

## **The Devil's Details**

a commissioned work by *Corrupting Power* ( <http://www.patreon.com/CorruptingPower> )

### **Chapter One**

The commute to work via the subway was no slice of heaven for anyone, but Tabitha St. Cloud had it worse than most people. Most people were worried about muggings or rats or stepping in trash or shit on the floors. Tabitha only wished she had those kinds of problems, because hers were of an entirely different strain all together.

Sometimes Tabitha saw things that weren't there.

It had started as a child, but back then, it had been rare, and eventually Tabitha stopped talking about them, especially since mentioning them had freaked out her foster parents. She'd always been exceptionally bright, even as a child. She'd figured out early on that they weren't things other people could see, and she'd done her best to push them to the back of her mind as she grew up, but over the last few years, they'd started appearing more and more frequently, and that was a very dangerous thing to have happening during her commute, especially since she had to change lines multiple times along the way.

She started on the Number 2 line, which she hopped on at the 233<sup>rd</sup> St. station, a short walk away from her apartment, then took it down to the Jackson Avenue station, where she hopped over to the Number 5 line. Then at the Lexington/53<sup>rd</sup> St. station, she hopped over to the M line, taking it over to her final stop, the Rockefeller Center station, where she'd get off and head back above ground to walk the final few blocks to the building that housed her job for the summer.

Assuming she made it, of course.

And the last few weeks, she'd felt more and more like that wasn't guaranteed, because the distractions were getting more vivid, more distracting and far more graphic.

When she'd been a child, they'd been simple things, easy to dismiss, a person standing in the distance, sometimes with wings, sometimes with horns, occasionally with both, usually just watching, sometimes waving, never getting close enough for her to get a good look at them.

The first few times, her foster parents had thought maybe she simply had an imaginary friend, something common enough for a girl of her age, but as she grew older, the visions receded and they became so infrequent that Tabitha herself had written it off as just the delusions of a child's mind.

On her first day on the commute, however, she had seen a large man sit down at the other end of the train car, and for half a second, she had been certain that she'd seen horns poking out from the edge of his hat.

That night, she'd woken up in the early twilight hours from one of the most vivid dreams she'd ever had, standing atop a clifftop of darkest obsidian rock, overlooking a sea of fire and lava, while on the hill behind her, dozens of couples, demonic in form and nature, engaged in all sorts of sexual perversity, female, male, some combination of the two, all layered atop of each other, bodies connected by barbed cocks and spiked tails jammed into any orifice they could find, a chorus of moans of ecstasy and agony all intertwined. And as she stood overlooking the mass of slithering flesh, she felt pride and a sense of accomplishment before she had snapped from the dream in a cold sweat.

She wasn't sure if it was a byproduct of spending all her time in New York City, or perhaps the immense increase in people around her all the time, and some part of her couldn't wait to get away from the Big Apple.

Since her first day in the city, the dreams had come every few days, each more vivid and lurid than the last. Sometimes it had even been hard to convince herself she was dreaming, as if the dreams had taken on coherency and reality of their own accord, unwilling to let her abandon them to step away from the moment and back to her day-to-day life.

She'd also caught glimpses of gothic and pornographic images out of the corner of her eye multiple times on the subway. Once, as she was getting off the train, she was *sure* she had glanced into

one row of seats to see a demonic woman going down on a demonic man, his clawed hands holding onto her horns, forcing her face upon his hideous and bulbous cock. But she'd been in a swell of people pushing towards the exit for the train, and couldn't stop to confirm it. In fact, the moment she thought she saw it, it was almost as though the crowd around her had surged forward even more vehemently, like she had willed them to take her away from the sight of it.

If this was the sort of thing she was seeing the commute, Tabitha thought to herself, then what sorts of horrors were going to infect the rest of her waking life? She'd had similar problems the previous year, when she'd been working in Brooklyn, but the distance between the office and her rented room for the summer were much shorter back then, which limited her exposure to the big city.

