

# Prologue

## JANUARY

*The New Orleans businessman, whose gray hair put him in his fifties, was accompanied by his much younger and taller bodyguard/chauffeur on the night he met the devil in the French Quarter. The meeting was by prearrangement.*

“This is really the Devil we’re going to see?” asked the bodyguard. He was tense—but then, that wasn’t too surprising.

“Not *the* Devil, but *a* devil.” The businessman was cool and collected on the outside, but maybe not so much on the inside. “Since he came up to me at the Chamber of Commerce banquet, I’ve learned a lot of things I didn’t know before.” He looked around him, trying to spot the creature he’d agreed to meet. He told his bodyguard, “He convinced me that he was what he said he was. I always thought my daughter was simply deluded. I thought she imagined she had power

because she wanted to have something . . . of her own. Now I'm willing to admit she has a certain talent, though nowhere near what she thinks."

It was cold and damp in the January night, even in New Orleans. The businessman shifted from foot to foot to keep warm. He told the bodyguard, "Evidently, meeting at a crossroads is traditional." The street was not as busy as it would be in the summer, but there were still drinkers and tourists and natives going about their night's entertainment. He wasn't afraid, he told himself. "Ah, here he comes," the businessman said.

The devil was a well-dressed man, much like the businessman. His tie was by Hermes. His suit was Italian. His shoes were custom-made. His eyes were abnormally clear, the whites gleaming, the irises a purplish brown; they looked almost red from certain angles.

"What have you got for me?" the devil asked, in a voice that indicated he was only faintly interested.

"Two souls," said the businessman. "Tyrese has agreed to go in with me."

The devil shifted his gaze to the bodyguard. After a moment, the bodyguard nodded. He was a big man, a light-skinned African American with bright hazel eyes.

"Your own free will?" the devil asked neutrally. "Both of you?"

"My own free will," said the businessman.

"My own free will," affirmed the bodyguard.

The devil said, "Then let's get down to business."

"Business" was a word that made the older man comfortable. He smiled. "Wonderful. I've got the documents right here, and they're signed." Tyrese opened a thin leather folder and withdrew two pieces of paper: not parchment or human skin, nothing that dramatic or exotic—computer paper that the businessman's office secretary had

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CHARLAINE HARRIS

[2]

bought at OfficeMax. Tyrese offered the papers to the devil, who gave them a quick glance.

“You have to sign them again,” the devil said. “For this signature, ink is not satisfactory.”

“I thought you were joking about that.” The businessman frowned.

“I never joke,” the devil said. “I do have a sense of humor, oh, believe me, I do. But not about contracts.”

“We actually have to . . . ?”

“Sign in blood? Yes, absolutely. It’s traditional. And you’ll do it now.” He read the businessman’s sideways glance correctly. “I promise you no one will see what you are doing,” he said. As the devil spoke, a sudden hush enveloped the three men, and a thick film fell between them and the rest of the street scene.

The businessman sighed elaborately, to show how melodramatic he thought this tradition was. “Tyrese, your knife?” he said, looking up to the chauffeur.

Tyrese’s knife appeared with shocking suddenness, probably from his coat sleeve; the blade was obviously sharp, and it gleamed in the streetlight. The businessman shucked off his coat and handed it to his companion. He unbuttoned his cuff and rolled up his sleeve. Perhaps to let the devil know how tough he was, he jabbed himself in the left arm with the knife. A sluggish trickle of blood rewarded his effort, and he looked the devil directly in the face as he accepted the quill that the devil had somehow supplied . . . even more smoothly than Tyrese had produced the knife. Dipping the quill into the trail of blood, the businessman signed his name to the top document, which the chauffeur held pressed against the leather folder.

After he’d signed, the businessman returned the knife to the chauffeur and donned his coat. The chauffeur followed the same procedure

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## DEAD EVER AFTER

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as his employer. When he'd signed his own contract, he blew on it to dry the blood as if he'd signed with a Sharpie and the ink might smear.

The devil smiled when the signatures were complete. The moment he did, he didn't look quite so much like a prosperous man of affairs.

