," the waiter interjects.

"For me?" I ask, feeling completely caught off guard.

The waiter gives a slight bow in confirmation. Like the busy-body she is, Connie cranes her neck to the side to get a look at the men sitting at the bar.

"Which one?" she asks the waiter.

"I don't know, miss."

The waiter seems bored with the conversation. His face remains impassive as he transfers the empty tray from his hand to the crevice under his arm.

"O-kay. Well there's like fifteen guys at the bar and none of them are looking over here. Can you find out which one sent it?" Connie presses.

"No, miss. The gentleman has requested that his anonymity remain as such."

"AaaaHAH! So you *do* know who sent it?"

The waiter glances at me, his eyebrow rising ever so slightly as if to ask, 'Really? This is the company you keep?' He completely ignores Connie's question and pulls the notepad out from his pocket. Connie and I order but as soon as the waiter leaves, her attention returns to the mystery man from the bar.

"I never know what to expect when I'm with you, Stella," Connie sarcastically mutters under her breath. "You're always a bundle of fun."

"Excuse me?"

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"No, I mean it's always *good* fun. But c'mon Stella. You're like a dude magnet. If it's not Evan, it's Jeremy. And if it's not Jeremy, it's some random guy at the bar buying you a drink."

Connie looks me up and down, her eyes unabashedly staring at my every curve.

"If I weren't your friend I'd hate you for having such a good figure, ya know."

She shrugs with a pout and shoots me a jealous look. I don't know why but the whole thing is so comical I can't stop the laughter from bubbling up my throat. Connie gapes at me, bristling that I'm not taking this seriously.

"Connie you always seem to have the right words to say to cheer me up," I say wiping at the corners of my eyes.

I push the martini towards her and nod my head. "Please, have a martini on me."

She seems pacified by the gesture and I realize that through this 'free drink' fiasco, she has been completely sidetracked from my kiss with Jeremy. *Thank goodness*. With her attention diverted, I glance over my shoulder and study the men at the bar. None stick out to me. I'm about to turn back around when I see one of them glance in my direction.

He's sitting at the far end of the bar looking quite comfortable in his surroundings. He's nursing a beer and I peek at his attire to see he's formally dressed in a pin-striped gray suit. He nods his head to the bartender and is immediately served another beer. I look at his face from the side, hoping it will spark *some* kind of recognition.

His face is very rugged, his eyes sunken in and dark. His nose is pointed and angular, his jaw line appearing to have been carved from stone. He's not someone I would pick out of a crowd, but I wouldn't say he's unattractive either.

His left foot bounces up and down against the leg of the bar stool. After many years studying psychology, I know that a body movement such as this is commonly referred to as a 'nervous tick.'

In other words, *he knows I'm watching him*.

I feel like I should thank him for his kind gesture, but then I remember how he wanted his identity to be kept secret. But why? Most men buy women a drink with the intent that she will come over and thank him for it. Kind gratitude will lead to conversation, conversation will lead to flirtation and flirtation will lead to -

"Oh God, Stella," Connie says through staggered breath. "Help m-me."

Her whole body convulses against the table. Her face has paled and her lips are rapidly turning to a light shade of blue. Drool starts spewing from her mouth and her eyes gloss over before rolling to the back of her head. Her body crashes to the ground and I call 9-1-1, shouting to the restaurant for someone to bring me a towel and water.

The paramedics arrive in no time and she is whisked away on a gurney. Her shaking has completely subsided and now her body is still - looking helpless, sick and utterly weak. Gavin calls my cell, telling me he will pick me up at the restaurant and take us both to the hospital. He is just minutes away.

Fixated in Time

I quickly gather my purse and jacket. My thoughts are in shambles, but from the corner of my eye I notice that damned martini still sitting there - half gone. I look at the bar and see all the guests have cleared out, including the man with the pin-striped gray suit. I don't know why but I lean my hand forward, dipping my first finger into the martini and touching it to my tongue.

Shit!!! I mentally scream as the acidic flavor numbs my taste buds. *It's been poisoned.*

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I pace the confines of the hospital hallways, completely consumed in my thoughts.

The man who poisoned that drink was trying to kill me. But if he was trying to kill me with poison, he obviously doesn't know I'm immortal. If he doesn't know I'm immortal, then he hasn't been keeping tabs on me all too long. Right? Was the guy at the bar the one who sent me the email too? Is he the one who hired Evan? Who IS he?

The same thoughts tumble through my mind over and over again as my brain tries to grasp for a reasonable explanation. Somebody obviously wants me dead. Badly. The only questions I have to answer now are 'who is it' and 'why do they want me dead.'

I move past the waiting room and catch a glimpse of Gavin. His elbows are resting on his knees, his head in his hands. It looks like he's going to vomit. The nurse said she thought Connie would be alright. *Thank God.* I stop just short of the end of the hallway and lean against the wall, closing my eyes and taking a deep breath.

I don't know why I feel guilty. After all, *I'm* not the one that poisoned the drink. But I *was* the one that offered it to Connie. *And therefore I am partially at fault.* I smack my head against the wall behind me until a pulsating throb resonates through my temples.

"Stella?"

Evan's voice calls out from the other side of the hallway. My demon spats in his direction. She doesn't like to be duped, especially by a soon-to-be angelic warrior. I keep my eyes closed and pretend I don't hear him.

Before I know it his hands are around my shoulders, shaking me until my eyes pop open.

"What the *hell* do you want?" I snarl.

Evan backs away from me, fear in his eyes. I *may* have let my demon's voice shine through with that last question. Her voice is evil enough to scare anyone, including a full grown man who is supposed to be a saint.

"You bet your scrawny ass it is," my demon retorts.

I can feel my irises swirling into their most evil form of black. *No, demon please. Not here, not now.* My demon ignores my request and I can feel the tips of my wings pressing against the newly made flesh on my upper back, fighting for a way to be free.

"Evan, you need to move away from me."

My voice has taken on its double timbre. Evan steps away from me and holds his hands up in surrender. I try and think happy thoughts to get enough strength to put a muzzle on my demon.

Fixated in Time

The beautiful beach

the warm ocean breeze

my kick-ass new house

traveling the world

Spending time with Jeremy

Kissing Jeremy

The last thought puts an ear-splitting grin on my face. I tackle my demon, throwing and pinning her against my mental wall. I look at Evan who is still staring at me in horror and my smile fades. I roll my shoulders back and move toward him, my walk confident and poised.

"I suggest you go and spend time with Gavin. He's in the waiting room," I say with a cold edge to my voice.

"Stella I - I miss you."

His expression is a mixture of fear and desperation. He feebly lifts his arm up to touch me but stops himself mid-way.

"Please, Stella. Let me come over tonight and explain myself. Please. I know you have questions. And you deserve all the answers. I swear under God that from this point on I'll give you nothing but my one hundred percent honesty."

I cross my arms over my chest and narrow my eyes on him. His hand recoils away from me completely.

"Please, Stella!" he whimpers and his voice trails off to nothing.

"Why? If you were paid to get to know me or date me or whatever the hell the deal was - you did it. You did your job. So why are you still hanging around?"

Evan huffs under this breath and he looks in both directions before moving in closer to me.

"Stella I promise you I will explain everything tonight. Please, just let me come over. If after you've heard everything you still want to get rid of me, then fine. I will leave you alone forever. But I can't just walk away from you without giving you my side of the story."

"Why!? Can't you see you've done enough damage?! Why can't you just leave me fuck alone Evan?!"

I'm screaming now, my hands up in the air and my face inching closer to his. It's taking everything inside me not to smack him right across the face. Evan looks up at me, his eyes drowning with grief. I can actually feel the pain, the regret, coming from his body. *Don't you dare soften to him, Stella. He used you remember.*

Evan glances around the room and leans in until he is just inches away from my face. His cheeks turn a deep shade of scarlet and he forces his eyes to mine.

"Because Stella," he whispers under his breath. "I'm in love with you."

Chapter 32: The Best Night of My Existence

I'm on my tenth glass of wine when Jeremy barges through the front door. Sweat glistens off his face and neck and I can hear gospel music blaring from his iPod. He lifts the end of his shirt and wipes his face with it, delectably showing off his lean, tan stomach.

Jeremy removes the ear buds from his ears and adjusts the chord around the back of his neck. I watch him as he moves through the front entry way and into the living room.

"You seem to be adapting to new technology just fine," I murmur taking another sip of my wine.

Jeremy jerks back, clearly startled by my presence. The music on his iPod silences and he gives me a sly smile.

"I suppose I am, yes. Soâ home early again? That's twice in one week."

His breathing is still heavy and he glances at the seats around the living room.

"Do you mind if I sit?"

"No. Why would I?"

"I'm all sweaty. I don't want to ruin your furniture."

I roll my eyes and take another sip of my wine.

"I can afford this exact set of furniture a hundred times if I wanted to. Please, sit."

Jeremy takes a hesitant seat on the edge of my leather couch. My eyes scan his face. High cheek bones, dazzling blue eyes, golden hair, and those luscious pink lipsâ!

My cheeks redden with lust. *I kissed those lips. I even nibbled on those lips.* Just the memory of it has my heart pounding and my insides tingling. The kiss had been so quick, but so passionate.

He had brought me in, pressed our lips together, and then allowed me to take the rest into my *own* hands. My tongue devoured his and *oh* it was so soft and sweet. My hands roamed all over his body. His skin was so soft, my fingers generating electricity with every new place I touched.

Not to mention - that man does not have a single ounce of fat on him.

I would have let it go on forever if I could. Hell, if I'm being perfectly honest with myself, *I would have let him do whatever he wanted to me.*

But mid-kiss Jeremy's lips severed away from mine. His eyes widened and his face darkened with some unnamed emotion as he turned away from me. He started shaking his head, closing his eyes and backing away from the bathroom as if trying to clear his mind of some terrible thought.

I wanted to run after him. But I didn't. I just remained standing in my bathroom - naked, wanting and confused.

Fixated in Time

Jeremy clears his throat, effectively pulling me out of my trance. I meet his eyes and my blush deepens. What I wouldn't do for another kiss with those mouth-watering lips!

"You know, you should come running with me sometime," Jeremy says breaking our eye contact. "It helps to ease the stress."

"And what makes you think I'm stressed?"

"Iâ," Jeremy's voice trails off and he repeats his prior motions of wiping the sweat off his face with the bottom of his shirt. "It was just a friendly suggestion."

"I have my own ways of relaxing. And to answer your earlier question, Connie is in the hospital so I took off work to make sure she was OK."

Jeremy pops up from his chair, his face etched in concern.

"What happened to her?!"

"Honestly?"

Jeremy looks puzzled but nods his head ever-so slowly. I finish my last few sips of wine and set the glass down next to my feet. I take a deep breath, folding my hands together on my lap.

"Some random guy at the bar bought me a drink. I gave it to Connie and it ended up being poisoned."

"You didn't know the guy?"

"No. I won't forget his face though. I never do. And if I see him again I'm gonna rip his head off."

Jeremy continues to pace the confines of my living room. The muscles in his face tense and his eyebrows knit together in concentration.

"So he was trying to hurt you."

He says it as a statement more so than a question. I nod my head in confirmation.

"But why, Stella?"

I shrug indifferently. "I have no idea. Wouldn't be the first time and it won't be the last. And while I'm telling you things, I may as well admit that I think Evan and I are done."

Jeremy's jaw drops so far down I swear it's going to hit the floor. He snaps it back in place takes a hesitant step closer to me.

"What happened!?"

"Basically your 'perfect soon-to-be angelic warrior' was paid to hunt me down and date me."

"I - I don't believe you."

I wave a dismissive hand through the air.

Fixated in Time

"No, Stella that can't be true. Because I felt his emotions towards you. They were real. They ARE real."

I stumble to the kitchen and uncork another bottle of wine. Jeremy follows me in and fills a cup of water for himself. All the while he studies my actions, his eyes never leaving my face. I sloppily pour my wine and hiccup just as the red liquid reaches the brim of my glass.

"I think that may be enough wine for you," Jeremy mutters under his breath.

"Oh shut up," I snap.

I can feel tears welling up in my throat. Evan's affections for me, his desire to date me - all fake. I don't care what he said at the hospital. None of it was real. And now I have to sit through his explanation which I don't even want to hear in the first place. I just want to be done with him.

But that means Jeremy will have to leave.

I swipe up my glass of wine, the liquid swaying from side to side with every step I take.

"You're going to spill that," Jeremy says matter-of-factly.

My throat is so constricted with tears that I feel like I'm choking. I attempt to swallow it down but it doesn't budge. The wine sloshes in my glass as I ascend up the stairs. I stare at it, willing it to not spill.

But when I reach the top stair, my foot catches and I topple over. My wine lunges from the glass, seeping into the white carpet beneath it. My arms and legs are sprawled across the floor and I cover my face with my hands as tears start pouring down my cheeks.

Gotta love alcohol.

Jeremy is at my side in seconds and scoops me up into his arms. He carries me to my room and gently sets me on my bed.

"I'll clean up the wine," he says quietly.

I know I should just thank him and sleep off my drunken stupor. But my emotions are on overload and I can't seem to stop them.

"Don't bother. Just leave."

"Okâ I guess I'll let you be. But I'll be waiting downstairs to cook you something when you wake up. We'll talk this all over and get everything straightened out. Alright?"

Jeremy pushes a strand of hair away from my face and tucks it behind my ear. His hand lingers and he traces his thumb down my cheek, wiping away my sad-ridden tears.

"No. No. You're not getting it," I say and despite my best efforts, my words come out slurred. "I want you to go back to Heaven. Evan and I are done, so the deal is void. You need to go home."

More tears spring from my eyes and before I can stop myself, my arms fumble from under the covers and wind around Jeremy's neck. *Oh God, please don't go.* Jeremy sighs at my touch and hugs me back, his warm arms a gentle caress to my shaking body.

Fixated in Time

My hold on him tightens, and he doesn't fight it when I pull him on top of me. He adjusts slightly, moving his body to create an inch of space between us, and supports his weight on his elbows. His face tilts to the side and he looks at me in question. I'm sure I look like a blubbering idiot.

"Is that what you really want, Stella? For me to leave?"

His voice is low and husky, my mind succumbing to his smoldering gaze. His expression is pained and I close my eyes to try and tame my raging hormones. My nostrils flare when I breathe in his scent - so raw, so masculine and so pure. Every region of me sizzles with desire, including one I haven't used for quite some time. I ache for Jeremy - all of him and in every way.

I hesitantly pull Jeremy on top of me once again, this time rubbing my hips against him. His breath hitches in response. I move my lips onto his soft neck and trail light kisses all the way up his jaw line. His body tenses on top of me and I feel his erection forming, pressing firmly against my stomach.

I nudge his face towards mine and wait for him to make the next move. I should really open my eyes but I'm too afraid to see his reaction.

So I just lay there and wait.

And wait.

And waitâ€¦

I'm about ready to give up when I feel the rest of Jeremy's weight collapse into me, his erection rubbing harder against my skin. I moan low in my throat and he captures my lips with his. He's aggressive with the kiss, effectively silencing me when his tongue intertwines with mine.

I glide my hands up his shirt and tug on the ends. He lifts his hands without question and I slip it up and over his head. He follows suit with my shirt and I unhook my bra immediately after. His eyes consume my body as I slide it off completely, my nipples hardening as soon as they feel the cool air.

As if in a trance, Jeremy brings his head in close to my breasts, flicking his tongue against each of my nipples. I am so wet for him. I struggle out of my work pants and thong, and Jeremy gets up and repeats my actions - dropping his running shorts and boxers to the floor. His erection springs free and my jaw draw opens. He is so *big*.

My muscles clench in anticipation and I squirm with excitement as he seductively crawls back on top of me. His naked body presses against mine and it feels like sheer ecstasy. I widen my legs for him and feel the tip of his erection dripping wet against my core. He pushes it into me just slightly and stops. I moan as the bigness of him squeezes me open.

I look at his face and see he is drowning with desire. Our eyes meet and I smile, so utterly consumed by him. His body is tense and I can almost feel the internal struggle he is fighting. He is performing a sin, one that would no doubt get him in loads of trouble 'when he got home.'

I'm so afraid he'll change his mind. I lean up and kiss his lips, doing my best to draw him into me.

"I want you," I whisper. "I've never wanted anyone more than I do now, Jeremy."

Fixated in Time

His eyes burn into mine, as if searching for the validity of my statement. He presses a single kiss on my lips and then latches his hands around my hips, plunging into me all the way.

I cry out, a mix of pleasurable pain and ecstasy as he draws in and out of me over and over again. I can already feel myself getting ready to climax. Jeremy's speed picks up and when I can't take it anymore I let go, my body collapsing in sweet sexual surrender.

Jeremy finishes right after me, clutching at my hips as he shoves deep within me and roars out my name. The heavy weight of his body is on me once again and the only sound I hear now is that of our own ragged breaths.

