

## My Second Life

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The red brick tower of St. Elizabeth's Cathedral loomed above Alessia, flanked by rays of sunshine, and the curious eyes of stained glass cherubs looking down upon her. What was once bright and shiny became dark and dull as she slipped on a pair of sunglasses.

As she looked up at the building, she felt her eyelids becoming heavy, weighing down her whole head. Sleep was an increasingly rare commodity these days, especially as she never knew when the demon might appear.

There were times she would stay up the entire night, expecting him to appear suddenly, but he never came. Other times, she would relax, and begin to fall asleep, only to see him appear across the room, peering at her with his faintly orange eyes, and that sharp, yet gravelly and articulate voice. He was always very calm.

She cast these thoughts away, and wondered if she should try to go inside. She hadn't been inside this building in ages. Not since she was 10.

"Tell me something, my dearest..."

Her eyes flicked to the right, to the source of the voice. She knew it was him, just from the voice. However, that didn't stop her involuntary reaction; her hand slipping into her purse, and clasp around the handle of the silver metal pistol she now carried around for protection.

Looking down, she saw the devil was on the ground, lounging on one of the chalky white stone steps, his crusty rock-ish legs stretched out lazily, as if he hadn't a care in the world.

She inhaled a quick breath at the sight of him. She wasn't always quite as startled by his appearances now, but the quick realization of his presence still sent a chill down her spine. She wanted to look away, but his presence, even in a relaxed state, was somehow overpowering. She found her eyes involuntarily traveling the strangely symmetrical grooves of rock that made up his "skin."

"Do you really expect *Him* to help?" Satan finished, jerking his head in the direction of the cathedral.

She looked back up at the cathedral. She thought about the question, and her stomach sank. The feeling pulled at her nerves. She tried to push them out with thoughts of things she enjoyed, the laugh of Rose and Gerrod, the taste of a Chocolate Croissant, but the awful feelings in her stomach simply vetoed the good ones right out of her.

"Well guess what, he won't help you... nor will he help *daddy*."

"How did you know?" she said in surprise, her head jerking up towards him.

"Oh, I heard the phone call, Alessia," he revealed. "I hear *all*. I know all about daddy dearest's turn for the worse... bed-ridden like an invalid."

She glared up at the cathedral... no... she didn't expect Him to help. She turned and walked away.

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Alessia's eyes hurt from the sunlight reflecting in through the stained glass windows of St. Elizabeth's Cathedral.

She moved her finger across the stitched cut on her cheek in morbid, dull, fascination. It had mostly healed since the accident, but the dried residue remained, rough and lumpy under her fingers. She resisted the urge to pick at it.

Alessia felt her father's hand rest on her shoulder. She looked up at him standing behind her. He had cleaned up well enough, his scraggly brown-yellow beard was cleaner than she'd seen in months, and he was wearing a loose brown suit. But his face was littered with bandages and he wore a cast on his left arm. He stared ahead, gazing into some deep unknown that neither Alessia nor anyone else could see.

Finally, he looked down at her, and motioned her to walk forward.

"If you wanna," he said.

She didn't want to, but she wanted to look 'strong' and 'grown-up' in front of her father and all the friends of the family who had gathered there. Thinking about it made her stomach hurt and made her want to cry.

Biting her lip, she stepped forward and worked her way through the pews. A few of the adults around cast saddened glances in her directions. Her aunt Tilde reached down and gave her a soft kiss on the cheek. As she walked, her eyes danced across the ceilings above her, ornate angular shapes that spiked in all different directions. The sight used to awe her. Not anymore.

The casket was polished oak, glistening in the scattered sunlight. She wasn't quite close enough to see inside, but its top was opened up like a mouth, giving a peek at the luxurious white silk insides.

She paused and looked back towards her dad. He stared, biting his lips, and shaking his head to nobody in particular a few times. As she turned back to the casket, she wondered why he was doing that, what he was thinking about.

Alessia was closer to the casket, and she leaned forward on her tip-toes to look inside. Her mother's body lay there. She looked peaceful and clean, like maybe she could have died in her sleep. As she watched the vacant face, the realization crushed her stomach: she would never see mommy again.

Alessia burst into tears, unable to hold them back any more. She threw her hands in her arms, hoping nobody would see.

"The poor girl," she heard Aunt Tilde whisper.

Wiping away the last tear, she took one last look at her mother's vacant face. Her stomach didn't hurt anymore, but now it felt like it was burning. The heat spread to her entire body. Her face contorted. She looked upwards and muttered "I hate you."

The house looked almost the same as Alessia remembered it. The only major difference was the door and shutters had been painted a matching dark green in décor. Other than that, it was the same faded beige walls that she said good-bye to when leaving for Boston at 18.

