

## Love, at Long Last

She's watching me again. I can see it in the way she angles her head away from me. The way she tucks her hair behind an ear. The way she smiles, ever so slightly, as she reads the morning newspaper.

I don't bother staring for long. She seems content sitting on a bench, flipping pages placidly and shooting covert glances in my direction. I want to go over and talk to her. I really, really do. But despite her constant presence in my life, she never seems interested in me.

I'm in line at the local grocery store, bagging my items. The cashier gives me the wide smile reserved for old men who are *just so sweet*. Men like me.

Thanking the cashier, I lug my two paper bags out the automatic doors and smoothly deposit them in the passenger seat of my truck, scanning the plaza for the woman again. I spot her tucking her newspaper beneath her arm and straightening her blouse slowly and methodically.

Her name is Dabria. She's lived near me for quite some time, probably around a decade. She has a good sense of fashion, with her smart pencil skirt and immaculate black tunics. Nobody else seems to notice her. But I do. The moment I saw her, I knew I wanted *her* to want *me*. She appears to be thirty years younger than me, but I haven't a clue how old she really is. It's hard to tell sometimes with women.

She smiles ever so slightly at me, and chills run down my spine. I feel for the rosary that always hangs around my neck, seeking its comforting shape beneath my palm. I clutch it hard and grin widely at her. Dabria wears a black wide-brimmed hat that I hadn't taken notice of before. A dark satin bow is wrapped around the peak, coming together in an irresistible flourish. She looks deathly beautiful, with her perfectly pale white skin and the thin eyeliner

she always wears. I want to go over to her. But I wait. She raises one perfectly manicured eyebrow at me, taking a small, delicate step in my direction.

I can feel my pulse increase. I can hear the blood rushing in my ear as she takes yet another step toward me. I want to rush to her. I want to place my hands on her face and feel those defined cheekbones that appear so often in my dreams.

She's over halfway across the plaza now, and I suddenly dare to wonder whether maybe *this time* she's coming for me. I fixate on her dark eyes with fascination and awe, starting when I realize she is staring into my own. I can feel her prying at my heart, my soul. There's a wonderful flutter in my stomach when I see that she's just on the other side of the small road dividing the plaza.

*So close.*

She moves to cross but stops dead. Almost as though she hears something. She tilts her head upward, breaking the intoxicating eye contact we had shared, her lips parting in what I can only assume is surprise.

*Not again*, I can't help but think. I start toward her, knowing I shouldn't but doing it anyway. I can reach her before she leaves again.

"I'm right here!" I scream at her, my old, aching bones equally loud in telling me to stop running. But I don't listen. I'm just about to cross the road when an SUV flashes in front of me, obscuring my view of Dabria. It's only for a second. *She'll still be there*, I tell myself.

But she isn't.

She's gone.

. . .

At home, I stare into my reflection in the mirror, studying my face carefully. I'm eighty-five years old, and it shows. Deep wrinkles snake across my face, threatening to

squeeze the breath from my lungs. My grey hair isn't very flattering, a woven tangled mess plastered across my skull. Maybe that's what Dabria doesn't like about me. My hair.

It's not my age. She has a thing for older men. I know from experience. But sometimes she chooses younger ones. Sometimes.

The steam from the filling bathtub clouds the mirror, slowly erasing the shell of the man within. Slowly, my features morph and shift. My wrinkles disappear. My shoulders broaden. My hair could even be mistaken for black. I look just like him.

I look exactly like my son.

He left me many years ago. He was twenty. Young and naive, he thought he could change the world. I told him he couldn't. We fought.

I told him I didn't love him.

He left without saying another word after that. He just stepped out the door and got into the fancy car his mother had bought him.

I never saw him again.

My wife left me after that.

Sometimes, I wake in the middle of the night to find myself sitting on his bed, one hand on the unused pillow, as though I had been comforting him.

Perhaps I was.

. . .

I wake to see someone looming over me. I start, but relax when I realize who it is.

Dabria.

Today, she sports a grey baseball cap, dark glasses, and black lipstick. Her lips turn upwards, and I can't draw air into my lungs. I can feel her squeezing me, holding me tight with her gaze. And yet it would be impossible to look away.

I suddenly realize this is the closest we've ever been to one another. I can hardly dare to hope that today, finally, she will speak to me. I see the words rising in her throat. She wants to talk.

"Hector, isn't it?" she murmurs softly, running a polished hand down her face. "I let myself in. I hope that's okay?"

Her voice is heavenly. No. That's the wrong word. It is... no... there's no word to describe it.

"Of course, I don't mind," I puff out, eager for more of her voice, the chords that layered it so beautifully still echoing in my head.

