

THE
DEVIL'S
INTERN

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Donna Hosie

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*For Beth Phelan and Kelly Loughman,
for loving Team DEVIL
as much as I do*

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1. Welcome to Hell

“How did you die?”

That’s the first question you’ll be asked in Hell. Four years ago it was certainly the first question I was asked. I had just walked into a holding area cramped with the recently dead—the processing center I know now to be the HalfWay House—when I was thrown against a wall by another dead person demanding to know. It’s a question I’ve been asked a million times since.

I was too shell-shocked to consider lying. So I told him the truth.

“I—I was hit by a bus,” I stammered.

Big mistake. Huge. Rule number one in Hell: if you have a crappy death, don’t tell other dead people about it. You’ll be mocked for all eternity if you do, and apparently that’s a long time.

It was a Greyhound bus that did the dirty deed. I was visiting my father in Washington, DC—my parents are divorced—and . . . splat.

Here is the thing I can’t quite get my head around, though. I wasn’t crossing the road when it happened, or at least I hadn’t intended to. I was just walking down the street, listening to my iPod, minding my own business.

Something distracted me. Something major. I can’t remember what it was, and it drives me crazy when I try to think back. For some stupid, dumbass reason, I ran out into the road. I couldn’t hear

the bus, or the squealing of the brakes. All I could hear was Radiohead through my headphones.

At least my death was instant; I should be thankful for that. Down here, devils wear their demise like a badge of honor, but I bet if they had to relive it, not one of them would choose to bleed to death on a muddy battlefield, or slowly asphyxiate by hanging.

My death may have been stupid, and I may not like talking about it, but at least I can't remember the pain.

A bus, though, I ask you. Of all the ways to snuff it.

I'm seventeen and always will be, but being dead for four years has made me a little more experienced. You can make your death as heroic as you want in Hell, because nobody checks up on you. The only way to know for sure is to look in the devil resources files, which no one ever does because the photographs freak everyone out. So now I say I died doing something brave. Animals, that's the key. Say you died saving an animal and . . . well, if you end up here—and you almost certainly will—you try it. See for yourself how much love you get.

I work in the accounting department of Hell under the supervision of Septimus, The Devil's accountant and civil servant number one. I'm The Devil's intern so I get a desk in here with The Devil's right-hand man. Like me, Septimus is tall and thin. Unlike me he wears the sharpest pinstripe suits. His dark skin has a reddish tinge to it, like a sunburned glow. He wears small golden hoops in his ears, and his head has been shaved to the scalp. But I think Septimus's most awesome feature is his eyes. They are bloodred. They weren't originally like that, of course, but Septimus has been here so long, he can't remember their original color.

One day I'll have eyes like that. Right now mine are pink. Pink! As soon as a devil enters Hell, their eye color changes. At first the irises turn opaque, the color of foamy warm milk. Eventually, after a year or so, the color starts to reflect the heat that has built up inside, and a hint of rose appears. This intensifies over time, and the spectrum of eye pigment changes from pale pink to magenta to cherry,

until finally the irises are bloodred. The only exception to this rule is The Devil himself. His irises are black.

I'm on my way to work right now—and I'm late. Again. Septimus isn't the kind of boss who will rant and rave, because he knows I work my butt off in his office, but I'm just no good with time. Hell is so overcrowded it takes hours to move from one end of the corridor to the other.

I was sure I was wearing a watch when I died, but somewhere between getting hit by a bus and getting checked in at the HalfWay House, I lost it. At least I got to keep my cell phone and my iPod.

And now I'm really late because the alarm is going off for The Devil's morning tea. The alarm is actually a recording of Chopin's "Funeral March." The Devil thinks it's funny.

Yeah, right. My sides are splitting.

What's even worse is that the recording is actually me. When The Devil found out I was a musical prodigy I had to spend a week playing Chopin for the Grim Reapers while they recorded it. I could hardly say no to The Devil, but I was so depressed afterward that I completely lost my appetite. All that recording session did was remind me of what I'd lost. I'm still not used to the fact that I'm dead, and I don't think I ever will be. I breathe on reflex, even though I don't need to. I still feel pain, though nothing can ever kill me again. I never really appreciated living until I stopped doing it.

And do you have any idea how unpopular that music makes me with some of the other devils? They have to hear the "Funeral March" every single day. Talk about rubbing our dead faces in it.

