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Starling

Nightcastle

BOOK ONE

*Deals With Demons*

By Ubriel Bryne



# Prologue



I was twenty-nine when I met Crow. That's when my life veered into the realm of fantasy. It took me a few years to recognize the nightmare it would become. Finding a way out took many years more.

I had just been released from an eight-month stay with the kindly sadists on staff at the Central Regional Mental Health and Wellness Center in southern Nebraska. I remember, it was so cold my nose went numb before I could fish my scarf out of the paper shopping bag full of my personals. The tail end of winter had brought freezing rain and sleet to turn the snow to sludge.

There I was, teeth chattering, knees getting soggy, paper bag clutched in one arm and my other arm elbow deep in my effects. A young man, probably a college student working as a process server to pay tuition, squatted down beside me and offered to hold the bag for me. I thought it was a kind gesture. I still do, honestly. He took the bag and stood beside me, patiently holding it open until I found my mismatched gloves and old Doctor Who scarf. You know the one. Tom Baker style, wrapped triple around my neck and shoulders and still hanging to my knees. He waited until I had both gloves on and was breathing hot, moist air into the scarf to defrost my nose. When he handed my bag back to me, he stuck out his hand, told me a name, probably not his real one, and waited.

I've always been a sucker. To the best of my knowledge, that trick would probably still work on me. I took the offered hand and gave my name, and he pulled a thick envelope from inside his coat. I was still staring, gape-mouthed, at the envelope he'd dropped on top of my bag with a quick, "You've been served," as he walked away. I probably still had my hand stuck out, too.

I peeked inside the envelope on the off chance it had been filled with cash and discovered I was officially alone in the world. I remember staring blankly at the divorce papers in the envelope and thinking strange things like how we had planned to visit his family at Easter and wondering if we were still going to do that. I started to wonder where I would go and what I would do. I couldn't have been standing there too long, but I don't remember seeing the guy, or his car, as I crossed the empty visitor's parking lot to the bus stop.

I don't know if you've ever been in Chester City, and I don't recommend it if you haven't, but there are more hills than people. I slipped and slid and fell more than once. By the time I hustled myself under the bus shelter, it didn't matter if the bench was wet. The ass of my jeans was soaked and trying to freeze against my skin. I wrapped the scarf higher over my face and began to have serious thoughts about how pleasant and warm it would be to just quietly drift off to sleep and die.

Oddly, I don't think I actually cried. I have no idea how long he had been there before he made a noise and I looked up. He startled me, standing there, shuffling from foot to foot, turning his head this way and that, and his close-set, black eyes always on me. I don't remember if I said hello or just scooted my ice-butt farther down the bench, but he sat next to me, a little too close, and held his hands up to his narrow face, covered his mouth and nose and made a show of blowing into them.

He said, "I'm Crow Corvus," smiled and stuck his hand out.

I remember thinking his parents had a warped sense of humor. I also remember thinking that the last nice guy with a handshake had served me divorce papers. Remember what I said about being a sucker?

I shook his hand. "Star. Short for Starling."

The wind and sleet and even the freezing drizzle, sort of, stopped. The sun didn't come out, but I felt warmer. He tilted his head at me, still holding my hand, and asked, "What's wrong, Little Bird?"

Now, I know it's odd. Who just tells her life story to some random weird guy at the bus stop? But, apparently, I did. Bad marriage. Sad

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circumstances. Devastating loss. A diagnosis and, finally, a stay in the looney bin. There I was, one hand imprisoned in his and the other clutching those vile papers.

“Would you like the pain to stop?”

He was really much too close, but I can't remember thinking much of anything before I heard myself saying, whimpering really, “Yes, please, for fuck's sake, I really want it to stop.”

Then, it did.

# Chapter 1. Coffee



My name is Starling Nightcastle. I often wake from dreams about living someone else's nightmare. For now, I'm stuck in my own nightmare, but I'm looking for a way out. One day, I'll find one. In the meantime, I need coffee.

The Holy Grounds Café is open 24/7, except on Christmas Day. Then, it's only open after noon. That works for me. I don't usually wake up until a couple of hours before dark. Jacob, never Jake, the owner and worst short order cook ever, doesn't like it when I come in through the back. So, I do almost every night.