The grass crackled under her black leather shoes as she walked across the front lawn, instead of going around it towards the sidewalk. She recalled once, many years ago, her mother chastising her for running across the grass.

Her knock on the door was answered by the home nurse, who was an elderly woman, possibly in her 50s, with wrinkles crawling up her face and shiny gray hair tied in a bun. She regarded Alessia suspiciously at first, but grudgingly let her in once Alessia explained she was William's daughter.

Alessia looked around as she entered the house, looking around. The paintings seemed new. She resisted the urge to wander around. The nurse motioned upstairs, and Alessia climbed the stairs to the bedroom.

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When she entered, she held back a sudden gasp. She knew in her mind that he was sick, but she wasn't prepared for the actual sight of him – he looked as if he was withering away, bones with skin wrapped just a little bit too tight over them. His once full mane of hair on his face was now just a graying fuzz, and his balding hair was thin, gray, and wispy.

He was wrapped up tight in blankets, and there was a table with water and medicine on it next to his bed, as well as a respirator air machine, which he was not hooked up into. His eyes widened when he saw her, and his mouth struggled to form a toothy grin.

"How ya feelin', dad?" Alessia asked, smiling back at him as she sat down in the wooden chair beside the bed.

"Oh, like a spring chicken," he answered, his eyes squinting a bit. "Can't ya tell?"

"Oh, most definitely," she said, squeezing his hand. "You look like you could run the Boston Marathon."

He wheezes a small chuckle.

"You didn't hafta come all the way up here, just to see me."

"Oh, it was no problem," she said, her eyes trailing to the respirator machine. "Besides, I could use the time away from... thing."

"What's wrong?" he asked, his energy level picking up all of a sudden. She smiled, remembering how eager he always was to help with any of her problems. "Everything okay, kiddo?"

"Kiddo? I'm 26, remember?"

"You're always kiddo to me," he said. "What's wrong?"

She opened her mouth to answer him, only to find she had nothing to say. A part of her desperately wanted to just spill everything. She wondered, how would it sound? There's a demon living in my head, he won't leave me alone, or let me get sleep, he insists on looking at the most painful memories of my life, and oh, by the way, I think he's the devil? Her stomach sank, tugged by despair, as she realized she couldn't tell him, or anyone else.

"It's personal... I'm just scared," she finally answered, choosing her words carefully. "I feel like I'm not in control... of myself."

She looked up to see Satan standing on the other side of the bed, along the wall. He was staring down at her father, without saying a word.

"We shouldn't even be talking about *me*," she insisted, hearing his wheezing breath. "Do you need anything?"

He coughed, waving a no with his hands.

"Listen, hon," he said, pausing to clear his throat. Alessia desperately wanted him to just rest, but he kept on talking. "You're always in control, ya always have a choice. Sometimes it feels bad, outta control... but one day you look back on everything, all the shit that got ruined, and you know it wasn't really you doing those things..."

"Dad, are you talking about something specific?" she asked, uncomfortable with the tone of what his words.

He locked eyes with her, and stared for a long time, without answering. Finally, he just shook his head.

"I just... wanted to say that," he said wearily. "I... don't have much time left, you know..."

"Oh, don't talk like that!" she admonished, grabbing his hand again. She looked back up towards Satan, on the other side of the bed. He was still staring down at her father. "You're going to be fine."

Then, slowly, but very deliberately, he looked back up at her, his eyes meeting hers. He simply shook his head *no*.

Alessia's felt her insides burn as she swallowed down a swig of Jack Daniels from the bottle far too quickly. She was in the living room of her father's house, her own childhood home. The TV set flashed blue hues of lights on the walls, visible in the dim light. She felt her body slump down on the mangy brown couch – the same couch had lived in this house for decades, worn out and grubby from all the use. The living room as a whole, with its thin and ragged Persian rug, and shaky oak coffee table, was all too familiar to her as well... 7 or 8 years old, sitting on the ground, curled up in her mother's legs, watching TV...

"Should you really be drinking at a time like this?" Satan asked, his gravelly articulate voice crawling up her spine.

“A time like whaat?” she asked, words slurring a bit, turning to see him sitting alongside her on the couch, slumped down just as she was. She had bought the drink at the corner store, as there wasn’t a drop in the house. Not long after her mother’s death, her father had stopped drinking altogether, most likely in her mother’s memory.

“You know, a time like...”

In a flash, she was back in the club on the night she died – moving, grooving, swallowing down drink after drink, the lights blinding and flashing, going round and round...

“Get out of my head!” she yelled at him, snapping back to reality. “Like you care anyways!”

