

Sweet Demon

Love Baby

Excerpt #1

Reymond Alvarez left his terminal and followed the signs for “Ground Transportation” until locating the car rental desk. He waited in line half an hour before renting a white convertible from a teenager visibly alarmed by Reymond’s facial tattoos. They masked the entire left side of his face.

He used the rental car’s built-in GPS for navigating him to his deceased brother’s apartment. Meanwhile, he ignored the guilt chewing at him for having missed his flight yesterday. He chose to be angry. Enrique just *had* to become a cop. Had to try and save the world, didn’t he? And what happened instead? He’d created a widow and a mother comatose with grief. Worst of all, he’d left Reymond alone to deal with the nightclub. And now the dream was likely over. Reymond would have to wing it from here on out. He’d improvised his entire life anyway, following what felt good and made money, so why not. Plans never worked out.

For instance, making his flight yesterday. He’d gotten arrested for his part in a securities and wire fraud. He’d borrowed a million from a Caracas hedge fund to help start *Sweet Demon Love Baby*. In a scheme to make more money, feeling deceptively lucky, Reymond had gambled the million away, which proved not only devastating to him financially, but was illegal. After he posted bail, he used former neighborhood connections to pay off a couple of customs officers, allowing him to flee Venezuela.

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Reymond's only reason for still flying to Miami was to help arrange his brother's funeral, square away his affairs, hopefully salvage the nightclub somehow. Maybe avoid jail if he could.

He took Interstate 95 South and wondered if his brother's death could be tied into the nightclub. An aggressive competitor maybe? Some crook Enrique had harassed once too often? In any case, Reymond swore to himself he would get to the bottom of this. More people would die before this whole thing was over. This much was guaranteed.

Having lived in Miami until the age of ten, he knew the fastest route to South Beach was I-95. He preferred the scenic route, so he connected to A1A at Dania Beach. He drove with the top down as warm, salty wind sang through his nose rings and flattened his blue mohawk. The bright sunshine stung his exposed temples as he cruised the beaches of Hollywood, Hallandale, Aventura, Golden Beach, Haul-over, Sunny Isles Beach, then Bal Harbour, traveling all the way down to Miami Beach.

Reymond loved America. He was proud to have been born here, though his chronic misbehavior brought banishment to a relative's home outside Caracas. Growing up, he'd met plenty of Americans in Venezuela who lived and worked there for the oil industry. They'd always treated Reymond as one of their own, so this ride felt like a homecoming of sorts. He felt needed.

He became so lost in thought, he slammed the rear of a silver hatchback, which had stopped at a traffic light. Reymond's head kicked back, wrenching his neck, his spine rattled from so many sudden shockwaves. He gripped the steering wheel with his arms locked straight.

The hatchback skidded forward and gave Reymond a good view of the damage he'd done—crushed trunk, shattered taillights, rear window webbed with cracks, all manner of debris dropped about the street. The driver got out of the hatchback and revealed himself as the dorky businessman variety in his sports jacket and chinos. He stomped towards Reymond, fists clenched like this was the last straw to his day. He couldn't take it

anymore.

The man paused when seeing the facial tattoos but recovered. He pointed at Reymond who had gotten out of his vehicle as well. "Hey, buster," the man said between his teeth, "you understand this was completely your fault, right?"

Reymond noticed a green, mesh-metal public garbage can on the curb. The can overflowed with shredded newspapers, paper bags, and food scraps, but not heavy enough to make lifting it difficult. He went to the curb and picked up the garbage can. He raised it over his head, bits of trash tumbling out. He walked the can over to the hatchback and brought it down across its front windshield, which didn't break, only suffering a long, Z-shaped scratch.

"Hey! Hey!" the man yelled. "Hey! Hey!" This was evidently his sole response to increased stress.

Reymond considered the man in a contemplative manner until raising the garbage can again. He brought it down across the windshield repeatedly. He heard a woman screaming and realized the car held a front seat, female passenger, hands over her mouth, eyes wide with terror. Why she had only now started screaming was anyone's guess.

Reymond heard sirens. He knew this couldn't possibly be the police responding to this small incident so fast, but better to be safe. He jogged back to his rental car, the front grill wrinkled but the vehicle running. The front fender appeared bent but not enough to obstruct the tires. He would outrun any police, no problem. Since his teenage years, he'd been the expert escape artist against any Venezuelan police pursuit. Their cars were fairly fast but never stood a chance against anything turbo. This wasn't what he had currently, but there was time. He could race away. No one in this solar system could catch him.

