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## Chapter 1

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*The devil in torn fatigues made an indecent proposal. I said, okey-dokey.*

I knew I was doomed when the devil walked into my Hallucinogens and Culture lecture at Miami International University wearing fatigues torn at the knees, a black t-shirt with a red anarchy symbol stretched on his broad chest, with a wrinkled khaki expedition shirt with the sleeves rolled up as a jacket. He had a snake tattoo on his muscular right forearm and a dagger tattoo on his left. He also had freckles. Even indoors, the devil kept his classic black Ray-Bans on his face and a black fedora on his head. *Who wears a black fedora in Miami?* The devil does.

First thing he did was pull his sunglasses down the bridge of his straight pointy nose, and focus his gray eyes on me.

I sat alone in the center front row of the auditorium, with my notebook out and my four-color Bic ready for action, waiting for my anthropology professor Dr. Pierce to arrive, possibly a little late again. The devil popped his glasses back over his eyes, gave me a twisted grin, sat in the chair to my left,

crossed his ankle over his knee, showing off bunched up khaki socks and combat boots, and leaned over to whisper in my ear, “Can I borrow your notes?”

“What?” I squeaked and snapped the rubber band on my wrist. Men didn’t talk to me. It was just a given. I was the goodie-goodie mouse with the buttoned up blouse and there were lots of hot chicks in college waiting for attention. I was waiting for my lessons.

“You look like you’ve been paying attention in class, and I’m getting caught up,” he said, his breath warm on my neck. “Can I borrow your notes?”

“Um, okey-dokey,” I said, reaching in my backpack for my giant ring binder with each of the six classes I was taking this semester marked on a color divider: English Literature, Astronomy, Linguistics, French, Philosophy, Anthropology. I turned to the last section, opened the ring binder, which made a louder noise than I recall it making before, pulled out my well-marked Cornell Notes and passed him all twelve pages. “You can keep them.”

He looked the papers over briefly, rolled them from the bottom up into a sloppy scroll, and stuffed the scroll in a pocket of his expedition shirt. It set my teeth on edge to see him treat my neat, pale-green pages this way, but I had given them willingly.

“Have you taken acid before?” he asked, as I put my binder away again. “Or peyote?”

“Nope,” I said, snapping the rubber band before grabbing my pen again and placing it in position to take notes as soon as Dr. Pierce walked in.

“Mushrooms?”

“Only on pizza,” I said.

“Smoked a joint?”

“No.”

“Drank absinthe?”

“No.”

Each of his questions sounded like an invitation, and I was feeling tempted to try anything he asked me next. There was something in the deep, raspy timber of his voice that drew me close to him, and his rich scent overwhelmed me. The devil smelled like the ocean in a storm, salty, turbulent and raw. You could drown in him.

I snapped my rubber band again and shifted in my seat, trying to put a bit of distance between us. He adjusted himself back to my side.

“What’s the worst thing you’ve ever done?” he asked.

That was easy. “I killed my father,” I said. *Snap*. I wasn’t sure why I was telling a perfect stranger this, but you just can’t lie to the devil. He makes you confess.

“How?” he asked

“Car accident,” I said, pulling hard on the rubber band and releasing it again.

“That doesn’t count.” He shrugged.

“It does to me,” I said. That broke his spell for a moment. Who did he think he was making light of my sin? Jerk.

“It’s fate. It’s random. Nothing deliberate,” the devil said, that voice soothing my pain. It sounded like he understood my guilt, which helped cast the spell again.

“What’s the worst thing you’ve done?” I asked him, imagining the answer could be almost anything under the sun. He looked like a man who had been around the world a few times, and a little too old for this class, to be honest. I guessed he might be on the GI bill, since the fatigues looked genuine enough and well-worn. There was an edge of danger to him and a bit of not giving a damn which I found extremely attractive. He smiled a full, warm smile which instantly put you at ease, which couldn’t be good news since the rest of him promised nothing but trouble. “Follow me after class, and I’ll tell you.”

Now, a normal, rational, healthy person would have turned that offer down in a heartbeat, right? But I am none of those things. I don't think I've ever been normal. My mother would be the first to tell you I'm not. I've never liked the things other girls liked. I'd lived my life in the fantasy world of my imagination and my books. Sometimes the real world felt like an interruption. While I might be smart, logic did not drive me. Fancy did. I had always been waiting to follow a rabbit down a rabbit hole so I could have tea with the Mad Hatter.