“Of course I care,” Satan admonished her. “I’m inside of you now. Without you, there is no me, at least not in this form... so your welfare, is my primary concern.”

She glared at him, furious with his audacity. What was the matter with him, sitting there idly chatting after what he’d done earlier.

“What’s the matter, dear?” he asked. “Have I done something to offend you?”

Alessia had known friends and relatives who had been sick, or even on death’s door. There was usually always a little hope – hope that you’ll still have time left with the ones you love, maybe a hope that things could get better, an optimistic hope that the doctor’s worst-case predictions were just plain wrong... some kind of hope.

But not this time though. This time, the devil himself had looked her in the eye and essentially told her: there is no hope. There was simply him telling, yes, indeed, daddy dearest is going to die, and it’s going to be sooner rather than later.

After all, he would know. To Alessia, it was an uncommonly cruel thing to do.

Satan’s eyes grew brighter as he stared at her intently, his lips curling just a tad. She couldn’t quite tell, was he smiling, just a little, at this cruelty, or was he actually expecting an answer. Could he really be so oblivious?

She took another deep swig from the bottle, a new question echoing in her head.

“Is he...” she paused, stopping herself from asking the question.

“Is he what?” Satan asked, cocking his head to the side, almost daring her to ask. She took a deep breath, trying to clear her head through the buzz.

“Is he going to heaven, or hell?” she asked, almost in a whisper.

Satan stared at her for a moment, his eyes widening considerably, and his monstrous mouth opened slightly in genuine surprise, or was that amusement.

“That is a very... daring question, my dear,” he insisted. “Are you sure you want the answer?”

“Just tell me!” she snapped back.

He paused thoughtfully, considering his next words.

“As far as daddy dearest goes... well... I think the man has his own sins he’ll have to repent to if he wants to go up high... it’s not really for me to say.”

Her skin crawled, and fear ran through her body, as she instantly regretted asking him this question.

“You’re a bastard,” she muttered, taking another drink.

Satan didn’t answer for a moment as she wallowed.

“Tell me, Alessia,” he said. “Where does this come from? This... resistance, this air of defiance in you?”

“What the hell are you talking about,” she muttered, staring at the dark golden liquid in the glass, seeing her warped face reflecting back at her.

“There’s no reason for you to fight me. I have your best interests at heart, I want to see you live...” he insisted, standing up to his feet. and “You know you can’t go through this on your own, how exactly are you planning on living the rest of your life with me living inside of you?”

She knew what he said was true, but her eyes fixed on the glass bottle, denying it inside of her.

“Who is going to help you deal with this? *God*? Take it from me, he doesn’t care,” Satan said. “Friends? How would you ever explain this to them? Who would ever believe you? Family? Well, no brothers, no sister, the only one who hasn’t been taken from you *yet* is daddy...”

“Shut up,” she interrupted, clenching her teeth, sensing where this was headed. She didn’t want to hear any more.

“But he will be taken, Alessia, oh yes he will,” Satan leered, leaning forward, staring deep into her eyes. “Daddy’s dying, and there’s nothing you can do about it-”

“SHUT UP!” she yelled, her insides exploding with hate. Without thinking, her hands clasped the revolver in her back pants. She whipped it out, pointing it at Satan. “GET OUT OF MY HEAD!”

She blinked, and suddenly he was gone. She stood there, paralyzed. She was pointing the gun at the wall, and it rattled as her hands shook. Her heavy breathing echoed loudly, over and over again.

She stumbled backwards onto the couch, her body still shaking. She stared at the gun in her hand, wondering what was wrong with her.

The next morning, Alessia sat down with her father, and they spent an hour talking about everything. They spoke of their mother, of Alessia growing up, of her life in the city, and his life in the suburbs, the new nurse, the house, the life all around him. Then, after a quiet lull in the conversation, he took her hand and sighed heavily.

“I need to tell you something,” he mumbled, his eyes escaping hers.

“Maybe you should rest,” she said, feeling concerned.

He closed his eyes.

“No, I’ve just had it bottled up so long... and I need to let it out...”

Satan sat on the other side of the bed, his sculpted face a mask of seriousness, staring down at her father.

“The night your mother died...”

She caught Satan’s eyes, and then, she saw herself in the back-seat of the car again. The dead of night, 10 years old, and her little body completely exhausted. She watched her eyes flutter and fall asleep.

She expected this to play out as it always did, with her jolting awake to the smoke and fire in her lung. Only she didn’t – she felt outside herself, watching her younger self sleep.

She turned her head, to see her mother and father, in an animated argument.

“We were out... and I had too much to drink.”

He sighed.