The heavy, metal door at the top of the stairs to my basement apartment effectively cut off sound, light, heat and smells from the kitchen. As I pushed it open, using the insubstantial force of my entire upper body, my senses were flooded with scraping sounds of metal spatulas on the metal griddle, glaring white brightness, warm and humid air, and the scents of greasy fries, searing meat, mystery soup and toasting burger buns. I inhaled deep and slow. *'There it is.'* Coffee, fresh, black and strong.

"Hi, Jacob." I waved and snagged a mug from the top of a rack and kept walking toward the swinging half-door.

"Starling! You can't be in the kitchen." I am still, to this day, surprised by the vehemence in his voice even after years of my nightly intrusions.

"I know. I'm going." I stopped at the server station and poured a generous serving of coffee into the mug.

Genia, Jacob's wife, came through the swinging doors, carrying a tray piled high with dirty dishes. "Hey, Star. How are you this evening?" Genia didn't bother trying to get me out of the kitchen. She just greeted me like another regular customer at the counter, set down her tray, and

reached up to pull a pen out of her cap of strawberry blond curls. “You want breakfast or supper?”

I sipped my coffee and hummed as the scalding liquid traveled down my gullet. “Hey, Genia. A little of both, maybe? How about a short stack and a basket of chicken strips?”

“You got it, Hun. You go on and sit down out there and I’ll bring it to you shortly.” She never bothered to ask if I wanted anything other than coffee to drink anymore.

I waved again at Jacob. He waved his spatula over his head already turning back to his griddle. I usually took that as a hello or goodbye, whichever seemed more relevant.

My coffee and I wandered out into the dining area, leaving Genia to call out my order. I heard Jacob calling back. “She was right here, Gee-gee. I got it.” That made me snort and I almost choked on my coffee.

There was always a newspaper on the counter beside the cash register. I didn’t have any idea who bought it, but the funny pages, the legal notices and the obits were always missing. That’s fine with me. I’d see who died in town when the sun went down.

I picked up the sales and coupons section and took it to the far end of the bar. I still like looking at what people are being convinced to buy. I don’t know why. There is always something ridiculous to make me grin. I don’t need any motivation other than that.

The AGA, Allied Grocers’ Association, was running a sale on pig’s feet. I scanned the rest of their ads but didn’t see any equally discounted deals on chops, hams, loins, or bacon. There was, however, a competitive offer on jowls. “Gross.”

“Have you ever even tried any?”

I still didn’t choke on my coffee, although the ads caught a light spray when I sputtered. “Jesus, Crow!”

“Please, Little Bird,” he held up a hand and turned his face from me. “Watch your language in my presence.”

I snatched a few napkins from the countertop dispenser and wiped my face. I didn't actually need to, but a simple glare didn't convey the necessary emphasis that came with the glare combined with indignant blotting. "You're here early. I haven't even eaten yet."

"Oh! Excellent." He slipped his long, woolen trench coat off and picked up the plastic menu that served as a place mat. "I want to try chili."

Genia came through the kitchen door carrying my food. She slowed not quite to a standstill when she saw Crow. "Mr. Corvus. Will you be dining with us tonight?" Her typically ebullient smile was propped up by sheer force of will as she deposited my food in front of me.

"Hello, Ms. Genia." Crow smiled so broadly I thought his teeth might begin to fall out. He had a lot of them. Too big and too pointy for his mouth, when he smiled that big, it gave me the creeps, and I'm used to him. "Do you have chili?"

"Sure do, Mr. Corvus."

Genia always called him Mr. Corvus. I asked her once about why she was so formal with him. She had said, "You keep things formal with the devil's minions and they can't catch you in a moment of weakness." I have no idea how Genia found out about Crow's true nature. I didn't tell her. But, it happened now and then.

"Then, I would like to have a bowl of chili, please."

"You're going to want something to wash it down with. It's spicy." Genia pulled the pen out of her hair, again, and scribbled on her order pad.

"Oh, what flavors of milkshake do you have?"

I, quietly minding my own business from behind the coffee-bespeckled newspaper, groaned. I crumpled the newspaper out of my way and goggled at him. I know he saw me. He could literally see out of the back of his head, and the sides. He ignored me, smiled at Genia, and listened to the options.