New York City was a world unto itself, and one, it seemed, that skewed towards her hallucinations being front and center.

So far, her work life had remained untainted by the dark visions, but she worried how much longer such a thing would last, and was debating whether or not she should go and see a doctor. But she was also willing to consider the option that the pressure of the job was simply getting to her, and that she just needed to relax and unwind a little.

There weren't any surreal visions today as she exited the subway and headed up to the building she worked in near Rockefeller Plaza. She had won a rather prestigious slot as a law clerk and paralegal for the offices of Ariton, Oriens & Associates, one of the most selective and well-respected private practices in New York City.

AOA, as they were called for short, took on only a handful of new clients each year, and instead dedicated themselves to 'full service' of the people that they had contracted with earlier. Exactly what sort of work that meant they were doing, Tabitha still wasn't entirely certain, and she was well into the time of her summer internship.

On her first day on the job, she'd been tasked with looking up maritime law in regards to piracy and commandeering vessels on the open seas. The day after that, her boss had set her into what the legal definition of the word 'salacious' when it came to broadcasting, and what specific laws were on the books in regards to that.

Each subsequent day brought with it a new task, often obscure, often titillating, never related to the previous day's work and never once with any knowledge as to what or who the research was for. In fact, she hadn't even met any of the six practicing attorneys in the office yet, something she'd thought was guaranteed as part of her position.

Tabitha still had a few years left of study to do at Buffalo State College, but her professors had all urged her to make sure she spent her summers clerking, and the more prominent the placement she could get, the better. Her first year she'd clerked for the public defender's office in Brooklyn, and while she had seen a side of the law she felt it was important to learn about, she had also learned that it was likely not where she saw herself once she graduated.

While she felt that the role of the public defender was an important one, she also felt like she had seen some of the absolute bottom of the barrel when it came to humanity, people so reprehensible that she couldn't even begin to understand how anyone could defend them. Some of them didn't lack remorse so much as take pride in the atrocities they'd committed, eager to brag about their criminal actions to any ear close enough to listen.

So when the next summer had rolled around, she'd made a point of sending her resume to every major law firm up and down the murderer's row of high-priced defense firms. If she was going to be exposed to horrible people doing horrible things, she decided, the least she could do was to be well compensated for the exposure.

She hadn't even remembered sending a letter to AOA, having to look them up when they called her to schedule an interview, only to see how prestigious their offices looked. The interviewer had been incredibly adept at avoiding telling her who they represented, only to say that the work was engaging, challenging and paid extremely well.

“One thing we can guarantee you here at AOA,” the interviewer had told her, “is that no two days will ever be the same.”

When they'd offered her a paid position for the summer, and included how much the compensation would be, she'd knew she'd have to be a fool to turn it down, so she'd accepted.

This was the first day of her third week with the company, and she hoped at some point, she learned at least a little about how her research was going to fit into the case it was tied to, or who the client was. Just *some* idea of what all of it was *for* would be an excellent start. It mostly felt like busy work, and while she tried not to have too big an ego, it almost felt like a waste of her time.

She stepped into the elevator, seeing only two other people in the small, ornately decorated box, both outlandish and unmistakable in their appearances.

One was a slender Asian man in his sixties, dressed in a traditional Chinese suit, the layered designs in white cloth over the powder blue backdrop of silk, his white hair drawn back and braided into a long whip-like tail that hung down his back, his eyes concealed behind a pair of large mirrored oval sunglasses, his hands folded together in front of him. A silver pendant hung around his neck, a sort of hyperstylized metallic flame design.

The other man was about of equal height as the Chinese man, but as muscular as the Chinese man was thin. He looked brawny in a way that Tabitha had never seen up close and personal before, his forearms as thick around as her thighs. His skin was a very dark brown, his black hair curled tight against his scalp. He had a thick bushy black beard that jutted down to his collarbone, but it was incredibly well-kept. He was dressed in a large dashiki, red with black, gold and purple patterns overlaid one another, with loose pants that hinted at powerful legs still concealed beneath. He, too, wore mirrored sunglasses over his eyes, although his were curved rectangles, wrapping around the side of his head, the frames almost flush against his skin. He kept his hands behind his back. Around his neck hung a gold pendant, the piece hanging from it a lump of gold that had been crafted into the shape of a cloud.