I breathe in the smell of lust, of sated desire, and I bask in it.

It has never been this good before. Ever.

I pull Jeremy into me, never wanting to let him go, and I realize this is the best experience I've hadâin my entire existence.

Chapter 33: Breakfast with Evan

I sip my coffee and mindlessly flip through the newspaper. Every few minutes I glance up at the door, patiently waiting for my visitor to arrive.

The large waitress waddles over to me and holds up her pot of coffee. "Refill?"

"No thank you, I'm fine."

"Can I get ya anything else? Bagel or somethin'?"

I lick my lips and my stomach rumbles in agreement. I haven't eaten a thing since yesterday afternoon. *Of course, I'd give up eating forever if that meant I got to keep Jeremy forever in return.*

I shake my head with a sigh. I promised myself I wouldn't think about Jeremy *too* much today. I only left him minutes ago and already I can't seem to keep my mind off of him. After our passionate, and yes - a bit rough - first round of sex, it was only minutes before he was ready for round two.

My cheeks flush.

For being out of practice for so long, Jeremy was dy-no-mite in bed. He was absolutely incredible. And it wasn't just beginner's luck. If anything, he got better and better with every time we had sex *which tallied up to twelve times in all.*

Only when we were both physically exhausted did we stop. Jeremy's body collapsed into bed next to me. He wrapped his arms around my body, pulling me into him until my back was pressed firmly against his chest and stomach.

By the time my alarm went off, I had only gotten an hour of sleep. My joints and body ached with fatigue and soreness. I checked my phone right before leaving the house and realized I had blown off seeing Evan - yet again.

Kissing Jeremy a sweet good-bye, I tip-toed down the stairs and hopped in to my car. I dialed Evan's number as I pulled out of my driveway and told him if he wanted to meet me, now was the time.

"Soâ.was that a yes or no on the bagel?" the waitress asks me again.

"I-I'm sorry," I stammer, pulling myself out of my thoughts. "Yes I'd love a bagel."

"What kind?"

"Uhm I'll take raison cinnamon if you have it."

"Cream cheese?"

"Strawberry - please."

The waitress gives me a curt nod and I can tell I've already irritated her.

Fixated in Time

When I'm half way done with my bagel I see Evan jogging up to the little café. He opens the door and a burst of cool air bristles through his thick brown hair. He sees me and gives a hesitant smile. Dark bags shadow his eyes and from the looks of it, he hasn't shaved since yesterday.

He still is handsome though, incredibly so. But after my night with Jeremy I know there's no contest.

And on some deep level, I don't think there ever was.

Evan slides into the booth across from me and runs a tired hand through his hair.

"Thanks for meeting with me, Stella."

I give him a nod and almost apologize for calling him so early. But he's the one that ruined this - not me. No apology should be needed on my end. I set my bagel back onto the plate and stare at him expectantly.

"How do you look so good, even at seven in the morning?" Evan asks with a playful smile spreading across his lips.

"I didn't have time to do my hair or make up. And I got practically no sleep. I don't look good."

Evan's face falls and he studies my face as I take another sip of coffee.

"Well, you're practically glowing. So maybe a lack of sleep suits you."

Yea more like - an abundance of angel sex suits me, my sub conscious giggles and I have to suppress a smile.

"So what'd you want to talk to me about, Evan? I have a big day ahead and I need to be leaving here soon."

Evan straightens and waves the waitress over, ordering two eggs and a cup of coffee for himself. My mind starts to drift off again and I imagine Jeremy sleeping soundly in my bed. His naked, muscular body ready for the taking while resting warmly against my sheets. The thought makes my stomach quiver with desire.

"Ok, let me start from the beginning," Evan says in a quiet voice. "I was in a really, *really* unhealthy relationship a few years ago. I won't go into any details but by the time things ended, my ex had stripped me of everything - my money, my pride, my dignity, my trust and my love. I was broken."

The waitress brings Evan his cup of coffee and eggs and sets them down at the table. She's completely oblivious to our conversation. A light buzz resonates through the air and I notice her large phone lighting up from inside her pants pocket. She scuttles away and when she thinks she's out of view, she grabs the phone and starts reading her text.

"I was in a dark place, Stella," Evan continues. "A really, really dark place. I was pretty much a hobo - to put it mildly. And I had no one to help me. And then one day I was approached by a gentleman. I had never seen him before and he offered me a proposition."

My body remains still as I soak in this information, doing my best not to forget a single detail. Evan pauses briefly and adds a dollop of cream to his coffee.

"Anyway, he offered me a job. He told me he would pay for new clothes, a place to stay, food, and a supplemental income. It was an offer I couldn't refuse. Especially with the mess I was in. I had no other choice, so I took it. He said all I had to do was pursue you. Take you on dates, get to know you, that kind of

Fixated in Time

thing. I'm ashamed to admit that after every date, I went back and reported to him all the new information I learned about you."

My knuckles have gone white and my blood runs cold as I absorb his words. It wasn't just that he accepted such terrible terms. It was the fact that someone had asked him to do it in the first place.

"Who was this man, Evan?"

Evan shakes his head. "I never got his name. I only saw his face once and if I wasn't such a damned awful artist I'd try to draw you a picture of him."

"Why did he want all this information? Is he trying to hurt me?"

Evan grimaced at the question. "I can't really say that either, Stells. He never indicated his feelings for you one way or another. Just that he needed more information."

"When did it stop?"

"When you and I became official. I couldn't keep doing it because the more I got to know you, the more I fell in love with you. So I told him I was done. He paid me a last paycheck and that's the last I've heard from him."

"Was he upset that you backed out?"

"If he was he didn't act like it. He just thanked me for all that I did and wished me the best. I haven't heard from him since then, Stella. Honestâ"

Chapter 34: Todd's Dream

My morning patients go by in a blur. I try to be attentive to their problems but my mind is bogged down with my own issues. With Jeremy. With the future. With the man who hired Evan. With the man at the bar.

Grace strolls into my office at a quarter to one and sets a plastic container on my desk. It's a Caesar chicken salad - dressing on the side.

"You worked through lunch again, huh?" Grace asks me.

She leans against the edge of my desk and gives me a sad smile.

"You really should take your breaks. They help clear your mind."

"Thanks for the salad," I say, completely ignoring her suggestion.

"How are things with you and Evan?"

Not now Gracey.

"Ahhh we're - well, we had a fight."

"Oh? Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not really Grace. But thanks. I have a patient coming in at one. Soâ!"

Grace stands and gives me a sarcastic salute. "Didn't know I hired such a hard working girl," she says with a faint smile.

I just roll my eyes and do my best to scarf down my salad in record time.

My one o'clock doesn't show and my two o'clock is with Todd. He knocks on my door at 1:45 pm and glances around my room to see if I'm with anyone else.

"Come on in Todd," I say with a friendly tone and gesture to his favorite leather chair. "Take a seat."

Todd sits down and starts his germ-X mantra. He pulls a folded piece of paper from his pocket and clears his throat.

"I had a dream last night. I wrote it down, like you asked," he says.

I try not to show my excitement, but I practically trip over my desk to get closer to him. My notepad shakes in my unsteady hands.

"Go ahead," I urge.

Todd gives me a weary look but then starts reading from his sheet of paper - word for word.

"He's becoming two different people," Todd begins. "This angel person. He is showing me his anguish and his confusion with it all. There are images of Heaven mixed with images of earth. It's like he can't decide which

Fixated in Time

one he belongs to anymore."

My breathing strains and I try to remain calm.

"And then this like - explosive firework went off inside his head. He wouldn't show me what happened but it impacted him like crazy. His emotions for that woman are in overdrive and it's like he's going crazy because of it. He doesn't think of anything else but her and knows it has to stop."

"But why?"

Todd looks from his paper and gives me a quizzical look. I try to mask my emotions at this new information, but I know my worry is cracking through in my expression.

"Why what, doc?"

"Why does the angel have to stop?"

Todd shrugs and looks back down at his paper. "He didn't say. Ok so where was Iâoh right. So he knows it has to stop. So then I got all these flashes of sadness, like he was crying. And then I saw him leave the earth, like he was floating on up to heaven or somethin'. He kept looking back and shouting for the girl but she didn't hear him. And the last thing I remember was this super bright light blinding me. I couldn't see or hear anything. And then I woke up."

My mouth hangs open and my mind is running rampant. What does it all mean? My stomach churns slowly and I have an ill-sitting feeling that when I go home, I won't find anyone there.

I somehow manage to make it through my hour with Todd and as soon as I'm done, I pack up my briefcase and race home. With clammy hands I get out of my car, slam the door and jog to the front door. I fumble with the keys, and when I turn the lock my heart is pounding so loud that I'm afraid I'll go deaf.

I swing the door open and call Jeremy's name. I wait for a response.

Nothing.

I start making my way through the house, tears welling up in my throat with every room that turns up empty. I go to my bedroom and see the bed is made. I turn around and look down the hallway. Jeremy's bedroom door is closed and I hope beyond hope that he is in there.

I give a tentative knock on the door and then let myself in. The bed is made and the room is immaculately clean. I start checking the drawers, pulling them open in a frenzy and then slamming them closed when I see there's nothing there.

I check his bathroom just to be thorough, but the eerie silence around me tells all. I am alone. I crumble down to a helpless ball on the floor, tears careening down my cheeks and into my hands. Todd's dream had been accurate. Every damn bit of it.

Jeremy was goneâ

âAnd I will never see him again.

Chapter 35: A Visit to the Hospital

After a night of insurmountable drinking, I manage to drag myself to the hospital to visit Connie. I buy a bottle of water at the vending machines and it thuds its way down to the output tray. My head throbs as I bend over to pick it up.

I reach into my purse, my fingers feeling around for my almost-empty bottle of Advil.

"Ahah!" I mutter under my breath when my fingers clasp around the prospective bottle.

I pop a few Advil in my mouth and guzzle it down with water, hoping they will work their magic on my ugly hangover.

Connie is in the same room as she was before - tenth floor, past the elevators, third door on the right. I hesitantly tip-toe into her room and notice in an instant how frail she looks lying in her hospital bed. Tubes protrude from her nose and her skin is a sickly yellow. Judging by the bagginess of her hospital gown, it appears she's lost ten pounds after being here only a few short days.

I move the chair from the corner of the room and push it to the edge of Connie's bed. I take her cold hand as I sit down and do my best to warm it. Connie looks at me, her eyes glossed over. The corners of her lips twitch upward.

"Stella," she croaks.

Her voice is as dry as sand paper and I compulsively swallow down a mouthful of guilt. I pull the card I bought out of my purse and set it on her nightstand. My neat hand writing is scrawled across the front of it, but it looks so small sitting on the table.

I should have gotten her flowers or something. I sigh in frustration. *I am soooo out of practice with interacting with humans.*

"Uhmâ !.I got you a card. Open it whenever you're feeling better. Ok?"

Connie nods and gives a small smile. I can't seem to stop staring at this woman in front of me. Only days ago she was full of life, practically bubbling over at the seams. Now she seems soâ !.broken.

"Oh, Connie. I'm so sorry I let this happen," I say bowing my head in shame. "If I had been any kind of smart woman, I would have just sent the drink back."

I blink back the tears that are forming in my eyes. Connie gives my hand a reassuring squeeze, knowing the tears are for her. It seems I cry at the drop of the hat lately. Of course, it doesn't help that Jeremy has left me high and dry and I still haven't heard a single word from him.

I miss him so much.

But I was the one that told him to leave, wasn't I? I clutch at Connie's hand, craving her human touch as a means to console my sudden swell of loneliness. Her eyes study my face for a moment before her head lolls to the side. I wipe at the corners of my eyes with my spare hand, doing my best to put myself together.

Why did he leave without saying goodbye?

Fixated in Time

Perhaps my final night with him *was* my goodbye.

Images of our passionate night together swim through my mind. Jeremy's kiss, his touch, his body pressed seductively against mine, his manhood thrusting into me over and over and overâ€¦

"Go talk to Gavin, Stella," Connie says and her voice is so weak she sounds like a woman well over ninety. "He's in the waiting room."

"Ohâ€¦ok. Well Connie - I'm thinking about you all the time," I say, sliding her hand under the blankets and then tucking them in closer to her body. "I'll go drop by and talk to Gavin for a minute. And then I'll come back and visit you tomorrow, alright?"

Connie gives a small smile but doesn't say a word in return. It's so unsettling being the one who talks more than she does. I leave the room and scuttle down the hallway. Hospitals have never been my favorite places. The sooner I can get out of here the better.

The waiting room is surprisingly sparse for this time of day. Only a few middle-aged men and women scatter the room, most of them flipping through various magazines and newspapers. Pale sunlight bounces off the beige drapes, illuminating the room in a soft, natural way.

My eyes move to the corner of the room where I finally spot Gavin, sleeping soundly in one of the over-stuffed lounge chairs. Despite the extra room, his body is so contorted I wonder how on earth he fell asleep in a position like that. I approach him and my nose hairs tingle in protest. Gavin *reeks*.

He's wearing the same clothes as he was when he first arrived at the hospital, their appearance now crumpled and matted with dry sweat. Gavin's facial hair has grown, clusters of it sprouting out from under his lip and around his jaw line. If I didn't know the man so well, on a first glance I'd guess he was a hobo.

Connie said she wanted me to talk to him, but he looks so peaceful in his slumber that I don't think I should disturb him. I turn on my heels and start walking towards the exit.

I've only gone a few steps when I hear Gavin rustling behind me.

"Stella?"

I turn and give a crooked smile, walking back and taking the seat next to him. He rubs his tired eyes and forces himself into a sitting position. His hands move up and down his face in a vigorous manner. When he seems to be satisfied with his wake-up ritual, his eyes turn on me and he gives me a kind smile.

"Thought you'd come through here without even saying hello to me?"

I try to sense any detection of anger or feelings of betrayal from Gavin. But there's none. His smile seems genuine and my shoulders sag with relief. I was *so sure* he'd be mad at me for this, for allowing Connie to have a drink that would end in a near-death experience for her.

I know if I was him, I'd blame me too.

I let a thankful smile spread across my lips and give Gavin a playful nudge.

"Well, in my defense you don't exactly look like you normally do. I almost didn't recognize you what with your grizzly beard and hobo-like appearance."

Fixated in Time

Gavin chuckles under his breath and scratches his newly-forming beard.

"I'm thinking of growing it out. Your thoughts?" he asks me.

"Solid plan."

Gavin's smile wanes and he lets out a heavy sigh. He glances around the waiting room and lowers his voice so just I can hear him.

"How's Connie doing?"

I shrug my shoulders and try to display the best poker face that I can muster.

"That bad, huh?"

I can feel my shoulders tensing again and another wave of guilt ripples through my mind. "I'm so sorry, Gavin. I -"

"Hey," Gavin says interrupting my apology. He slides his arm around my shoulders and gives me a side hug. "It wasn't your fault. If you'd known that drink had been tampered with I know you wouldn't have let her drink it. I may not have known you for very long, Stella, but I know you well enough. You've got a good heart. You care for your friends and you wouldn't do anything to hurt them. And that includes Connie."

I'm so touched by his words that even my demon seems to be appeased by the compliment. I try not to question it. Just the feeling of having respect, of having *a friend*, is more than I could have asked for. Especially given the current circumstances.

"So where's your usual flock of men?" Gavin asks.

His voice has softened and I can tell he's trying to lighten the mood. In my experience though, unless if someone is having a baby, it's virtually impossible to keep a positive attitude in a place like this.

And have I mentioned how much I hate hospitals?

"Well, I'm still not talking to Evan really. And Jeremy -"

"Gavin!" a man calls from the other end of the room.

Gavin's head snaps up and his features become clouded with confusion. He leans forward and gives me a reassuring squeeze on the shoulder. He tells me he'll just be a minute and walks towards the exit where the intruder man is standing.

I sit back in my chair, doing my best to inconspicuously look at the man who has diverted Gavin's attention. His back is turned toward me so I do all I can to focus on the sound of his voice. It's low and gravely, something I swear I've heard in a mystery-murder movie many years ago.

And then Gavin points a finger to me and the man turns around. His face is strained with a smile and when he sees me, his eyes light with an emotion I can't quite place. Whatever it is, it isn't good.

And then my stomach drops as I realize who he is.

Fixated in Time

He's the man that poisoned my drink.

He's the man with the gray pin-striped suit.

Chapter 36: The Man in the Gray Pin-Striped Suit

I don't wait for Gavin to introduce me. My feet automatically move to the exit door where I confront the bastard face to face.

"And who is this lovely young woman?" pin-striped suit asks, his loathing eyes not matching the tone of his question.

"You know who I am," I snap.

Gavin raises a brow to him and then to me. He gently pats my shoulder and tries to calm me down.

"Stella it's ok."