“I have vanilla ice cream and a bunch of sundae syrups. Caramel, chocolate, strawberry, buttersc...”

“Strawberry. A bowl of chili and a big strawberry milkshake with extra whipped cream, please, Ms. Genia.” He smiled again. With fewer teeth this time, his smile almost managed to be as smooth as his voice. He was never much to look at, but when he wanted to, he could calm traffic with his voice.

Genia nodded and jotted down his order. She glanced up before scurrying away and I swear I could see her beginning to blush. I waited till she’d gone, then smacked Crow on the shoulder with my newspaper. “Bad demon.”

Crow lifted one hand to fend off the next wallop and my newspaper crumbled to ash. I sighed, watching the ash flutter to the floor, and wiped my hands together to brush away any errant smudges before I touched my food. “I was reading that.”

“In point of fact, Little Bird, you were wielding it as a weapon.” Crow’s hand shot out and stole a chicken strip.

“I was eating that.”

His beady eyes squinted above his rounded cheeks as a genuine smile, not the creepy, toothy, or sexy ones, lifted the corners of his too broad mouth around the chicken strip. It looked almost obscene if it hadn’t been so silly.

After more than a decade together, I could mostly see through his glamour. He wasn’t ugly or deformed or anything like that. Really, just plain, scrawny, and pale enough to look anemic. If he’d been a real man, I could probably have snapped him in two. He had a boyish face, a little crooked, and all his features seemed a little under-done. He employed his glamour just enough to discourage anyone uninvited from looking too closely. Except, maybe Genia.

“Don’t fuss. I’ll be handing off that milkshake to you, I’m sure.” He bit off another chunk of my chicken strip and turned to look around the dining room.

The diner was never very full. Well, there was that one time when Jacob's tiny generator had made Holy Grounds the only restaurant in the neighborhood still open for business for almost three days. But, otherwise, there were usually only a dozen patrons at any given time. The food was lousy, but the service was fast, and the coffee was excellent. So, they did okay.

"Well, now, you have obliterated my entertainment. You'll just have to talk to me." I stood on the footrest of my bar stool and leaned over the bar in search of syrup.

Crow turned just as I plopped back into my seat, still syrup-less. He shifted my chicken strip to his other hand and snapped his fingers. Warm syrup not only appeared, it materialized just above my pancakes in a golf ball-sized orb and oozed in a trickling line from its airy container to run down the sides of the stack.

"Thank you." I picked up my fork and watched the last of the syrup bubble drip from the air.

"Mhmm." He turned back to the other diners and nibbled the chicken.

Genia brought a pot of coffee with Crow's order and refilled my cup. When she had gone, leaving an enormous milkshake and a bowl of chili about half its size, Crow said, "I think I've found our next client."

I frowned and shook my head. "I don't hunt in the diner, Crow."

He scooped a spoonful of chili and sniffed it. With a small noise of approval, he popped the spoon in his mouth and closed his eyes to relish his treat.

He liked to make me wait. Once, he made a little old lady's grocery bag keep falling over inside a cab that I was waiting for. I stood there, holding the door and seething, for a full five minutes before the little old lady gave up and told me to keep the groceries.

When he'd swallowed the chili, he lifted the milkshake and sniffed it. He hummed and glanced at me before flicking his tongue out like a shovel to scoop whipped cream from the top. The grimace it produced

was priceless. “That’s worse than harpy shit.” He shoved the milkshake at me.

I moved it to the other side of me just to get it out of his way. He used two paper napkins to scrub the remaining cream from his tongue before lifting another spoonful of chili. There he paused. “He isn’t in the diner. He’s outside.”

I looked over my shoulder and through the plate glass windows. The darkening sky left long shadows on the sidewalk. In one of them, a grizzled man sat huddled against the wall of the building with a little cardboard sign resting against his legs.

I sighed and turned back to my pancakes. “Great.” Using the side of my fork, I cut into the pancakes and stabbed them onto the tines, and into my mouth. The syrup, still warm and silky, provided the only real flavor to the bread. I chewed slowly, petulantly hoping to make Crow wait. I dropped my fork and picked up a chicken strip, dipping it unceremoniously into the whipped cream atop Crow’s discarded milkshake, before turning my head to look back at the man-shaped huddle again.

