

TOSCA LEE

ДЕМОП

A MEMOIR

So few books rattle me to the core yet lift my hopes to the heavens in the same breath. *Tosca Lee Demon: A Memoir* is a rare find that must be read.

—**Ted Dekker**, *New York Times* best-selling author of *The Bride Collector* and the *Circle* Trilogy

Imaginative, compelling, deep, memorable. If you want a novel that has you compulsively turning pages and makes you think at the same time, you'll love *Demon: A Memoir*.

—**James Scott Bell**, best-selling author of *Deceived* and *Try Fear*

Wise, imaginative, funny, and poetic, this is a book that lingers in memory after you've turned the last page.

—**Sophy Burnham**, *New York Times* best-selling author of *A Book of Angels*

Even readers who don't believe in the biblical elements of this tale will have a difficult time not being coaxed into this struggle of intellects.

—**Eric Wilson**, *New York Times* best-selling author of *Fireproof* and *Field of Blood*

The story—the writing—is mesmerizing . . . It has jumped high onto the list of my all-time favorite novels.

—**Frank Redman**, FictionAddict.com

Riveting, graceful and razor sharp.

—**Claudia Mair Burney**, Christy Award Finalist and author of *Wounded*

I will not read the Creation story or the story of Lucifer's fall again without picturing the scene described in *Demon*.

—**Brandilyn Collins**, author of the *Kremer Lake Series*

Demon: A Memoir isn't a mere work of fiction. *Demon* is an experience.

—**Tracey Bateman**, Christy Award-winning author of *Thirsty*

Compulsively readable and subtly convicting, *Demon* will forever recast your understanding of redemption.

—**Nicole Baart**, Christy Award Finalist and author of *The Moment Between*

This book is a masterpiece of fiction. It's hard to put down and impossible to forget.

—**Nancy Mehl**, author of *Malevolence* and *Graven Images*

This is one of the most sensational, thought-provoking books I have ever read. It is a masterpiece and will sit alongside C. S. Lewis and other such luminaries from now on.

—**Kristine Smith**, author of *Purposeful Christianity*

Lee's prose is powerful and beautiful. Her imagery of Eden, of Paradise and angels and Elohim fills

me with awe.

—**Novel Reviews**

An excellent novel that will hold your attention and stretch your perspective on life.

—**Jake Chism**, *Armchair Interviews*

Lee is really proving to be a leader in the art of speculative fiction.

—**Inside Corner Book Reviews**

Demon took me totally by surprise. Tosca Lee has crafted a story that snatched my attention from the first and compelled me to turn the pages.

—**Mike Parker**, *LifeWay*

A magnificently entertaining story.

—**Inspire Monthly**

One of the most captivating books I've read.

—**Sara Mills**, author of *Miss Match*

Demon is supposed to be fiction . . . but is it? Tosca Lee has created a stunning work of pure genius.

—**Wanda Winters-Gutierrez**, author of *The Search for Peace*

Highly Recommended.

—**ChristianFictionReviews.com**

You will find many well-known Bible accounts unfolding vividly before your eyes in a way you never imagined.

—**Virginia Smith**, author of *Stuck in the Middle*

An intellectual and spiritual thriller that begs to be read.

—**Crosswayz**

A must-have that'll haunt the reader long after the last page

—**Press & Sun-Bulletin**, Greater Binghamton, NY

This book simultaneously chills and awes.

—**Eternity Happens**

A riveting look at one demon's reflection on his fall from grace, and the shuddering implications for each of us. This story is about YOU; it will change the way you look at life.

—**Austin Boyd**, author of the Mars Hill Classified series

A powerful, discerning tale that will have fans pondering their own deals with the demons.

—**Midwest Book Review**

Demon: A Memoir may well be the most creative, mind-twisting novel of this summer.

—**Kevin Lucia**, author of *Hiram Grange* and *The Chosen One*

One of the best books I've read yet this year.

—**Camy Tang**, author of *Sushi for One?*

I adore Tosca Lee's ingenious use of soul-deep first person point of view writing. This is one of those books I couldn't put down until I crossed the finish line—what a ride.

—**Julie Garmon**, Guideposts

The Bible and urban fantasy combine to create an intelligent and thought provoking multilayered tale.

—**Harriett Klausner**, Amazon.com #1 Reviewer

TOSCA LEE

DEMON

A MEMOIR



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For Amy.

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It was raining the night he found me. Traffic had slowed on Massachusetts Avenue, and the wan light of street lamps reflected off the pavement. I was hurrying on without an umbrella, distracted by the chirp of a text message on my phone, trying to shield its illuminated face from rain and the drizzle of storefront awnings. There had been a mistake in my schedule, an appointment I didn't recognize and had stayed late at the office for—until six forty-five—just in case. Our office manager was texting me from home now to say she had no idea who it was with, that the appointment must have belonged to Phil's calendar, that she was sorry for the mistake, and to have a good night.

I flipped the phone shut, shoved it in my bag. I was worn out by this week already, and it was only Tuesday. The days were getting shorter, the sun setting by six o'clock. It put me on edge, gnawed at me, as though I had better get somewhere warm and cheerful or, barring all else, home before it got any darker. But I was unwilling to face the empty apartment, the dirty dishes, the unopened mail on the counter. So I lowered my head against the rain and walked another two blocks past my turnoff until I came to the Bosnian Café. A strap of bells on the door announced my entrance with a ringing slap.

I liked the worn appeal of the Bosnian Café with its olfactory embrace of grilled chicken and gyro meat that enveloped me upon every arrival and clung to me long after leaving. That night, in the premature darkness and rain, the café seemed especially homey with its yellowing countertop, chipped mirrors, and grimy ketchup bottles. Cardboard shamrocks, remnants of a forgotten Saint Patrick's Day, draped the pass-through into the kitchen, faded around their die-cut edges. A string of Christmas lights lined the front window, every third bulb out. On the wall above the register, a framed photo of the café's owner with a local pageant queen and another with a retired Red Sox player had never been dusted. But no one, including me, seemed to mind.