"No it's not!" I shriek. "This is the asshole that poisoned my drink! He's the reason Connie's in the hospital right now! Did you know that?!"

Gray pin-striped gives me a disgusted look. He glances around the waiting room and I can tell from his body language that we are attracting a lot of unsolicited attention.

Whatever, I don't care.

"Yes Stella, I know. But, he came here to apologize. He didn't mean to -" Gavin starts.

"Gavin, could I please step out and have a word with Stella?" pin-striped asks, cutting Gavin off mid-sentence. "Just to explain what happened, of course."

Gavin seems baffled at the question and he looks at me, gauging my reaction. My face remains stone-cold and my irises pool with fury. Eventually he gives a small shrug and opens the door for us.

"I'll be watching from the window, Stella. Holler if you need me."

Pin-striped leads the way and I follow suit, allowing the door to close behind us with a soft *click*. He turns to me and his eyes are filled with such hatred I nearly back-pedal in surprise. His face is wiped clean of his fake smile and he takes a step closer to me.

And he is *huge* - at least 6'5 and with the broadest shoulders I've ever seen on a man. He towers over me and puffs out his chest.

"W-who are you?" I stammer.

Damn, where was my confidence?

Pin-striped lets out a soft chuckle.

"Who am I? My dear, I am your worst nightmare. And to save ourselves from a lot of mindless questioningâ Yes, I am the one who sent you the email. And yes, I am the one who poisoned your drink."

My scalp prickles as I digest the malice in his voice after he makes his confession. A shiver dances down my spine and I take a faltering step backward.

Fixated in Time

"I have been searching for you for quite some time, Stella. And now that I found you, I will make sure you are dead as quickly as possible. I'm what you call - a demon hunter. And I'm fully aware of who and what you are."

I'm so dumb founded by his words that all I can do is gape. *Where are you, my guardian angel? I need you!*

I take a deep breath and stand confidently, remaining silent in an attempt to collect my thoughts. Millions of questions tumble through my mind as I try to put together all the pieces to this very psychotic puzzle.

"Ok!..so!..then where does Evan fit in with all of this? Was there a specific reason you hired him? Or!..?"

Pin-striped frowns at my questions, crossing his massive arms across his chest. "What are you talking about?"

His threatening facade falters and it is evident that he has no idea what I'm talking about. I know I should be relieved, but the thought only terrifies me more. *If he isn't the one who hired Evan, that means there's not just one, but TWO people out there trying to make my life a living Hell.*

"N-nothing," I stammer.

Quick movement catches the corner of my eye, and I glance up to see Gavin closing the waiting room drapes. His body is hidden once again behind the curtain but when pin-striped gives an irritated sigh, I realize Gavin's 'sneaky' attempt to check up on me has been for naught.

"Well. I don't want to make a scene. Not yet anyway. So I better be going," Pin-striped says with a grunt. Then he lowers his voice and adds, "And I wouldn't run too far if I were you. I've gotten pretty good at tracking you down."

His words send another chill down my spine and I swallow down the desire to vomit. I numbly nod my head and try to relax my body language. The last thing I need is for Gavin to come out here and attempt to rescue me.

Pin-striped moves away from me and goes for the door but Gavin is a step ahead of him. He swings the door open and helps me back inside. Gavin keeps it open for pin-striped but he shakes his head and holds up a hand in surrender.

"Thank you Gavin, but I need to be going," pin-striped says.

He gives us a slight nod of his head, and after an awkward moment of silence he makes his way to his car. Gavin and I watch as pin-striped drives away in his dodge caravan. I memorize his license plate number, chanting it over and over again in my head as if willing my memory not to forget it.

"You ok, Stella?" Gavin asks me under his breath.

"Yea. I'm fine."

I think.

"I know he comes off kind of creepy Stella, but at least he came in here to apologize. Ya know?"

Did he? *That's news to me.* And then I realize that through all the commotion, I never even got pin-striped's name.

Fixated in Time

"Did he introduce himself to you at all? I mean - do you know anything about him?"

I try to sound casual when I ask the question, but I know I sound like a nosy detective. Internally I am screaming for more answers. The more I know about this guy the better chance I have to take him down. Because if he knows how to kill me, my demon and I will be separated forever *â which will land me in an eternity of Hell.*

I shudder at the thought.

Gavin shrugs and starts making his way back to his waiting room chair. "Well, he said he's from Indiana originally. He moved down here a year or so ago for work. Don't remember what he does though. I asked if he was single, seeing as he bought you a drink - which, by the way, he told me he had no idea the drink was tampered with when he sent it to you. But I'm sure he explained all that to you."

I raise my brow. *What a load of bull shit.*

"But yea, he said he sent it to you just as a kind gesture since he was dating your friend."

"My friend?"

"That's what he said anyway."

The only female friend I have is Connie. Unless *â*

"What did you say his name was, Gavin?"

"Ahhh, Richard. I believe."

I run the name through my mind, my blood running cold when I realize who it is. It's a name I've heard for only a short time but one that I'm not likely to forget. Richard isn't just a demon hunter that's been on my trail for years.

He's also Grace's new boyfriend.

Chapter 37: My Beautiful Dream

"I've missed you," I whisper into Jeremy's ear.

His warm, lean body positions itself over mine and I inhale his intoxicating scent. His erection rubs against my stomach and an excited giggle bubbles from my throat. I wiggle beneath him, my hands reaching up and urging his lips to mine.

"I can't Stella," he says and weakly fights against my hold.

His voice is so husky and deep. If he really wanted me to stop, he'd be more forceful. And he wouldn't be soâexcited.

So I try again.

I swipe my tongue across his supple lips and his breath hitches in response. His grip on my hips tightens and I smile proudly. I'm driving him wild.

And loving every minute of it.

He dips his head down to mine and trails air-light kisses across my face and neck. And when he kisses my lips, it's as if a summer breeze is caressing my soul, seducing my senses quickly and completely. I have never experienced such a gentle kiss in all my life. Jeremy's tongue slides into my mouth, intertwining with mine and tasting as delicious as honey.

I want to ask him why he left me, why he didn't say good-byeâ!

âbut all my questions evaporate the longer my lips are captivated by hisâ!

"Stella. Stella, please wake up."

Strong hands are around my shoulders, vigorously shaking me awake. I blink my way to consciousness and squint into the darkness. Jeremy's image falters in my mind and his soft touch evaporates into the very air that I compared his kisses to just minutes ago.

"Stella, are you awake? Are you ok?"

I'm becoming aware of my surroundings and recognize Evan's deep and masculine voice that is now just inches from my face.

"Evan - w- what are you doing?"

I move away from him, kicking my feet from underneath the covers. Evan immediately backs away, his expression masking the hurt in his eyes.

"I guess I uhâ! Well I talked to Gavin. He said he hadn't seen you in a few daysâ! We, well I, just wanted to make sure you were alright."

"I know. I'm sorry. I've just been busy with work."

Fixated in Time

Evan gives a slight nod and scoots another precautionary inch away from me.

"How's Connie?" I ask.

"Better. She got out of the hospital this morning. Can you believe she was in there for over a week?"

I shake my head and make a mental note to go see her tomorrow. I should have visited her these past few days. I know I should have. But I've been so preoccupied with researching this Richard character that time has seemed to slip away from me.

"Where's Jeremy?" Evan asks. "I stopped by his bedroom and all his stuff is gone. What's the deal?"

I reach across my night stand and grab for my glass of water. I sip on it slowly, gathering my thoughts before blurting out an answer that I know will surely bring me to tears. When I set the glass back down, I turn on the crystal lamp winding the up the side of my headboard.

Its light is dulled but it does the job in helping me see Evan. I draw my arms up around my legs and give him a cautious glance. He is cleanly shaven, his dark hair falling around his face in a haphazard way. His bold green eyes stare back at me and despite all that's happened, I still find him handsome. Which of course irritates the hell out of me.

He starts to blush under my gaze and shifts his body further away from me. His snug jeans mold to his muscular legs and lean hips. He's just wearing a plain white t-shirt and I shake my head thinking about how such a simple outfit can look *so damn good* when it's on the right person.

"You haven't looked at me this intently since the first time we met," Evan comments and lets out a nervous laugh.

"Oh?"

"Yea. It drives me crazy, to be honest."

I raise a brow but my steady gaze lingers. "I apologize."

Evan holds up his hands and smirks. "No, no it's fine. Really. Yes, it drives me crazy. But it's in a good way. I promise."

A beat of silence passes between us.

"I'm sorry. I didn't even give you a chance to answer my question. So is Jeremy moved out and everything? Or..."

I frown and scratch my forehead at his question.

"Uhm. No he's not still living here. He moved out over a week ago. I'm sorry - how did you get into my house?"

Evan gives me an impish grin and shrugs his shoulders.

"Back door was unlocked."

Fixated in Time

"So you broke into my house?"

Evan's grin vanishes, his eyes pleading with me to see reason. Since Jeremy has left me, only bad things seemed to have happened in my life. First Connie in the hospital, then Richard hunting me down *now Evan breaking into my house*. I glance towards the clock and see that it's only midnight. I must have fallen asleep earlier than I'd planned.

Well, at least it's still early enough to have a drink.

Without waiting for Evan's response, I hop off my bed and start making my way down the stairs. My night wear is a bit sparse and I bite my lip thinking I should have put on more clothes. A black tank top and booty shorts tend to give off a less-than-conservative message to any ogling eyes.

Stop Stella. Evan's not here to do anything with you. He doesn't even want you - remember? He only pretended to want you because he was paid to.

My demon growls at the notion, beyond furious that I allowed myself to be duped by a perfect stranger.

Evan shuffles down the stairs behind me, and when we're both in the kitchen I can feel his curious eyes peeking risky glimpses at my curves. I pull a bottle of wine from my top cabinet and uncork it with ease. I pour the sweet red liquid into my favorite wine glass and pause, turning my attention to Evan.

"You want some?" I ask, tipping up the wine bottle to him.

"Ahh, yea. I guess I'll have some."

I can't help but wish the man behind me waiting for his glass of wine was Jeremy *and not Evan*. I hand Evan his drink and move into the living room. I sit on the far left of the couch and Evan takes a seat near the middle. He's leaving just enough distance between us to not come off as too pushy or overbearing. *Smart man.*

"So what's been new, Evan?" I ask in a neutral voice and take another sip of my delicious wine.

"Not much. I'm actually looking for a new place. And a new job."

The reminder of his former 'employment' leaves a bad taste in my mouth. I take another sip of wine.

"Why are you moving out? The rent on your one-room-hut too much to handle?"

My question is dripping with sarcasm and even though he deserves every mean comment I can muster, I regret it instantly. Evan blushes at my hurtful remark and shakes his head.

"No actually I'm looking for a place to settle down. An actual house. I've got quite a bit of money saved up from my last job and I haven't spent hardly any of it. I could easily afford to put a down payment on a modest-sized home and cover the mortgage for the first year or two without having to work again *and*."

Evan drones on about this topic for what feels like hours *and* where he's applying for work, what he thinks will turn over the best profit, the best houses on the market, which ones are in his price range *and* I completely tune him out and just focus on the gnawing thoughts that are tumbling through the back of my mind.

Of course they all revolve around Jeremy *and*.

Fixated in Time

Where is he? What is he doing? Is he thinking about me? Do I ever cross his mind? Does he regret our last night together? Will I ever get to see him again? What will happen if I do?

I finish my glass of wine and pour a second.

And then a third.

It's not until my fourth glass that I realize Evan has completely switched topics and is now staring back at me, clearly waiting for some type of response from my end.

"What?"

"I just asked if you'd given 'us' any thought from the last time we'd spoken?" Evan repeats himself slowly.

What?!

My fuzzy brain processes the question as if there's a million dollars on the line. I look at my wine bottle and see its insides have been sucked dry. Time for another bottle.

"Doyawantmorewine?" I slur to Evan as I push myself off the couch.

The room sways as I steady my feet to make it stop, but my feet fumble beneath me. Before I reach the kitchen, Evan scoops me up in his arms and carries me upstairs. He brings me to my room and sets me gently on the bed. My wine glass is still clamped in my right hand as I glare up at him.

"I wanted more wine," I say.

"I know you did Stells. But you have work tomorrow. So I think that's enough for tonight."

In a childish fit I throw my wine glass at the floor. I must have not thrown it very hard because its glossy sides just roll across the carpet, unfettered by my poor behavior. Evan's fingers clasp the bottom of my chin and he turns my face to his, demanding my attention.

His features are tensed but his eyes are soft. I've always compared his eyes to emeralds before, but now they look so much gentler and more subtle. Like a field of wild green grass on a warm summer's day.

"I miss you, Stella," Evan says. "And I know what I did was wrong. Terribly wrong. But Stella you have to believe me when I say I'm willing to spend as long as it takes, and do whatever it takes to get you back. I don't know why that guy had me follow you or learn all that I did about you. But I can't say I regret it."

"Why?"

"Because it led me to *you*."

Evan's voice is so soft and his immovable gaze makes the prickly ice around my heart melt into a puddle of forgiveness. I nod my head and give him a small smile.

"I forgive you, Evan."

Fixated in Time

Evan's eyes are wide and his body is rigid. I wish I could read minds. It would help so much in cases like these.

"So, you're willing to give me another chance?" Evan asks, his voice so small and hopeful.

I want to tell him yes. Not necessarily because I want to be with him, but I just don't want to be alone anymore. I've done it for centuries. That's long enough. Evan must detect my indecision because he starts moving his face towards mine, his gazed fixed on my lips.

I hold my breath and close my eyes in defeat.

Jeremy, I wanted it to be you.

Evan's lips move across mine, capturing my mouth in a soft but passionate kiss. He moves his body closer to mine, his hands moving down my back and holding on to the sides of my waist.

And then I feel it.

A tingling feeling creeps up my stomach and rises all the way up the back of my neck. This is a feeling that not so long ago I hated, but now it's becoming something I dream about.

It's the feeling of being watched. By none other than those beautiful, beloved angel eyes.

Chapter 38: An Early Arrival

The next morning I go through Starbuck's drive thru, order up a Venti Mocha with a double shot of espresso and then drive like a wild woman to try and get to work on time. The bitter-sweet coffee burns my tongue as it enters my mouth and travels down my throat.

I slip out of my safety belt and hop out of the car with an energetic bounce to my step. The caffeine seems to be kicking in already. Grace is just a few steps ahead of me and I call out for her to wait. She gives me a friendly smile and we walk into work side-by-side.

After doing hours of research on Richard, and after multiple encounters with Grace thereafter, I am fully confident that she is oblivious to both Richard's true intentions and true identity. A piece of me feels it's my duty to warn her. And yet I have remained silent.

"You have a good night last night?" Grace asks as we step onto the elevator.

"It was alright. Nothing exciting."

Actually, it was. My angel eyes are backâ

Grace shakes her head, giving me a perplexed look.

"Stella, you're an obvious knock out, you're brilliant, sweet and funnyâ.how on earth can you still be single?"

Grace seems to feel the need to bring up my 'single status' at least once a day. And I truly believe a fraction of her concern is directed towards me. But the *main* reason she brings this up is to find a way to drag Richard into the conversation.

"I'm just not really looking, I guessâ"

"Well, you know *Richard* and I were talking the other night and he suggested online dating. Have you ever thought about that?"

Oh here we go againâ

I shake my head as the elevator doors *ding* open. I move toward my office and give Grace a parting wave. She gives me a worried look, but eventually returns my wave before going into her own office and shutting the door.

I flick on my office lights and boot-up my computer. It beeps and buzzes to life and when the main screen comes on, all my previous day's research comes popping up. I unlock my top desk drawer and take out my small notebook, which I have now named my "Richard Notebook."

I still don't have all the information I need on him. And admittedly, what I *have* found on him is helping me very little. But I keep trying. I flip open my notebook to my most recent entry and re-read my latest notes.

- Richard Bartock - lived in Indiana for ten years prior to moving.

- Worked as a hotel manager of Western Inn.

Fixated in Time

- Graduated from ISU in 1986 with Bachelor's in finance and hospitality.
- Never been married.
- No children.

I feel like the answer should be screaming back at me and yet all of Richard's information seems to check out. Car, plates, family, schooling, job, past, everything. So how did he start his demon hunting?

And how on earth did he find out about me?!

I sigh and read through my list again, imagining Richard's life on a time line.

"Stella?"

My head snaps up and I see Todd poking his head through my door. I glance down at my clock's computer and see he is half an hour early. I close my notebook and put it safely back in its drawer.

When I have it locked up, I usher Todd into the room, telling him to close the door behind him.

"Todd, this is an unexpected surprise. You're never early. Is everything alright?"

Todd gingerly sits down in 'his' seat and squirts a few globs of Germ-X onto his hands.

"I know I'm early doc and I'm sorry for that. But I think I need some medication."