I—along with millions and millions of other devils—work in the central business district, or CBD, of the Underworld. There are nearly seven hundred floors, each with its own balcony and elevator. Flaming torches hang from the walls, so at first glance it looks like the façade of an enormous cruise liner docking in the dead of night. It freaked me out the first time I saw it, but pretty much everything freaked me out back then.

Each floor in the business hub of Hell deals with a specific area

of administration or maintenance. The higher up the cave you are, the more important the office. So The Devil's Oval Office—not that he's a democratically elected demon, he just likes irony—and the busy accounting department tower above everyone else on level 1; the heating department is on level 2; and The Devil's fabric selection team has recently been promoted to level 3. Those in true torment work on level 666. This is a new department, reserved for reality TV stars. They clean out the ground-floor toilets.

The rest of Hell is separated into zones, connected by thousands and thousands of tunnels. Our dorms are near where we work, so there are enormous swaths of the Underworld that most of us never get to see.

Now I'm *really* late, because the recording of me playing Chopin has finished. I'd better reach the office by the time "Abide with Me" reminds everyone it's lunchtime.

Finally, I get to the elevator. If I close my eyes, I can pretend I'm an astronaut flying into space. I wanted to do that when I was little: walk in space. Then I was going to be a paleontologist. Finally I settled on rock star. Not like Jon Bon Jovi or even Hendrix, but more alternative rock, like Chris Martin. Someone who plays the piano like a madman.

But then I died and became The Devil's intern. They don't tend to give you that option on career night.

I'm actually walking on tiptoes as I inch toward the accounting office. First I need to get past the Oval Office, and even though I walk past this door several times every day, it still makes me anxious.

I'm at the door when I hear raised voices. It's The Devil and Septimus. I can tell The Devil is in another foul mood because sparks of blue electrical current are zapping across the damp outer stone walls.

The Devil has been throwing tantrums all week, and from the sound of it, he's finally reached the end of his patience. Heaven—or Up There, as most of us call it—has sent another notice, making The Devil scream and rant until he set fire to his gold throne (the seat he extorted from King Louis XVI in return for his head). Septimus must have gone to try to calm Sir down.

I don't know why I listen in on their conversations. It's hard not to be inquisitive when you're this close to power, but most of the stuff they talk about in there gives me nightmares.

"Septimus!" shrieks The Devil. "I am vexed, Septimus. One could claim I am in despair."

"What's He done now, sir?" asks Septimus. His accent, which apparently was once Roman, has now transformed into a deep southern American drawl. A lot of accents and languages change in Hell. I guess it depends on who you hang with. All dead people are implanted with a communication translator as soon as they arrive at the HalfWay House. So regardless of the mother tongue, all of us can understand one another. With all the scary stuff that gets screamed around here, I sometimes wish I didn't have the translator.

"He!" cries The Devil. "I'll tell you what He has done, Septimus. He has threatened to stop funding the HalfWay House. That is what He has done. He really has gone too far this time.

"And," says The Devil, continuing to wail, "to compound my misery, Septimus, His letter exploded into rainbows and destroyed another set of my drapes. He is such a vile show-off. Why can't He send a messenger like the rest of us? It's getting to the point where I'm considering the removal of all my furnishings, and you know how much I cherish my drapery.

"Up There is conspiring against me, Septimus," sniffs The Devil. "Without the HalfWay House to triage the dead, our reception area will soon be swamped with poets, librarians, vegans, and charity workers. It's no good, Septimus. It's getting absolutely out of control. Hell is already bursting at the seams. Soon we'll be overrun, and our costs are already astronomical. The Highers created Hell and Up There for a good reason—these dead people have to go *somewhere*. He can't simply refuse to take His fair share."

"I agree wholeheartedly, sir. In fact, I was thinking it might be time to bring the Viciseometer out of storage," says Septimus. "I have been formulating a plan."

"The Viciseometer? That's an excellent idea," replies The Devil. The hairs on my arm suddenly lift with a chill I don't usually

experience in Hell. The Devil's voice has dropped. It sounds much deeper, menacing. "You know, I was thinking we could unleash Operation H as well," he adds.

There is silence.

"You don't think that might be a little too hasty, sir?" says Septimus. "We have yet to explore all alternatives. Every scientist who saw the infection spread in those poor dead souls is still traumatized. . . ."

"But isn't that exactly what we want, Septimus?" whispers The Devil, and although I can't see him, just the tone of his voice is making me feel sick. The words tumble from his mouth, as if he has waited a long time to say them.