A gust of wind rifled his greasy, lanky hair and made the thin material of his jacket sleeves whip around his thin arms. For Crow to have picked him out, his time was coming soon. Within four months.

It was always within four months. Well, one hundred and twenty days. It was a weird time allotment, and Crow was cryptic about why. I pestered him about it early on, until I got a very detailed, two-hour explanation of demon mathematics and something about the moon. I just kept nodding until he’d made his point and figured he probably didn’t really know, either.

“So, what’s in the folio?”

Crow lifted his napkin and dabbed greasy, red chili streaks from the corners of his mouth. “Not much. He was in the army in his youth but was discharged early for mental health. His poor, single mother took care of him for a few years thereafter, until she died in a traffic accident. His personal demons are the little, common ones, alcoholism and drug

dependency. With the right treatment, he could have remained a productive member of society, but no one with the power to diagnose and treat him took the time to try.” He turned a broad grin in my direction. “Ahh, when human kindness fails.” He sighed wistfully and picked up his spoon. “That’s my bread and butter.”

I turned my narrow-eyed frown on him to convey my disapproval of both the apathy of humans and the delight he took in the suffering it caused. My narrow-eyed frown never bothered him. It occurred to me then, as it had before, that perhaps the look was just egging him on, but it’s my only recourse for when he was being annoying. I wasn’t giving it up.

“So, he’s winning the fight against his own demons?” I looked over my shoulder out the window, dubious. He must be if Crow was interested in saving him from death.

Crow turned in his stool, leaning one elbow on the counter behind him. “He wasn’t. But he’s actually been completely sober for four days.” Crow sighed. He reached into his inner coat pocket and pulled out a sheet of paper folded in half and with writing printed so that it could be read like a pamphlet. “That’s when he began going here.”

I took the paper in one hand and reached for a napkin with the other. “What is this? A church bulletin?” I turned around straight in my seat and lay the paper flat on the counter, reading the front while I wiped chicken grease from my fingers.

“Almost. It’s a soup kitchen.” Crow waved his hand in the air between us before flicking his fingers at the paper again. “Open it up. He’s been getting a bowl of soup and a kind word.” Crow twisted his mouth around the words with a grimace.

I chuckled at him and lifted the paper in my clean hands. The front cover was printed with the words, Fellowship Ministries. Inside, a daily menu listed a type of soup, a passage of scripture and an invitation to that day’s volunteer event.

Some small voice in the back of my mind screamed. That little part of me knew how wrong what we did was. But it was as scared as the rest of me. Scared of what would happen to me if I refused to do my part. The chill of fear and dread tingled at the edges of my awareness.

I shoved the bulletin back at Crow and pushed away from the counter. “Time to go.”

## Chapter 2. Work



Crow walked with me, nattering about this demon or that news article. I pulled the collar of my long pee coat up over the scarf that enveloped my neck and winced at the feel of a sharp pebble through the sole of my shoe. “You destroyed the newspaper before I got to read about any of that, Crow.”

“That’s really too bad. Not really important, though. There’s nothing really new in the news.” He donned a self-satisfied grin and clasped his hands together behind his back. His straight-backed posture, clean shaven chin raised, thin lips slightly parted, and eyes half-lidded, was probably his most birdlike pose. I shoved my hands in my coat pockets.

It was full dark when we arrived at the city morgue. The big dark red brick building contained the vital statistics office and the county corner’s office, both accessible from the front. The morgue entrance was around back. The ambulance and hearse access from the street opened out into a wide parking area that would accommodate two of those clunky vehicles while still allowing a third to turn and maneuver. The small lot was empty, as usual.

The one small window in the red double door was covered with a white paper printout, backlit from the hallway inside, giving the hours the morgue was open to the public. I punched my access code into the keypad. Crow stood behind me patiently surveying the night. I cast a glance up the access drive to the empty staff parking lot as the lock buzzed and clicked, and I pulled the door open. Inside, my teeth took up a resonant hum in harmony with the soft buzzing of the white fluorescent lights.