I get out of bed clumsily, suddenly conscious of the ratty old pyjamas I wear.

"What brings you here?" I ask her shyly, hoping I don't come off as accusatory.

"I just wanted to see you," Dabria answers, reaching out a hand and lightly brushing my face.

"I see you a lot," I blurt out. "I always want to talk to you... but you always disappear."

"Perhaps it wasn't your time."

"But now it is?"

"I'm merely a neighbour coming over to check on you. And... perhaps to get to know you better." Her lips purse and she seems... excited almost. Eager. "Maybe over tea."

"You *know* I would love that." I pick up my glasses from the bedside table and wipe them with the hem of my shirt, a nervous habit of mine. "Just let me freshen up, and I'll put on the kettle for us."

She nods, a silky smile spreading across her face as she slinks out of my room, closing the door softly behind her.

. . .

I bring a teacup over to the couch and take a long sip before shooting a smile at Dabria and sliding the cup onto the coffee table. She sits comfortably on the sofa opposite me, beaming at me.

“I assumed you wouldn’t need tea,” I explain to her. “I can pour you some if I was wrong.”

Dabria nods. “You were right. I don’t tend to partake in many earthly pleasures on my visits.” She laughs, and I join in, not entirely sure what’s so funny.

I get up and walk over to her as she licks her lip seductively. She stands, snaking a hand around my waist. I lean in and wrap my mouth around hers, moving passionately and without hesitation. I’ve waited too long for this moment. After what seems like hours, we break away.

“Soon,” Dabria whispers. “I promise, my love.”

. . .

Later, I wake with a start, reaching out and clutching my chest. I cry out, but the sound is cut short by my quick breaths. I feel the pain spread up to my jaw and let out a quick scream before losing my breath. I see a woman enter the room before everything goes black.

. . .

I’m suddenly in a windowless, featureless white room, a slight groove across from me indicating a door. I’m not surprised. I know what’s happening.

An armoured woman stands near, looming over me.

She wears a heavy skull-like helmet, adorned with horns and grotesque paintings. Something that looks like dried blood runs down the side. My mouth drops in astonishment as my eyes travel down her body. Her breast is plated with metal, and her arms are clothed in thick, ragged cloth. Her dark cloak flows behind her as she takes a few steps toward me, giving her a spectral appearance.

I know it's her, despite the wardrobe change. I would recognize her figure anywhere.

The angel of death.

"Dabria? Is this it?" I ask her, motioning at the room. "Am I dead?"

A deep rattling voice rings out from beneath the helmet, shaking me to the soul. "You courted me for months. You wanted this."

"I wanted to see my family again."

"Your son, dead on impact in his friend's car. Your wife, dead from cancer."

"I just want to see them. Please." I lift a hand, closing the distance between us. I touch the side of Dabria's helmet, stroking it gently. "I want you."

"Right now, you're lying on a bed in the hospital. The medical professionals are preparing to pull the plug," she tells me. "So tell me, Hector." My eyes sting, and I can barely breathe. "Are you sure you want me?"

Dabria reaches up and slowly removes her helmet, allowing her silky hair to fall down past her shoulders. I can see her face now. The one I was never able to see.

Red, angry lines run down her face, weeping puss and blood. An eyeball hangs from its socket, and the other looks at me narrowed and angry. She has no eyebrows, and small horns protrude from her skull.

"Do you see what I am?" she screams at me, spittle hitting my face. "Do you still want me?"

I don't flinch.

She doesn't understand.

I shake my head slowly.

"I know who you really are, Dabria. You're the woman who visited me the day before my heart attack. The woman who wouldn't give me the time of day for the longest time." I

chuckle ruefully. "I know who you are inside. I know you." I take a deep breath. "You are beautiful, and it pains me that nobody else seems to see that."

A look of shock passes across Dabria's mangled face. "Do you see me?" she whispers. "Do you see what I am?"

"It doesn't matter what I see," I answer. "I still want you."

Her lips part ever so slightly, as though she wants to say more. But she must see the conviction in my eyes, as she remains silent.

"Too many people fear you, Dabria," I say. "Too many people cling to life tightly. As though there can be nothing after. But it was my time. I lived a full life. I never wished to die. But I *did* know my time. And that time... is now."

The door across the room clicks open, slowly swinging to reveal two dark human figures, silhouetted by a blinding light.

I look back to find Dabria gone.

She has a busy day, I guess.

I take several steps toward the two figures in the doorway. I know them. They know me. The young man comes forward first, taking my shaking hand before pressing into me in a way he never did before. I lean in, seeing the woman over his shoulder, a joyful smile spread across her face.

Through the tears and laughter and happiness, I manage four quick words.

"Love," I choke out, "at long last."