

## “HELL’S MAGNUM OPUS”

Furious and impetuous, Romance launched her tumbler against the wall, quietly ruminating over the sounds of the shards as they showered against the floor.

“You’re finally cracking.” Appearing from the shadows themselves, the woman spoke with a chuckle on her tongue and poison in her teeth. She was everything wicked and marvelous at once, the devil herself.

Romance pounded a fist against her work table, rattling the paintbrushes that scattered it. She refused to dignify her tormentor with a response. Instead, she pivoted on her toes to put her back to Lucifer, only for Romance to open her eyes and find her less than a foot away. She offered Romance a new glass, suspiciously identical to her previous one, brimming with a fresh helping of brandy.

A sharp breath filled Romance’s chest as she regretfully snatched the glass from Lucifer’s hand. She’d mutter out her thanks if she weren’t so jarred from that woman’s nasty habit of popping out of thin air.

“That’s the wrong glass for such a poison,” Lucifer said with a haughty scoff. She picked out a lock of hair from Romance’s raven curls and twisted it around her finger.

“Doesn’t matter,” Romance replied. “Doesn’t change the drink.”

Lucifer’s lips curled into a devilish grin. “Does it help?”

Romance paused. She had heard that question before many times. It was no mystery that she drank. Nearly every interviewer felt the need to bring it up as though it was some secret ingredient to her success.

“Maybe it does,” Romance said, shrugging. “Van Gogh drank and he’s one of the greatest artists of history.”

“Van Gogh died a miserable, deranged death,” Lucifer said. She flicked the lock of hair against Romance’s nose, leaving it dangling between her eyes. “Reminds me of you a bit, actually.”

Romance snarled back at her. “I’m nothing like him. I’m stronger than he was.”

“You’d better be.” Lucifer pulled Romance closer, her breath tickling Romance’s ear as she whispered, “You understand what’s at stake if you fail.”

Romance stilled, her breath tangled in her lungs. She would not fail. She *could not* fail.

“Failure is not an option.”

Romance understood that she was nothing more than amusement to the devil. Like a priceless porcelain doll, soon Lucifer would grow bored of playing and would forever trap her on a shelf to be displayed alongside numerous other stolen souls.

“That’s what I like to hear,” Lucifer said. She pulled away and turned to the eastern wall to gaze upon Romance’s handicraft.

The piece, though unfinished, was a marvel to the human eye. Built twenty feet tall, Romance had used fifty-odd canvases, each framed and carved into organically-shaped forms, to

puzzle together a grand portrait of herself. The only thing missing was the final, largest canvas, where one would assume her head might go. Though surely she couldn't just paint her face and be done with the ordeal. That was too boring, too expectant. No, viewers wanted to see something new and inspired. They wanted something she had never done before.

To hell with the viewers, Romance thought. It was Lucifer she needed to impress. She watched the devil scan over her work, nervously chewing her lip raw. If Lucifer didn't like it, she'd have to start all over. That was the one rule she had to abide by when she sold her soul away for fame and talent: every piece Romance created needed to be better than the last. If it wasn't, she'd forever suffer in hellfire as Lucifer's personal trophy.

Romance opened her mouth to speak, hoping she might get some sort of reaction from Lucifer, but a rapping at the door cut her off. Startled, Romance let out a sharp curse and the glass slipped from her fingers.

Lucifer frowned as it shattered against the floor. "Waste of good crystal," she said under her breath.

"Ruth!" a voice outside shouted. "Are you alright in there?"

Romance could place that voice anywhere. It was Matthew, an old friend from high school. Five years ago, it would have lifted her spirits to hear him at her door during such trying times. But once Romance signed her soul away, friends became a temptation she could not indulge in.

Like clockwork, Matthew had shown up at her studio every time she started working on a piece she could not finish. She had once suspected he was stalking her, watching her every

movement from the cracks between her curtains, but the truth was that Matthew always had a keen ability to sense Romance's restlessness. Ever since they were fifteen, sitting in the same art class, Matthew and Romance were connected somehow.

Times had changed since then. What was once a tender visit from a close friend suddenly had become a nuisance of the highest degree.

"Ruth!" Matthew shouted again. "I know you're in there!"

Even hearing that name, "Ruth," drove Romance further towards fury. Matthew was nothing short of a distraction. For the past five years, she had put up with his impromptu visits. No more, Romance thought. There was no time for pleasantries. She had a task to finish. Matthew needed to go.

Again, Matthew banged a fist against the door. He jumped back in surprise, his hand hovering awkwardly in the air, as Romance ripped the door from its frame, scowling like a lioness.

"What?!" she asked. The word echoed in the studio behind her, creating a thickness in the air that made it hard to breathe.

