

# The Well

## CHAPTER 1

So this is Hell. I have to admit the devil's design is quite surprising. A Christian bookstore in the burbs. Nice.

"Autumn, are you paying attention?"

Who would have thought Satan was a sassy Black woman? Raised brows are all the response you'll get out of me demon.

"Good, because I hate repeating myself."

I'll never admit it out loud but Satan has fantastic fashion sense. She must have gotten the boot from heaven in her fifties or underneath that flawless makeup is a butt load of wrinkles.

"You're scheduled for three days a week. Please be on time."

My Godmother of all people is to blame. She cast me into the pit genuinely expecting gratitude. Not the most Christian thing to do in my opinion.

Oh crap! She's staring straight into my eyes. What did she just say? I really should've been paying attention.

"If you're concerned about the others knowing your business, they don't. If they ever find out, it won't be from me. As far as I'm concerned, we learn what we need to from the past and leave the rest behind."

Okay maybe calling you Satan was a bit harsh. "It's whatever." I really didn't mean to roll my eyes when I said that. "But thanks Mrs. Graham."

"Let me introduce you to the store manager. I'm in and out but he's here every day."

That has to be the best thing about being your own boss. When you own the joint, you do as you please. Including the decorating. I'm sure she meant for this pale yellow hallway to be calming. It isn't. Mrs. Graham may not be Satan but this still feels like hell.

I hate awkward introductions. If I had a polite smile this wouldn't be so scary. On second thought, I prefer scary. He should fear me. This is one subordinate he won't walk all over.

"Mr. Burke our newest employee," Mrs. Graham is all smiles announcing me.

I can smell scented candles even before entering the office. Vanilla. He's definitely going to be... drop dead gorgeous. You sir belong in a magazine spread not a back office.

I can't help looking down watching Mrs. Graham pass him my application. One look at my qualifications, more like lack thereof, and he'll know that this job is a favor. Here it comes, the judgement.

"Welcome to the team."

His smile is perfection. His strong hand is reaching towards me. Is that a wedding ring? Why!

"It's a pleasure to meet you Autumn."

His shake is firm, his hand warm. "You too."

He keeps his office neat this Mr. Burke. Thankfully what's sure to be a picture of the Misses is facing away from me. Ugh, is that scripture written on the walls? Church boy, of course. What else did I expect to find working at The Well aka Hell.

"Alright then."

Your goodbye shake is pretty tight Mrs. Graham. It feels like a warning. Can't say that I blame her.

"I'll see you again soon young lady."

I'm certain of it, but for now how nice of you to leave me alone with my new handsome boss. He's got great height, over six feet easily. Oh my God! You're Captain America. Don't laugh out loud. Autumn don't laugh aloud. He probably hates that actor because he hears it so much.

"You're a little early this morning. The others will be here soon. In the meantime, let me show you around the store."

I'm more than happy to follow that cute butt of yours anywhere sir. Lead the way Captain.

The Well is much larger than I initially thought. It's deep not wide so it looks small from the outside. There're shelves of books upon books, all bible babble of course, but there's also music and movies.

I wouldn't be caught dead in any of these clothes, or drink from a mug with inspirational clichés sprawled across it. Some of the jewelry is cute, but bedazzled crosses aren't really my style. Coffee is however, and this sweet little corner drink station is just what the doctor ordered. I haven't had to wake up before ten in years.

"Care for a cup?"

"Yeah." The menu can't compete with bigger franchises but there is some variety.

"Caramel macchiato please."

"Coming up."

"Is it free or is this coming out of my check?" The smirk on my face says I'm joking but I'm sure he knows that I'm not.

"This one's on the house."

"So how long have you worked at the one stop Jesus shop?"

"Two years."

Good, he isn't uptight about his religion. That crack barely registered.

"So where you from? That accent?"

"Philly."

"Florida's quite the change of pace huh?"

"Yep." Autumn you know what's coming next. He'll ask what you brought you here. Don't let him. "So what um, am I actually going to be doing? Working the register?"

"We rotate stations. This week you'll help stock while you learn the ropes." Wow, even the way he licks a cup is sexy. "Here you go."

"Thank you," and yes I purposely ran my fingers across your hand. I'd flip my hair right now if I hadn't cut it. This summer I was feeling asymmetrical and went for it.

I really hope this shop doesn't get a lot of traffic. Bells chiming every time the doors open is going to get annoying really quick. Oh great, here they come.

Hello co-workers. Aren't you just a pretty picture of American diversity. I guess I'm not the only one here courtesy of a handout. We're all matching in khaki pants and powder blue polos. Yeah for uniformity.

First up is Mateo. I don't habla Español so hopefully he isn't a new import.

"Hi. Nice to meet you."

No hint of an accent. You aren't new here. He's got a gentlemanly shake. Not too firm for the ladies. I'm digging your tan and cute curls. I wonder if he surfs.

Next up is Jacob, who also could be fresh off of a boat. Is there a Chinatown near here? Wait is he Chinese?

"Hello."

He sounds homegrown as well. His parents must be the immigrants or maybe his grandparents. It doesn't matter. If he threw on some eyeliner he could be in one of those K-Pop bands. Not that I listen to K-Pop but there was this Korean girl in my high school-

"Nice to meet you."

Woah, I was mid-thought Beyonce. I take that back; you've got a ways to go before being compared to Queen B. Burke did just say your name was Aniyah right? I really gotta pay more attention.