More disturbingly, neither man wore shoes, each sporting a pair of leather sandals, leaving their bare feet exposed. In Buffalo, she might not have thought much of it, but in NYC, it almost felt like taking one's life into one's own hands.

As the doors closed, Tabitha moved to push the button for her floor, 37, only to see that it was already lit. The only offices on that floor, and the one above it, were for AOA, so she immediately began to wonder if the two men were clients, although she supposed it was possible they could also be attorneys.

“I see you are headed to the same place we are, young lady,” the Asian man said to her, his voice layered with an accent from somewhere in southeastern Asia, Singapore or Hong Kong perhaps. “Are you one of the associates?”

“Well,” Tabitha said with a shy smile. “I'm a summer intern, one of many law clerks AOA employs, so only in the most literal definition of the word. I'm certainly not a practicing attorney with them. I'm guessing you must be clients?”

The darker skinned man laughed, a warm and calming sound like full clinking beer glasses, as he answered her in a voice that was tinged with a heavy African accent. “No, no, we are, what is the word I am seeking for, my friend?”

“Leg breakers?” the slender Asian man joked.

“Consultants,” the African man replied, sounding pleased in his ability to recall the word. “That is it. We are consultants.”

“Only to be requested for special and extremely specialized tasks,” the Asian man said to her. “Because we do not take sides, you see, so we are among the few who can be tasked as arbiters, to ensure a fair competition.”

“Competition?” Tabitha said.

“Mmm,” the African man said to her. “As we are without loyalty to either side, something that

is quite rare in a game of this scale, our presence is invaluable.”

“But most necessary,” the Asian man said. “We cannot be compelled, no matter how much the two factions might wish it.”

“And lo, how they do wish it,” the African man agreed.

“But that compulsion is to be denied, and sportsmanship, instead, to be maintained.”

“That sounds important,” Tabitha agreed. “Who's our firm playing against?”

“It isn't so much the entire firm as simply one of the partners. Veronica Gomory. She has retained our services to ensure a fair competition as dictated by the terms of the Accord.”

“The Accord?” Tabitha said. “Which Accord?”

“For the Western worlds? The oldest one there is,” the African man said, matter-of-factly as the elevator doors moved to open. They waited for her to step out into the lobby then stepped out behind her. “We did not catch your name, Miss...?”

“St. Cloud,” she said, taking his hand, shaking it. “Tabitha Saint Cloud. And you are?”

“Oh! Well, then it has been our pleasure making your acquaintance early, Miss St. Cloud,” the man said, towering over her, bowing down, still not bringing his eyes to be level with hers. He went to shake her hand, and for a moment, Tabitha thought she saw her own fingers disappear in the inky muscular grip of the black man's powerful hand. “My name is Shango, and this is my colleague and friend, Zhurong.”

“A pleasure, Miss St. Cloud,” Zhurong said, offering a very formal and practiced bow. “I am certain we will be seeing more of one another in the coming days.”

“Good luck to you,” Shango said, releasing her hand. He turned to the receptionist, a good looking woman in her mid twenties named Teresa. Tabitha had always thought Tessa quite lovely, although maybe a little too formal for her own tastes. “Shango and Zhurong, here for our appointment with Miss Gomory.”

“Of course, gentlemen,” Teresa said, standing up immediately. “If you'll just follow me?”

“Morning Teresa,” Tabitha said to her, the receptionist offering back just a polite wave before leading the two men down the hallway towards one of the meeting rooms, being left to wonder just what the hell they'd been talking about. As she went, Tabitha thought Teresa's skirt framed her ass very well, although it was perhaps a little too loose. Almost as if in response to her thought, Teresa gave a little tug on the fabric, pulling it tighter so that Tabitha could see the faint outline of a thong top through the skirt.