His eagerness surprises me and I grab for his file folder. Todd usually isn't too keen on taking medication. Upping his dosage is something I was sure he'd never agree to. I give him a thoughtful look and notice that he's lost weight over the last few weeks. His cheek bones are hollowed out and his face looks so thin and gaunt.

The more I observe him the more odd he seems to look. Usually dressed and well kept, Todd's appearance today is quite disorderly. His hair is tousled, his shirt casual and wrinkled. His normal khaki pants have been substituted for ripped jeans. His left foot bounces up and down with a rhythm so fast it's making me nervous.

"Todd, what seems to be bothering you?"

Todd gives a nervous glance over his shoulder and then leans toward me, his eyes grave and serious. "I had another dream, Stella. It was about you."

Chapter 39: It's All Relative

"You disobeyed your orders."

The voice of his leader made Jeremy cringe with fear. He had sinned, badly.

"I confess to you my sins, and beg for your forgiveness," Jeremy said in a calm voice.

The angelic warrior, Raphael, peered into Jeremy's eyes. Jeremy stood confidently but bowed his head in shame. How long had he been an angelic warrior? Hundreds of years. How many missions had he completed? Millions. He had never made a mistake.

Until now.

"Tobiah," Raphael said softly, using Jeremy's angelic name. "As much as I love you brother, I do not see sorrow in your eyes. And I do not feel any in your heart."

Jeremy flinched at the statement. He knew what he had done was wrong and yetâhe was having trouble finding shame in his sins. If he had the chance to go back to earth, he knew he would make the same mistake. Again and again and again.

"What is to become of me?" Jeremy asked in a worried voice.

Raphael's strong hands settled atop Jeremy's shoulders and he felt a wave of peace move through his soul.

"You have a choice, Tobiah. One that will change the course of your existence. I have been elected by the archangels to explain to you your options. And when I am finished, I will give you a moment of peace to make your decision."

Jeremy nodded his head in understanding.

"Option one is to stay an angelic warrior. However, if that is your decision, you will be stripped of your title and rank and will have to work your way back up to my second-in-command."

Raphael paused a moment and searched Jeremy's face for a reaction. The tips of his golden wings slid across the billowy clouded floor. Jeremy had always been in awe of Raphael's wings. They were as majestic as the very Heaven that made them, and their golden shimmer could be spotted from hundreds of miles away.

"Option two is to resign from your warrior duties altogether. This would leave you in the heavenly realm as a greeting angel for all who enter Heaven's gates."

Jeremy absorbed Raphael's words, a sinking feeling forming in the pit of his stomach. He should be relieved that his punishment was not greater after failing to complete his task. But still he wasn't happy with his choices. Truth be told, the only thing he wanted was to go back down to earth and see Stella one more time.

He hadn't even had a chance to tell her good-bye. After his night with her, he was summoned back to Heaven by his leader - a summon which could neither be denied nor put off. Jeremy had gathered his things and had allowed Raphael to bring him back to Heaven, body and soul.

Fixated in Time

He was told to stay away from Stella. She was a temptation to him, a temptation that consumed his mind every minute of every hour of every day. And Jeremy did his best to obey. But when he felt the tug of Stella against his mind, he had to check up on her.

And what did he see?

Stella wrapped in the arms of another man. Of Evan. Of Jeremy's soon-to-be brother as part of the angelic warriors. Jeremy tried to let it go. But the feelings of jealousy coursed through him like the eye of a storm.

Why were his feelings so strong for her? And were they even for her? Or was the devil playing tricks on his mind? After all, Stella did have a demon inside her. Perhaps she used it against him.

But that just didn't seem like something she would do. She was good, and kind, and sweet, and beautiful.

"-And there is one final option," Raphael said, captivating Jeremy's attention once again. "You may fall."

Jeremy couldn't hide the shock and surprise on his face. A fallen angel was an unthinkable punishment, one that every angel feared. And yet it was an option for him to consider. Because of Stella.

"Would I ever be able to get back into Heaven?" Jeremy asked hesitantly.

Raphael gave him a pointed look, sheer wonderment in his eyes. Raphael was an angel who knew him soul deep. He always knew what Jeremy would do or say ten steps before he did it. But now Raphael was looking at him as if they were meeting for the very first time.

"As you know Jeremy, when an angel falls, it's usually not by choice. It is a punishment. In your case, however, it is a sacrament of the Lord, to sacrifice one of his angels to allow you time on earth. Therefore, -"

"-a sacrifice will be needed to get me back into Heaven," Jeremy finished for him. "What kind of a sacrifice?"

But Jeremy didn't have to wait for an answer to know what kind of sacrifice was needed. He knew what he had to do. The only question was - was he willing to do it all for a chance to be with Stella?

Stella listened to Todd's dream, mouth agape and eyes wide.

"And that's when I woke up. Stella I've been dreaming about this angel the whole time. It's consuming my mind. I can't eat, I can't sleep, it's like I'm in a walking dream, mentally connected with this man, who I now know is named Jeremy. And he's real. Isn't he?"

It's hard for me to look at Todd's pained face. I selfishly want to know more, crave to know if Jeremy will make the choice to come back to me.

Oh God, please let him come back to me.

"Damn it Stella, is he real!?" Todd shouts to me.

"Y-yes Todd. He's real. He's very real."

Todd looks crazy as he bounces his leg up and down against the floor, staring at me with his anxious eyes. "What's wrong with me doc?"

Fixated in Time

"Listen to me Todd, there is nothing wrong with you. Nothing. There are people that have souls that are so light and so open, that your mind allows you to see other spirits, other beings, outside of yourself. Through your dreams you see their pain, their pleasure, their lives."

"How do you know that's all it is?"

"I've read about it before, Todd. Back in school. And I'll be honest, it's something I've never believed in or even have come across until you. But I truly believe that's all it is and it's nothing to be afraid of."

Todd nods his head numbly and mutters something under his breath that I can't quite catch.

"Jeremy said in the dream that the devil was trying to push him towards you. You're not bad thoughâright Stella?"

My heart clenches at Todd's question and the blood rushes to my cheeks making them flush with red. *Am I bad?* It's a question I have faced time and time again. And after all this time, I think I have come to a firm decision.

"No Todd, I'm not."

"I didn't think so. I trust you Stella. I'm on your side."

On my side?

Todd glances down at his watch and gasps as he realizes the time. He hurries out of his seat and nervously scratches at the back of his neck.

"I have to go Stella. I - I - I have stuff to do. I'll be back again for the next appointment."

I reach out to stop Todd from leaving but he brushes right by me, opening up the door and rushing down the hallway. I stare after him and feel like my brain is going to explode. Nothing is making sense and I feel like I'm missing a big piece to the puzzle.

My stomach clenches and I wipe my clammy hands down the length of my thigh. *What does it all mean?*

Grace rounds the corner to my office and plops a stack of mail on my desk.

"I saw Todd running down the hallway," she says with a smirk. "Making progress with him, huh?"

Her playful question is filled with sarcasm. I gather my notes and stuff them into Todd's folder.

"I am, actually."

Grace shakes her head and leans against the edge of my desk. She crosses her feet at the ankles and gives her chin a thoughtful tap.

"He's an odd character. I made absolutely zero progress with him in the few weeks I had him."

A prickling sensation runs down the back of my spine at Grace's admittance. Something doesn't add up.

"So Todd was your client before I took over?"

Fixated in Time

Grace nods her head. I frown as I digest the information. Grace has been with this practice for quite some time. She knows every single mental disorder and illness and all the 'classic symptoms' for each.

She knows just as well as I do that Todd has chronic OCD. With a case like that, the psychiatrist should *never* cut ties with a client without solid grounds. Clients with OCD get attached quickly to people and like their routines.

I can't imagine something went so wrong that Grace would sign off on Todd and give him to me as a new client. So why did she do it?

Normally I wouldn't ask such a thing, but there's a feeling in the pit of my stomach that's telling me I should. I look Grace straight in the eyes.

"Why did you sign off on Todd and give him to me? Did something happen?"

Grace's face ignites into all different shades of pink. Her eyes dart away from me, to the floor, and then back to me again. She shifts uncomfortably in her position and bites her lip with hesitation.

"Wellâ !."

There is an uneasy silence between us but I refuse to back down.

"Well, I just wanted to make sure everything was 'legal.'"

"Legal? How do you mean?"

Grace moves away from my desk and starts fiddling with her fingers.

"I just, well, you know how we're not supposed to date clients that we see?"

Oh please don't tell me she slept with Toddâ !

"Well, you're really not supposed to date or see any of their family members eitherâ !" Grace pauses and then rushes out, "But when he showed interest in me, I just *had to* take a chance Stella. I *had to*. And I know that's not the most ethic thing in the world, but I just didn't want to pass up a chance with a great guy."

I pinch the bridge of my nose and hold up my hand for her to slow down.

"Wait, wait wait - hold it. So you're telling me you stopped treating Todd so you could date who now?"

Grace raises her brow and then rolls her eyes as if I'm the stupidest girl in the world.

"Richard, duh. Where have you been?"

I try to take a deep breath but my brain is starting to spin out of control.

"Richard. And Todd. They'reâ ! related?" I ask in a choppy voice, my blood running cold by the second.

"Well yea Stella. They're brothers."

Chapter 40: Telling My Secrets

My demon wails against my temples as I leave the fiery pits of Hell. My black wings ruffle against the cool wind, a refreshing change to the suffocating smoke that filled my lungs only minutes ago. The moon shines brightly against my sparkling skin. And for the first time ever, I feel rejuvenated after leaving Hell.

Who would have thought handing the reigns over to my demon for a few hours would give my mind the 'breath of fresh air' it needed to reload?

My demon hisses a handful of insults at me before my sub-conscious - now strengthened - enforces her to be silent.

After the day I had, first with seeing Todd, and then learning of the new information on Richard, my brain melted down into a puddle of confusion. I couldn't shake the feeling and the harder I tried to sort it out, the more lost I seemed to feel.

And when my mind was most vulnerable, my demon pounced, demanding it was time to visit her home.

The trip was longer than the last, giving my demon time to bask in the glory of seeing her worshipful followers.

I guess for once, being in Hell wasn't so -

My body hits hard against a low palm tree and I grunt as I fall to the ground. I really need to stop making it a habit to day dream when flying so low. I glance around at my surroundings and see I'm just a short distance from my house.

The waves lap at the beach's edge, seducing the sand to allow its waves closer to shore. The salty breeze tickles my face as my wings fold into the slits on my back. My skin turns to its normal, human skin-tone and my eyes swirl back to their original shade of chocolate brown.

I see a small sports car pull into my driveway just up ahead and frantically go through my mind to try and identify the owner. I jog the short length to my house and make the climb up to my front door.

Evan, dressed in black pants and a dress shirt, turns to me with a winning smile.

My breathing has picked up just slightly. Whether it's from the jog or from seeing Evan, I really don't know. I give a sideways glance to the car parked in my driveway and put my hands on my hips.

"New car?" I ask.

Evan's flawless face moves closer to mine. He gives a small kiss to the tip of my nose and then backs up step to admire the car from my angle.

"Yes. Do you like it?"

I shrug and move to the front door, suddenly aware that my attire only consists of a low cut tank top and very tight sport shorts. Evan is just a step behind me, closing the door as soon as he's inside my house.

"Why are you here, Evan?"

Fixated in Time

My tone comes off more irritated than I intend. I shake my head and rub my temples using the first two fingers of each hand.

"I'm sorry Evan. I'm not trying to be rude. I just have a lot of work to get done."

"Do you not remember calling me earlier and asking if I'd give you a ride to Connie's boat for dinner?"

Oh. Crap.

Seeing the look on my face, Evan's smile falters.

"You forgot, didn't you?"

Evan's red shirt gleams against the low lights of my living room. His dark hair is just as I remembered the first time we met - styled and not a piece out of place. His shimmery eyes gaze down at me and I have to look away.

Evan brings his hand up, tracing his fingers across my cheek.

"You're always so beautiful, Stella. It's like I can't stay away from you. But ya know, something has changed with you."

I jerk away from his touch and give him a questioning look. "What do you mean?"

"I just mean you're so uptight now. It's like your head's always in the clouds and no one can get through to you."

Even sighs and shrugs his shoulders.

"I just want to make sure you're ok, Stella. I know I'm probably the last person you would want to trust - with anything - but I'm here for you. I've got your back, more than you know."

And then he adds quietly, "I'd do anything for you."

The honesty in his voice makes me slump into the couch and put my face in my hands. I do feel alone. So alone. And stuck. Stuck in a place that will never allow me to move forward with my life.

Evan sits next to me and slides his arm around my shoulders. I lean into his body, my muscles relaxing at the protectiveness of his touch.

"It will be ok, Stella," he coos in my ear.

I take a choppy breath and nuzzle into his touch, deciding now that all this information is too much for one person to bear.

So I tell him. Everything.

Chapter 41: My New Protector

Connie's boat glides across the ocean current. I sip another drink of my 'spiked' fruity punch and hold on to the balcony's railing. The wind picks and I glance to the sky, noticing storm clouds brewing against the moon and stars.

I can't seem to ignore the tightening in my chest as I'm reminded Jeremy is up there. Somewhere. And then I am brought back to Todd's dream, his vivid reenactment of what could possibly lead to Jeremy's return to earth.

But of course, Jeremy could change his mind.

After all, he's now seen Evan and I kiss, share a tender embrace, and now - *if he was watching* - he's witnessed me telling Evan my deepest and darkest secrets. I shake my head and scold myself for my behavior. If I was him, I'd probably change my mind too.

No sooner does Jeremy leave me, and a week later I flit back to Evan's side.

Pathetic.

I breathe in the ocean air and close my eyes, mentally calling out to Jeremy and begging him to come back to me. Thoughâ I can't quite pinpoint what would happen if he did. What would that mean? That we were together? Would we get married? Would that mean he loved me? Or just wanted to live another life on earth with a woman he knew would sleep with him whenever he wanted?

Again, pathetic.

I sigh and gulp down the rest of my punch. I'm ready for another glass.

I hear Evan come out to the balcony and approach my side. He moves his hand around my waist and gives my hip a reassuring squeeze. I was so sure after I told him everything he'd want nothing to do with me.

I mean seriously - telling someone I'm half demon, half human, have lived for thousands of years, and am now being sought after by a demon hunter - that doesn't exactly scream 'sane person.'

And yet strangely enough, whatever feelings Evan had for me before only seem to be intensified now.

"You doing alright, Stells?"

"Yea. I'm just thinking about everything."

Evan nods and follows my eyes to the clouds in the sky.

"Storm is coming."

"Mmmm."

"I wanted to thank you, Stella. For telling me and trusting me with everything. I can't tell you how much it means to me. And I believe what you said. Every damn word of it."

Fixated in Time

Evan grabs a hold of my shoulders and turns me to face him. He looks into my eyes with an intensity I've only witnessed in moviesâ *or from the clouds above*â.

"And believe me when I tell you I will not leave your side until all this has been sorted out. I will protect you and care for you so nothing bad happens."

"But I - "

"- I know you're going to say you don't need me to. I'm not asking you to 'be with me.' After all, I heard about you and Jeremyâ. I know I messed up what we had and I have to work hard to get it back. And that may never happen. I realize that. But I'm not going anywhere. I will stay by your side until I know you are safe and protected. Period."

I know whatever argument I have is futile at this point. I smile softly. "Well, thank you Evan. I wouldn't mind someone protecting me for a few days."

The small lines around Evan's eyes crinkle as he laughs. I turn my back to him and let him drape his arms around me. The smell of his seductive cologne tickles my nose. I wonder how it is possible to have feelings for two men at once. I see men and women do it all the time, but just have never been able to wrap my head around it.

Until now.

"I love you Stella," Evan whispers into my ear.

My eyes widen at his admittance, but I refuse to turn around, in fear of buckling under his tender gaze.

So I pretend I don't hear him at all.

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"Now make sure you call me, alright?" Connie asks, her arms locked around me like a vice.

I chuckle and move away from her, my cheeks flushed with embarrassment and too much alcohol.

"I will, Connie. I promise."

I think this is the first time I've seen Connie more sober than everyone else. Apparently she was instructed by her doctor to limit her alcohol intake. I smile at her warmly and give her a pat on the arm. I am so happy she is alive and is standing in front of me that I want to leap for joy.

Ok, maybe the 'leaping' part is the alcohol talking.

Connie diverts her attention to Evan and suffocates him in one of her bear hugs. He lets out an uncomfortable laugh and squirms out of her hold.

"You better take care of my girl Evan or I'll beat the shit outta you. I'm serious!"

She points a finger at Evan and puts on a playful 'angry face.' Evan holds up his hands in surrender and then reaches for my hand. His slender, warm fingers intertwine with mine, and the action catches me so off-guard that I feel like a giggling girl in grade school.