Crow stepped in behind me and followed me to the morgue office. He took a seat on a stool in one corner and began thumbing through the

day's reports, while I changed from my personal coat and scarf into my preferred lab coat and went about preparing for work. There were two overdoses and one car crash victim waiting for me to work them through the system. Four more had been worked in but the autopsies hadn't been scheduled yet. Three other completed autopsies needed their notes typed up and the cases closed out.

I glanced at Crow as I walked out to the exam room. He had joined his hands behind his head and leaned his head back with his eyes closed. He didn't usually just hang out with me in the morgue. He was waiting for something. One of our clients, probably. Asking would just give him a chance to tease me. I'd find out before long. I turned my back on him and stepped up to the first table. After checking the file number against the table chart, I unzipped the HRB, human remains bag, and sighed. This woman had definitely been in a car crash.

A couple of hours later, I had just finished the initial intake on the second new case when my phone buzzed in my back pocket. Break time. Crow hadn't moved a muscle when I walked back into the cramped office that served double duty as a breakroom. I pulled off one sterile glove, balling it up in the palm of the other, and pulled that one down over my fingers. As the wadded ball of discarded gloves hit the inside of the trash bin, Crow opened his eyes. A toothy grin, the predatory kind, spread on his face a breath before the CCTV security monitors flared to life.

Trained on the small parking lot, the motion sensor on the camera had been triggered by an ambulance pulling into the lot. I watched the bus maneuver into place with one eye as I changed the filter and spooned coffee grounds into the basket. Just as the reverse lights on the ambulance winked out and the doors began to open, I pulled the pot out of the machine and walked out to the water fountain in the hall.

Crow stood and clasped his hands behind his back to follow me as far as the hall. He was preparing his Boss Man façade. The light around him seemed to pull back. It actually dimmed behind him. With a sigh, I rolled my eyes at his display but kept my peace as I pushed the button on

the wall. Hearing the click and buzz of the big double doors opening, I turned to the water fountain to fill the pot.

I didn't wait for the paramedics to push their gurney through the doors. As soon as the pot was full, I walked back into the office and started the coffee brewing. The demons would want a cup, too. In the ambulance, that would be Pete and Donna. They're alright as far as demons go. I've met a few less than alright ones. At least these two never broke anything on purpose. They even went so far as to try not to leak sulfur and brimstone around me. With the coffee brewing, I moved into the doorway and leaned my shoulder on the doorframe to watch them wrestle the gurney into the building, headfirst.

"Hey. Who do we have here?" It always rankled Crow just a little when I interrupted his displays of power, so I took every opportunity to do so. Pete and Donna, however, knew who kept their toast buttered and waited for Crow's lead.

Crow turned his toothiness on me, briefly. It was sweet of him to acknowledge my attempt to irritate him. Turning back to his two underlings, he spoke in a deep and reverberant voice. "Who comes?"

Pete and Donna bowed at the waist, still standing on either side of their gurney, and trained their eyes on their own feet. Pete said, "Madelyn Delaney, acute myocardial infarction, officially DOA, but we heard a little prayer..."

Pete and Donna stepped back to stand at the foot of the gurney as Crow stepped forward, the dimness following him. He reached out to lay a hand on the head of the dead woman. "Wake up, Madelyn."

I'd met Madelyn over two months ago, just after she'd celebrated her forty-ninth birthday. Poor health had been her life-long personal demon. It had brought with it a basket full of drugs and injuries and medical bills. She had been a nice lady, even after all of that. Crow's interest in her was a result of a new diet and exercise therapy that had been working for her for almost a year. The corpse on the gurney had lost half its girth in that

time and its hair and skin looked healthier than it had two months earlier.

She had done it. She'd won against the demons she had been challenged with. If she turned Crow down, she could leave this life of pain and suffering, having earned the right to a blissful next existence. But, she hadn't quite shuffled off this mortal coil. Her eyes fluttered. No one ever turned Crow down.

Madelyn's eyes took a moment to clear as she focused on the ceiling. The glimmer of recognition sparked as she slowly shifted her eyes to look at Crow, not quite looming above her. She gave a start and sat bolt upright. That brought Pete and Donna, still standing at the foot of the gurney, hands clasped behind their backs and heads bowed, into view. Confusion and shock began to give way to fear as she took in her surroundings.