“Odd coincidence,” she thought to herself before heading towards the clerks area.

There were three exits from the lobby, one to the left, one to the right, and the center. The left and the right led to partners offices, but the center led into the main clerks area, a section full of cubicles for people to work surrounded by law books and computers.

The clerks area did have one large window on one side, proximity to it was arranged by seniority, and as an intern for just the summer, Tabitha was as far from the window as it was possible to get, in a cubicle with almost no natural light breathing into it.

The window might as well have been on Mars for as far away as it was.

There were a dozen other law clerks and paralegals already hard at work, and it wasn't even eight AM yet. The sound of typing was like a little army of marching ants, tap tap tap tapping again and again, over and over, a symphony of micro noises.

Tabitha moved over to her seat, settling in to get to work on whatever today's litany of lethargy held for her. The stack of papers next to her shitty little computer terminal looked like it was related to medical malpractice law when it came to underage patients. Heaven only knew what it was all for.

She buried her head in the books and got to work for what felt like half a day but was likely only a couple of hours, if that, before the phone on her desk flashed. She'd been so engrossed in her research, she'd almost missed it. It had taken her several seconds even to register that the flashing light meant something, a signal of some kind she'd never seen in the office before.

A call.

She'd never gotten a call before. In fact, she'd sort of assumed that the phone on her desk was just a relic that nobody actually used any more, but that it had been too much hassle to remove them all, so they'd been left on all the desks, a reminder of a forgotten time. Nobody in any of the other cubicles ever seemed to get calls on them, as far as she could tell.

They had different ways of communicating to her what needed doing around the office, and it was always as indirect as they could possibly make it. Usually it had been that someone had come down to her cubicle and pulled her into a meeting room where they had dictated to her what she'd be working on for the next few days. More often than that, however, it had just been a stack of books with a single sheet of paper on top of them telling her what specific things they needed her to extract from the tower of tomes.

This was different.

She picked up the phone unsteadily, lifting the old relic to her ear. "Hello?"

"Miss Saint Cloud," the purring feminine voice on the other end of the line said to her. "I need you to meet me in the McCallan meeting room in five minutes. All your current work is being reassigned to other interns, so you needn't worry about wrapping up whatever it is you have in front of you. Just finish whatever sentence you were currently writing, close the book up, and then come and meet me in five minutes time, so we can discuss what's to become of your future here at AOA."

Without giving her so much as a chance to respond, the line went dead, and Tabitha was stuck holding a dead telephone.

At first, she started to panic, thinking that she'd done or said something that had ended her career before it had even gotten a chance to get off the ground, but the fear passed quickly and a sense of curiosity had remained, as the woman on the other end hadn't sounded upset or angry. If anything, she'd had a sense of amusement to the tone of her voice.

It had felt less like a boss to a flunky and more like... well, more like someone trying to pick someone else up at a bar. At least in tone, anyway. There was something unusual about that. The instructions had been quite clear, so Tabitha finished up her sentence, closed the book, placed her work on top of it, grabbed her purse and then headed out of the room, walking towards the west wing of the office.

All of the seven meeting rooms in the AOA offices were named after different brands of alcohol, always high end, although she hadn't realized that on her first tour. The McCallan meeting room was at the far end of the hallway. All the meeting rooms had smart glass that could be turned opaque or clear at the flick of a switch, and it was currently all set to the frosty blocking level so that Tabitha couldn't see what was going on inside of the room.

She wasn't entirely confident that she should go in, but the instructions hadn't been that she should knock, so instead she simply nudged the door open gingerly, stepping into the room. "You called for me, ma'am?" Tabitha said, peeking her head in.

"Hey Tabitha," Veronica Gamory said to her. "Come in and take a seat. We've much to discuss." While Tabitha had seen pictures of the partners, this was the first one she'd met in person.