He looked too damn happy.

"You get a signing bonus," he told the businessman. "Since you brought me another soul. By the way, how do you feel?"

"Just like I always did," said the businessman. He buttoned up his coat. "Maybe a little angry." He smiled suddenly, his teeth looking as sharp and gleaming as the knife had. "How are you, Tyrese?" he asked his employee.

"A little antsy," Tyrese admitted. "But I'll be okay."

"You were both bad people to begin with," the devil said, without any judgment in his voice. "The souls of the innocent are sweeter. But I delight in having you. I suppose you're sticking with the usual wish list? Prosperity? The defeat of your enemies?"

"Yes, I want those things," the businessman said with passionate sincerity. "And I have a few more requests, since I get a signing bonus. Or could I take that in cash?"

"Oh," the devil said, smiling gently, "I don't deal in cash. I deal in favors."

"Can I get back to you on that?" the businessman asked after some thought. "Take a rain check?"

The devil looked faintly interested. "You don't want an Alfa Romeo or a night with Nicole Kidman or the biggest house in the French Quarter?"

The businessman shook his head decisively. "I'm sure something will come up that I do want, and then I'd like to have a very good chance of getting it. I was a successful man until Katrina. And after

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CHARLAINE HARRIS

[4]

Katrina I thought I would be rich, because I own a lumber business. Everyone needed lumber.” He took a deep breath. He kept on telling his story, despite the fact that the devil looked bored. “But getting a supply line reestablished was hard. So many people didn’t have money to spend because they were ruined, and there was the wait for the insurance money, for the rest. I made some mistakes, believing the fly-by-night builders would pay me on time. . . . It all ended up with my business too extended, everyone owing me, my credit stretched as thin as a condom on an elephant. Knowledge of this is getting around.” He looked down. “I’m losing the influence I had in this city.”

Possibly the devil had known all those things, and that was why he’d approached the businessman. Clearly he was not interested in the businessman’s litany of woes. “Prosperity it is, then,” he said briskly. “And I look forward to your special request. Tyrese, what do you want? I have your soul, too.”

“I don’t believe in souls,” Tyrese said flatly. “I don’t think my boss does, either. We don’t mind giving you what we don’t believe we have.” He grinned at the devil, man-to-man, which was a mistake. The devil was no man.

The devil smiled back. Tyrese’s grin vanished at the sight. “What do you want?” the devil repeated. “I won’t ask again.”

“I want Gypsy Kidd. Her real name is Katy Sherboni, if you need that. She work at Bourbon Street Babes. I want her to love me the way I love her.”

The businessman looked disappointed in his employee. “Tyrese, I wish you’d asked for something more lasting. Sex is everywhere you look in New Orleans, and girls like Gypsy are a dime a dozen.”

“You wrong,” Tyrese said. “I don’t think I have a soul, but I know love is once in a lifetime. I love Gypsy. If she loves me back, I’ll be a

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## DEAD EVER AFTER

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happy man. And if you make money, boss, I'll make money. I'll have enough. I'm not greedy."

"I'm all about the greed," said the devil, almost gently. "You may end up wishing you'd asked for some government bonds, Tyrese."

The chauffeur shook his head. "I'm happy with my bargain. You give me Gypsy, the rest will be all right. I know it."

The devil looked at him with what seemed very much like pity, if that emotion was possible for a devil.

"Enjoy yourselves, you hear?" he said to both of the newly soulless men. They could not tell if he was mocking them or if he was sincere. "Tyrese, you will not see me again until our final meeting." He faced the businessman. "Sir, you and I will meet at some date in the future. Just give me a call when you're ready for your signing bonus. Here's my card."

The businessman took the plain white card. The only writing on it was a phone number. It was not the same number he'd called to set up the first rendezvous. "But what if it's years from now?" he said.

"It won't be," said the devil, but his voice was farther away. The businessman looked up to see that the devil was half a block away. After seven more steps he seemed to melt into the dirty sidewalk, leaving only an impression in the cold damp air.

The businessman and the chauffeur turned and walked hastily in the opposite direction. The chauffeur never saw this version of the devil again. The businessman didn't see him until June.