The soft rattle of breath filtering through her dead lungs preceded a squeak and a clearing of her throat. "Where am I?" She looked down and gave a strangled cry at the sight of the open HRB and gurney beneath her. "Oh, God." That made all three demons wince. She lifted her hands to her pajama-covered chest. "You said it would happen. You said it was coming. Even with the dreams, I didn't really believe you." Her shoulders began to heave as her breaths quickened and her eyes grew wider, shifting this way and that in search of an escape.

I shifted my feet and held my tongue as Crow slowly stepped up beside her, judging it to be the right time to reel her in. He let the dimness fade, the lights coming back to full strength in the hall as he smiled. With measured movements, he reached out and took one of her hands between his own. His touch stilled the turmoil of her emotions so they could talk. I have no doubt he would have let her continue to panic if he could have conducted business with her in hysterics.

Her eyes locked on his and he asked, "Have you considered my offer?" For the last two months, she had been given dreams every night. Through them, she had been allowed to ride through the experiences of

another woman's life. The other woman's demons were nothing like her own, but that woman was losing the fight. The choice was simple. She could choose to have her soul trade places with the soul of this other person, and live her life, with those demons, or she could die there and then.

Madelyn blinked. "Sonya had a big presentation at work today. She missed Lyla's soccer game preparing for it." Her brow creased. "She and Dan got into a huge fight over it. Do you know what happened to them?"

Crow's smile shifted with the smallest narrowing of his glittering eyes. He nodded. "Yes. But unless you accept my offer, that won't be any of your concern."

"Will I still be able to see my sister?" Madelyn had already made her choice. I knew it, Crow knew it, and by the way Pete and Donna's shoulders relaxed, they knew it too.

"No. Not as yourself. She wouldn't believe you anyway." Crow stood completely still.

Madelyn took one more deep breath. "I accept your offer."

I felt a chill run down my spine. That in itself was enough to begin the fear. Unless something happened to make me pay attention, I never seemed to notice until that point. I cast through my memories of the evening as Crow helped Madelyn to lie back and relax. *'Had I laughed at Jacob and Genia? Had I enjoyed the warmth of the coffee at the diner? Had a bit of fear and dread accompanied the talk of a potential new client? Had I winced at a pebble poking through the sole of my shoe while walking here? Was that pulsing ache a bruise forming on the bottom of my foot right now?'* I gave a little start when Crow called my name. "What?"

Crow tilted his head and looked at me from beneath his lashes. "Little Bird, if you would join us, please?"

I gave myself a mental shake as I stood straight. Of course, I could feel those things. Crow always found a new client just in time. I sighed again and could smell the faintest sulfur and brimstone in the air. I tossed a frown at Pete and Donna. They were excited but that wasn't really an

excuse. I stepped forward and took one of Madelyn's hands in my own. My turn.

"Madelyn. Before we do this, it's important that we make sure you understand completely." I bent my head to look down into her eyes and tried to impress on her the seriousness of what I was saying.

The slightly older, dead woman nodded. Peevish, and in a hurry now that she knew what was happening, she said, "I remember what you said before. I will be relegating Sonya's soul to die. Tantamount to murder as well as preventing her from taking whatever opportunity she might have had to defeat her own demons, et cetera, et cetera." She made a wobbling motion with her head before meeting my eyes again. "I understand. I want to live. I want that fine and healthy new body. I want to take care of that sweet husband and those two adorable babies. I want to have those Christmases and birthdays surrounded by family that I never had."

A tear welled up and spilled out of the corner of one of her eyes. There might have been more if rigor mortis wasn't setting in. I nodded. I had tried. Not hard, but I'd tried. No one ever thought too hard about how exactly like murder this was. All they could see was the chance to live, to beat death. No one ever asked if there was a guarantee on how long their extension on life would be, either. I wasn't allowed to bring it up.

That was a stipulation of the deal I'd made in the beginning. Once we got them this far, I had five minutes to try to talk them out of it, but I wasn't allowed to mention warranties on the new body or guarantees for duration of the life extension. In exchange, Crow got his soul count, and I didn't have to feel. I didn't have to feel anything. I rarely took the whole five minutes anymore.