Fixated in Time

Gavin watches all the action in silence standing obediently behind Connie. I watch as his eyes lock on Evan and I's intertwined hands. Slowly Gavin looks up at me and gives me a fleeting look, one that holds confusion and an underlying accusation. Or maybe my eyes are playing tricks on me. Why would Gavin be giving me such an accusatory look? Does he know about my feelings for Jeremy?

No. He couldn't.

Evan gives a final wave before leading me off the dock and back to his car. I adjust the seat and slowly clasp my safety belt in place.

"Ok driver, where to?" I ask, my voice loud and my words slurred.

Evan chuckles and his tires peel against the newly paved asphalt.

"I'm going to stop at my place and pack a suitcase. After that, I-"

"Pack a suit case?"

"Yea, a suitcase."

"Why?"

"To stay with you."

I open my mouth to protest but Evan is a step ahead of me. *I blame the alcohol.*

"I said I wasn't leaving your side, Stella. I meant it. I'm staying with you whether you like it or not."

Evan gives me a smile that makes my stomach tremble and my head tingle.

"A-a-and then what?" I ask, half afraid and half excited to hear the answer.

Evan's face turns serious as he glances back at the open road ahead of him. His voice drops and his words are almost inaudible.

"Then we're going to hunt that bastard Richard down and kill him."

Chapter 42

I knock on Evan's bedroom door and he opens it promptly. I don't wait for him to invite me in - *it's my spare bedroom after all* - and look around. The room hasn't changed much. The black dresser is still in the corner, its surface bare as ever. The twin bed with silky red sheets remains in the middle of the room, untouched or used by anybody. Abstract black and white paintings hang from the walls, their beauty unseen by human eyesâ until now.

I frown as I look around the room. It is tastefully decorated - *if I do say so myself* - but looks the same as it did before Evan arrived.

"Did you even unpack your stuff?"

Evan laughs takes a seat on the edge of the bed. Low mesh sport shorts ride the edges of his hips, and a plain white t-shirt clings to his chest. I can't help but notice how handsome he looks even when he's dressed so casually.

"I don't have much, Stells. And all that I brought fits in the dresser just fine."

I nod my head and look around the room. This is probably one of my least favorite rooms of the house. Although it has a beautiful view of the ocean, its color scheme reminds me of Hell. A piece of me wanted to give Evan Jeremy's old room.

But I just couldn't do it.

After seeing Jeremy's clothes in there, his body on that bed, his bare skin pressed up against those light and silky sheetsâ ..

I give an audible sigh and shake my head. I'm acting as if Jeremy has died. After all, that *is* what people do when they've lost a loved one. They try to preserve a room, a piece of clothing - anything tangible as a means to protect the memory of their loved one.

It's a classic textbook behavior as one of the stages of grief. So is that what I'm doing? Grieving over my loss for Jeremy?

Oh Stella, get it together girl.

"Stells?"

"Yeah?"

"You doin' alright? You have that 'lost in the clouds' look goin' on."

I wish I was lost in the clouds right now. Then maybe I'd run into -

"Just thinking I guess," I say, cutting off my pathetic train of thought. "I feel like I have a lot to get done in the coming days. I'm glad you're here, Jeremy."

Evan frowns, his lips puckering into a mulish line.

Fixated in Time

"It's Evan. Not Jeremy."

"Err, right. Sorry. I was just - "

"-thinking about Jeremy. No I get it," Evan says cutting me off.

The hurt in his eyes is obvious and I curse myself under my breath. Evan shakes his head and stands up, fixing a smile back on his face. He puts a tentative arm around my waist and pulls me in for a loose hug. The warmth of his body gives way to goose bumps all down my bare arms.

"Anyway. What are your plans today, Stells?"

I check my watch and see that it is already 8:30 AM.

"Shit! I'm late. I have to get to work. One of my neediest patients comes in at ten and I have to be there for him."

Evan pulls his jacket from the top dresser drawer and fishes out his keys from his pocket.

"Alright then let's go."

"Y-you're driving me?"

Evan gives me a wink and pulls me in, placing a light kiss on my forehead. His voice drops low and he leans in closer to my ear.

"I said I wasn't going to leave your side," Evan whispers. "I meant it."

Chapter 43: As the Pieces Fall Into Place...

Evan gets me to work in record time. I push my final bobby-pin into place and take a final look in the passenger side mirror.

Well, it'll have to do.

I shimmy out of my seat belt and hoist myself out of the car. My stomach grumbles loudly as I move to the driver's side of the car, and I realize I haven't eaten a thing since yesterday.

"Feel like running an errand for me?" I ask putting on a sly smile.

"What'd you have in mind?"

"Wanna go get breakfast for us?"

Evan smiles and pulls out a small notepad and pen from his center console. He nods for me to continue and scribbles down my order as fast as the words leave my lips.

"And you can get yourself whatever you want," I say and fish out two twenty dollar bills from the side pocket of my purse.

"I'm good Stella. I don't need your money."

But then I remember just *how* Evan acquired his money and the thought makes me sick.

"I insist," I say more sternly and shove the money into his hand.

Evan gives me a parting wave and I scuttle into work just shy of 9:30 AM. Grace's office door is closed and I silently wonder if she noticed how late I was today. I'm sure I'll be getting a lot of questions from her either way.

I tip toe into my office, so thankful Todd isn't early for once. I flip on my office lights and start rummaging through my filing cabinet to pull Todd's file. With Evan moving in, I didn't have time to start doing my research on Toddâ or on one of his select family members.

Two minutes before ten, Todd barges through my office door. His skittish eyes look all around the room until finally landing on me. He grimaces and takes a seat. His left foot starts tapping as he pulls out his Germ-X and squirts a generous amount all over his hands.

He looks just as bad as he did last week, if not worse. I tentatively open up his file and give Todd a sideways glance. Todd fidgets in his seat and sighs with impatience.

"We ready to start doc?"

"Whenever you're ready, Todd."

"Well, for starters, I know you know about Richard."

My jaw drops at Todd's statement and I can feel my eyes bugging out of my head.

Fixated in Time

"W-what?"

Todd looks over his shoulder once again. It's as if he's afraid someone will overhear our conversation. Returning to my role as his psychologist, I clear my throat and regain my composure.

"Todd, I assure you no one can hear us."

"I know that, doc. I just don't want any 'surprise visits' from my brother. If you get what I'm sayin'."

I nod a single time and take a few deep breaths. My stomach is in knots. Maybe it was a good thing I came to work on an empty stomach.

"Before you go and start askin' a bunch a' questions, yes - I know my brother is a demon hunter. He changed his name years ago and took up a fake identity so when the two of us were workin' together, it wouldn't seem obvious. We wouldn't be connected."

"But then why would he tell Grace .?"

"Ha, no. I was the one that told Grace 'bout us bein' brothers. I did it because I wanted you to find out. I thought she would've you sooner though."

I close Todd's file and set it on top of my desk. Clearly he and I are past the stage of 'client - patient' relationship. I cross my legs and intertwine my fingers on my lap.

"Are you trying to kill me too, Todd?" I ask trying to mask the fear in my voice.

Todd shakes his head and his foot taps faster.

"If I wanted to, you'da been dead weeks ago. Richard and I started this demon-huntin' business when we were kids. Our parents taught us. I was born with this gift of seein' demons, doc. I can see 'em, and I gravitate towards them. I was dreamin' about you before you even moved here. But I homed in on your dreams and knew you'd be here. That's when I started to see Grace."

I hear my cell phone buzz in my coat pocket and know it has to be Evan. He must be here with breakfast. I steal a quick glance at my watch and see that mere minutes have passed.

He must have been hauling some serious ass to get back here so fast.

"-and that's when I told Richard he needed to start datin' Grace. Because if she did I knew I wouldn't be her patient anymore. And I was right - she gave me to you."

I study Todd's movements as he spills his confessions to me. I can feel nervous sweat trickling down from my arm pits and into my cloth shirt.

"So let me get this straight. You had all this planned out before even meeting me?"

"Yea. And truth be told doc, my brother still wants to see ya' dead. And he's been huntin' demons long enough to know how to do it. I usually do the brain work behind a demon hunt, and then he goes in for the kill."

"So .what makes *me* different?"

Fixated in Time

Todd's foot slows and he looks me straight in the eyes.

"You weren't, at first. You were just like the others. I experienced the trips to Hell enough to know how you treated humans. But then you got that angel to fall for ya.' You know what that told me?"

I am captivated by Todd's words - too nervous to talk, too afraid to even breathe.

"It told me that your human soul was stronger than your demon. You know how rare that is to find, doc?"

"Iâuhmâno I don't."

"Never seen it in my lifetime. Or my parent's lifetime. I heard about it once from my granddaddy. But that was just once."

My cell phone buzzes again. Evan must be getting impatient.

"Why am I different?" I press.

Todd shrugs and his foot begins its nervous tapping mantra all over again.

"All I know is that when you make a pact with the Devil, he puts one of his minions inside you to do his bidding. Human souls that make a pact with the Devil are weak, pathetic, and easily ruled by their demon. So for your soul to be stronger than your demonâI'm guessin' that means for whatever reason you made that pact with the Devil, it wasn't *all* bad. Because somehow your *human soul* was able grow back to its original strength over time. I don't rightly understand it myself."

My demon sits quietly in the back of my mind, too absorbed in Todd's words to throw a temper tantrum. I know she is wondering what this means for her.

I must admit, I'm wondering the same thingâ

"Richard and I kill your type, doc. We split demon and human, sending 'em both back to Hell where they belong. But I don't think your human soul deserves that. And if an angel thinks so too, that's proof enough for me. So what I came here to tell ya' is I'm gonna do all I can to keep Richard off your coat tails and leave ya' alone."

"And you think he'll do that - just like that?"

"Nah. He'll need proof too. So you're gonna need to bring Jeremy over to us once he comes back to earth. Unless Richard sees proof, he won't stop comin' after you. I can only hold him off for so long, doc."

I hold up my hand to silence Todd. It's too much to take in at once. My phone continues to buzz in the background and I silently beg Evan to stop calling me.

"Ok. Todd, if Jeremy comes back to earth, I'll be sure to swing him by. But I honestly don't know if that's going to happen."

Todd gets up from his seat and runs a hand through his messy hair. After his action he reaches into his pocket and takes out his Germ-X, squirting another glob into his hands. He looks at me and his eyes seem to sparkle with some hidden secret.

Fixated in Time

"Oh don't worry about that, doc. He'll be back."

And without another word, Todd turns to leave, opening the door with the sleeve of his jacket. I watch him walk through the doorway and press the 'down' button for the elevator. When the elevator doors open, Todd gives a startled look and makes way for the person getting off.

It's Evan, I realize, and he's carrying a brown paper bag which I know is my breakfast. He stares at Todd over his shoulder. And then Evan's eyes swing to my door and his walking picks up pace. He meets my gaze but fails to return my smile.

Evan enters my room and sets the brown paper bag on the empty seat next to him.

"Why was he here?" Evan asks as soon as he shuts the door.

"Who?"

"That man who just went on the elevator."

I raise my brow at the question. "Because he's my patient?"

Evan runs a nervous hand down the side of his face.

"Stella, that's him."

"Who?"

"That's the guy. The one that hired me to date you."

Chapter 44: Fun in the Sun

Evan takes me home after work and believe it or not, I'm *relieved* that Todd is the one who hired Evan to date me. Part of it is the sheer liberation of finally knowing who it is. The other huge part is knowing that the person who hired Evan *doesn't* want me dead.

And that's always a good thingâ€¦

"Why didn't you just tell me about Todd when you told me everything else?" Evan questions as we pull into my driveway.

"I told you all I could without breaking my code of ethics as a professional psychiatrist."

Evan rolls his eyes.

"Yea. I think that ethics code is thrown to shit when one of your patient's brothers is trying to kill you."

I chuckle under my breath and stop Evan from turning off the car. Aside from the fact that my heart is still in shambles over Jeremy and there is a crazy demon hunter on my trail, I feel oddly happy.

Now that I know the last piece to the puzzle, I think I can start getting everything sorted out. And with Todd and Evan on my side, I have protectionâ€¦ just in case anything goes wrong. It's just uphill from here.

Pffft. Famous last words.

Evan gives me a questioning look and I give him a broad smile in return.

"Let's go do something."

"Uh, sure? What did you have in mind?"

I shrug.

"I don't know. I just want to do something FUN! I've been cooped up in this damn house fretting over 'this and that' for too many days now. I need a break."

Evan's eyes move forward and his lips twitch upward into a smile. He puts his car in reverse and starts moving out of my driveway.

"Stells, I think I have the perfect idea."

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"A water park?" I ask as Evan parks the car in an overly-crowded parking lot.

Mini-vans seem to be everywhere. Families, teens and young children filter into the water park. The smell of chlorinated water and sunscreen hits my nose as soon as I open the car door. I haven't been to a water park sinceâ€¦ well, ever.

Fixated in Time

I tilt my head to the side, studying the dangerously tall water slides that look like to be made of flimsy plastic. I have never been too keen on rides, especially when they look like they will fall apart with the flick of a finger.

"C'mon Stells. It'll be fun!" Evan urges.

I look at the sun and know we still have a few hours before it gets dark.

"What time does this place close?"

"Ahhh I don't know, Stells. Like seven or eight?"

"But it's already 4:30."

Evan gives a hearty laugh and swings his arm across my shoulders.

"I know that. C'mon. It'll be fun. We'll just go in for a few hours. We'll go on a ride or two, get some sun, and work up a nice appetite."

I take another nervous glance at the massively large plastic water slides. Evan is all but bending over backwards to keep me safe and try to make me happy.

The least I can do is try.

"Ok," I finally say with a courageous deep breath. "Water park it is."

Evan finds us a sunny, secluded corner to put our things and after a few minutes splashing around the wave pool, I ease my body onto the lounge chair to soak up some rays. The sun caresses my skin in a warm, tender way and I can practically feel my stress and worry seeping from my pores.

A few drops of water land on my stomach and I crack open my eyes to see Evan hovering over me. He gives me a playful smile and nudges my leg with his.

"Can I help you?"

Evan rolls his eyes. "Yea. Get up and come on a ride with me."

I adjust my lounge chair to a sitting position and grab for my sunglasses.

"I thought you wanted to have fun, right?" Evan questions in a teasing voice.

"And what makes you think I'm not having fun?"

"I don't know Stells. How about the fact that we're at a water park full of awesome rides, and yet you're over here doing the same damn thing you do when you're out on your secluded beach every stinkin' day?"

I tip my head back and a soft laugh emerges from my lips.

"That's not entirely true, Evan. When I'm at home, I don't bother with a bikini."

Fixated in Time

Evan's cheeks redden as his eyes hastily look over my chest and curves. His gaze snaps back to my face and his blush deepens.

"You just pictured me naked, didn't you?" I ask, surprising myself with my boldness.

Evan's jaw drops a notch and his lips fumble for a good response. I give his arm a soft punch and try to stifle a laugh.

"I'm just teasing you, Evan."

I take off my sunglasses and stand to stretch my limbs. Evan watches me from the corner of his eye. I know I've embarrassed him and the thought makes me giggle.

He's not easily thrown off guard, so I have to cherish these precious moments whenever they come along.

"Alright," I say in defeat. "You win. Let's go on one of these magical rides you keep building up."

Evan's eyes sparkle with delight.

"Seriously?"

I give a dramatic sigh and give him a hand gesture that indicates for him to lead the way.

"And I'd hurry if I were you, in case I change my mind."

Chapter 45

As I stand at the top of the water slide, my stomach starts to squeeze into a nervous knot. I guess I never realized I was afraid of heights. I lean against the rail and my eyes observe the great distance between myself and the hard ground below me.

Evan brings me into his arms, kissing the top of my head and wrapping me into one of his warm hugs.

"You're gonna love it, Stells. I promise. It's almost our turn. You want to go first? Or do you want me to?"

I bite my lip and give Evan a frightened look. He chuckles under his breath and squeezes me tighter.

"God, you're so cute. Ok how about this. I'll go down first. That way, when it's your turn, I'll already be waiting for you at the bottom. Sound good?"

I nod my head a single time. The lifeguard on the platform shouts for the next person and Evan breaks his hold from me. His athletic body positions himself in the narrow tube. He crosses his arms over his chest and looks back at me once more. He flashes me a toothy smile and then brings his attention forward.

His body creeps forward until I see it zoom down the tube. My palms begin to sweat. I feel like it's only been seconds when the life guard turns to me and says, 'Next.'

My feet fumble their way up to the edge of the ride. The lifeguard shoots me an impatient look. My right foot steps into the gushing water and I feel my body start to shake. The lifeguard opens his mouth to probably say something along the lines of 'hurry the hell up,' but when his eyes meet mine, he stops himself.

He lowers his sun glasses down the bridge of his nose. A sly grin stretches across his face and his eyes devour the length of my body.