## JUNE

*Far away—thousands of miles away—a tall, thin man lay on a beach in Baja. He was not in one of the tourist spots where he might encounter lots of other gringos, who might recognize him. He was patronizing*

CHARLAINE HARRIS

[6]

a dilapidated bar, really more of a hut. For a small cash payment, the proprietor would rent patrons a large towel and a beach umbrella, and send his son out to refresh your drink from time to time. As long as you kept drinking.

Though the tall man was only sipping Coca-Cola, he was paying through the nose for it—though he didn't seem to realize that, or perhaps he didn't care. He sat on the towel, crouched in the umbrella's shade, wearing a hat and sunglasses and swim trunks. Close to him was an ancient backpack, and his flip-flops were set on the sand beside it, casting off a faint smell of hot rubber. The tall man was listening to an iPod, and his smile indicated he was very pleased with what he heard. He lifted his hat to run his fingers through his hair. It was golden blond, but there was a bit of root showing that hinted his natural color was nearly gray. Judging by his body, he was in his forties. He had a small head in relation to his broad shoulders, and he did not look like a man who was used to manual labor. He didn't look rich, either; his entire ensemble, the flip-flops and the swim trunks, the hat and the cast-aside shirt, had come from a Wal-Mart or some even cheaper dollar store.

It didn't pay to look affluent in Baja, not with the way things were these days. It wasn't safe, gringos weren't exempt from the violence, and most tourists stayed in the established resorts, flying in and out without driving through the countryside. There were a few other expats around, mostly unattached men with an air of desperation . . . or secrecy. Their reasons for choosing such a hazardous place to live were better not discovered. Asking questions could be unhealthy.

One of these expats, a recent arrival, came to sit close to the tall man, too close for such proximity to be an accident on a thinly populated beach. The tall man gave the unwelcome newcomer a sideways

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#### DEAD EVER AFTER

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look from behind his dark glasses, which were obviously prescription. The newcomer was a man in his thirties, not tall or short, not handsome or ugly, not reedy or muscular. He was medium in all aspects, physically. This medium man had been watching the tall man for a few days, and the tall man had been sure he'd approach him sooner or later.

The medium man had carefully selected the optimum moment. The two were sitting in a place on the beach where no one else could hear them or approach them unseen, and even with satellites in the atmosphere it was probable that no one could see them without being spotted, either. The taller man was mostly hidden under the beach umbrella. He noticed that his visitor was sitting in its shadow.

"What are you listening to?" asked the medium man, pointing to the earbuds inserted in the tall man's ears.

He had a faint accent; maybe a German one? From one of those European countries, anyway, thought the tall man, who was not well traveled. And the newcomer also had a remarkably unpleasant smile. It *looked* okay, with the upturned lips and the bared teeth, but somehow the effect was more as if an animal were exposing its teeth preparatory to biting you.

"You a homo? I'm not interested," the tall man said. "In fact, you'll be judged with hellfire."

The medium man said, "I like women. Very much. Sometimes more than they want." His smile became quite feral. And he asked again, "What are you listening to?"

The tall man debated, staring angrily at his companion. But it had been days since he'd talked to anyone. At last, he opted for the truth. "I'm listening to a sermon," he said.

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CHARLAINE HARRIS

[8]



The medium man exhibited only mild surprise. “Really? A sermon? I wouldn’t have pegged you for a man of the cloth.” But his smile said otherwise. The tall man began to feel uneasy. He began to think of the gun in his backpack, less than an arm’s length away. At least he’d opened the buckles when he’d put it down.

“You’re wrong, but God won’t punish you for it,” the tall man said calmly, his own smile genial. “I’m listening to one of my own old sermons. I spoke God’s truth to the multitudes.”

“Did no one believe you?” The medium man cocked his head curiously.

“Many believed me. Many. I was attracting quite a following. But a girl named . . . A girl brought about my downfall. And put my wife in jail, too, in a way.”

“Would that girl’s name have been Sookie Stackhouse?” asked the medium man, removing his sunglasses to reveal remarkably pale eyes.