He threw the car into drive and wheeled to the right of the damaged vehicle ahead of him. Reymond floored it forward and jumped the curb. He rode over the median and mowed down an intricate arrangement of trumpet lilies.

What Reymond didn't know was that the rental car came equipped with a microchip,

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which allowed the nearest pursuing police officer to fire a HALT (High Speed Avoidance Using Laser Technology) laser at his car. This cut the fuel supply to Reymond's engine, and he soon rolled to a stop across two lanes of traffic. He tried repeatedly to start the car, but a trio of patrol cars came screaming from three different directions. Reymond chose to flee on foot. He made it two blocks where a gang of officers tackled him into a shrubbery block. The officers piled on afterward, all of them struggling to be the first to successfully handcuff him. It only took a few minutes.

Excerpt #2

Trace waited inside a small room within the Miami-Dade Corrections and Rehabilitation Department. A pinched-mouth woman in a caged booth periodically returned the possessions of prisoners as they became released. Trace used his sixth "detective" sense to try and determine which one might be Reymond. He'd only ever met him once.

There was a thirty-something man in white, button-up shirt, pleated slacks, and expensive-looking dress shoes. He was handed back his tie, belt, and wallet. From his overnight stubble and bleary eyes, he was a DUI case. Guaranteed. Next came a young, eraser-haired youth dressed head-to-toe in *Miami Hurricanes* sportswear, obviously a marijuana case. You could still smell it on him. Next came a Hispanic man, only slightly older than Enrique with his same body category and head shape, wearing a pair of gold earrings. As the man signed the form, attesting he was being given back the entirety of his possessions, Trace made a move to shake his hand. The man was greeted by a young woman who hugged him and began sobbing. His girlfriend. Not Reymond.

Enrique had never mentioned Reymond much, only ever doing so in a hushed tone, as

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if fearful that speaking his name might conjure him. Enrique had once confessed that his becoming a cop was mainly a retort to his older brother and his violent habits, which were closer akin to their father's than anyone else. Likely running afoul of some local gang, their father had gone missing when Reymond was twelve, Enrique nine. Afterward, their mother sought help with a cousin who worked at the American Embassy. She helped her claim persecution so they could immigrate to the US. They lived with her sister in Hialeah while awaiting approval for asylum. In the meantime, she worked "off the books" as a housekeeper while also raising two sons who couldn't stay out of trouble. By seventeen, Reymond became such a burden he was sent back to Venezuela, meant to be raised by his uncle but was essentially on his own ever since.

Trace didn't know much else about the Alvarez Family, except there was a younger sister named Lilly somewhere, born in the U.S. Both brothers were aggressively protective of her. She attended Florida International University and studied Accounting. She'd been promised an important job in the nightclub when she graduated.

The last prisoner released was a large man, around six-foot-two, his exposed skin painstakingly inked with all manner of thorns, bleeding eyeballs, and goblins. He was the one man Trace hoped Reymond was not. Half his face was even covered in tattoos. He wore a blue mohawk. When the large man set his eyes on Trace, there was a flicker of acknowledgement, which let Trace know this was, of course, Reymond.

After getting his possessions back, which seemed to be only his wallet and a few rings, he approached Trace. He put his hand out for Trace to shake, which he did, and his hand swallowed Trace's.

"How did you know it was me?" Trace asked him.

"I remember you. We met a long time ago." To Trace's dismay, Reymond worked on clasp the rings through his nostrils, not around his fingers.

"You didn't have so many tattoos back then," Trace said.

"No, I didn't. How do we get the fuck out of here?"

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Trace opened the door directly behind himself and held it open for Reymond to walk through. The two men stood together and blinked in the sunlight until Trace led him to his 4Runner, parked at a meter nearby.

"Where am I taking you?" Trace asked him. He turned to see Reymond had stopped following him about ten steps back.

"That's all right. I'll walk," he said.

"Walk where? This isn't the safest part of town."

"I don't want to, um, bother you."

"You're already bothering me. I want you to. Tell me where to take you."

"Take me to my brother's apartment?"

"You have a key?"

"Of course I do."

"Get in."

"You sure?"

"Positive. I prefer it. I have a lot I want to ask you."

Trace drove them onto I-295, crossing the causeway to Miami Beach. They rode in silence a while. Trace's questions, compounded with his confusion and grief, stayed lodged in his throat.