"I thought you and I were in agreement here. I want Up There so scared, so beyond fear, so traumatized at just the *thought* of what I can do to them that they will go down on bended knee and beg to take more of the dead."

"I do understand, sir," says Septimus gently, "but perhaps you would like to see my plan for the Viciseometer first? I just have a couple of extras to add, but it should be ready within twenty-four hours. Just leave it to me. I have never failed you."

"Then I should allow you to get back to your plan. Don't keep me waiting."

My desk—now.

I run into the accounting office and throw myself into my chair. I grab a stack of papers and try to look busy as Septimus's shoes clip along the marble floor toward our connecting door.

Then a high-pitched voice calls out, "Send in the cherubs on your way out, Septimus. I need amusement to take my mind away from the torment."

I hear Septimus sigh on the other side of the door. "Sir, we don't have the cherubs anymore. Remember, you lost them in a game of chess several thousand years ago. He has them now."

The Devil starts wailing again.

"Perhaps you would like me to send for the chimeras?" says Septimus hurriedly. "I understand they have been learning the art of Irish folk dancing from one of the witch covens."

Septimus walks into the office.

“Make the call, Mitchell.”

“Send for the chimeras,” I say into the handset, “and better have the leprechauns on standby. Sir is having a very bad day.”

Septimus slumps into his office chair and puts his feet up on the mahogany desk.

“It’s getting worse, isn’t it?” I ask.

“He’s proving to be rather troublesome,” replies Septimus, “but then He knows exactly which buttons to push and Sir rises to the bait every single time. This time He’s threatening to close the Half-Way House.”

“Can He do that?”

Septimus shakes his head. “I don’t believe so—although I know Fabulara would find it very funny. But even then, He knows that if the dead aren’t sorted properly we will have anarchy in administration on both sides. However, it is an undeniable fact that more of the dead are crossing our threshold than theirs.”

“So what will you do?” I’m fishing for information, and judging by the narrowing of Septimus’s red eyes, he knows it. We rarely mention Fabulara, the Higher who is responsible for Hell and Up There. The Devil is paranoid about the name being said aloud. He thinks it’s cursed. But it isn’t Fabulara I’m interested in. I want to know what a Viciseometer is, and what Septimus plans to do with it.

“It’s going to be yet another long day, Mitchell,” drawls Septimus, ignoring my question. “Now, file the laundry receipts and then pop down to maintenance and ask Geronimo if he has a quote for furnace number eight yet. When you’ve done that, send the quarterly figures to Augustus for double-checking and then ask IT to come and look at my computer—another virus has gotten into it, the Black Death I think, judging by the pus oozing out of the hard drive. Take my suit to the dry cleaners, and then send the ledger for the Masquerade Ball costs to Heather in accounts five.”

Now, I can juggle a lot of things when it comes to work, but smoke is rising from my pen as I furiously scribble down Septimus’s instructions.

“And when you’ve done that . . .” I look up in alarm. Time is running short and I want to grab a shower and a burger or three before I meet Medusa.

“Never mind, perhaps tomorrow,” says Septimus hesitantly. “Then you shall go to the ball, Cinderella.”

“Does that make you an ugly stepsister?”

“I’m far too handsome,” says Septimus as a gong from the Oval Office starts to ring over and over again.

The unmistakable shrieks of The Devil are now bouncing off the walls throughout the entire first floor.

“Septimus! Septimus! Help me! The chimeras are attacking my pelmets. Send for security. Oh, woe is me . . . *Septimus!*”

Believe it or not, this is actually a typical day in Hell: heat, long hours, The Devil’s screaming, heat, wishful thinking, and even more heat.

This is my existence for the rest of eternity.

Because four years ago, on the eighteenth of July, I died and went to Hell, and nothing will ever change that.

2. The Masquerade Ball

The Devil's Masquerade Ball is apparently one Hell of a party and, for many devils, the only highlight of their existence in the Afterlife.

It takes place in an immense rock cave situated between the business district and the accommodation complex, where most devils sleep when they're not being worked to another death. For the Masquerade Ball, the cave is decorated to be an exact replica—although on a far larger scale—of the Salon de Mars ballroom in the French Palace of Versailles. I wouldn't know if this was true, myself. I never had the time to get a passport, let alone travel.

