

PROLOGUE

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THE DEVIL STANDS ON MAIN STREET, HIS LARGE WINGS folded behind him, the sunlight crowning him with the golden breath of Heaven...and casting strange and unsettling shadows over his face. Save for the fabric carved around his hips, he's naked and, given the proud set of his jaw and the arrogance rippling through his muscled body, clearly feels no shame about it.

A wooden hand beckons to the east, the direction of the morning star. A hint for anyone who might not see the horns hidden in the statue's intricate tumble of perfectly carved curls, although how anyone would need a hint after seeing the statue's expression, I don't know. From a distance, the statue broods, haunted and almost tender, but the closer you get, the more malice you see in that finely carved mouth, the more burning, petulant will you see in those eyes.

"Holy shit," my brother Sean says, squinting up at the statue's face. "It *is* you." He looks askance at me. "Why is there a statue of the devil with your face, and why is it in front of city hall this morning?"

My heart is thudding against my chest as I circle the carving; my mouth is dry with excitement. “I don’t know,” I finally say. I can feel my cheeks burning, the blood and adrenaline rushing through my body.

“You look angry,” observes Sean. And then, dryly: “Do you need to talk about your feelings?”

The trouble with a brother old enough to be your dad is that he frequently tries to act like your dad. But it doesn’t bother me like it used to. I’ve spent the last seven years perfecting my mask, and it fits so well now that I almost believe my own unruffled tone of voice when I answer, “I’m not angry.”

That’s a lie. I *am* angry, but the anger is stitched to too many other things—lust, obsession, relief, eagerness—to fairly call it anger alone.

When I come around the front of the statue again, I’m smiling at it, even with this needy, metallic urgency pumping through me. I’m smiling because the artist spared no detail in rendering the lean, powerful torso of the devil, even though I know she had to use her imagination for most of it.

I’m smiling because she was imagining me.

Even the hair below the devil’s navel—which arrows down to the drape of fabric hanging low on his hips—has been carved into flat curls to match the curls on his head. It’s the kind of detail you don’t think of unless you’ve been thinking about someone’s body quite a lot.

Oh, Birdie. You’re in so much trouble, and you don’t even know it yet.

It’s the devil’s outstretched hand I pause to look at the longest, the fine lines of its knuckles, the smoothness of its fingernails, the faultlessly articulated joints and tendons. The statue is a little larger than life-size, and it’s on a wooden plinth, so I only need to duck a little to see its downward-facing palm.

Unlike the rest of the wood—pale and so fine-grained that the grain itself almost disappears—the devil’s palm is splotched with a large, hidden knot that had been tucked away in the tree. A burl in the trunk formed a hundred years ago, revealed only when a pretty girl thought to take a chisel to it and carve the hand of God’s most beautiful angel.

I straighten, fury and glee and triumph coursing through me. Seven years and this is how I find her.

“Does anyone know who left it here?” I ask my brother.

Sean is staring at the statue and then over at me, his eyes narrowed like he’s considering something. “There would probably be a freight record,” he says after a minute. “No one is moving something like this without equipment.”

I nod and smile up at the devil—at my own wooden face, carved with such accuracy, such clarity, that must have been like devotion in its own way.

Speak of the devil, Birdie Cooper, and he shall appear.