"Thanks for getting me out," Reymond said. "Hundred percent. I didn't know who else to call."

"You're lucky I know the only trustworthy bail bondsman in Miami."

"What was your collateral?"

"You're riding in it. How did you get my phone number?"

"My brother had given it to me for some reason. Speaking of whom..."

Trace waited but there didn't seem to be a continuation of that phrase. Reymond stared straight ahead. "Yeah?" Trace asked him.

"Nothing. I forgot for a moment why I was here."

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"Your brother was a dear friend of mine. More than a partner."

"Who killed him?"

"I don't know yet. Possibly a man named Jason Shaw."

"Who's that?"

"A really bad guy."

"Why don't you arrest him?"

"I was on my way to when you called me. Why don't we go do it right now together?"

"Are you serious?"

"I might could use your help, yes."

"See, if I go, I'm probably going to kill the dude. Are you prepared for that?"

"No, we can't kill him unless he tries to kill us first."

"I can't promise you that."

"Well, you have to. We'll go to prison." Trace took a deep breath. He gripped his steering wheel harder. He gave Reymond an anxious look but threw his eyes back on the road.

"Maybe I should go alone."

"Take me to my brother's apartment. I need to think about this."

"And I'd like to research and find out where Jason Shaw lives."

Off to the east, the sky darkened from banks of dark-gray clouds, stacked like filthy marshmallows. Lightning pulsed between them, the thunder like boulders tumbling. A biblical flood approached, on its way to bring savage winds and pounding rain for five minutes. Florida's topography was that it had none. It was a flat peninsula, so weather tended to speed through unimpeded.

Reymond was such a large person, his elbow kept touching Trace's. Apart from his physical presence, Reymond also carried a psychic presence, taking up as much space and energy, if not more. He was the type of person who sucked all the oxygen out of a room. No wonder Enrique had spoken of him with such dread and reverence. Looking into Reymond's eyes was like looking into the eyes of an alligator. No soul, only hunger

and an instinct derived from ruthless violence. He was polite, but it sounded forced, like he'd rehearsed the words, telling himself this was how polite people talked.

"Jason Shaw," Reymond said. "Tell me everything you know about him. Not just '*he's a really bad guy.*' I assume that. Hundred percent."

"He owns the strip club my girlfriend danced at. He owns a lot of restaurants. He's a big deal in Miami."

"You think he killed my brother?"

"I plan on asking him."

"You have proof?"

"No, but I think Jason Shaw might've also murdered my girlfriend."

"No shit. When?"

"A few days ago."

"*Put a madre.*" Reymond took this in and shook his head. "I need a shower. I smell like jail."

Bringing Reymond along to accost Jason Shaw was certainly an impromptu idea, but why not. Nothing to lose. Besides, Trace could use the extra muscle behind him. Reymond was, if anything, an imposing figure. The facial tattoo was startling, but he could make it work. Trace decided it was also best not to mention he'd been fired from the police department.

He brought the 4Runner to a stop as a railroad crossbar lowered across Biscayne Boulevard. Red lamps flashed and bells rung to herald the oncoming freight train. The rail traffic in Miami had recently increased after having shut down. This was from so many tracks getting destroyed during recent hurricanes. Now the trains seemed as though they were making up for lost time.

After the train passed, raindrops tapped the windshield, gently at first, then harder until Trace was forced to put on his wipers. He drove down I-195 to the MacArthur Causeway. He traveled beyond the freighters and cruise ships parked along the dock, each

awaiting its return to the open ocean. Trace merged onto Alton Road and cut a right onto Seventeenth Street.

He found a parking space only a block away, doing a better job of parallel parking this time. Both men ducked through the rain, crossed the street, and turned right. Enrique's apartment was located inside an art deco coop, painted canary-yellow with stained glass and interlacing lines of bright blues and greens. Dwarf majesty palms marked the property lines.

Trace followed Reymond as he entered an unlocked lobby, then ascended the only available staircase. Once arriving at Enrique's door, Reymond dug a glob of keys out of his pocket. He flipped through the keys until finding the right one, trying it, but realized it wasn't the right one. He tried another and the same. He tried three more keys, grew impatient, and smashed his right fist through one of the glass panels. He twisted his wrist down, unlatched the door from inside. Reymond opened it. He seemed oblivious to the blood coating his knuckles and dribbling down his arm and onto his right pant leg. Trace took note that Reymond had issues with impulse control.