"Nervous?" he asks, taking a step closer to me. "Or are you just standing around in hopes that I'll hit on you? Because if it's the second option sexy lady, you don't have to wait much longerâ "

His question puts a frown on my face, and thankfully, is enough for me to forget about how nervous I am about the ride. I swallow down my sarcastic reply and pacify my disgust with a roll of my eyes.

I give myself a starting push and then cross my arms over my chest. My body moves slowly at first, the gushing water behind me not helping my progress. But once I move over the first 'hump' of the ride, my body lunges forward.

My stomach feels like it's somewhere near my esophagus and I hold my breath the entire time, not knowing when to expect an onslaught of water. My body travels through twists and turns, my muscles strained with stress.

My body chutes out of the last turn and I fall several feet before I am engulfed with water. I kick my legs and arms until I reach the surface of the water. My lungs feel like they're going to explode as I let out a long-overdue mouthful of air. I gasp for breath as I kick my way to the side of the pool.

As promised, Evan is there waiting for me. His strong arms help me out of the pool and he embraces me once again.

Fixated in Time

"I was afraid you'd never come down," Evan whispers into my ear.

"Why? I didn't take *that* long, did I?"

"Not at all," Evan says with a grin. "But I saw how nervous you were up there. I'm proud of you for going through with it."

I show off a triumphant smile.

"And see? It wasn't so bad was it?"

With his question my smile falters and Evan lets out a bellowing laugh.

"Ok, ok, Stells. Now more rides. Let's just go soak up a little bit more sun and then we can head to dinner. Sound like a plan?"

I slip my hand into Evan's, intertwining my fingers with his.

"It sounds perfect," I confirm. "Absolutely perfect."

Chapter 46: Evan's Question

By the time Evan and I arrive back at my house I am wiped out. After a full day of work, hours of lapping up the sun, a near-death experience with a plastic water slide, an evening filled with wine and dancing, and then a full three course meal my mind and body are ready to collapse.

I thank Evan for the wonderful evening and trudge my way up the stairs. My feet somehow manage to drag my body into my bathroom. My skin still smells of sun screen and chlorine. I smile as I inhale the scent even deeper.

I look at myself in the bathroom mirror, pleased with how tan my skin is getting. Even my dark hair has seemed to lighten a shade from the intensity of the sun. I have to admit, I like it. I strip out of my casual clothes and then shimmy out of my tiny black bikini.

My naked body hasn't changed for so many years. It is flawless, not a scratch or scar to call my own. Most people would want something like this. But with every scar comes a memory. And with every memory comes a chapter in someone's life which they can reflect upon over the years.

And then there's me.

A freak.

A woman whose body remains unchanging to the battering hands that accompanies everyday life. With a sigh I hop in the shower, turning the water to a level that is hotter than sin. The scalding water careens over my smooth skin. My nipples harden from the sudden change in temperature and I bite my lip at the pleasurable pain it causes.

The bottom of my stomach clenches and I can feel a warm, tingling sensation in the core of my being. The smell of soap lingers in my nose. I pour a small squirt of body wash into my palm. After rubbing my hands together, I bring one hand across my breast. I pinch my hardened nipple, making it pucker even more.

A low moan emits from my throat.

My other hand travels down to the region that is now aching for release. I brush my thumb across my clit, savoring the touch. I plunge one finger deep inside me and groan. I push in a second. I pump my fingers in and out, indulging in my need for self-satisfaction.

I can feel myself ready to bubble over with satisfaction, but am interrupted with a sharp knock at the door. My heavy breathing slows and I huff out a frustrated breath.

"What?" I call out.

"I have a question for you Stells."

"Okâ !.what is it?"

"Well, uhm, I - can you just come out here so I can ask you in person?"

"Can you give me like - five minutes?"

Fixated in Time

There's a pause at the door and then I hear Evan let out a nervous laugh.

"Actually Stella. It's kind of urgent."

Arrrghh!

I slam my palm against the water faucet, effectively ending my pleasurable shower time. The steam rises all around me. I snap a towel off the rack and wind it around my body. I grab another and twist it around my hair.

I'm ready to tear Evan's head off, but when I open my bathroom door my breath catches in my throat. My mouth flounders open and closed, all words fleeing my mind.

The lighting in my room is dimmed. Two candles are lit on my nightstand, their summery scent permeating the air.

A single rose lies against my pillow. But what catches my attention the most is the naked man lying in my bed. My sub-conscious squeals with delight. Even my demon has no opposition to the sight before me.

Evan's body is *is* heavenly. Every inch of him is toned and utterly delectable. My hands twitch at my sides, wanting to 'have a go' at this delicious man. I let out a ragged breath as my eyes sweep over Evan's manhood. He is HUGE. And hard *is* so hard and ready for release of his own.

I hear Evan chuckle under his breath and my eyes snap to his face. His lips form a lazy smile and he gives me a playful wink. His face looks so relaxed, so at ease *is* which surprises me given the current circumstance.

I start making my way to the bed and the closer I get, the more I can see the fiery passion and insurmountable desire that are burning in his eyes.

"W-what are you doing?" I finally manage to ask.

Evan pats the empty space next to him. He licks his lips and takes a deep breath.

"I heard you in the shower."

My cheeks flush with embarrassment.

"Heard me *is*? What do you mean -"

"-I heard you pleasuring yourself, Stella."

"Oh *is*!"

"So, I'm sorry that I interrupted. And if you think I'm being a crazy bastard for being here, just say the words and I'll get out of your room - no questions asked."

My body seems frozen as his words seep into my brain. Evan runs a hand through his hair and his face tenses as he waits for me to speak. He's nervous, I realize. Nervous of rejection.

"I'm not usually this bold, Stella. You know that," Evan continues. "But I have a feeling that if I don't take my chances with you while I have them, I'll be kicking myself later. So my question for you is this: would you allow me the incredible honor of being the man that gets to pleasure you tonight?"

Chapter 47: My Bad Decision

"Evan, Iâ."

But no other words come to me. My cheeks flush with desire as I sit on the bed next to him. I look at Evan, his eyes brimming over with longing. But as I continue to gaze into his breathtaking green eyes, I can see an additional emotion pushing to the surface.

Love.

The thought is heart wrenching. How badly I wanted Evan to love me just a few short weeks ago. But now...

Everything changed after my night with Jeremy.

"I-I'm so sorry Evan. But I can't have sex with you," I say with a quivering breath.

Evan scoots closer to me and puts a reassuring hand on my bare shoulder. His touch sends warm tingles down my spine as his fingers caress my arm.

"Talk to me, Stells. I won't be offended if you don't want to. Really, I won't."

I remove the bulky towel from around my head and toss it on the floor. Then I remove the towel from around my body and allow it to fall to the floor as well. Evan's hungry gaze consumes every inch of my naked body. My nipples harden instantly and I hear a low growl emitting from Evan's throat.

He runs a frustrated hand through his hair and sighs.

"Stellsâ. I'm only human. If you don't want to have sex, I'll be a gentleman and back off. But I can't make any promises if you keep flaunting your insanely hot body in front of me."

I bite back a smile and shimmy under the covers. And then I realize I too am affected by Evan's body and pull one of the towels up from off the floor. I hand it to Evan and close my eyes.

"Along those linesâ would you mind covering your uh - manhood up? It's distracting."

Evan grabs the towel from my hand and chuckles. "Alright, alright. I'm covered up. You can look now."

I turn my gaze back to him and my shoulders slump with disappointment. *Why did I ask him to cover up that glorious body again?*

"Now. Remind me why we can't have sex?"

"You're gonna freak when I tell you."

"Ha. Stella I haven't freaked out with any of the other things you've told me - what makes you think this will push me over the edge?"

I shake my head and my head droops against the pillows.

Fixated in Time

"Ok. Here goes. See, I made a pact with Jeremy. I told you about how you're destined to be that angelic warrior or whatever, right?"

Evan's face is serious and he gives me a single nod of confirmation.

"Wellâ! Jeremy knew how bad I wanted you. But he also knew how much I cared for you. So we made a deal. I could keep 'dating' you without interference from him as long as I didn't have sex with you."

Evan's eyebrows furrow together.

"And what will happen if you *do* have sex with me, Stella?"

"My demon and I both will be cast down to hell. For eternity. And there's no way around it, Evan. We shook on it and everything. A bond with an angel can't be broken."

I hang my head in shame and can practically feel Evan's anger emitting from beside me. After a minute of silence, my eyes venture up to his. He's staring past me, looking out the window, his eyes trained on some immovable object outside.

"Evan please, say something," I beg.

Evan gives me a calculated look and his lips purse downturn into a scowl.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, Stells. But you and Jeremy had sex, multiple times. Correct?"

I cringe hearing the words come out of Evan's mouth, but nod in validation.

"So then the deal has to be voided. The agreement says that as long as you don't have sex with me, Jeremy has to butt-out of our relationship. Correct?"

"Correctâ!?"

"Well I don't know what you kids are calling it these days, but when someone has sex with my woman, I'd put that into the category of "butting-in."

I glance at Evan's face and see his anger has softened. A small grin pounces onto his lips and I breathe a sigh of relief.

"So you're not mad about the deal, then?"

Evan shakes his head. "Of course not. In a way I should be flattered. The only reason you did it was to get more time with me."

And more time with Jeremy, I silently admit in shame.

"It's my own fault for not coming clean with you sooner. I practically led you right into Jeremy's arms. Either way, the deal is voided, Stells. So there's nothing to worry about now."

"But - are you sure? Because if for some reason you're wrong and -"

Fixated in Time

My statement is cut off abruptly as Evan's lips mesh against mine. His kiss is rough at first, his lips demanding all my attention. But as we ease our way into the kiss, his touch lightens. His lips part and I can feel his tongue probing for a way in.

Our tongues press together and I succumb completely to Evan's seductive charm. He manages to remove the blankets from off my body and settles himself on top of me. His hard body presses against me and I push my tongue further into his mouth.

His hands reach up to cup each of my breasts, his fingers playing with my aching nipples. My spine arches into him. Evan moves his left hand down my body and starts to masterfully play with my clit.

A moan escapes my lips and our kiss is severed just for a moment. Evan continues to excite my senses and in adding to the pleasure, inserts two of his long fingers deep inside of me. I can feel myself tighten around his fingers and this spurs him on to pick up his speed.

Faster and faster he moves, and with every stroke I can feel myself getting closer to the edge of release.

"Feels. So. Good," I say with a staggered breath.

"Mmm. Are you about to orgasm, baby?"

I give my head a jerky nod. But Evan doesn't let me finish. He withdraws his fingers and gives me a wicked grin. I open my mouth to protest but stop when I feel the tip of his erection grazing against my wet opening. Already I can feel his bigness and my stomach tightens with anticipation.

"Can I make love to you, Stells?" Evan whispers against my lips.

"Yes. Please. I want it."

I wait for him to plunge into me but when he doesn't, my body squirms in frustration. I open my eyes and see Evan staring down at me, his green eyes practically glowing.

"W-what's the hold up?" I say, my mind intoxicated with lust.

"Nothing now. I just wanted to look into your eyes the first time I did this."

I give Evan a weak smile and run my hand down the side of his cheek. He moves his hands down the length of my body, latching onto my hips in a possessive manner.

"I love you, Stella," Evan whispers.

And with that he thrusts deep inside me, stretching me out and pushing me over pleasure's edge.

But the feeling doesn't last long. A searing pain shoots through my mind and my demon squawks with fury.

Oh God. It's happening. Please. Please God, no!

Chapter 48

I can feel my brain being split into two. It feels like someone with a chain saw is severing me apart, right down the middle.

My demon and I are being detached, but her desperate claws latch onto my soul. The pain is excruciating. I let out an agonized cry and can feel Evan's warm hands grasping me around my shoulders.

The concern in his voice is palpable but his words are blurred and slow, as if he's talking through a mouthful of tar. I pry my eyes open and the room around me swirls into a hazy mess. Evan's face is somewhere nearby, his voice my only semblance of peace in amongst the chaos.

My demon slashes at my mind, at my soul, and at my body. It feels like sharp knives cutting away at my flesh. I must be spurting blood all over the place and cringe when I think of my warm blood all over Evan's beautiful hands.

An aching moan leaves my lips as my demon severs from my body completely. Her sneers and screams fade into silence. My soul feels empty, so weak without my demon part to sustain her.

It's over. It's all over.

My body quivers uncontrollably, petrified of what will come next. My descent into Hell.

Silence radiates around me and my senses are lost to the game of time. I cannot feel or hear anything. My eyes remain open but all I can see around me is a world of total blackness. My body becomes stiff and rigid as I travel through this state of nothingness.

Am I traveling to Hell?

Or am I already in Hell?

But no, that can't be right. I've been to Hell before. And this is nothing like Hell.

So am I dead?

I think the same questions over and over again in my mind. But none are answered. I continue to travel in this hole of darkness not knowing what is to become of me. The only thing I can see is blackness. And the only thing I can feel is loneliness. The feeling of it is so strong, so deep, that my soul cries out in anguish.

But there's nothing I can do to stop it. It has taken up the empty space in my mind and in my soul. The feeling of loneliness is everywhere.

I am nothing. And I have no one. I am fixated in time.

â lâ lâ lâ lâ lâ lâ lâ lâ !..

It feels like years have passed as I continue down my path to nowhere.

But as I travel on my path to nowhere, my eyes see something new. There, in the distance, a faint blue light hums to life. My body has long since given up on moving. Or trying. So when I see the light, I think it must

Fixated in Time

be a figment of my imagination.

As my body draws closer, however, the light becomes brighter and brighter. I try to open my mouth to ask what is out there but my lips remained clamped shut. I try to move my limbs to cover my eyes from the blinding light, but my arms remain immovable at my sides.

And when I'm close enough to this radiant shade of blue, my anxiety peaks as I realize it's not a light at all.

It's an eye - a beautiful blue eye gazing back at me with wonder.

But waitâ!

I know that eye.

A second eye emerges, a matching color blue to the first. The pair of them stares back at me and a rush of warmth radiates through every inch of my being. The ever familiar feeling of loneliness inside me is washed away and I bask in the foreign feelings of love, happiness, and security as they trickle into my mind and soul.

My body stops moving when I am mere inches away from the pair of eyes and I can feel my soul smiling. And for some reason I can't quite explain, I know now that I am safe.

And then I remember.

Jeremyâit's youâ!

The eyes seem to smile as if hearing my mental thoughts. And then the eyes engulf the entirety of my being. My body is scorched with sizzling heat as all my senses return to me. It's too overwhelming. And then a burst of energy explodes within me as I am pulled back down to a place I know well.

A place I call home.

Earth.

â!â!â!â!â!â!â!â!â!â!

"Did you get her in time?"

"Yes I think so."

"God, I'm so sorry man. I had no ideaâ!"

The voices around me slowly come into focus. They're both male, I recognize, and both full of concern.

For me?

I feel fingers move to the side of my neck. The touch is so warm, so tender.

"Her heart beat is back. But it's weak."

"That's a good sign."

Fixated in Time

The touch against my neck vanishes. I hear a grunt of pain and then a rustling of movement.

"You okay, man?"

"Just stay with her. I can't be in here right now."

Footsteps pad down a carpeted floor and then a door opens and closes. The soft feeling of warm air treks over my face. My nose detects a masculine scent and I'm comforted by the familiarity of it.

"Stells? C'mon baby, please wake up for me."

The male's voice is just a whisper from my lips, his tone soft and soothing. The feeling of my arms and legs slowly returns. My eyes begin to open of their own accord and Evan's beautiful face adjusts into view.

He gives me a wide smile and leans forward, pressing a gentle kiss on to the tip of my nose. I feel myself grinning at his affection and blood rushes into my cheeks.

"God, Stells. I can't tell you how good it is to see you staring back at me. I was so damn worried about you."

Evan's brows furrow together and I try to lift my fingers up to straighten his brow, but my movement is stopped. I feel so *weak*.

"I'm tired," I choke out. "And weak."

Evan nods his head and scrapes a hand down the side of his face. He positions himself next to me and grabs my hand without hesitation. He intertwines our fingers and the warmth of his hand radiates all the way up my arm.

Evan glances out the window and I follow his gaze. My bedroom window is ajar, an ocean breeze dancing through the room. The sound of the waves lapping against the shore purrs in my ears. The sun has just dipped below the horizon, giving way to a blanket of night. Bright stars poke their way through the hypnotizing dark sky and twinkle back at me in unison.

I shift my attention to Evan and do what I can to clear my dry throat.

"W-what happened?" I ask. "How long was I gone?"

"Seven days," Evan says slowly. "And they were the worst seven days of my life. Honest to God, Stella. I thought I'd lost you."

I give my head a wobbly nod and wait for him to tell me more. But he doesn't. Instead Evan just holds my hand, tenderly rubbing his thumb against the top of my hand. Tiny tears prick the corners of his eyes and I look away knowing he won't want me to see him cry.