I stood in the entry waiting for Esad, the owner, to notice me. But it was not the bald man who welcomed me.

It was the dark-haired stranger.

I was surveying the other tables, looking for inspiration—chicken or steak, gyro or salad—when he beckoned. I hesitated. Was I supposed to recognize him, this man sitting by himself? But no, I did not know him. He waved again, impatient now, and I glanced over my shoulder. There was no one standing in the entryway but me. And then the man at the table stood up and strode directly to me.

"You're late." He clasped my shoulder and smiled. He was tall, tanned, with curling hair and a slightly hooked nose that did nothing to detract from his enviable Mediterranean looks. His eyes glittered beneath well-formed brows. His teeth were very white.

"I'm sorry. I think you have the wrong person," I said.

He chuckled. "Not at all! I've been waiting for you for quite some time. An eternity, you might say. Please, come sit down. I took the liberty of ordering for you."

His voice reminded me of fine cognac, the Hors d'Age men drink aboard their yachts as they cruise their Cohibas.

"You have the wrong person. I don't know you," I insisted, even as he steered me toward the table. I didn't want to embarrass him; he already seemed elegantly out of place here in what, for all practical purposes, was a joint. But he would feel like an elegant fool in another minute, especially when his real appointment—interview, date, whatever—walked in and saw him sitting here with me.

"But I know *you*, Clay."

I started at the sound of my name, spoken by him with a mixture of familiarity and strangeness.

interest. I studied him more closely—the squareness of his jaw, the smoothness of his cheek, his utter self-possession. *Had* I met him before? No, I was certain I hadn't.

One of Esad's nephews arrived with a chicken sandwich and two cups of coffee.

"Please." The stranger motioned to a vinyl-covered chair. Numbly, stupidly, I sat.

"You work down the street at Brooks and Hanover," he said when the younger man had gone. He seated himself adjacent to me, his chair angled toward mine. He crossed his legs, plucked invisible lint off the fine wool of his trousers. "You're an editor."

Several thoughts went through my head in that moment, none of them savory: first, that this was some finance or insurance rep who—just like the pile of loan offers on my counter at home—was trying to capitalize on my recent divorce. Or, that this was some aggressive literary agent trying to play suave.

Most likely, though, he was a writer.

Every editor has stories to tell: zealous writers pushing manuscripts on them during their kid's softball game, passing sheaves of italicized print across pews at church or trying to pick them up from bars, casually mentioning between lubricated flirtations that they write stories on the side and just happen to have a manuscript in the car. I had lost count of the dry cleaners, dental hygienists, and plumbers who, upon hearing what I did for a living, had felt compelled to gift me with their short stories and children's books, their novels-in-progress and rhyming poetry.

"Look, whoever you are—"

"Lucian."

I meant to tell him that I was sure we didn't publish whatever it was he wanted me to read, that there were industry-accepted ways to get his work to us if we did, that he could visit the Web site and check out the guidelines. I also meant to get up and walk away, to look for Esad or his nephew and place an order in. To go. But I didn't say or do any of these things because what he said next stopped me cold.

"I know you're searching, Clay. I know you're wondering what these late, dark nights are for. You have that seasonal disease, that modern ailment, don't you? SAD, they call it. But it isn't that disorder—you should know that. It isn't even your divorce. That's not what's bothering you. No, really."

I was no longer hungry. I pushed away the chicken sandwich he had ordered and said with quiet warning. "I don't know who you are, but this isn't funny."

He went on as though he hadn't heard me, saying with what seemed great feeling, "It's that you don't know what it's all for. The hours and days, working on the weekends, the belief that you'll eventually get caught up, and on that *ultimate* day something will happen. That everything will make sense or you'll at least have time to figure it out. You're a good man, Clay, but what has that won you? You're alone, growing no younger, drifting toward some unknown but inevitable end in this life. And where is the meaning in that?"

I sat very still. I felt exposed, laid open, as though I had emptied my mind onto the table like the contents of a pocket. I couldn't meet his gaze. Nearby, a couple—both of their heads dripping dirt, blond dreadlocks—mullied over menus as the woman dandled an infant on her lap. Beyond them, a thickset woman paged through *People*, and a young man in scrubs plodded in a sleep-deprived daze through an anemic salad. Had any of them noticed my uncanny situation, the strange hijacking taking place here? But they were mired in their menus, distractions, and stupor. At the back counter a student tapped at the keypad of his phone, sending messages into the ether.

"I realize how this feels, and I apologize." Lucian folded long fingers together on his knee. His nails were smooth and neatly manicured. He wore an expensive-looking watch, the second hand which seemed to hesitate before hiccupping on, as though time had somehow slowed in the sallo

light of the diner. "I could have done this differently, but I don't think I would have had your attention."

"What are you, some kind of Jehovah's Witness?" It was the only thing that made sense. His spiel could have hit close to anyone. I felt conned, angry, but most of all embarrassed by my emotional response.

His laughter was abrupt and, I thought, slightly manic.

"Oh my." He wiped the corners of his eyes.

I pushed back my chair.

His merriment died so suddenly that, were it not for the sound of it still echoing in my ears, I might have thought I had imagined it. "I'm going to tell you everything." He leaned toward me, and close I could see the tiny furrows around the corners of his mouth, the creases beneath his narrowed eyes. A strange glow emanated from the edge of his irises like the halo of a solar eclipse. "I'm going to tell you my story. I've great hope for you, in whom I will create the repository of my tale—my memoir, if you will. I believe it will be of great interest to you. And you're going to write it down and publish it."

Now I barked a stunted laugh. "No, I'm not. I don't care if you're J. D. Salinger."

Again he went on as though I'd said nothing. "I understand they're all the rage these days: memoirs. Publishing houses pay huge sums for the ghostwritten, self-revelatory accounts of celebrities all the time. But trust me; they've never acquired a story like mine."