They walked inside. The apartment was a lot tidier than Trace remembered from the few times he'd been over. Large windows allowed light to flood in, despite the storm outside, already diminishing. Enrique had added a beaded curtain to his bedroom entryway.

Trace and Enrique rarely went to each other's apartments. No specific reason. Their lives had simply kept them outdoors, especially since they both loved surfing. He spotted Enrique's shortboard hanging horizontally above the kitchen entrance, in an area that would never get too hot, so the board wouldn't warp. He heard this being explained to him in Enrique's voice and an absence ballooned within his chest. He choked and stopped himself from crying. Not in front of his brother. Smooth it out. He'd managed not to cry about any of this so far. Staying strong. Staying focused.

"What are you looking for?" Trace asked Reymond when he noticed him digging

through drawers. He had wrapped a dishtowel around his bleeding hand, but it was already turning red.

"Any idea where Enrique kept his car keys?" he asked Trace.

"Don't have those either?"

"Help me find them. It's for you. He wanted you to have his car. It was in his will."

"Enrique had a will?"

"Don't all cops have a will? You don't?"

"But you've had a probate hearing? Doesn't that take months?"

"That's bullshit. Where did you hear that?" Reymond extracted the keys from a kitchen drawer. He tossed them to Trace.

He caught them against his chest. He looked at them. "Keys to the Mustang?" he asked.

"The Mustang. Yeah, my bro wanted you to have it. Hundred percent."

"Where are the papers?"

"You'll get them."

Trace felt puny in Reymond's presence, and it began to annoy him. There was a certain level of dismissal in everything Reymond said to him, as though Trace were some inconsequential detail of a larger picture. As in, *here, have a car. Be my friend. I might need to kill you*. Plus, Reymond didn't seem too heartbroken over his brother, though he could've been the tough guy pretending. It was Trace's own excuse.

Reymond lifted a lump of glazed ceramic from a shelf. It was a brown-blue amorphous sculpture made by a child. "Look at this guy," he said. "I made this for him when we were kids. For his birthday. He still has it."

Reymond threw the ceramic sculpture against the wall, and it broke into pieces, scattering in a spray of powder. He wrapped his arms over his face and wept.

Trace wasn't sure what to do. He thought of walking over and giving the poor guy a hug but worried he might, from reflex, meet the same fate as the sculpture. Reymond soon spared him any decision by taking Trace in his immense arms and embracing him.

Trace hesitated. He hugged him back, getting his own arms around him. He did his best to ignore the blood being smeared over his own shirt now. It was too late though. The hug couldn't be stopped.

Excerpt #3

Tiny elves used tiny jackhammers to drill into the back of Trace's skull. He tried to sit up, but forces held him back. The unexpected resistance created more pain in his skull, a throbbing that refused to subside. Why couldn't he move?

A full bucket of cold water splashed across his face and the front of his body. The sensation was electrifying, but not in a good way. Trace cried out and his head flung back, jolting his neck. He gritted his teeth and squeezed his eyes shut, which seemed the only form of pain management currently available.

"Sorry," he heard a young male voice say. "I'm tired of waiting. You were taking forever to wake up."

Trace blew excess water from his lips while trying to find adequate oxygen. He coughed and spit. He opened his eyes but couldn't see. He tried to remember how he'd gotten here, and where was here? His vision returned but kept rolling. The wall flipped onto the roof, and the roof flipped onto the floor again. Sparkling dots of light floated around him. He wanted to take his own head off and set it down somewhere.

"Where am I?" Trace asked.

"You don't know this place?" the voice asked him.

Trace tried turning his head, but the pain at the base of his skull was excruciating. He attempted once more to move, but realized his arms were fastened behind him. His legs

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were stuck to the front legs of the chair. He was tied up.

Once his sight became completely unclouded, he recognized where he was: *Sweet Demon Love Baby*. The nightclub. It was late at night, but there were halogen lamps everywhere. The outline of a person stood nearby. No one else. They were surrounded by renovation debris, including sawdust, stepladders, drop cloths, and such. He recalled how the nightclub itself was an oceanfront complex with an outdoor courtyard area, comprised of cabanas nestled between palm trees.

“Who are you?” Trace asked the outline.

“We met tonight. At my dad’s. Forgot me?”

Trace squinted. The person’s face came into focus. He did look familiar, but a name wouldn’t come. His blonde hair was shaved on the sides with long bangs swept back. He wore the same yellow and orange collared shirt and ripped jeans he’d worn at dinner.