## Chapter 3. Swap



Astral projection is weird. The ordinary sensations of being alive go wonky when you no longer have a body upon which such forces can act. Instead of gravity holding your feet to the floor and giving your inner ear a sense of balance, it feels more like an impression you might get when reading a compass rose on a map. It's just information; that way is down. Instead of a breeze rifling your hair, it passes through you, almost like a gas bubble traversing your intestines. It isn't unpleasant or anything, just weird.

Crow always appeared as an actual crow. At least to me, his black shadow flew while somehow surrounding my awareness. The client was carried along beneath us, a misty and faintly glowing cloud, sometimes in the vague outline of a person, but often just a roiling cloud. Madelyn kind of resembled a dough girl.

It is strange to me to think that it should take us any time at all to make that flight. Not nearly the amount of time it would take to walk or even to drive, but it did take a few minutes. I asked Crow about it a few times. He actually tried to explain, probably because he knew it would just confuse me more. I tried not to think about all the things he couldn't explain.

Eventually, we arrived in the bedroom of the sleeping, and completely clueless, Sonya and Dan. The woman sleeping in the tangle of sheets and blankets wasn't particularly beautiful or even very thin; her pudgy belly spilled out over the top of a pair of bikini style underwear. But she was alive and healthy and everything Madelyn thought she wanted to be. Madelyn's ghost hovered above her, a longing look on her ephemeral features.

Crow, in man-shape again, stood beside me holding my hand. I reached down to lightly touch the shoulder of the sleeping woman and closed my eyes. I didn't like to watch. I said a silent prayer for Sonya and Madelyn. She could still back out. Crow jostled me, as he always did, and my eyes popped open. I had to be an active participant, which meant I had to watch.

Crow laid one hand on Madelyn's ghost, and she slowly lowered into the sleeping body. At the same time, another form, Sonya's soul, seeped out of her body through every pore. Crow made a pulling motion, as if lifting a sheet, as we stepped back. Sonya's ghost coalesced in front of us, her face confused but not yet alarmed.

"Sonya?" Crow smiled as she focused on him. "My name is Crow Corvus. I have unfortunate news for you."

She began to look a little concerned at that. Before she could speak, another form appeared beside her. There was no pop or staticky crackle or any of that silliness. Only a slight stirring of otherwise calm air announced the reaper's arrival. Sonya turned and shied away a step. She bumped against the side of the bed and turned her head sharply toward it, toward her own sleeping body. *'There it is. Now she's alarmed.'*

The reapers didn't particularly like Crow's little venture. It cut into their schedule and caused last-minute changes in their assigned routes, but they're neutral parties. Professional courtesy, if nothing else, prevented them from interfering or putting their own strictures on him, but they wouldn't help him beyond the scope of their job either. This one was in the form of a young man, probably less than twenty years old at the time it was copied. There was no telling when that had been. The form wore the severe black suit with its hooded robe that was the uniform of the reapers rather than the clothes of any given era. But the hair was cut in a boy band style that spoke of the early nineties.

"Master Reaper." Crow gave a solemn and formal bow.

"Crow." The reaper groaned and turned to Sonya. "Sonya Melville Berkowitz?"

“Yeah? Who are you? Why are you here?” Sonya’s strangled voice warbled, grasping at the common, while her eyes rolled toward her body and away again, fleeing the terrifying.

She was Jewish. They never asked about things like that. Everyone always assumed the new life would be the same as their own in all these little ways. I sighed again. *‘So much for Madelyn’s Christmases.’*

The reaper laid a hand on Sonya’s shoulder and, in a voice that held a long-suffering note of boredom, said, “You are dead. Welcome to the afterlife.” Before the ghost could work up a good protest, probably before she could wrap her thoughts around what the reaper had said, they were gone.

I turned to Crow and gave him the best withering look I could muster. He grinned, toothy and creepy, and reached down to touch the sleeping woman’s hip. A tiny piece of soul material came away on his fingertips, like the dust from a nacho cheese flavored snack. He plucked his handkerchief from where it stuck out of his coat pocket and rubbed it between his soul-dusted fingers. Tucking the handkerchief back into his pocket, he shifted back into his crow form and flew us back to the morgue.