Tickets for the Masquerade Ball are snapped up within seconds of going on sale, and the waiting list for returns stretches into the millions. The rules of entry are simple: each devil in Hell is only allowed to apply once every hundred years. You aren't guaranteed a ticket, but at least you have a chance. Septimus—who has been in Hell for thousands of years—has been to nine balls. The last one he attended was in 1547, which was the year Henry VIII arrived. The Devil was so impressed by the royal parties Henry—or Chopper, as everyone calls him—threw when he was alive that the king was fast-tracked onto the organizing committee.

This year's Masquerade Ball is to be my first. I'm going with Medusa, one of my best friends in Hell. Apparently, I was lucky; to get a ticket after just four years of being dead is unheard of. *Lucky* isn't a word I tend to use a lot now. Medusa has been so excited that

she's barely slept. So, because of her, I'm looking forward to it, too. Plus I get to listen to live music all night, which is numbers one, two, and three on my what-I-miss-about-being-alive list.

So, once work is finished, I rush back to my dorm and throw on my rented tux—which has clearly been worn a thousand times, judging by the smell. Then I have to fight my way back through the crowds to the ballroom.

I look—and stink—like a stretched penguin. I devil-watch while I wait for Medusa, taking care not to catch any eyes. I don't like standing out.

The costume designers on level 339 have clearly been working their fingers to the bone creating everyone's masks and outfits. We all get paid for our work, although it's more pocket money than a wage. Most of us spend it on food and cell phones, the only salvations we have left. Those who get tickets for the ball often go without to pay for their outfits.

Except me. I've got best friends who keep me supplied with burgers.

My thoughts of food disappear when a smoking-hot devil sidles up to me. Her slim figure is wrapped in a sequined black dress that falls to the floor and then fans out like a fish tail at the back. It's only when I pay attention to the rear that I notice that the dress plunges to a deep V at the back. It takes a while for me to realize my mouth is open. The girl is pale and her chestnut-colored hair is wound into a complex knotted bun that rests on the back of her neck. Her eyes, like mine, are pale pink, and are just visible behind a black satin mask studded with tiny red jewels.

Pink eyes are very pretty on a girl.

Without warning, a sharp elbow makes violent contact with my stomach.

“Ow.”

“Stop looking at my ass.”

“Medusa?”

“Who did you think it was?”

“I don’t know—it’s just—well, you look gorgeous,” I reply, massaging my stomach.

“Thank you for that display of shock,” says Medusa tartly. “I can clean up pretty nicely when I make the effort, you know.”

Medusa is small and skinny. She usually has a wild mane of tightly curled hair—hence the nickname Medusa. She works in the kitchens on level 180, and she makes the best strawberry cheesecake in Hell. Her real name is Melissa Pallister, and she has been dead for just over forty years. She’s never told me how she died, but I have my suspicions because of her nightmares.

Not that we sleep together. Let’s get that straight. We just have a tendency to crash at the end of each other’s beds when we’re too tired to navigate the labyrinth of bunks packed into each dorm.

“How about we start again?” I suggest quickly, fearing another blow from my best friend. I take five steps back and then approach Medusa at a slow pace. I place my arm at a right angle in front of my stomach and bow deeply.

“Medusa Pallister, also known as Melissa Pallister, also known as the Queen of the Cupcake, may I have the honor of your hand?” I say, gazing into her pretty pink eyes. Medusa immediately starts giggling.

“What about the rest of me?”

“Do you want me to pick you up and carry you in over my shoulder?”

Medusa curtsies, still giggling. I’ve noticed that girls giggle a lot, but I never know whether it’s from nerves or amusement. Is there an instruction book somewhere that I should know about?

Medusa slips her arm through the crook of my elbow and we go in search of our table. I certainly don’t need an instruction book for anything that involves food.

The Devil has expensive tastes, and each year the Masquerade Ball gets more outrageous. This year is no exception. A red satin cloth covers every table, each embroidered in a heavier thread with images of The Devil. The bewildering amount of cutlery that frames every black china plate is made from the finest gold, mined

from Aztec mountains thousands of years ago. Trust me when I say this stuff costs millions, which Hell just can't afford.

With everyone in the ballroom masked and dressed in their penguin suits and party dresses, it's hard to distinguish who is who. Older devils mix with the new, and only the color of their irises gives away their seniority.

Have I mentioned my eyes are pale pink? It could be another two hundred years before they start to turn red.