Veronica was much younger than Tabitha had expected. She might have been in her mid thirties, but if so, the woman had taken incredible care of herself. She was rail thin, and yet somehow those willowly limbs of hers also looked muscular, like a ballerina. Her skin appeared like polished marble, a stark contrast to the onyx shade of her long hair that was done up into an elaborate bun on top of her head. She was dressed in an incredibly expensive crimson blouse beneath a blazer, a black skirt that went down past her knees, dark stockings covering the rest of her legs beneath it.

When Tabitha looked at her face, she almost felt like she was looking through an out-of-focus camera, as if parts of Veronica's head were drifting through blurry patches of reality. It made her head hurt if she tried to concentrate on the blurry patches, so she decided not to focus on them for the time being, glancing over to see that the two men she'd seen in the elevator were sitting on either end of the

table, both of them still wearing their sunglasses. They had a sense of amusement about them.

"I'm... I'm not sure what we have to discuss, ma'am," Tabitha said, moving into the room, sitting down at the table as far as respectfully away from everyone as possible. "I'm just an intern here, and the firm keeps us all pretty much in the dark as to what we're doing and why. I don't know that I'm going to be of much help."

Veronica casually tossed a large folder down onto the board room table with a flourish, moving to sit down at the head of the table. "Let's not get bogged down in talking about the firm, Tabitha. We're on a different subject today. I want to talk a little bit about you."

"Is... is that all about me?"

The woman extended a single fingertip and hooked it beneath the edge of the folder, flipping it open, the paper making a very quiet thud as it did so. "Tabitha Saint Cloud. Reported birthday of June 29<sup>th</sup>, 2001, although because the adoption agency couldn't get a confirmed birth certificate, that date is speculative." She smirked a little bit. "It's right, though."

"How do you know that?"

"Adopted by Thomas and Rene Saint Cloud of Syracuse, New York on August 15<sup>th</sup>, 2001, who were content to name their new child Tabitha. Thomas was a cop and Rene was a teacher, both accomplished in their fields without being remarkable in any way, shape or form. Both good people, although both lived tragically shorter lives than they should have. He died in 2015, killed in the line of duty, and his wife, your adopted mom, passed of cancer just a couple of years ago, just after you'd left for your first semester of college at Buffalo State College," Veronica said, her voice even keeled and giving nothing away. "I imagine that must have been quite hard on you, being left completely alone in the world, with no one looking out for you, no one to have your back when times got rough, and being without your adopted mother and father, I would consider that to be about as rough as it gets. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Have... have you been spying on me?"

"Spying is such an *ugly* word, Tabitha," Veronica chuckled. "I prefer to think of it as 'keeping tabs' on you. Besides, I think you're going to want to hear what I have to say. I know your mother, after all."

"Mom's been gone for—"

"Not Rene, Tabitha," Veronica said with a predator's smile. "I mean your *real* mother, your *birth* mother. In fact, it's my relationship with her that brought you here."

"You... you know who my real mother is?" Tabitha said, suddenly feeling very antsy and eager to have that bit of information. "I've spent quite a bit of time trying to find that out."

"I'm aware."

"And you're telling me it's just sitting there in that file in front of you?"

"Not exactly."

"*Give it to me*," Tabitha said, her voice taking on a funny echo, blood boiling behind her eyes for a moment, as she felt a flare of pain inside of her skull like a hornet trapped under glass.

Veronica's hand moved to the folder jerkily, as if she both wanted to and didn't want to, before she finally forced the paper across the table towards her, a slightly nervous laugh rolling from the older woman's lips. "That's good. That's good, Tabby. How long have you been able to do that?"

"Don't call me Tabby," she said, her eyes moving to scan the papers in front of her. "There's nothing in here about who my real parents are. Nothing about my mother *or* my father."

"You didn't think it was going to be that easy, did you?"

"What do you *want*, Miss Gomory?" Tabitha said, frustration cutting through the tone of her voice like a knife.