"Look," I said, a new edge in my voice, "You're no celebrity I recognize, and I'm no ghostwriter. So I'm going to get myself some dinner and be nice enough to forget this ever happened." But as I started to rise, he grabbed me by the arm. His fingers, biting through the sleeve of my coat, were exceedingly strong, unnaturally warm, and far too intimate.

"But you *won't* forget." The strange light of fanaticism burned in his eyes. The curve of his mouth seemed divorced of their stare, as though it came from another face altogether. "You will recall everything—every word I say. Long after you have forgotten, in fact, the name of this café, the way I summoned you to this table, the first prick of your mortal curiosity about me. Long after you have forgotten, in fact, the most basic details of your life. You will remember, and you will curse or bless this day."

I felt ill. Something about the way he said *mortal*. . . . In that instant, reality, strung out like an elastic band, snapped.

This was no writer.

"Yes. You see," he said quietly. "You know. We can share now, between us, the secret of what I am."

And the words came, unbidden, to my mind: *Fallen. Dark Spirit.*

Demon.

The trembling that began in my stomach threatened to seize up my diaphragm. But then I released me and sat back. "Now. Here is Mr. Esad, wondering why you haven't touched your sandwich."

And indeed, here came the bald man, coffeepot in hand, smiling at the stranger as though he were more of a regular than I. I stared between them as they made their pleasantries, the sound of their banter at sick odds with what my visceral sense told me was true, what no one else seemed to notice. I was sitting here with something incomprehensively evil.

When Esad left, Lucian took a thin napkin from the dispenser and set it beside my coffee cup. The gesture struck me as aberrantly mundane.

He sighed. "I feel your trepidation, that sense that you ought to get up and leave immediately. And under normal circumstances I would say that you are right. But listen to me now when I tell you

that you are safe. Be at ease. Here. I'll lean forward like this, in your human way. When that coup over there sees my little smile, this conspiratorial look, they'll think we're sharing a succulent bit of gossip."

I wasn't at ease. Not at all. My heart had become a pounding liability in my chest.

"Why?" I managed, wishing I were even now in the emptiness of my apartment, staring at the world through the bleak window of my TV.

Lucian leaned even closer, his hand splayed across the top of the table so that I could see the blue veins along the back of it. His voice dropped below a whisper, but I had no difficulty hearing him. "Because my story is very closely connected to yours. We're not so different after all, you and I. We both want purpose, meaning, to see the bigger picture. I can give you that."

"You don't even know me!"

"On the contrary"—he slid the napkin dispenser away, as though it were a barrier between us—"I know everything about you. Your childhood house on Ridgeview Drive. The tackle box you kept your football cards in. The night you tried to sneak out after homecoming to meet Carrie Kraus. You broke your wrist climbing out of the window."

I stared.

"I know of your father's passing—you were fifteen. About the merlot you miss since giving up drinking, the way you dip your hamburgers in blue cheese dressing—your friend Piotr taught you that in college. That you've been telling yourself you ought to get away somewhere—Mexico, perhaps. That you think it's the seasonal disorder bothering you, though it's not—"

"Stop!" I threw up my hands, wanting him to leave at once, equally afraid that he might and that I would be stuck knowing that there was this person—this *thing*—watching me. Knowing everything.

His voice gentled. "Let me assure you that you are not the only one. I could list myriad facts about anyone. Name someone. How about Sheila?" He smirked. "Let's just say she didn't return your message from home, and her husband thinks she's working late. Esad? Living in war-torn Bosnia was no small feat. He—" He cocked his head, and there came now a faint buzzing like an invisible swarm of mosquitoes. I instinctively jerked away.

"What was that?" I demanded, unable to pinpoint where the sound had come from.

"Ah. A concentration camp!" He looked surprised. "I didn't know that. Did you know that? And as for your ex—" He tilted his head again.

"No! Please, don't." I lowered my head into my hand, dug my fingers into my scalp. Five months after the divorce, the wound still split open at the mere mention of her.

"You see?" he whispered, his head ducked down so that he stared intently up into my face. "I can tell you everything."

"I don't understand."

"I've made a pastime of studying case histories, of following them through from beginning to end. You fascinate me in the same way that beetles with their uncanny instinct for dung rolling used to fascinate you. I know more about you than your family. Than your ex. Than you know about yourself. I daresay."

Something—some by-product of fear—rose up within me as anger at last. "If you are what you say, aren't you here to make some kind of deal for my soul? To tempt me? Why did you order me coffee, then? Why not a glass of merlot or a Crown and Coke?" My voice had risen, but I didn't care. I felt my anger with relief.

Lucian regarded me. "Please. How trite. Besides, they don't serve liquor here." But then his calm fell away, and he was staring—not at me but past me, toward the clock on the wall. "But there"—he pointed, and his finger seemed exceedingly long—"see how the hour advances without us!" He leaned to his feet, and I realized he meant to leave.

“What? You can’t just go now that you’ve—”

~~“I’ve come to you at great risk,” he hissed, the sound sibilant, as if he had whispered in my ear~~ though he stood three feet away. And then he strode to the glass door and pushed out into the darkness, disappearing beyond the reflected interior of the café like a shadow into a mirror. The strap of my bag fell against the door with a flat metal clink, and my own stunned reflection stared back.

RAIN PELTED MY EYES, slipped in wet tracks through my hair against my scalp, ran in rivulets down my nape to mingle with the sweat against my back. It had gotten colder, almost freezing, but I was sweating inside the sodden collar of my shirt as I hurried down Norfolk, my bag slapping against my thigh, my legs cramped and wooden, nightmare slow.

The abrupt warmth inside my apartment building threatened to suffocate me as I stumbled up the stairs. My ears pin-tingled to painful life as I fumbled with my keys. Inside my apartment at last, I fell back against the door, head throbbing and lungs heaving in the still air. I stayed like that, my coat dripping onto the carpet, for several long moments. Then a mad whim struck me.