As we sit here in silence, the memories of what happened come flooding back to me. I remember allowing myself to get into bed with Evan, enjoying his naked body against mine until he finally thrust himself inside me. And it had felt so good. But then my demon -

-oh God.

Where's my demon?

Fixated in Time

I call out to her inside my mind.

Silence.

I try again, this time using a foreign tongue that she cannot help but obey.

Silence.

I don't know why, but a handful of tears start to burn my throat at the realization of her absence. She's gone. And yetâ I'm still here. On Earth and not in Hell.

How can that be?

"What happened?" I ask Evan. "Where is she?"

Evan scoots closer to me and loosens his hand from mine. He brings his arm up and drapes it around my shoulders, pulling my body closer to his.

"Where is who, Stells?"

"My demon."

Evan's face contorts as he tries to find the right answer until finally he sighs with defeat.

"Your demon is gone."

"Then how am I still here?"

"Becauseâ !..because you were given another chance at life. You're human, Stella."

The news is a shock to me and my body trembles with the truth. Evan speaks to me in gentle tones, breaking down all the facts, and explaining all that happened to make my situation possible. He explains the story again and again until I finally nod my head in understanding.

"Soâ !..so I have another chance at life? Another chance at Heaven?"

The news is almost too good to be true. Evan nods his head in confirmation and gives me a warm smile.

"You do, Stells. And with that life, you have a choice. A choice to what you wantâ !..and to be with whomever you want."

Evan says the last sentence under his breath. He looks away from me and his breathing starts to stagger. I cuddle in closer to him and am about to reassure him but am stopped when my bedroom door flings open.

My heart skids to a halt as I take in the gorgeous man before my eyes. His tousled blonde hair hangs around his face and his blue gaze burns into me. I refuse to blink in fear that he will fade away.

Tears start streaming down my face as the realization sinks in. He's here, in the flesh. And he came back. *He came back for me.*

My love.

My angel.

My Jeremy.

Chapter 49

For the next two weeks I stay within the confines of my home. Evan never leaves my side. He does all the house work by day and sleeps by my side at night. He prepares all my meals and patiently works with me to start building up my human strength. Being mortal takes its toll and I find myself getting tired faster than I thought possible.

Since the day I woke up, Jeremy hasn't been around. After barging into my room he hastily told Evan he had to leave and that he would be back as soon as possible. Evan gave him a nod of understanding but said nothing in return. Jeremy didn't give me a hug, whisk me off my feet, give a sigh of relief, or even give me a friendly 'hello.' After he said his piece with Evan, he was gone five minutes later. And all the while I was left in the dark, not knowing what on earth was happening.

Since then I've asked Evan multiple times where Jeremy is, what he's doing, when he'll be backâ ;

But he gives up nothing. And I'm starting to realize that my constant pestering is annoying him so now I just keep my questions to myself.

And honestly? They're driving ME crazy now too.

All these thoughts mull through my mind as I continue to run on my newest piece of work-out equipment. The treadmill. My feet pound against the ever-rotating wheel and beads of sweat drip down my forehead and trickle down my neck.

Why do I feel like I'm a human hamster right now?

I glance at the time and see I've almost run my four miles. I increase the speed of the treadmill, inspired to sprint the remainder of the distance. My aching muscles strain against the speed but I push forward.

As I surpass the four mile marker I slow my speed and take in a few gulps of air. My heartbeat hammers in my ears but I feel a real sense of accomplishment.

Evan approaches me and hands me a cold glass of water. Condensation drips down its slippery sides and I can't help but compare it to my sweaty neck.

"Thank you," I say and guzzle down its contents.

Evan just smiles.

"What?" I ask and pull up my shirt to dab the sweat away from my eyes.

"I'm proud of you, Stells. And - I didn't think it was possible for you to get any prettier. But here you are, proving me wrong."

"I'm a sweaty mess," I argue with a light hearted giggle.

"Yea. But you're *real*. You're human. You have this glow, this spark in you that you never had before. It's beautiful."

Fixated in Time

I hop off the treadmill and my legs feel rubbery. I can still feel the forward momentum of the treadmill even though I'm on solid ground. *I don't think I'll ever get used to that feeling.*

I walk back to the kitchen and get another glass of water. Evan comes up behind me and winds his arms around my waist. I lean into his touch, allowing his lips to devour the length of my neck and all the way up to my earlobe. A shiver skips up my spine and I turn around to face him.

"I'm so gross right now. And yet you're still trying to seduce me?"

Evan gives me an impish grin and averts his eyes from mine.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," he says feigning innocence.

I shift my weight onto my tip-toes and lean into him while closing my eyes. I place a hesitant kiss on his lips and am delighted when Evan leans into my touch, pushing his tongue into my mouth and furthering our kiss to a passionate level. I bask in the softness of his lips, the sweetness of his tongue.

Evan winds his arms around my waist and pushes his hips against mine. I can feel his erection forming as it presses against my stomach.

I have to give Evan credit. In the entire two weeks he has slept with me, not once has he pushed it further - sexually speaking. Aside from some intense cuddling and a few kisses here and there, Evan has remained the picture perfect gentleman.

Maybe he's afraid if he has sex with me he'll hurt me againâ

Pushing aside my primal desire, I pull my head back slightly, effectively severing our incredible kiss. Both of our breathing patterns are staggered and I look up to see his eyes fixed on me, his cheeks flushed with longing.

"Too much?" Evan asks.

I shake my head. "Not at all. I just wanted to tell you something before - before we got too carried away."

"Okâ. What's on your mind, Stells?"

"Thank you," I say with a soft smile.

"You're thanking me? Forâ lâ !?"

"For this," I say gesturing to myself and the room around me. "If it weren't for you I'd have none of this. I'd be rotting in Hell. Don't you see? You found a way to save me - to save my soul. And now I've been given another chance, Evan. Thanks to you!"

As my breathing begins to slow, I reach my arms up to engulf Evan in a tender embrace. But he stops me. Guilt flashes across his features and his smile falters.

"Stella, don't get me wrong. I fought like hell to keep you alive. And I stayed by your side until I saw the honest-to-God life snap back into you. Butâ !"

"-but what?"

Fixated in Time

"But I'm not the reason you're alive."

"What do you mean?"

Evan puffs out a sigh and moves a step back from me. He runs both of his hands along the sides of his face and rubs at his temples.

"You're giving me credit where it's not deserved," Evan admits. "I'm not the reason you got another chance at life. Jeremy is."

"But I thought you said that it was youâ"

"I did. Because that's what Jeremy asked me to tell you. And hell, he's the reason you're here today so who was I to argue with the man? I wanted Jeremy to be the one to tell you this Stella. I really did. But *he's* the reason you got another chance at life. Not me."

My muscles clench and my eyes widen at Evan. "A-and how did he manage that?"

"He fell, Stella. Jeremy fell from Heaven for another chance at life. But when an angel falls, they're not allowed to go back into Heaven. That is, not unless they make a sacrifice."

I continue to stare at Evan as my hands become clammy with unwanted sweat. I wipe them down the length of my skimpy running shorts but the attempt is futile.

"And incidentally, there was no way you could have been 'released' from Hell without someone else providing a host for your demon."

The pieces of the puzzle slowly push into place. My body leans against the kitchen counter and my mind begins to swarm with hundreds of questions.

"So Stella, what I'm trying to say is-"

"-is that when I died, it *was* *Jeremy* who saved me. He made his sacrifice by taking my demon into *himself* - not only to save himself, but to in-turn save me as well. Right?"

Evan gives me a clipped nod. He watches me as the information sinks into my mind. Jeremy chose to fall from Heaven.

But why?

I voice my question to Evan and the saddest look clouds over his features.

"That's something you need to ask Jeremy, Stella."

And after that, Evan says nothing more.

â lâ lâ lâ lâ lâ lâ lâ lâ lâ lâ lâ lâ !

Another few weeks pass and I begin to grow restless. My muscles and body feel stronger than they did when I was immortal and the feeling of being alive practically hums through my every movement. And while spending all my time with Evan is nothing short of amazing, my desire to spend time outside my house is

Fixated in Time

becoming unbearable.

Now that I've had time to fully digest all that has happened, another one of my insatiable cravings is to see Jeremy again. I owe my life to him - *literally*. And I still haven't had a chance to thank him.

And admittedly there's still a piece of me that wants to do a LOT more than just thank himâ.

I try to ignore my repetitive thoughts and hurry through my shower and into clean clothes. Taking two stairs at a time, I descend down to the first floor and happily skip into the kitchen. Evan has our lunch set out on the table and my stomach rumbles in anticipation. I give him a swift kiss on the cheek and plop my body into the nearest chair.

"Ohhhhh it looks so yummy!" I say with a clap of my hands and grab my fork for the first bite.

Evan chuckles at my childish behavior and takes a seat across from me, slowing stabbing the noodles onto his fork.

"Evan," I say through a mouthful of whole wheat Alfredo pasta. "Can we please *do* something? I'm going stir crazy shut up in this house."

"Sick of me already, huh?"

I roll my eyes at his playful question and reach for a stick of garlic bread. I notice that Evan isn't eating at his normal pace - *which FYI, is extremely fast* - and see that his face has paled since just an hour ago. I drop my fork and reach across the table to put the back of my hand against his forehead.

"You sick hun?"

Evan pulls away from my touch and starts to tap his foot against the tiled floor.

"I'm fine Stells. Just nervous."

"Nervous? What for?"

I gulp down my mouthful of food and wash it down with some mineral water. I don't know what it is, but since becoming human again, food has never tasted better.

Evan gives a strained laugh under his breath. The tapping continues, I notice.

"I know you've been sick of being cooped up in this house. And I know you want to get back to work and all that jazz. And I have to tell you - Grace and Connie have been calling to check up on you like crazy. And before you get mad, Jeremy told me to just cool it with seeing other people until you looked like yourself again. You've gotta remember Stells - Connie, Gavin and Grace still think you've been human this whole time."

Oh rightâ.

"Well what do they think has been happening with me?"

Evan shrugs his shoulders. "We told 'em you had Mononucleosis. You can be out for well over a month with that. And it's highly contagious."

Fixated in Time

I purse my lips at the notion but after a thoughtful second, I realize it's not so crazy after all. Now that I'm human, I too am susceptible to such illnesses and diseases. The thought gives me a weird sense of panic.

"But anyway, Jeremy called me a few days ago and said he was back in town. He asked how you were doing with your - er, transition, and I said you were handling it surprisingly well. And then he said he would talk to Connie and that he would take things from here."

"So what happens now?"

"I got a phone call from Connie this morning. They're throwing together a 'surprise' birthday party for you. "

The unfamiliar phrase forms in my mouth and slips into the open air. "A birthday party?"

I see Evan fighting back a smile while he nods his head. "Yea. We figured you hadn't had a birthday party in a while. And I really do mean *a while*. And since I know you don't remember when your actual birth date is, we just decided to have it be today and make it a real celebration."

I bite my lip and can feel those butterflies tumbling around my stomach with glee. I move my food around my plate, suddenly feeling too excited and anxious to eat the rest of my meal.

"Who all is coming?" I ask.

Evan sighs and taps his foot with increasing speed.

"Well that's the reason I'm nervous. See in these past few weeks, Jeremy has been with Richard giving him the 'run down' of everything that's been going on. He knows that Jeremy has your demon now and that you're fully human. Richard is willing to back-off completely, but only if he saw you with his own eyes first."

"Uhmâ and why does he need to see me?"

"Just to make sure you're human."

"Ohâ and he's just fine and dandy with Jeremy having my demon? He's a crazy demon hunter, Evan. He'll come after Jeremy too."

Evan shakes his head and puts a reassuring hand on mine.

"Jeremy will be fine. Todd was the middle-man with all this and he trusts Jeremy implicitly. And thank God Richard trusts Todd. Without that on our side, we'd still have to convince Richard that Jeremy was a fallen angel, that he is now housing your demon, and that he fully agreed to put no harm onto human kind *while* he is host of your demon."

Evan sighs and laughs humorously. "I know. It's all very complicated."

I nod my head numbly and feel like my pasta is all of a sudden sticking to the sides of my stomach. Maybe I shouldn't have eaten so fastâ .

"So - what?" I blurt out. "Jeremy just has my demon forever and as long as he doesn't kill anyone, Richard will back off?"

Fixated in Time

"Well, obviously Richard will check up on Jeremy every once in a while. Richard isn't exactly the most trusting guy I've ever met."

That's the understatement of a century.

"And as far as Jeremy living foreverâ well that's something we'll be discussing tonight as well."

I want to push the conversation further but stop when I see how drained Evan looks from all of it. Taking advantage of the break in conversation, he gets up from his chair and takes our dishes to the sink. He comes up from behind me and starts to skillfully rub the stress and tension out of my shoulders.

"No matter what happens, Stells," Evan whispers sadly into my ear. "Just know I'm here for you and that I'll do whatever it takes to stay by your sideâ."

Chapter 50

"SURPRISE!"

Even though I was told of the surprise beforehand, the magnitude of shouts resonates in my ears, scaring the ever living crap out of me. My body shakes with shock and I have to suppress the urge to cover my ears to drown out the noise.

I stand stupefied while my friends continue to shout a variety of birthday wishes in my direction. Connie is the first to reach me, a sparkling party hat bobbing to and fro on the top of her head. Her smile is infectious and I can't help but get lost in her excitement as she scoops me in for a bear hug.

"Stella. Oh girl I have missed you so much!" Connie squeals. "Please tell me - are you feeling better love?"

I nod my head and smile. Connie grabs my hand and drags me forward, her speed of speech seeming to increase with every step we take. Before allowing me to greet my other guests, she tugs me over to the food table. She points down the food selection, telling me all about the food she has prepared for my special day.

By the time we get to the alcohol section, Evan has joined us and sidles up beside me. He drapes an arm over my shoulder and whispers into my ear.

"Remember you're human now, Stells. Go easy on the alcohol."

Connie is already putting her bartending skills to the test and starts making me a 'birthday martini.' When she's done she puts the fancy cup in my hand and waits for me to take the first sip. The bitter -sweet liquid burns my throat and I fight the urge to shudder.

Evan wasn't kidding. This is STRONG.

"Ok girl I love you, but you have to go mingle now. I need to make drinks for everyone else," Connie says with a giggle.

Evan leads me away from the food table and I give everyone else a proper greeting, making sure I thank them for coming to my party as well. It's a strange thing to be doing really. Thanking people for coming to a fake party. On my fake birthday.

When I finish my short conversation with Gavin, Evan ushers me to the patio doors.

"Why are we going outside?" I whisper.

Evan's face is serious and he pulls me closer to his body.

"There's two more guests you need to greet."

Evan holds the door open for me and I venture onto the wooden deck. Dimly lit candles are scattered everywhere and I smile to myself. Connie really outdid herself for this event. Four large patio chairs center around a low wooden table. A bowl of chips is in the middle, untouched.

Two of the chairs are empty. The other two are occupied by my last two guests - Richard and Jeremy. My nervous eyes glance to Richard. His gaze remains passive as Evan and I take our seats.

Fixated in Time

And then I finally allow my gaze to travel to Jeremy.

Oh God. He. Is. Beautiful.

He's wearing a simple long sleeved polo with jeans, his left leg folded over his right in a casual manner. His blonde hair jostles with the night wind and his electric blue eyes stare back at me. The corners of his mouth twitch up into a quirk and my cheeks flush crimson in return.

My heartbeat hammers against my chest and my fingers fumble together in my lap. Just looking at him makes me want to cry. And dance. And laugh. And scream for joy.

God I'm a mess.

Evan clears his throat, effectively pulling Jeremy's attention away from me.

"We all know why we're here," Evan says.

He glances towards Richard and then points a finger in my direction.

"You are welcome to see for yourself, Richard. Stella's human."

Richard says nothing but continues to stare at me. His dark eyes look menacing against the candle light and I can't help but fidget in my chair. Richard emerges from his seat and moves closer to me.

I don't dare move.

He takes his two fingers and pushes them against the top portion of my neck. My heart beat hammers through my veins. Richard looks into my eyes, his gaze penetrating my very soul. We sit like this for what feels like forever. Just staring at each other. Richard's fingers pressed against my neck.

And then I hear a rustling behind him and Jeremy's voice cuts through the silence.

"That's enough, Richard."

Richard gives me a final, warning glare and removes his fingers before moving back to his chair.

"Appeased?" Jeremy says with a low growl.

And that's when I realize his voice has taken on a double timbre.

It's my demon!

I could recognize her voice anywhere. And a piece of my mind aches at the knowledge that she is gone.

Richard and Jeremy exchange a wary glance before they both lean into each other, whispering furiously against the ocean breeze. My strained muscles begin to loosen and Evan scoots his chair closer to mine. He offers me his hand and I accept it gratefully, intertwining my fingers with his.

Jeremy watches the action and I see his beautiful blue eyes begin to bleed with black. He is struggling with my demon.