The taller man’s head snapped in his direction. “How’d you know?” he said.

## JUNE

*The devil was eating beignets, fastidiously, when the businessman* walked up to the outside table. The devil noticed the spring in Copley Carmichael’s step. He looked even more prosperous than he had when he was broke. Carmichael was in the business section of the newspaper frequently these days. An infusion of capital had reestablished him very quickly as an economic force in New Orleans, and his political clout had expanded along with the money he pumped into New Orleans’s sputtering economy, which had been dealt a crippling blow by

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### DEAD EVER AFTER

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Katrina. Which, the devil pointed out quickly to anyone who asked, he'd had simply nothing to do with.

Today Carmichael looked healthy and vigorous, ten years younger than he actually was. He sat at the devil's table without any greeting.

"Where's your man, Mr. Carmichael?" asked the devil, after a sip of his coffee.

Carmichael was busy placing a drink order with the waiter, but when the young man was gone, he said, "Tyrese has trouble these days, and I gave him some time off."

"The young woman? Gypsy?"

"Of course," said Carmichael, not quite sneering. "I knew if he asked for her, he wouldn't be pleased with the results, but he was so sure that true love would win in the end."

"And it hasn't?"

"Oh, yes, she's crazy about him. She loves him so much she has sex with him all the time. She couldn't stop herself, even though she knew she was HIV positive . . . a fact she didn't share with Tyrese."

"Ah," the devil said. "Not my work, that virus. So how is Tyrese faring?"

"He's HIV positive, too," Carmichael said, shrugging. "He's getting treatment, and it's not the instant death sentence it used to be. But he's very emotional about it." Carmichael shook his head. "I always thought he had better sense."

"I understand you wish to ask for your signing bonus," the devil said. Carmichael saw no connection between the two ideas.

"Yes," Copley Carmichael said. He grinned at the devil and leaned forward confidentially. In a barely audible whisper he said, "I know exactly what I want. I want you to find me a cluviel dor."

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CHARLAINE HARRIS

[10]

The devil looked genuinely surprised. “How did you learn of the existence of such a rare item?”

“My daughter brought it up in conversation,” Carmichael said, without a hint of shame. “It sounded interesting, but she stopped talking before she told me the name of the person who supposedly has one. So I had a man I know hack into her e-mail. I should have done that earlier. It’s been illuminating. She’s living with a fellow I don’t trust. After our last conversation, she got so angry with me that she’s refused to see me. Now I can keep tabs on her without her knowing, so I can protect her from her own bad judgment.”

He was absolutely sincere when he made this statement. The devil saw that Carmichael believed that he loved his daughter, that he knew what was best for her under any circumstance.

“So Amelia had been talking to someone about a cluviel dor,” the devil said. “That led her to bring it up with you. How interesting. No one’s had one for . . . well, in my memory. A cluviel dor would have been made by the fae . . . and you understand, they are not tiny, cute creatures with wings.”

Carmichael nodded. “I’m astounded to discover what exists out there,” he said. “I have to believe in fairies now. And I have to consider that maybe my daughter isn’t such a screwball after all. Though I think she’s deluded about her own power.”

The devil raised his perfect eyebrows. There seemed to be more than one deluded person in the Carmichael family. “About the cluviel dor . . . the fae used them all. I don’t believe there are any left on earth, and I can’t go into Faery since the upheaval. A thing or two has been expelled *out* of Faery . . . but nothing goes in.” He looked mildly regretful.

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## DEAD EVER AFTER

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“There is one cluviel dor available, and from what I can tell, it’s being concealed by a friend of my daughter’s,” Copley Carmichael said. “I know you can find it.”

“Fascinating,” the devil said, quite sincerely. “And what do you want it for? After I find it?”

“I want my daughter back,” Carmichael said. His intensity was almost palpable. “I want the power to change her life. So I know what I’ll wish for when you track it down for me. The woman who knows where it is . . . she’s not likely to give it up. It was a legacy from her grandmother, and she’s not a big fan of mine.”