“I always had too much to drink back then...” he admitted. “W would argue about it, that’s what we were arguing about...”

She saw her father turn the wheel clumsily. Her mother pointed, frantic, at two headlights flashing in the front windshield. He swerved left, or was it right, or could he even tell? No, he was dead drunk. The two lights zoomed closer and closer, until they crashed into the windshield.

She blinked, back in the bedroom now. She had been holding her breath. She looked down to see tears welling up in her father’s eyes.

“it was my fault... the whole time...” he sobbed. “I don’t know why I’ve never been able to tell you...”

Alessia sat there, body paralyzed. She didn’t say anything else. She didn’t want to be upset at her father, to hate him, but feelings overwhelmed her. She felt comatose, the images of what he had just told her running through her head. When she could take it no more, she stood up and rushed out of the house. She didn’t want to cry, but couldn’t stop the anger rushing up inside of her.

Alessia stared up at the cathedral again. She tried not to think about it, not to even consider what she had heard. Even giving it the slightest bit of thought stabbed at her insides. The hurt and pain dragged down every feeling and thought she had.

*I hate you* echoed in her mind, again and again. What had she lost all these years?

She didn’t know if she would ever even go back to her father’s house. But in the next few weeks, he could pass, she told herself. But the thought of going back, to confront all of the feelings she felt, the betrayal, the anger, and the knowledge that her father being a drunk was the real reason she grew up without a mother... not a cruel act of God.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

*Help me*, she asked, stumbling up the steps.

She tripped across one of them, falling into the stone. A burn stretched across her knees as she fell upon the steps, wincing in pain. She stared up at the cathedral, wondering again, what had she lost all these years.

“Where are you going, Alessia?” Satan asked, standing behind her.

She threw him a get-away-from-me glare, as she climbed to her feet. He rushed up the steps behind her, keeping pace with her.

“He can’t help you now, nor could he ever,” Satan declared in her ear.

She bit her tongue, ignoring him, walking up the steps to the front door of the church. She just had to have strength, she told herself. She just needed to hold on a little longer.

Then, she reached for the doorknob. For half a second, she felt the cold metal of the door on her hand, until it ignited in searing pain.

“Aaaahhh!” she screamed, pulling her hand back. The doorknob was *hot*, so hot it burned her hand. She looked down in horror, at the faint reddening of her palms. She hesitated, then grabbed the doorknob again.

A faint whiff of smoke singed off the skin of her hands, and a small spark of fire flashed, and she felt the burning pain run up her hands again.

Screaming in agony, she pulled back, stumbling back a few more steps, falling to the ground.

“What... what is this!?” she yelled, turning furiously towards Satan, who was calmly climbing the steps behind her. Memories of the night on the cliff were fresh in her mind. “What did you do!?”

“Me? Why, I didn’t do anything,” Satan answered, holding his hands up innocently. “This isn’t my doing...”

She turned back to the door, desperate. Once more she grabbed it, and once again the fiery pain exploded across her palms. She fell back, clutching her hand. It was as if she’d accidentally touched the hot end of an iron some years back, except prolonged, and even more cutting.

She collapsed on the steps, staring up in helpless horror.

*Please... I need your help...*

“You see,” Satan explained, leaning down on one knee to whisper directly into her ear. “I’m not allowed in there... or any ‘houses of worship’ actually... regardless of religion or group...”

She stared at him, and back up at the building. She tried to block out the pain, but her hand still burned.

“It upsets his ego, you see, having me in a place dedicated to *Him*... off-limits to me, and thus, to you too. Rather selfish if you ask me... but nobody ever does.” Satan sighed.

“No... please...” she whispered. *Please...*

“It’s time you understood something, Alessia,” Satan declared, standing up from his knee. He suddenly loomed over her like a shadow. “This is not a game. No life, no family, and no God... the longer you resist me, sooner or later, you *will* break.”

She stared back up at the cathedral, trying to comprehend how this could be happening. *Why...*

“*He’s* never going to help you. *He’s* abandoned you, just like he did mommy and daddy. He’s nothing to you now, you’re *mine*,” sneered the devil.

She held back the tears this time, but couldn't stop the hopelessness from filling up inside of her again.

"He'll never help you in any real way..." Satan insisted. "Not now... and not ever."

Sprawled across the steps, flanked by the devil himself, Alessia did something she hadn't done in at least fifteen years, she prayed for help, and for a sign, just one sign that she wasn't alone in this fight. She felt the devil's mocking laughter at her prayers reverberate inside of her, long after he disappeared from view. It echoed deeper and deeper into her soul, and his last words rang over and over again inside of her head.

"Not now... and not ever."

Two days later, her father made a full recovery. The nurse called it a miracle.