The Devil arrives as the clock strikes midnight. The orchestra immediately commences "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow," and most of the guests enthusiastically sing along. I pretend to sing by mouthing the words until Medusa pokes me in the ribs and glares at me for cheating. The Devil grins and waves exuberantly at his guests. He is tall, with pale skin that looks almost transparent, like parchment paper. His jet-black hair is thick and gelled back from his face. Apart from his black eyes, it's rumored that The Devil's pride and joy is his goatee, which is just long enough for him to curl at the chin. I also know—because of the receipts—that he never wears anything other than Prada.

Medusa nudges me in the ribs once more.

"Will you quit doing that? You have bony little arms that hurt."

"Look who's sitting next to The Devil," she whispers back. "It's Septimus."

She starts waving at the high table. Two bloodred eyes shine back at her, hidden behind a white mask with diamond teardrops. Septimus waves back.

The Devil is soon heckled with cries of "Speech!" He motions that he has no intention of standing up, but the calls are getting louder and louder. All of the dead in Hell know it's in their best interest to stay on The Devil's good side, and no one misses an opportunity to kiss ass.

Someone hands him a microphone. It whistles loudly, causing everyone to wince. Somewhere in the darkness beyond the ballroom, a wolf howls. It sends shivers down my back, as if freezing fin-

gers are touching the bones in my spine. Perhaps it means someone has just walked over my grave?

“Deities, Your Royal Highnesses, lords, gentlemen, ladies, humans, and things that haven’t been categorized by social services yet,” calls The Devil in his shrill voice. “Welcome to the thirty-nine hundredth Masquerade Ball.”

He pauses for dramatic effect as thousands of hands bang their approval on the tables. I don’t. I’m too preoccupied with getting thoughts of my grave out of my head. By the time I realize I’m the only one not cheering, it’s too late.

“I won’t keep you long, as I know you are all champing at the bit to get going—which reminds me, did someone muzzle Cerberus?” The Devil turns around in a panic but is immediately calmed as several civil servants—Septimus among them—nod in unison.

“Excellent,” continues The Devil. “We wouldn’t want a repeat of last year’s entertainment, would we?” He laughs and thousands of sycophants laugh with him. Medusa and I don’t laugh, though. I don’t think there’s anything funny about a rabid three-headed dog tearing dead people to pieces, which is apparently what happened to the devils who arrived too early for last year’s ball.

“Well,” continues The Devil, “all that remains is for me to thank the committee once again for their tireless work in organizing such a party. I understand Chopper only lopped off one hundred and eighty heads this year, which is a vast improvement from last year. Special mention must also go to Joanne Cartwright, a new . . .”

I zone out as my thoughts drift back to what I heard earlier between Septimus and The Devil. What is a Viciseometer? I’m sure I’ve heard of it before. Maybe Medusa knows. She knows everything. Then again, I shouldn’t get her involved in this, even on the periphery. The Devil is psychopathic on a good day. Medusa is smart because she asks questions; I’m smarter because I know when to keep my mouth shut.

Eventually, The Devil stops talking, the butt-kissers stop

cheering, and the arrival of roasted potatoes and flame-grilled steak is enough to bring my attention back to the present. After I fill my stomach to the point of bursting, Medusa announces she wants to dance. I'm unwilling to part from my third bowl of crême brûlée but relent when Medusa threatens to pummel me with her elbows. She says she never got the chance to dance when she was alive, but I haven't danced ever.

Since I'm a good friend, I slip one hand around Medusa's waist and, rather stiffly, we waltz around the dance floor. My fingers go searching for the bare skin of her back, but I quickly learn my lesson after Medusa grabs hold of them and twists.

"You may have been a musical prodigy when you were alive, but I am not a piano," she growls. "Leave your hands where I can see them."

"Can we go back and sit down? Dancing is for girls."

"I *am* a girl, Mitchell," replies Medusa, "and try telling The Devil that." We both look over at the master of Hell, who has cleared the dance floor with his moshing.

We sit back down at our table and I pull my bowl of crême brûlée toward me. But I've lost my appetite—thoughts of this Viciscometer thing and Septimus's plan are eating away at my insides. I don't understand why. Maybe it was the tone of The Devil's voice in the Oval Office. It was chilling.

"What's wrong, Mitchell?" asks Medusa.

I stare at her hair. The curls are already starting to escape from the bun she tied them into. I don't know why she bothered. I love her hair. It's different.

"Hell calling Mitchell Johnson," says Medusa in a singsong voice.

I tuck the errant curls behind Medusa's ears. Her cheeks have gone red. She must be hot from the dancing.

"I need to ask you something," I say. "In private."

She laughs at the irony. Okay, so there is no such thing as *private* in Hell.