"Nice dreads." I genuinely mean it although normally I don't like the look.

"They're twist actually. Senegalese twist, but thanks."

Sing-a-what? Hopefully she isn't ghetto fabulous. I can't stand ratchet behavior. Black women and their attitudes can get out of control. I mean, my Godmother's Black, but she's not like one of those Black people.

Well since the gangs all here, I guess it's time to go to work. I would have preferred Burke personally show me the ropes but Jacob is cool. He does most of the heavy lifting. Stocking shelves would be a complete bore if not for his muscles flexing every time he bends.

"So not a Christian then?" he's suddenly asking me.

"What?"

"You either roll your eyes or suck your teeth at every other book title you pull out of that box."

"No. I'm not. You have a problem with that?"

"Nope. I'm just wondering why you do?"

"Excuse me?"

"Say this was Barnes and Nobles. Just because I'm a Christian doesn't mean I couldn't stock books on Buddhism without feeling offended."

"I'm not offended. I'm just, there's other things I'd rather be doing."

"Like what?"

"Sleeping."

"Okay."

That's right, you go get another box. I'm going to see if I can get some more free coffee. Thankfully the morning crowd is light. A few old biddies gossiping about their grandkids over muffins.

"Mateo right?"

"You read well." Stop mocking me motioning to your name tag.

"What's the policy on free samples for employees?"

"It's up to the Barista's discretion."

I'm not batting my eyelashes like crazy for no reason pal. Ask me what I want to drink.

"Didn't you just finish a free cup?"

"Not from you." Cue puppy eyes.

"I have two younger sisters, that will get you nowhere. While the Manager is on the floor you gets nothing."

I forgot Burke was helping Aniyah man the registers. "Understood."

Oh look, a new box to unload. Jacob is hot from behind as well.

"Ahh!"

And ticklish too. A little underarm action to break the tension.

"Sneaking up on people." He's pointing playfully at me. Tension successfully broken up.

"Christians forgive."

"They do."

How sweet, he's giving me a little porcelain angel. And now he's tapping the shelf where it belongs.

"So you working full time or are you in school?" he wants to know.

"Part time and yeah I'm going to school."

"So are the rest of us? Where do you go?"

Just toss it back. "Where do you go?"

"Florida U."

"Everybody?"

"Just me and Aniyah. Mateo goes to an Art Academy. He's studying graphic design."

"What are you studying?"

"History."

"Why?" I didn't mean to make him laugh but the sound is giving me life. You're adorable Jacob. I have decided as much, so it must be so. "I meant to say really."

"Yes, really. What about you?"

"Psychology. I like to know what makes people tick."

"What year are you in?"

"Sophomore." He looks surprised. Why do you look surprised?

"You have a baby face. I thought you were a freshman. What school are you at again?"

Not again, because I didn't tell you the first time. "Right now I'm at the community college but I'm gonna transfer." I think that's enough lies for now. "So where do I hang these license plates?"

Eight hours of hanging, stacking and lining things in a row has finally come to an end. Okay seven hours because of lunch, and now onto the interrogation that is sure to begin the second I step into this car. If only I had a driver's license.

"So how was it?"

The car isn't even moving yet! We are still in front of the store. "Fine."

"That's all you got?"

"It's a job, like any job. It was fine." Please don't give me the 'you should be grateful for this opportunity' speech. This twenty-one-year-old high school dropout has heard that enough from you.

"You get along with the other staff?"

"God! Yes, what did you think I was gonna do?"

"Why are you being so defensive?"

Honestly, my Godmother Lily is my freaking hero but damn if she can't be annoying sometimes. It's the mothering part of her that gets under my skin. If I wanted that, I would have never left my parents' house in the first place.

"I'm not being defensive. It's just been a long day. I've been stocking shelves and fake smiling at people for hours."

"You hungry?"

"Yes."

"Your Uncle ordered pizza."

"Nice." The wind on my face feels good. I love the night. I've never feared darkness.

"My day was great. Thanks for asking." Aunt Lily sarcastically feels the need to share with me.

"Isn't that what Uncle Gavin's for?"

Her hand always rears back like she is about to slap the living daylights out of me, but it always comes down gently like a love tap. I guess that's what it was because she's laughing and so am I.

Man, its been six months since I moved in with my Godparents. Looking back, it was truly a do or die situation. I guess that's why I rarely look back. You're here now Autumn and here sucks most of the time, but it's still better than what's in the rearview.

Uncle Gavin and Aunt Lily are truly couple goals. Most people don't give them crap over being interracial. They kindly pray for the ones that do. Christians.

At least they don't force me to go to church. I bow my head out of respect during grace but I'm normally plotting on the food on my plate. Uncle Gavin is the better cook and Aunt Lily knows it. I cringe every time she winks and tells me that he didn't marry her for her cooking.

Marriage is overrated anyway. It's just another system of control and I can't be tamed. To them it may currently seem that way but I'm biding my time. They insisted I get a G.E.D and a job. I'm content to let them have their way for now. Day one at The Well done.

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The logo for 'The Well' is written in a cursive, handwritten style. The word 'The' is smaller and positioned above the 'W' in 'Well'. The 'W' is the largest and most prominent letter, with a large loop at the top. The 'e' and 'l' are also written in a fluid, cursive script.

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