"When you turn twenty-one, Miss Saint Cloud, you're in line to inherit quite the legacy. But you have to survive to be able to claim it, something I'm rather invested in making sure happens, despite what some of my fellow brethren might have in mind for you."

"Lawyers are blood thirsty," Tabitha said, "but they usually aren't cold-blooded killers."

"That's true," Veronica said with a smile. "But I wasn't talking about my professional brethren so much as my blood kin. You see Tabitha, you're the daughter of Lucifer, the Queen of Hell. And every time she gives birth to a child, the child is eventually given a test, to see if they're worthy of assuming the long vacant post of Reagent of Hell."

"Wait, you're telling me my mom... was Satan?"

"*Is*, darling, is, although I haven't been in touch with her for quite some time. It's been..." Veronica whistled for a moment. "Almost seven years since I saw her last, although she looked good for a demon in self-imposed exile."

"Self-imposed? I didn't think anyone was allowed to *leave* Hell. Isn't that why it's *HELL*?"

"When you're in charge, they let you do it," Veronica said, tilting her head a little. "Your mom, she's been wandering the Earth for centuries, living a life in concealment, trying to further understand the divine plans, avoiding angels everywhere she goes. And usually once a century, she takes a lover and gives birth to a nephilim. In this century, that's you."

"Nephilim?"

"Half angel, half human, although when it comes to Lucifer, it's half fallen angel and half human."

"What's the difference between an angel and a fallen angel?"

"The books more commonly call fallen angels 'demons,' dear girl," Veronica said with amusement. "A matter of semantics really."

"And I suppose these two men are angels or demons or whatever."

"Gods, actually," Shango said, a dry chuckle rolling off his lips. "From the non-Judeo Christian pantheons. I realize we aren't quite as in fashion as we used to be, but when the angels and demons are having one of these little contests, they are quite content to call us to serve as judges."

"And, you're, what, the god of outdated fashion sense?" Tabitha said to him.

Shango removed his sunglasses and where humans would have eyes were two empty holes through which Tabitha thought she could see swirling storms, clouds lit up by tiny sparks of lightning. "I am one of the gods of lightning, little nephilim, and while I am not on one side or the other, you will still provide me some basic respect." He lifted the glasses back up and slid them in place over his eyes once more.

"I thought that was Thor," she said quietly, still entirely uncertain of what she had seen. The man's missing eyes had felt the same way her visions had, solid enough to seem true, but beyond the realm of what possibly *could* be true.

"There are many gods for any one thing, child," Zhurong said to her, taking off his own glasses for a moment, letting her see that instead of eyes, the old Asian man apparently had flames inside of him, filling up those holes with flickering red, orange and yellow shades before he placed his sunglasses back on. "Nothing is simply one thing or another."

"And you're... you're here because of me?"

Shango smiled, a tiger in the wild. "We are here at *her* request, and *she* has requested us on your *mother's* behalf."

"My... my mother. Lucifer."

"That is correct."

"This is insane," Tabitha said, starting to panic.

"All your life," Veronica said to her, "you've thought you were seeing things that weren't there, but instead, you were peeking behind the veil, able to see what's really going on in the world, one of the gifts of your mother's lineage."

"It's never *felt* like a gift," Tabitha said. "It's felt like I was going crazy."

"That's been you struggling to overcome the base glamour your mother placed upon you as a newborn. Think of yourself as a baby bird, struggling to peck your way out of your eggshell. There's

still bits and pieces of it lingering on you. Let me just sweep them away.”

Veronica's hand lifted into the air, and for a moment, Tabitha was certain she could see sparks of purple and red dripping from them before Veronica clenched her hand into a fist, and for the first time in her life, the world snapped completely into focus.

“So Tabitha,” Veronica said. The blurry patches around Veronica's head were gone, and in their place, Tabitha could see two small red horns sticking up from the woman's scalp. “Let's talk about what your next month is going to look like...”