With numb fingers I retrieved the laptop from my bag and set it up on the kitchen table. With my coat still on, I dropped down onto a wooden chair, staring at the screen as it yawned to life. I logged into the company server, opened my calendar.

There—my six-thirty appointment. It was simply noted: *L*.

For the next two days, I kept to my office and home. I stared at my monitor by day and at my ceiling at night in bed, trying to dissect how someone with enough research, a talent for suggestion, and a few lucky guesses might pretend to be a demon with seeming credibility to the point where I might actually believe I was in the presence of evil. And while I decided it was possible, the one thing I could not answer was why.

Of course my mind went first to Aubrey. But to think that she would direct so much energy my way—even out of cruelty—seemed pure vanity on my part. I had given her no cause for vendetta toward me, having stepped aside with near silence once her resolve to leave was clear.

I briefly considered Sheila, who was not only our office manager but the wife of my colleague and roommate. I owed her much, I supposed; it was through her that I first met Aubrey. She had also been the one to alert me to the position at Brooks and Hanover when my predecessor left to join Random House. And she was the only one in the office with ready access to my calendar. But while our conversation had been stilted, if polite, since the divorce, such a scheme was so far beyond anything beneath her that I rejected the idea immediately.

That left three options. The first was Richard, but I could think of no reason for him to take this trouble. He already had what he wanted. Still, he had the resources and access to a storehouse of information about my history via Aubrey.

The second was, again, that Lucian was a writer. And while I had heard stories of writers tracking editors like crazed fans stalking movie stars, I had to wonder why anyone would direct so much interest my way when editors for the Six Titans, as I called them, were a train ride away in New York City.

The third was that Lucian had targeted me for more mysterious reasons of his own. This was the most disturbing possibility of all.

On Thursday afternoon I put in a call to Esad to ask if he remembered the man I had been sitting with two nights past. “Yes!” He raised his voice over the sear of the grill in the background. I could practically smell cooking onions. “Very nice!”

“Do you know him?” I asked, feeling foolish.

“No, no, it’s the first time to meet him. Bring him back! I’ll make something special.”

I had no intention of doing that. Further, I determined that if this Lucian pursued me again, I would go to the police.

NEW YORK LITERARY AGENT agent Katrina Dunn Lampe was a polished, vivacious woman who sapped my energy. But because she represented talented clients, I tried to meet her for lunch whenever she came to town. And so I was shifting time blocks in my schedule like square pieces in a puzzle box, trying to find that doable—preferably short—lunch slot during the two days she would be in town when the appointment materialized in the corner of my screen.

6:00 p.m.: L.

Tonight.

I got up, hardly able to take my eyes off it, not trusting that it wouldn’t disappear the minute I blinked. Forcing myself away, I strode out of my office and down the hallway. Sheila was missing from her desk. I sat down in her chair and tapped her keypad, bringing her screen to life. I closed a

open e-mail, but not before catching the subject line: “*have to see you.*” I noted it wasn’t from my husband, Dan. Opening the group schedules, I found my own, scrolled through it.

It wasn’t there.

I went back to my office and stared at my monitor.

L.

What did it mean? Did he just expect me to show up at Esad’s again? Or did he plan to follow me when I left work? Was he waiting, watching for me even now?

I sat like a ghost through a last-minute titling meeting. Stared at the sandwich I had brought from home without eating it. Shifted manuscript pages on my desk without reading them. Watched the clock.

I distracted myself by thinking of Sheila’s mysterious e-mail. A part of me wished I had noted the sender, a part of me wished I hadn’t seen it at all. I couldn’t help but remember Lucian’s insinuation. I hoped for Dan’s sake it wasn’t true.

By five o’clock I was useless. I shut down my laptop, shoved it along with a stack of proposals into my bag, grabbed my coat, and left.

Outside on the street, I realized I had no idea where I was going. But one thing I did know: I was *not* going to Esad’s. Neither did I want to risk anyone following me home. For a moment I actually considered going to Carmichael’s, a small restaurant with a decent wine list, once my favorite watering hole. I quickly discarded the idea—not for my three months on the wagon so much as the thought that my supposedly preternatural acquaintance might find it pathetic.

Which just made me mad.

If he was what he claimed to be, the last thing he should want was for me to stay sober. And the last thing I should want was to care what he thought. But here I was, a flustered wreck, having doubted my experience and second-guessed myself a thousand times since Tuesday.

I descended into Kendall Station. I normally hated the claustrophobic press of rush hour, but today there was something comforting about the electric lights, the subterranean warmth, the flow of bodies to and from the *T*.

On the train I did something I rarely do: I studied the faces around me. I took note of clothing, skin color, and watches but saw no one resembling the Mediterranean stranger. Packed in the Red Line car, I considered the distant dullness of the commuters’ eyes, even of those playing games on their phones or jacked into iPods, of the book readers who had all but escaped their bodies for the ride.

How long had I been one of them?

I filed out and up onto Park Street, one in a milling flotsam of bodies. I often felt lost in the current, everyone around me having places to be and going there with a purposeful intent I envied.

But not tonight.

Tonight I meant to end these three days of anxiety—days during which I had somehow forgotten that I was a rational and intelligent person. I meant to remember that, despite how I had felt in the past, I was not at the complete whim of circumstance—or of any other phenomena either.

I walked down School Street in the brisk cold of pre-twilight and entered the bookstore.

There was a time when this sheer volume of books—shiny in their crisp dust jackets, stacked along the new arrivals section or, better yet, orphaned on the bargain table—was as intoxicating to me as any wine. That was before I entered the business. Now I couldn’t remember the last time I had been here—only that it had been with Aubrey.

I took the stairs up a half level toward the back of the store. I wasn’t sure where I was going; I just wanted to get out of the entry. Passing between shelves like labyrinth corridors, I veered off between Women’s Studies and Sexuality and found myself, ironically, in Spirituality. There I sequestered myself at the end of a row housing books on guides, angels, and psychics.