As far as healthy goes, well, I wasn't that either. My orderly, structured habits were a corset I forced myself to wear so my messy, bloody guts wouldn't spill out. But I was dying to spill. I was eager to break. The corset was stifling, and I could barely breathe. The devil offered oxygen. I snapped my rubber band.

"Okey-dokey," I said.

Just then Dr. Pierce walked in, and after missing a step up to the lectern when he glanced our way, he adjusted himself and began his lecture on the historic uses of the *Amanita muscaria*.

I recognized it as the cute red and white mushrooms my mother had on her sugar bowls, kitchen towels and refrigerator magnets back home. I thought they were just the little Super Mario mushrooms, which actually the Nintendo ones were based on that, but the real ones were deadly, and a strong hallucinogen used by witches to fly on their brooms, according to lore. There was probably some sexual angle to that, I figured.

"Have you ever tried one of those?" the devil leaned in again to ask.

"Of course not," I whispered.

"Do you want to?"

I snapped my rubber band. Dr. Pierce shot us a look, and I didn't answer. But what part of deadly poison, even in small

doses, didn't this Mad Hatter in a fedora understand? The devil laughed.

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His name was Erik Rowland, the devil. He put his arm around my shoulders as we walked out of class and didn't seem to mind when I tried to shrug out of it. Erik just grabbed me closer and said, "You need some trouble in your life, girl."

"No, I'm sure I don't," I said, but honestly I did. I needed trouble, danger, sin. I needed Erik.

You're going to think this is weird, but I think it was his scent. Pheromones work just as nature intended. They are like a drug. Erik's scent made me high. It made me feel wild and free. I wanted to do terrible things when I was near him, and I wanted him to do terrible things to me.

It sure wasn't his creepy personality that won me over. Erik, the devil, acted like he'd decided I was his new pet and he was going to teach me all kinds of tricks from the start. Well, maybe it was that. I don't know. I was also eager to learn tricks. He looked like the sort of man who could teach me more than a few.

College is hard, and I was feeling very out of place, especially since I had to settle in the living room of our quad because of Princess Lucia. More on that later. I felt a strange blend of tired and vulnerable and wired. I was easy prey, and Erik was an apex predator.

But there was more to it, too. I'd been a good girl my entire life. Aside from getting my father killed, that is. Erik was right. It was fate. But how would he know? He was weird, but so was I. Maybe that was what it was. He was definitely no angel. Or maybe just a fallen angel.

Erik was painfully handsome. Like it literally hurt me to look at him. He made my chest ache; it was hard to breathe.

My skin felt so tight around my body that I thought it might snap, and a spot deep between my legs wept with hunger. Even in his odd, ratty clothes, hiding under sunglasses and a fedora — *Seriously, why?* — Erik seemed to only be disguising a sinfully gorgeous appearance. His body was rock hard temptation. And that smile. There was something in it that just made you want to say ‘yes’ to anything and everything.

That was part of it, too. After the whole Princess Lucia thing—I’ll explain soon, I promise—I was questioning the wisdom of my good girl habits. I had been wishing I could learn to be a bad girl, the kind who didn’t get pushed around unless she wanted to be. You know what I mean?

“Want to have a beer?” Erik asked as we walked the crooked path between buildings, under the shade of the Hammocks, approaching the Student Union.

“I don’t drink,” I said.

“Because of the accident?” he asked.

*And that was weird. How could he know?* “Yes, plus, drinking makes me very sick. I’ve got a heavy credit load this semester. I’m on a tight budget,” I said. *And I was a good girl who did nothing but study and didn’t party.*

I pulled my rubber band. *Snap.*

“So, what do you do for fun? What would you be doing now, if you weren’t with me?”

“Um, I would be at Finnegan’s Lake, feeding Patrick and the boys, and reviewing today’s notes.” *And avoiding going back to the dorms until it was absolutely necessary.*

“Finnegan’s Lake?”

“It’s what I call the lake between the art and the science buildings, on the way to the dorms. It’s a pleasant spot to watch the sunset and people leave you alone.”

“Like Joyce,” he said, understanding the reference in the name I’d given to my hangout, which surprised me a little. I didn’t expect someone built like him, who literally carried no

books and had to borrow my notes, to get it. Erik wasn't what he appeared to be.

"Who are Patrick and the boys?" he asked.

"Patrick is a really ornery snapping turtle and the boys are ducks," I said. "They really like cheese crackers from the vending machines. We've all become friends."