The devil turned his face to the morning sun, and his eyes glowed red briefly. “Imagine that. I’ll set things in motion. The name of your daughter’s friend, the one who may know the whereabouts of the cluviel dor?”

“She’s in Bon Temps. It’s up north, not too far from Shreveport. Sookie Stackhouse.”

The devil nodded slowly. “I’ve heard the name.”

## JULY

*The next time the devil met with Copley Carmichael, three days after their conversation at Café du Monde, he dropped by Carmichael’s table at Commander’s Palace. Carmichael was waiting for his dinner and busy on his cell phone with a contractor who wanted to extend his credit line. Carmichael was unwilling, and he explained why in no uncertain terms. When he looked up, the devil was standing there in the same suit he’d worn when they’d met the first time. He looked cool and impeccable.*

CHARLAINE HARRIS

[12]

As Carmichael put the phone down, the devil slid into the chair across from his.

Carmichael had jumped when he recognized the devil. And since he hated being surprised, he was unwise. He snarled, “What the hell do you mean coming here? I didn’t ask you to visit!”

“What the hell, indeed,” said the devil, who didn’t seem to take offense. He ordered a single malt whiskey from the waiter who’d materialized at his elbow. “I assumed you’d want to hear the news of your cluviel dor.”

Carmichael’s expression changed instantly. “You found it! You have it!”

“Sadly, Mr. Carmichael, I do not,” said the devil. (He did not sound sad.) “Something rather unexpected has thwarted our plans.” The waiter deposited the whiskey with some ceremony, and the devil took a sip and nodded.

“What?” Carmichael said, almost unable to speak for anger.

“Miss Stackhouse used the cluviel dor, and its magic has been expended.”

There was a moment of silence fraught with all the emotions the devil enjoyed.

“I’ll see her *ruined*,” said Copley Carmichael venomously, keeping his voice down with a supreme effort. “You’ll help me. That’s what I’ll take instead of the cluviel dor.”

“Oh my goodness. You’ve used your signing bonus, Mr. Carmichael. Mustn’t get greedy.”

“But you didn’t get me the cluviel dor!” Even though he was an experienced businessman, Carmichael was astonished and outraged.

“I found it and was ready to take it from her pocket,” said the devil.

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## DEAD EVER AFTER

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“I entered the body of someone standing behind her. But she used it before I could extract it. *Finding it* was the favor you requested. You used those words twice, and ‘track it down’ once. Our dealings are concluded.” He tossed back his drink.

“At least help me get back at her,” Carmichael said, his face red with rage. “She crossed us both.”

“Not me,” said the devil. “I’ve seen Miss Stackhouse up close and talked to many people who know her. She seems like an interesting woman. I have no cause to do her harm.” He stood up. “In fact, if I may advise you, walk away from this. She has some powerful friends, among them your daughter.”

“My daughter is a woman who runs around with witches,” Carmichael said. “She’s never been able to make her own living, not completely. I’ve been researching her ‘friends,’ very discreetly.” He sighed, sounding both angry and exasperated. “I understand their powers exist. I believe that now. Reluctantly. But what have they done with those powers? The strongest among them lives in a *shack*.” Carmichael’s knuckles rapped against the table. “My daughter could be a force in society in this town. She could work for me and do all kinds of charity stuff, but instead she lives in her own little world with her loser boyfriend. Like her friend Sookie. But I’ll even the score there. How many powerful friends could a waitress have?”

The devil glanced over to his left. Two tables away sat a very round man with dark hair, who was by himself at a table laden with food. The very round man met the devil’s eyes without blinking or looking away, which few men could do. After a long moment, the two nodded at each other.

Carmichael was glaring at the devil.

“I owe you nothing for Tyrese any longer,” said the devil. “And you

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CHARLAINE HARRIS

[14]

are mine forever. Given your present course, I may have you sooner than I'd expected." He smiled, a chilling expression on his smooth face, and he rose from the table and left.

Carmichael was even angrier when he had to pay for the devil's whiskey. He never even noticed the very round man. But the very round man noticed him.

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**DEAD EVER AFTER**

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[15]