Demons, too.

~~5:40. I felt a spike of anxiety but reminded myself that tucked away here, I was the colloquial needle in the haystack. Six o'clock would come and go, and here I'd be, my nose in a book on psych healers. By seven o'clock I'd be taking dinner at a restaurant in Chinatown, perhaps contemplating writing an essay about the lengths desperate writers will go to get published, or at least requesting that our technical team put up a better firewall.~~

I had a second reason for coming here—one that had more to do with the exorcism of Aubrey than disproving the authenticity of demons. Sometime last summer I realized that in moving to Cambridge, I had penned myself in to a little safe-cage and that the city I first loved for its culture, for its civic and intellectual history, had become a connect-the-dots of locations infused with painful memories. So I had started the slow, deliberate process of reclaiming those places I had frequented with Aubrey and of putting new pins in my map that were solely my own.

It was difficult. Even today, walking in through the oversized double doors and passing the coffee bar, I remembered the soy lattes that Aubrey used to drink, the way she drifted up that stair to wander the travel section, there to pick up books on Africa, Italy, and Mongolia, to point out the exotic locations where one could hike to the summit of Kilimanjaro, walk through ruined Pompeii, or spend an overnight in felt yurts—all trips I agreed should go on our list of future places to see. All places I knew I could not afford to take her.

Walking up that half flight of steps tonight, I recalled the collection of *Eyewitness Guides* she had kept on our bookshelf—a constant reminder of unfulfilled hopes and my own shortfalls as a provider. A detail I had forgotten until now. But it came upon me, reflexively and fully formed, the way the smell of a hospital room could conjure my dying father.

It was always like that. I might open a box—there were several in my apartment I had never unpacked yet—and find one of her long, dark hairs still clinging to a spare set of towels or even one of my sweaters. They used to stick to our pillows and sheets, adhering in tangled twists to the lint collector in the dryer. I still expected to see them there sometimes, still smoothed their phantom presence off the pillow before I lay down, just as I still got out of bed in the morning without pulling back the covers.

I slid three books from the shelf and then—on a whim—set up camp in the middle of the aisle I had done as a college student in the Amherst library. As I folded my legs, I noticed that the hem of my pants was fraying. That surprised me as I considered these pants relatively new, but then I realized that they were simply among the last pieces of clothing Aubrey had chosen for me.

The thought summoned a small surge of panic. As much as I was on a mission to mark the corners of all our old haunts, I did not like the idea of her presence disappearing from my life altogether. The long hairs clinging to the sheets were gone. Soon the clothes she had chosen for me would be pawned off to a charity and worn by another man.

I forced my attention to the book in my hands.

I was camped there, well into the first chapter of *Unseen Hands: Discovering Your Guardian Angels*, when a woman tried to sidle past my makeshift roadblock.

I apologized, tried to scoot to the side, and then gave up and got to my feet.

“Sorry.” I nudged my bag out of the way. But instead of passing, she bent down and retrieved two of the books I had left on the floor. Long curly hair the color of new pennies fell over her shoulder. When she straightened, I saw that she was pert-featured and curve-lipped, her skin devoid of the freckles I expected. A tiny diamond winked from the side of her nose as she tilted her head one way and then the other to read the titles in her hands. No wedding ring.

“What do we have here? *Unleashing the God Within* and *Angelic Voices*. Well, it's official”—she returned them to me—“you're a seeker.” She smiled, the bow of her lips stretching in a generous

curve. She was wearing a burgundy coat—velvet—and a low-cut top beneath it. A silver ankh hung from the open neckline against a smooth expanse of skin. She would have stood out anywhere, but she did so especially here, where the local dress code seemed to be anything black.

She was possibly the most beautiful woman I had seen in years.

“Actually, I’m a Republican,” I said stupidly.

“In this town?” She arched a sleek brow at me. “Then you’ll need all the guardian angels you can get.”

Was she flirting? “Are you volunteering? Because I make a good charity case. Obviously.”

Was I flirting?

She fingered the thin chain at her neck, the ankh dancing like a body on a hangman’s noose. Her hands were slender, almost girlish, and I found myself wondering if she were a pianist. “Well, as far as I would have it, I just happen to be between appointments.”

I looked around. Not a well-groomed Mediterranean in sight. I glanced at my watch—it was just past six o’clock. “Would you be willing to discuss terms over coffee?”

“It’s a deal,” she said, laughing. The sound was warm, like sun against my chest.

Downstairs, I ordered coffee and scones—just a snack to tide me until dinner. Who knew, maybe I wouldn’t be dining alone.

Now that was an odd thought. It occurred to me that such an event would constitute my first real date since my divorce, frayed pant hems and all.

At the table I watched with some curiosity as she emptied no fewer than three sugars into her mug, the ankh drawing my attention back to the skin beneath it every time it swayed on its silver chain.

“So, how is the guardian angel business these days?”

She traced the handle of her mug with a fingertip. “Well, for one, the pay is horrible.”

“Sounds like editing.” I chuckled. “My name is Clayton, by the way.”

“I know,” she said, her hazel gaze leveled upon me.

“Guardian angel intuition?”

“No, Clay, because I know everything about you.”

I hesitated. “You didn’t tell me your name,” I said, slowly.

“Yes, I did.” She was no longer smiling.

“You did?” But I knew she hadn’t. Then I saw it: the dark intelligence behind her eyes. Every capillary under my skin bloomed to startled life. She glanced at her wrist; an expensive-looking watch peeked out from beneath her sleeve. “You were early today.”

My heart beat at my ribs like a cudgel. I flashed back to the office I had left an hour ago, to my hesitation on the street—and the fact that even as I entered the *T* station I had not known for certain where I was headed. Had she been following me? I didn’t recognize her from the myriad faces I had studied on the train.

I found myself staring at the copper-haired woman, trying to reconcile what I heard and saw with what I knew to be possible and had formerly thought impossible. I felt fear like a pickax in my gut. “This can’t be real. How can this be real?”