Fixated in Time

But what got him so upset?

I decide to drop Evan's hand and when I do, Jeremy's eyes snap back to their original shade of blue.

Oh myâhe's jealous!

I lower my gaze in an attempt to hide my smile. Minutes pass while Evan and I sit in silence, patiently waiting for Richard and Jeremy to finish their conversation.

Finally Richard straightens his red dress shirt and adjusts his sleek gray tie. He tips his head to me.

"Until we meet again, Stella. Enjoy your birthday party."

And with that Richard extends a hand to first Jeremy, and then to Evan. As they shake hands, they all seem to pass knowing looks to one another. Richard takes a single chip from the bowl on the table and the sound of his loud chewing resonates throughout the room.

He gives us all a parting wave and meanders back into the party. When he opens the patio door, loud music and muted laughter spills into the patio. Connie's shrill laugh sticks out the most and a nervous chuckle bubbles up in my throat.

That girl is something else.

When the patio door is securely closed, Evan's body relaxes.

"So I take it everything went well?" he asks, directing his question towards Jeremy.

Jeremy's eyes land on me, his intense gaze making my knees buckle and my hands tremble within my lap.

"It did."

"So, we're in the clear now?"

"Yes."

"T-thank you," I hear myself say. "To b-both of you."

I peek up from behind my long lashes and see that Jeremy's eyes are still fixated on me. His face is showing no indication of what he's feeling but his blue eyes are screaming a million different things.

"Jeremy, uhm, how's my demon treatin' you?" I ask timidly.

Jeremy raises his brow to me and draws his hands up to rest directly under his chin.

"She misses you, Stella. And she's very protective of you."

I nod my head. "See? She's not so bad, is she?"

Jeremy gives me a sideways glance before taking a big breath and puffing it out in irritation.

Fixated in Time

"She's horrible, Stella. I don't know how you put up with her for *decades*, let alone a few days. But when you're around her attention is focused solely on you. It's a nice break, to say the least."

I don't know why but I start giggling. "Well I'm not gonna lie, I miss her too. Kind of. Just a little bit."

And after that, another uncomfortable silence radiates between the three of us. All the questions I wanted to ask push to the forefront of my mind. *If neither of them is going to say anything, I guess it's going to fall on me.*

"So what happens next?" I ask.

Evan and Jeremy exchange a furtive glance.

"That really is up to you, Stells," Evan says with a sad smile.

"What do you mean?"

Jeremy leans forward, his voice lowering so our conversation will go undetected.

"Your demon is linked to you, Stella. To put it simply, when your human body dies, your demon will destroy me. When I said she's protective of you, I don't think you fully comprehended what I meant. When she sees your human soul die - whether that's tomorrow or fifty years from now - because of the connection you two share, she will destroy my human soul as a means to try and save you."

"B-but that can't be," I stutter in disbelief.

Jeremy silences me with his hand and I see Evan nod his head next to me.

"It's true Stells. We did the research for it. When you die, Jeremy will die too. And then your demon will run rampant."

My eyes widen at the thought.

"But don't worry. We have a plan for that as well," Jeremy says in a strained voice. "As long as everything goes according to plan, we have three human people willing to 'step up' to house your demon should anything happen to you."

I raise my brow and my stomach tightens with anticipation.

"Ok and those would be...?"

Evan reaches for my hand and gives it an affectionate squeeze. "Richard and Todd have both volunteered. But before it would go to either of them I would be the first to accept your demon into my body when you die Stella."

I gasp at his admittance and violently shake my head from side to side.

"No. No no no no no!"

I tear my gaze away from Jeremy and look at Evan.

Fixated in Time

"Evan, you can't do that. You'll never die then. Ever. Don't you get it?! You'll be stuck here forever and I - I - I'll never see you again!" I shout.

Evan pats my hand in comfort and gives me an understanding smile.

"Stella, *someone* has to house your demon, unless we want her running amuck and destructing lives everywhere. And when you die, Jeremy dies too. So I had to step up. It was the only way we could get Richard to leave the two of you alone. I know what I signed up for, Stells. You don't have to worry about me."

I can feel my body temperature rapidly rising at all this new information. When I die, Jeremy will die with me. And when we die, Evan will take Jeremy's place and house my demon. *For eternity.*

"But what if you die before me?" I ask Evan.

Evan shrugs and leans back in his chair. "Then Todd or Richard will step up to take my place. Or they'll find someone else to do so. I'm not all that worried about it right now, Stells. Just know that we have a plan for everything that could go wrong. We're here for you. To protect you in any way we can."

I bite my lip and my eyes flicker to Jeremy. His gaze is still trained on me, his mesmerizing blue eyes watching me like a hawk. From the corner of my eye, I see Connie's eccentric party hat plastered against the patio door. Then I see Gavin pulling her away, his voice urging her to 'let us be.'

I roll my eyes. I love that girl, but damn. *She is so nosey.*

"Well, I suppose we better get inside," I say as confidently as I can muster. "My party awaits."

Evan and Jeremy look at one another as if they want to say something more. But instead they both stand and move towards the door. Hundreds of butterflies soar around my stomach as Jeremy passes me, his hand brushing against my arm. His touch is electric. Evan follows second and reaches for my hand as we both enter the party once again.

Our fingers intertwine and a faint smile spreads across his lips when I give his hand a reassuring squeeze. I know I have decisions to make. But for tonight, for just one night, I'm going to enjoy my fake birthday. For one night I am going to enjoy having everyone I love under one roof, having fun and celebrating life.

And just for one night I am going to push aside the fact that the two men that are battling for my heart are risking their lives just to save mine.

And just for one night I am going to be human.

Just me.

Just Stella.

Chapter 51

I finish typing my email to Grace, reading it over a few times before finally hitting send. I let out a sigh of relief just as Evan knocks on my bedroom door.

"Come on in," I say and start closing down my laptop.

"You send it?"

"Yep," I say with a nervous smile.

"I'm proud of you, Stells."

A few days after my birthday party, I made the bold decision to quit my job. Now that I'm human, I realize that I want to spend my days with the people I love, having fun and doing all I can to enjoy my life on earth.

When I told Evan how much money I had saved up over the years, he told me I was smart to quit my job and that he would have done it too. And then he told me I needed to travel the world. When I told him I already had, he told me to do it again - but this time bring someone along so I wouldn't have to be by myself.

So I called Grace and told her I'd be quitting. She was unhappy about it of course, but said she understood. She just told me I had to email her a final letter indicating my resignation so she could file it with my paper work.

Yahoo!!! No more work!!! I silently congratulate myself and a wide grin stretches across my face.

"Well Stells, where are you going to go first?" Evan asks me.

I lean back into my computer chair and tap my chin thoughtfully.

"I'm thinking Paris. It really is quite lovely over there. Lots of culture, delicious food, great places to seeâ!"

Evan gives me a tense nod. He looks around my room and then his eyes fall back on me.

"You gonna' sell this place when you go?"

I scoff at the notion.

"What? No! I love this house! I plan on traveling, but even if I take my time and tour the world for three years straight, I'll still need to come back to a place I call home."

Evan gives another thoughtful nod, but when he purses his lips, I can tell something else is on his mind.

"Ok, Evan. You're acting weird. What's going on?"

Evan sighs and his shoulders start to sag.

"I know it's only been a week since your birthday party, Stells. Jeremy and I both have been trying to tip toe around the issue but I just can't keep going on like this. Stella, you know I love you. And I know some portion of you loves me too."

Fixated in Time

I see my bedroom door creak open and Jeremy's blue eyes silently probe the inside of my room. He remains hidden but doesn't show any embarrassment when his eyes lock on mine. Evan doesn't notice, so he continues.

"I don't know how long you're planning on being gone, Stella. But obviously you know that the three of us - you, me and Jeremy - are all linked together now. We will all be in each other's lives until you die. And trust me; I view that as a good thing. And I'm fine with sharing *time* with you Stells. But I'm not fine with sharing *you*."

My eyes flash over to Jeremy and I see he is still standing behind the door, his gaze still fixed on me. He is intently listening to our conversation and I know it's because he's looking for answers too.

Oh Jeremy please go away. This is embarrassing enough!

My palms begin to sweat and my heartbeat thrums against my chest. I knew I would have to make a choice with these two men.

I just didn't know it would have to be so soon.

"Stells, if I know you as well as I think I do, I think you were planning on asking both of us to join you on your traveling adventures. Just to be nice. But I speak for *both* of us when I say that whoever you want to be with *in the long run* is the *only* one you should take on this trip with you."

I gulp down a mouthful of saliva and my clammy hands find their way to my hair. I start twirling the ends in a nervous fit.

"But why don't you both want to come with me?" I ask in hesitation. "I want you both there."

Evan shakes his head.

"Don't you get it, Stells? We're both in love with you. But you're only one person. So whoever you pick will go with you. But in return, the person you decide to 'let go' will stay here. That will give us time to get over you while you travel the world."

I frown at his words and he gives me a hesitant laugh.

"I know it sounds stupid Stella. But when people fall in love, they need time to heal when they've been rejected. Jeremy and I have already talked this over. Multiple times. And we decided that whoever you pick will be the one to travel with you to start a life with you. If that's what you want of course. And the other will stay here. Either way Stells, we both want to be a part of your life in the long run. One of us just needs time to get over you in order to make that happen. Does that make sense?"

I give a trembling nod. Evan moves closer to my side, his hands reaching up and stroking my arms with the warmth of his fingertips. From the corner of my eye I see Jeremy move into the room, wordlessly closing the door behind him. Evan sees him enter as well and scoots away from me.

Jeremy approaches us and sits on the bed, his beautiful blue eyes looking between the two of us. His thick blonde hair is styled, just like it was from the last time he was here.

"Is it true, Jeremy? What Evan said?" I whisper under my breath.

Jeremy clears his throat and shifts his gaze to a spot on the floor.

Fixated in Time

"Yes," he says in a calm voice. "It's true."

I bite my lip again and look back and forth between the perfect men sitting across from me. One blonde, one brunette. One blue eyed, one green eyed. Both handsome. Both caring. Both loving. Both kind. Both selfless.

Both perfect in their own way.

And then, for some strange reason, I begin to let my guard down. And I can hear my demon's distant voice swirling around inside my head. She's angry with me for letting her go, for not protecting her all those weeks ago. But underneath her anger, she is giving me a plea. She is begging me to make the right choice.

I can't help but smile with the realization that even though my demon is pure evil, perhaps my good soul really *did* rub off on her. Because her words show me she really does care about me. That she *does* want to see me happy.

And how ironic that the cause of all these years of pain is now fighting her hardest to lead me down a path of happinessâ

Decision made, I stand up from my chair. I walk the short distance to Evan and take his hands in mine, kissing each one softly. When I look into his eyes, I see they are filled with unshed tears. And when he sees the way I'm looking at him, in my heart I know I don't have to say anything more.

He knows.

Evan gives a slight nod of his head and stands. He pulls me in for a tight hug and lets the tears cascade from his eyes and spill down his cheeks.

"I'll always love you, Stells," he whispers into my ear.

Evan presses a gentle kiss to my forehead and tries to put on a happy face.

"I'll always be here if you need me," Evan says.

And with that he gives Jeremy a tip of his head and walks out of the room without saying another word. Jeremy watches Evan and when he is gone, his gaze returns to me. My heart dances inside my chest when I see the smallest grin make its way onto Jeremy's lips.

I take a step towards him and offer up my hand. Jeremy takes it in his and our fingers intertwine. He clears his throat and his blue eyes shine up at me.

"Soâ you choose me?" Jeremy asks, his voice just above a whisper.

Tears of my own become lodged in my throat. I give him a single nod.

"It's always been you, Jeremy."

Jeremy's small grin extends into a full smile and his hand yanks me forward, pulling my body into his. His strong arms wrap around my waist and before I know it, Jeremy is kissing my lips over and over again. My happiness bubbles over into a giggle and Jeremy's hold on me tightens.

"So, you're taking me around the world, huh?" Jeremy asks in a low, sultry voice.

Fixated in Time

The sound of his rich voices makes me weak at the knees. I suppress another giggle and let my body sink into his.

"As long as that's OK with you," I say softly.

Jeremy places a slow, lingering kiss on my lips.

"I'll follow you anywhere Stella. I'm yours now. Forever."

My heart leaps with joy in hearing those words. I nuzzle into Jeremy's embrace, bringing my lips to his ear and whispering the words I have wanted to say for months.

"I love you, Jeremy."

"I love you too, Stella. Always have. Always will."

THE END

Chapter 52

Epilogue

15 years later

â 'Evan's Perspective' :

"Uncle Evan! Uncle Evan!"

I hear my little 'niece' and 'nephew' scuttling in from outside, their squealing voices echoing through the house. I let out a deep chuckle as they both tackle me to the floor and tell me through gasping breathes all the adventures they had while swimming. I wrap my arms around each of them and listen patiently.

Caroline, my four year old niece, bounces up and down on my leg. "Uncle Evan?"

"Yea sweetie?"

"When are mommy and daddy gonna be home?"

I glance at the wall calendar hanging on the back of the laundry room door. Stella and Jeremy are taking a two week cruise to Alaska for their fifteenth honeymoon. And of course I was the 'only suitable baby sitter' while the two of them were gone.

My eyes narrow-in on the circled black date, indicating their day of return.

"Ten days down, four days to go Caroline."

When Caroline gives me a confused look, I pick her up and walk us both to the calendar.

"See," I say pointing to the calendar. "This was the day they left, sweetie. Last Monday. They will be back this Sunday and it's already Wednesday night."

I move my finger across the square boxes and count slowly to show Caroline exactly what I'm saying. When my finger lands on the day of their arrival, Caroline shrieks with delight and squirms in my arms. I set her on the floor and she starts running around the living room.

My nephew JJ, Jeremy Junior, gives his sister an annoyed look. JJ just turned seven a few weeks ago. He likes to think he's an adult now. I can't help but grin as I watch the two of them. They are night and day, those two kids.

Caroline has curly blonde hair and sparkling blue eyes, just like her daddy, while JJ has dark hair and dark eyes, following suit with Stella's exotic looks. They're the two most beautiful children I've ever seen. *But I could be bias.*

I turn on the TV while they continue to play, knowing they will be wiped out soon and will want to watch cartoons. I wander into the kitchen and start getting out ingredients for their favorite dinner - mac n' cheese with pigs in a blanket.

While I make dinner my mind travels back to all the wonderful years I've spent with Jeremy and Stellaâ .

Fixated in Time

Just as they said they would, the two of them traveled the world and were gone for over two years. Aside from the seven days that I thought I had killed Stella, that first year was the worst of my life. I was heartbroken.

But after a year had passed, the ache in my heart seemed to mend on its own. It's funny how time allows your heart to heal without you even knowing it. I also realized through time that Stella had made the right choice. Jeremy was her true soul mate.

The second year they were gone though, I was just lonely. I ended up getting a small house of my own and starting my own 'beach-store' business.

I know, I know, it doesn't sound like much. But I'm actually getting quite a profit off of it, especially from the tourists.

By the time Jeremy and Stella came home, my heart was completely healed and I was just happy to have them backâ

And since then?

It's been a blur of happy memories.

Jeremy and Stella were wed shortly after they returned home (but I later found out it was just a renewal of vows since they had eloped in Paris). Gavin and Connie got married a year after that. And while Stella and Jeremy waited on having kids for a year or two, Connie seemed eager to get started with the baby making business.

Can you believe it - they have eight kids already!?! *Yes, you heard correctly. Eight.*

Grace ended up closing her practice after her and Richard had a very messy break-up two years into their relationship. And now, as far as I know, she lives in Texas.

Random, I know.

Richard keeps his distance from us, but pops in every year or two just to make sure everything is going 'smoothly.' *Which - thank God - it is.* Everything is still going according to planâ including me taking 'the demon' on the day of Stella's death.

But I prefer not to think about that.

And Todd? Believe it or not, Todd is now part of our group. He's the only single one left aside from myself. So when the six of us hang out - Gavin, Connie, Stella, Jeremy, Todd and I - we end up being the odd men out. Incidentally, he's become like a brother to me.

And as for myself? I'm happier than ever. I have five amazing best friends who love and support me, a successful business, and a beautiful niece and nephew.

What else could a guy ask for?

I bet you're wondering about my love life, eh? Not going to lie, I wonder about that myself from time to time. I've tried dating. *Believe me.* But after Stella, no girl seems to measure up. All my friends hound me to find a wife and 'settle down.'

Fixated in Time

But I'm content without it. Really, I am.

And who knows? With an eternity of living on earth, the right girl is bound to show up at some pointâ!

â!..Right?

A/N: Sorry to startle you with this being in Evan's perspective! I just wanted to give you all insight into everyone's life while setting up for the possibility of a book twoâ!..in Evan's perspective?! I don't know - what do you all think????!

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