Pete and Donna had slumped a little on their feet but hadn’t moved. They straightened sharply as Crow and I drew deep breaths upon reentering our own bodies. Well, I reentered my body. I’m not sure if Crow’s body stayed or went during those trips. The soul dust on his handkerchief would seem to suggest that he went physically, but that’s not definitive proof when it comes to a demon.

“How’d it go, Sir?” Donna chirped in a high and ringing voice.

Crow took my hand as he plucked the handkerchief from its pocket once more. “Excellent. Excellent. Thank you for asking, Donna.” He shot Pete a significant glance, then turned to me. “How do you feel?”

The question was a trigger. All of the small sensations, all of the precursor feelings that warned of the avalanche to come, flooded into my

awareness. The fear welled up in me and a silent sob shook my shoulders. All I could do was nod.

Crow squeezed my hand and held the handkerchief above Madelyn's corpse. With a little shake, soul dust fell from the handkerchief, scattering across the pajama-covered chest on the gurney. Tucking the handkerchief away, Crow lifted my hand to the corpse's forehead, and I felt the sensations flowing away. Like fog receding, the small pains and the fear flowed out of me through my hand and into the corpse. All of the small joys flowed out, too.

I told myself, as I did every time, that I wouldn't miss them. Who misses life's little happinesses in the absence of any pain and suffering? The grey and mottled miasma of feelings puddled around my hand like a dirty spill of water. Nothing like the inky oil slick that had been deposited into the divorce papers that first time. I watched it slowly soak into the corpse under my hand until it was all gone. With a deep cleansing breath, I lifted my hand and stepped back, letting Crow's hand go as well.

"Thank you." My voice was steady, and my mind was clear. *'Who needs to feel?'*

"You are very welcome. Thank you, Little Bird." Crow clapped his hands together and beamed at Pete and Donna. "Excellent. Shall we have a cup of coffee then?"

Pete and Donna followed me, pushing the gurney into the staging area of the exam room. We zipped Madelyn's bag up and left her and all my pain there, taking her paperwork back to the office with us. Crow had already helped himself to a cup of fresh black coffee and sat in his corner, waiting. I tossed the folder on the desk beside the other new arrivals. Pete lifted the coffee pot and began to fill cups as I passed them out.

"What does the rest of your shift look like?" I settled into my desk chair and started the light chit chat expected during a coffee break.

Donna sat on a short file cabinet beside Crow, crossing her long legs toward him. "Oh, you know. Trundle around a bit, find a quiet spot to park and wait. Avoid saving lives if we can."

I looked at Crow. “Do you know if they’ll have any more deaths to bring in tonight?”

“No, Bird. I didn’t check the schedule for that.” Crow sipped his coffee and let his eyes flutter as he inhaled the steam. *‘He’s so weird.’*

Pete settled back in the third chair, a straight-backed wooden thing that looked less than comfortable. He stretched his long legs out in front of him and crossed his ankles. “We brought in the important one. How about you? Busy night?”

I shrugged one eyebrow. “Not terribly, but enough to occupy my time.” Very dull chit chat. “Pete, weren’t you trying to get some girl to go out with you tomorrow?”

That sparked his interest. He sat up straighter and pulled his feet back. “Denise. Yeah, and she agreed.” He turned to Crow. “Thanks, Boss. Those tickets did the trick.”

Crow nodded graciously; his eyes half closed. I studied him as Pete expounded on the physical virtues of Denise and what he hoped to do with her after the concert. Donna chortled here and there, adding her own suggestions and comments. Crow just sat there, letting Pete’s voice roll by. I twisted in my chair to pull a bottom desk drawer out and lifted one foot to rest on its lip.

I could tell where the bruise was on the bottom of my foot and pressed the sole of my shoe into the side of the drawer, testing the sensation of the bruise. It wasn’t like I couldn’t tell when I touched things, if they were hot or cold, sharp or soft. I suppose I could, technically, feel them. It’s just that there was no emotional response. I sipped my coffee, jabbing my foot against the hard metal side of the drawer, and pondered the sensation.

With a start, I realized I had been staring at Crow. He was staring right back, meeting my own unblinking gaze. He let the corners of his mouth lift in a subtle smile before lifting his cup to take a sip, never breaking his gaze away from mine.

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