“This is real. So calm down and listen to me.”

“I can’t calm down! This can’t be real. No! I refuse to accept it. Who put you up to this? Was it Richard? He has my wife—what more does he want?” I was trembling, my mind splattered in too many directions at once: Richard, Aubrey, the Mediterranean stranger, the dark presence—and now I felt it, as I had in the café—cloaked in the flawless skin before me. “Tell me why you’re doing this!”

She muttered in a language I didn’t recognize. Suddenly she lunged forward, copper coils splayed over her shoulder, the color at odds with the burgundy of her coat. The effect struck me for an instant

moment as one of fire.

~~She grabbed my hand. "I told you," she said, as though I were unintelligent or a child, or both. "To tell you my story."~~

Warmth spread like something injected directly into my bloodstream, creeping up my arm to my shoulder. I tried to pull away, but as in the café three nights ago, the demon's grip brooked no argument. The warmth spread into my chest. My heart rate slackened. It was still too fast—I don't think any power could have quelled it in that moment—but even as I thought this, I felt my anxiety, the alarm, the intensity of my fear, smooth out into something more placid. As alert as ever, but at least within my control.

"I don't have time for your breakdown, Clay. There are things I need you to know, and at the rate you're going, you're going to give yourself a heart attack, and then you won't be any good to either one of us." Her voice was as smooth as a hypnotist's, and I thought again of my theory that this was in fact, a hoax, that it was merely the power of suggestion working its way through my muscles and veins that even now had relaxed back into the chair.

Then I remembered that for suggestion to work, the subject had to be willing.

My gaze dropped to the table, to her hand, holding mine. Ten minutes ago I had considered the possibility of this very circumstance. Now that it had come to pass, though not in any way I might have imagined, something inside me splintered. With the same kind of spontaneous recall with which I had remembered Aubrey and the travel guides, I returned to that night in our apartment when, long after she was asleep, I crept out of bed, careful not to uncover her. And I saw again the e-mail on her account from Richard, a man I didn't know, saying that he loved her, that he would be thinking of her tomorrow as she told me she was leaving, and that he would be waiting up for her with warm arms afterward. And I knew that night that nothing would ever be the same again.

I knew the same thing now.

Were it not for the unnatural tranquility that had probably saved me a public scene here in the bookstore coffee bar, I might have been overcome by the uncontrollable urge to shout like a madman to lash out at her with a fist, or even to bury my head in my arms and weep.

But I did none of these things. And the woman—the demon—nodded as though satisfied and let go of my fingers. The calm ebbed, but only slightly, when our contact was broken.

"Your body simply needs some time to adjust to what your mind now knows. Meanwhile, no, Richard did not send me. He could no sooner send me than he could call down rocks from heaven. I am here of my own volition, and I have much to tell you."

"Am I going to hell?" I asked, ashamed at the smallness of my voice. "Is that why you're here?"

She sighed and rubbed the back of her neck, rolling her head slightly, in an all-too-human way. "I don't know the answer to that right now."

No comfort there. And while my visceral self had returned to seminormalcy, my mind was as frenetic as before, in ways that would have been impossible had my calm been the result of any conventional means like a drug. I was desperately trying to remember what, if anything, I had learned about demons in eighth-grade confirmation class.

Something, like a shiny bit of pottery mired in the mud of a shipwreck, caught the eye of my memory: *Father of Lies*.

"If you're a demon, why should I believe anything you say?"

She nodded, making no apparent effort to pass it off. "You raise a very good point. So let's get this issue of credibility out of the way right now. I won't waste my time telling you I'm not a liar because that, in itself, would be a lie. But I tell you, lying to you now will not serve my purpose."

"What purpose is that? And why should I care or listen to anything you say?"

"*Finally* an interesting question!" the demon said with what nearly sounded like relief. "The first

answer is that I want to set the record straight. To shatter a few myths about my kind. The second answer is this: because it is a story unlike any other. I believe you'll find it to be of personal interest.

"Why, because I'm a seeker?" I didn't hold back the bitterness.

"Because my story is ultimately about you."

Something in me recoiled. "I don't see how that's possible."

She folded her arms on the edge of the table. "When you were growing up, you honestly believed in the morals of stories, in the integrity of comic-book heroes, of Batman on television, didn't you? And it had a greater impact on you than having morality drummed into your psyche by a church telling you to please an angry and distant god. You were good on principle. And yet here you are without a wife or kids, or the success that being good was supposed to win you. Am I right? I know I am. And so you're on a quest for new meaning because the alternative is only this: that goodness has won you nothing but pain. And you're not willing to accept that."

"No."

"You need a sense of context, that larger picture. As I said before, I can give you that. But you have to hear me out."

As she said all of this, I found myself drawn to her in a wholly different way than I had before—against judgment, against instinct. And perhaps this was the grandest seduction of it all: that she was right.

"Don't worry about anything else. Simply write down what I tell you. Each word. Everything. And then you'll know it is real and you are sane."

"I can't remember each word. My mind is shattered, can't you tell?" But even as I said this, I knew I could recite that first conversation verbatim if I wanted to. Even now the full flow of that conversation came over me, as though summoned by the mere act of thinking of it, our exchanges that night and this one intertwining and overlapping like competing melodies in my mind.

"You'll remember."

She glanced at her watch and frowned. The ankh swung in the window of her neckline as she gathered her coat. I had been transfixed by that view before, but found I could hardly look at it now.

She . . . he . . . it left, as it had before, without preamble. *I come to you at great risk*, Lucian said the first night. What, exactly, had the demon meant by that?

I SPENT THE NEXT two weeks going through the motions of a job that seemed suddenly meaningless. I checked the time, the date, my calendar, with a regularity that bordered on obsession. I wrote down and read—and then reread—my accounts of both encounters, though I didn't need to. As I promised, I hadn't forgotten one word of either. I began to think that this was the real demonic trick to trap me in this limbo—less dead than before, not quite alive.