"Can I join you?"

"Seriously?"

"Why, is Patrick jealous?"

"No, just snappy, but he responds well to crackers. The boys can be persistent."

"I can handle them," Erik said.

I didn't doubt the devil for a minute.

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We sat in my favorite spot, watching as the sun painted the sky in shades of lavender, pink, and orange. Erik had told the boys to go away when they came after a second bag of crackers and they listened. It impressed me, since they would usually keep coming back. But maybe he had this dominating effect on all living things. For example, he'd asked me to tell him about myself and I'd spent the last two hours baring my soul, sharing things I rarely said aloud or allowed myself to dwell on for very long, while he sat listening intently, hanging on my every word, not judging.

"I'm sorry, I've been babbling," I said, snapping my rubber band, feeling self-conscious.

"No, you haven't," he said, stroking my arm, which sent an electric shock running through me to beat the rubber band.

"How about you?" I asked, trying to recover. "Why are you only starting the semester now?"

It was the beginning of October, and it surprised me Dr. Price had allowed any more sign-ups, to be honest. Like I said,

Erik just didn't look like he belonged in college, though I wasn't trying to be judgmental. It wasn't his age. It was his demeanor. He was young; I guessed somewhere under thirty. But he was also old beyond his years.

"I'm not starting," he said, "just auditing. I've been busy with other things. Why'd you pick that class?"

"It just sounded interesting," I shrugged. "I needed a Humanities elective and, believe it or not, that counts."

"So you're not trying to become a witch or a shaman?"

"No," I laughed.

"That's a shame," he said. "I bet you'd make a good witch."

"I don't really want to be a good witch," I said.

"Do you want to be a bad one?"

"Some days," I admitted, snapping my rubber band. "Being good all the time can be exhausting."

Erik put his finger on my rubber band and lifted it up with his index finger. "What's this for?"

"Nothing, just a habit," I said. I'd told him so much about myself already, my favorite books and movies and how they made me feel, my greatest ambitions and my hopes and dreams. The rubber band was my shame, and I wasn't ready to talk about that yet.

He raised it and let it snap, keeping his eyes turned to me. Except he still had the sunglasses on, so all I saw was myself reflected, wincing at the delicious burning sting of the thick rubber striking my flesh. His lips twisted into a grin.

"I'll make you a deal," he said. "Share all your class notes with me. Tell me all your secrets. I'll teach you how to be the best wicked witch in this place—in all of Miami. Possibly, the most wicked witch in the entire world."

"Don't be silly," I laughed.

Erik gripped my chin, took off his sunglasses, and looked at me with those hypnotic gray eyes. "I am dead serious,



Cynthia.” The way he said my name, stretching the ‘Cyn’ and stroking the ‘thia’ with the tip of his tongue made me melt like *helado* in the sun. I needed to be licked right quick, or put back in the freezer. “I want to train you to be everything you dreamed you could be, and more.”

“Why?” I asked. My voice was little more than a jagged breath.

“Because I’d enjoy it,” he said. Then he moved closer, gripped my head in one firm hand and my back with the other and gave me a kiss that was practically a prolonged violation, except I had totally wanted him to do it.

It was mouth to mouth resuscitation. I felt like I had just come to life, like everything up to this point had only been a troubling dream, and I’d been mostly numb, but now I was wide awake and on fire. His kiss promised sharper pain and better pleasure than my rubber band could ever deliver. When he stopped, with a gentle nip of my lips, I was his already, and he knew it. He could make me do anything he liked.

“Okey-dokey,” I sighed.

He grinned. “Come, Cyn.” He rose and took my hand, pulling me up off the lawn. “Let’s sort out your princess problem.”

“Oh, I don’t know.” I hesitated. I didn’t think he meant to turn me into a wicked witch immediately. Maybe just teach me a couple of tricks? The kiss definitely counted as a major one. That was probably enough lessons for one night.

“I *do* know,” he said, putting his arm around my shoulders. “And you have to do what I say. That’s our contract.”

“What’s the worst thing you’ve done?” I asked, running my finger over the rubber band.

He smiled again, a broader smile that made me ache for him more intensely. Then he pulled and snapped my band again. “I haven’t done it yet.”

It wasn’t really an answer. I hoped whatever the worst

thing he did, eventually, wouldn't involve me. I had the sense it might. Despite that, I followed Erik, his hard hand holding my rubber band hand, down the path to the dorms.

What can I say? I was enchanted and the devil always gets what he wants.