Matthew blinked back at her in shock. He could not recognize the woman before him anymore. She was fuming mad and reeked of booze. Her situation had become far worse than he thought.

"I came to-"

"You came to check on me, I know!" Ruth hurled the words at him like a cruel accusation.

Nervously, Matthew backed up a pace. “Ruth, no one has seen or heard from you in a month.”

“I’m *busy*. And stop calling me Ruth!”

Matthew scoffed at her and rolled his eyes. “I’m not calling you ‘Romance.’ You and I both know that’s nothing more than a gimmick.”

“It’s who I am.”

“No the hell it isn’t. I don’t know how many times I need to tell you that!”

“Ruth Madden is dead, Matt. That woman was pathetic and weak.”

“That woman was my friend!” Matthew said in protest. “I don’t know who the hell ‘Romance’ is but ever since she showed up here she’s done nothing but turn my best friend into a raging bitch!”

Ruth dug her heels into the ground, ready for a fight. “Romance is the best damn thing I’ve ever become! Ruth could never make it in the art world. She tried and she failed. And that failure is what led to her downfall. Romance would never be that pathetic! Just watch! I’m working on something that’ll put everything I’ve ever created to shame!”

Matthew’s gaze softened. “Ruth, you say that every time I come here. When is this going to be enough for you? You used to love to paint. What happened to that?”

“Artists don’t become famous by making pieces with love. They become famous by making pieces with blood, sweat, and tears. Only a child would think like that.”

Letting out a long, drawn-out sigh, Matthew reminded himself of why he had come. He had found himself against a wall recently and decided that if Ruth refused to come to her senses, she no longer had a place in his life.

“You know what? I’m done. I came here to help *Ruth*. But from what I hear Ruth is long gone.” Matthew dragged his feet towards the driveway. “If you see her around here, just let her know that her best friend stopped by. Let her know that he’s stopped by nearly every month for the past five years. Tell her how much bullshit I’ve put up with on her doorstep. All the drunken arguments, all the threats, and all the times I’ve been told that I’m nothing but a pathetic, hopeless failure. Tell her all that, would you? Maybe then she’ll come to her senses.”

“I don’t need you to try to make me feel bad. I don’t need you at all!”

Romance slammed the door behind him, loud enough to rattle her bones. Laid out across a couch in the back corner, Lucifer applauded her performance with a devious grin.

“Bravo, my friend,” she said with a hum in her voice. “You truly understand the level of sacrifice it takes-”

“Get out!”

Lucifer frowned, pouting as if she had done nothing wrong. She blew Romance a kiss as she stood and whisked away to the shadows, crawling back to her throne in Hell.

Truly alone, a guttural scream rose up from the depths of Romance’s throat and echoed wildly around her. Anger poured out through her fingertips as she flipped her work table onto its side. The brushes, paint, and dirty water littered the ground beneath her. Her rage turned to the shelves, curtains, and furniture, yanking them each onto the floor.

Her breath hysterical and rabid, Romance grabbed a large shard from the broken tumbler and charged toward her massive, untouched canvas. She had meticulously made it herself over the course of six days. Maybe that was why she hesitated to rip it open and reduce it to scraps.

In her pause, Romance collapsed to her knees, bowing her head weakly. Her brain was spiraling into delirium as her voice became choked with uncontrolled laughter.

“It’s hopeless. Utterly hopeless. I can’t do this.”

She ran her fingers through her hair and tugged angrily at their roots. How vain she had become to think she was capable of outsmarting the devil. How easy it had been those five years ago when she came to understand just how heartless the art world truly was. How simple it was to turn to Lucifer for aid. Her mortal soul in exchange for a lifetime of fame and fortune at the cost of constant stress? Only a fool would make that choice.

Oh, and what a fool she was. Ruth was so broken at that time. She was helpless and desperate to achieve her dream. Then Lucifer, stunning, radiant Lucifer, came along to whisk away all of her problems as if they had never existed. Now look where it had gotten her. She’d die a has-been, remembered by history as one of the greatest burnouts ever to put paint to a canvas.

Tears began streaming down Romance’s cheeks. Her breath trembled with each inhale, quickly crescendoing into a ballad of stomach-twisting sobs.

Behind her, Lucifer appeared once more, glaring down at her sniffling prey. She clicked her tongue bitterly and scraped up a paintbrush off of the floor.

“Pathetic,” Lucifer began. She knelt beside Romance and snatched her by the chin. “Are you going to spend what’s left of your life feeling sorry for yourself?” She shoved the brush into Romance’s hand. “Or are you going to do the only damn thing you’re good at?”

Romance coiled her fingers around the brush, studying its worn-down bristles. What other choice did she have?