And then the mysterious *L* appeared again.

Trying to get away from my home before the appointed time, I noticed the church down the street with new eyes, saw it for perhaps the first time as more than scenery on the way elsewhere. A moment later I was checking the doors—it was Saturday, after all. But they admitted me easily, and I found myself loitering in the narthex until, with great hesitation, I entered the sanctuary.

I chose a creaky pew toward the back.

I immediately felt out of place. I hadn't been to church in years, and then only for holidays and weddings. I was conscious of every sound, of the still postures of those few sitting or kneeling in the pews ahead of me. I wondered if, having been in the presence of a demon, I would conversely better notice the presence of God.

But I felt nothing.

In the last week I'd been tempted to search through the boxes remaining in my spare room for my old confirmation certificate. But I couldn't bear the idea of discovering something of Aubrey's, or even seeing her writing on the side of the box from the first time it had been used when we moved together. Ultimately, I decided a weathered certificate would shed light on nothing. Nothing could have prepared me for this. I couldn't remember Pastor Feagan ever teaching about demons, or even the devil, except in the vaguest terms.

Not that God had been a specific notion to me, either. God was as real as the gravity on Jupiter or the expansion of the universe. Conceptually significant, yes—especially if one studied astronomy and lived on Jupiter—but nothing I expected to know much about, firsthand, in this world. I had always subscribed to the more modern belief that religion was fraught with contradictions, the product of an overgrown oral tradition that only the fanatical tried to package neatly as one tries to tame kudzu.

And, as Lucian had aptly observed, I'd never needed religion to be a good person. My father brought that out in me on his own. Never a perfect man, his temper would lie dormant for weeks at a time, waiting to erupt at the first sign of any misdeed or bad grade. Silence was a good sign, no never always the good kind. With an upbringing like that, there had been no need for God.

A stretch of afternoon light angled across several pews as the church door opened. A moment later a black man in a denim jacket entered my pew from the other side and sat down next to me. He smelled like sandalwood and soap. My gaze slid to my watch.

4:15 p.m.

"I wondered if you'd be able to walk through the door." I kept my eyes fixed on the altar, on the cross atop it.

"Lucifer himself has access to the throne room of God. Do you think a church is any problem for me?" His voice was a warm baritone that did not need whispers to be kept between us.

"How can that be?"

"Why would it not be? Neither of us is evil by design."

"Because you were angels, you mean."

"I was. Lucifer is a cherub."

With some confusion I conjured chubby-winged children in diapers and practically heard him answering scowl. "It isn't what you're thinking," he said, more loudly than before. "The cherubim are the highest of our order, the most powerful of us all. Know that on Lucifer's creation, El called him perfect."

I turned toward him, openly studying him now. He had a broad forehead and long, high cheekbones. The angular lines of a short moustache exactly delineated the curve of his upper lip.

which was perfectly matched to the lower one. A hint of stubble smattered his chin and neck, like lichen growing on a great, smooth stone.

“He called him perfect with good reason. Lucifer was his masterwork. He was powerful, anointed by God, and so very beautiful.”

I thought I heard him sigh.

“Then what about seraphim?” I asked, not because of any spectacular knowledge of my own, but according to literary lore, CHERUBIM and SERAPHIM had once been the license plates on Ann Rice’s two limousines.

“The seraphim are fearsome fighters, but the cherubim outrank them. And then there are the archangels. You’ve heard of Gabriel and Michael—”

There was a slight, just-perceptible intonation to his words when he spoke these names, as well as the name of Lucifer, and even his own name. Not quite an accent, it was more an elongation on the tongue, as though the pure names in another language might be unpronounceable in ours. Hearing him now, I remembered it in the speech of the woman in the bookstore and of the man in the café.

“I won’t go into detail about all the various kinds of cherubim and seraphim. It may be best that I not describe them, lest, with all those faces and wings, you think us a spiritual freak show.”

Beyond his profile, a stained-glass saint stared out upon us both with hollow, fractured eyes. “And you? What about you?”

“Ah, me.” He spread his hands on his lap. They were lighter colored on the inside, the creases between them dark. The calluses on his palms struck me as aberrant. A stainless-steel watch peered beneath the edge of his cuff. “I was a member of the Host. A shining light, mere and marvelous.”

“How did it happen then—your change, I mean?” The question tasted surreal on my lips.

Lucian reached up to rub the back of his neck. I had seen Sheila do the same at the onset of her migraines. “I should tell that story from the beginning. But this place isn’t conducive to talking.”

“Because of the crosses?”

“No, because the praying of those people is giving me a headache.”

“The crosses don’t bother you?”

“They should bother you a great deal more. They were used to kill humans.”

I had not thought of that.

“Stay if you like, but I’m going.” He rose and moved down the length of the pew to the side aisle where he’d entered. Two weeks ago I would have gladly let him go. I would have camped out, in fact, in the front pew and inquired about moving in. But now I needed to know what this, any of this, had to do with me.

This, the question that had niggled at me these last two weeks, was helped not at all by his cryptic answers.

We stepped out, blinking, into the cold afternoon light. Now I could see the wiry gray hairs above his ears, the dark spots dotting his cheeks, betraying his age. He had a presence about him, an unflappability that I found slightly unsettling. He was casually dressed, his pants not dissimilar to mine that day in the bookstore, albeit softer around the knees. To any other eye he might have been a local academic out for a casual weekend. An accountant on his day off. A tourist.

“So you popped up from hell to meet me in church.” I shoved my hands into my pockets.

“I’ve never been there.”

“To church?”

“To hell.”

I squinted at him.

“You’ve got so much of this wrong, Clay. Your conventional wisdom lacks one thing: wisdom. None of us have been to hell.”

“So it doesn’t really exist.”

“Not now, no.”

“So you mean you haven’t been to hell *yet*.”

He flashed me such a baleful glance that my heart tripped in my chest. I started down the street stiffly, my shoulders having risen toward my ears in the chill. A moment later, the demon fell into step beside me.

“To begin my story I should say that my beginning predates yours by a brief infinity.”

“You’re not making sense.” I didn’t look at him.

“The beginning of the world is only the beginning of time. Your Scriptures, being written for your benefit, begin at the point where you enter history. But my beginning came long before.”

“In heaven, I suppose.”

“No, Eden.”

“What, the garden of Eden?”

“Yes. That garden, the green one, was in Eden. And Eden is here. This.” He spread his hands out toward the expanse of sidewalk in front of us. “Eden preexisted that garden and the first of your kind. It was Lucifer’s—and my—home first.”

I raised my brows.

“What—you thought the world was full of nothingness before your creation?” He gave a short laugh. “Rather ethnocentric of you, isn’t it? Do you believe the earth is flat, too? Listen to me: Elohim created Eden. He also created us. And that includes Lucifer—which is important because no creation is equal to the creator. What that means for you is that, contrary to popular myth, Lucifer is no evil opposite of God.”

“I thought Lucifer was God’s nemesis.”

He stopped. “Clay, for this to work you have to let go of that. This is not your so-called classic human tale of the struggle between good and evil. Hades, but you humans always have a way of distorting the truth into something utterly simplistic and banal—not to mention trite.”

We walked again, and for several moments there was nothing but the steady sound of our heels on the sidewalk and the occasional brittle leaf that skittered across it, joined from time to time by the orphaned bits of conversations from passing pedestrians and the cars on Massachusetts Avenue. In the distance a church bell chimed the half hour.

At length he said, “Elohim was my god before you ever existed. We called him that—‘Mighty God and Creator’—though the name implies so much more. I say this for you because the fearful names we have known since those first days cannot be formed by human tongues.”

I thought again of the barely perceptible lilt of his words that I had noticed earlier.

“El made a garden in Eden and lavished Lucifer with everything—all government, total power. He lived there like a favorite first son, the hawk to our sparrows, the jewel to our quartz.”

“So why did he make you? Especially if he knew you would turn out . . . like this.”

“I could ask you the same thing.” But he didn’t. “Why El made us, I’ve never known. One could surmise that El was lonely, but the fact is that he didn’t really need us. You, created in his image, might actually have more insight into that question than I do. We’re not so privileged as you in that way. As for me, my purpose for living, my role in this great scheme was clear to me from the first: to fall down, to worship, to praise, to wait upon the word of El.”

“That sounds really boring.”

“Really? Imagine the bliss of fulfilling one’s created purpose.”

I couldn’t. “Why do you sometimes call him *El*—irreverence?”

“Here is where your language fails you utterly. *El* means ‘Mighty God’, though that does the meaning no justice. *Elohim* implies more, including plurality—‘the God of gods,’ you might say

Regardless of what you call him, he was all things to us then, which is very different from what I may be to you. Not a father—no, never that for us—but the reason for our very existence. The Great Initiator. Ever Enduring. Alpha and Omega.” The demon sighed. “As for us, we were a sight to behold, glorious, unequivocal, each of us distinctly individual but of one purpose. Shining, more than brilliant, we had spent a brief infinity reflecting Shekinah glory like so many polished mirrors. How radiant we were! It was my happiest, most glorious moment. For a small eternity—if you can fathom such a thing—I was happy.”

There was poignancy in the rich timbre of his voice. Walking with me like this, he might have been any man retelling the tale of a happy, thirty-year marriage before his wife died. For a moment I almost felt sorry for him. “So why did you turn your back on it?”

He tilted his head skyward, narrowed his eyes. “I was promised more.”

We were on Brattle Street and had come to a drugstore advertising a post-Halloween sale. Masks hung in the window, a motley assortment of orcs, Klingons, zombies, and former presidents—the presidents looking too much like the zombies for any zombie’s comfort. In the corner a red-faced Satan peered out between Yoda and Spider-Man. The sight of it startled me, as though Lucifer himself, having heard his name, had come to eavesdrop on us.

Lucian stopped before the red face, the stubby, polyurethane horns that protruded from the forehead. He studied it so thoughtfully I wondered if it were possible he hadn’t ever seen one like this before.

“I remember the first time I ever saw a rendering of one of my kind,” he said, finally, seeming to gaze beyond the glass, beyond even the store. “Belial took me to see it with such passion and insistence that I expected a wonder, a thing of marvel—anything but the hideous vision before me with the man’s body and bird’s taloned feet. It was covered with fur like a mangy goat and had dark and hideous wings. I was stupefied and not a little offended. ‘What kind of abomination was this supposed to be?’ I demanded. Belial, finding this uproariously funny, bowed and pointed. ‘Behold, the fearsome Belial!’ he said, which was ridiculous, as he has always been beautiful.”

He turned a baffled look on me. “I thought your mad and genius artists were supposed to succumb to higher visions beyond the corporeal world. But there you are, still painting your devils red with horns, making Lucifer, our shining star, into a grotesque goat-man. And these are the images that remain to this day: ugly, marred, toppling from heaven, herded toward hell by the swords of shining blond men with stoic faces and bleached togas—Michael and Gabriel, I presume.” He turned away.

“Just think,” I said, in a moment of facetiousness, “you can dress up as a devil on Halloween and no one will recognize you.” I regretted my recklessness the moment I said it.

“Just think,” he said, too lightly, “you might pass me in the street and never know it. If I wished you might even feel lust for me.”

He glanced sidelong at me, and I shrank back at the memory of copper hair, of a silver anklet swinging against smooth skin, pointing at the breasts beneath.

“Why do you show up like this, in these different guises?” I hated the feeling of being caught always unawares.

“I like the feel of trying them out,” he said, as though they were nothing more than new shoes on a bicycle.

I thought of the calluses on his hands, the telltale record of a history not his own. I wondered if they belonged to someone, or once had.

I shook the thought away. I might be a seeker, but there were some things I did not want to know.

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