He wasn’t sure where the name came from, but it entered Trace’s mouth, and slipped out into the air: “Wally,” he said.

“You *do* remember me!”

“Wally, untie me. I don’t know how I got here.”

“I’m the one who brought you here, dummy. I busted the lock.”

Trace let this compute, neurons still scrambled, struggling to rediscover a formation for the world. “Who tied me up?”

“Wow, that guy hit you hard, huh?”

That guy. It was the trigger phrase which brought the entire evening back. Trailing Raymond. Finding Jason Shaw with a gunshot wound. Trying to get him to a hospital. Then—darkness. Blindness and pain. He couldn’t piece together what he was doing here in the club though.

“Wally, where’s your dad?” he asked.

“At home.”

“What-what’s going on? You’re going to set me on fire?”

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"I'll show you." Wally picked up a metal can with a nozzle. He tipped it and began sloshing gasoline over the bar, then randomly onto the floor. He next wetted down the area behind the bar. He dropped fuel over the tables and chairs. The benzene inside the gas stung Trace's nostrils and he gagged.

He struggled against his restraints as a reflex, but there was no give. Not an inch. Kid knew how to tie rope.

"Why are you doing this, Wally?" he asked. "This doesn't make sense."

"Can you believe my own father was about to invest in this horrible place? He got smart though. He usually does."

"Wally, you need to untie me. Chief Fulcher's not going to be cool with this."

By this point, Wally had upended the gas can and was shaking it to get the last drops out. He made it as far as the pool tables. When the can emptied, he tossed it to the floor where it tumbled. "That was all of it. I was going to dump some over your head. Damn."

"Wally, come on. This is murder."

This brought Wally closer. He towered over Trace and seemed to enjoy this superiority in height. "I killed your spic girlfriend," he said. "I didn't know she was your girlfriend until dinner tonight though. I also killed your spic partner. And I killed another stripper named Camila. Oops."

"Camila is still alive."

"How do you know?"

"Wally, why are you doing this? Your father's the chief of police!"

In response, Wally took a lighter from his front pocket. The terror this brought on Trace made him freeze from the solitary fact that the lighter was light-blue. A calming color. He hoped to own such a lighter someday.

Wally kept on, "A man in your line of work should know more than most that our country is under attack. Foreigners come here uninvited. Refuse to assimilate. Refuse to learn English. They're uneducated. Dad complains about them all the time. I'm only

doing what he would do if he could.”

Trace closed his eyes. This was worse than he thought. “Wally, my guy, I think you’re a little confused.”

“I am confused. It’s true. See, I was in line for a scholarship, one I’d been aiming for since elementary school. I did the work. I had the grades. That scholarship was mine. Except, nope, it wasn’t. The scholarship went to Emilio Simon Ares Cruz because he was a minority, and I wasn’t. Yes, I am very confused.”

Trace thought carefully on how to respond. He could agree with what he was saying, just to get on his side. He could try reasoning with him. Or he could attempt both. “I get that you’re pissed,” Trace said, measuring the words, “but is the solution to throw away the rest of your life? You lost a scholarship and now the world must pay? Those people you killed, Wally, what did they have to do with your scholarship?” As he spoke, Trace watched the light-blue lighter bouncing in Wally’s hand, never feeling such dread from such a simple device. A single spark and he was toast. Had to keep the kid talking. Buy time.

“You shouldn’t have come over for dinner tonight,” Wally said. “You should’ve resigned. What can I say? You’re in the way.”

“You won’t escape from this. I’ll be your last victim. You’ve crossed the line.”

“I imagine at some point I’ll be killed, too. And that’s okay. I’ve come to accept it. Any real man should be willing to give his life for something he believes in. Wouldn’t you?”

Trace shook his head. He was out of words. He couldn’t think of what else to say or do except to start begging for his life. The kid’s mind seemed made though. And he was a kid. Just a kid.

“How did you know Nora?” Trace asked, trying to sustain their dialogue. With any luck, the gasoline would dry. “She was the love of my life.”

“She gave excellent lap dances. That’s for sure. She was the only one who would let me touch her ass sometimes.”

“You met her at The Club Cabana?”

“She was my favorite dancer. Definitely.”

“When did they start allowing children in?”

“I have a fake ID. And I’m not a child. Don’t you dare call me that.”

“Prove it. Untie me so we can work this out, Wally. It’s never too late.”

He flicked the lighter and it produced a small flame. “It is too late though.”

“Hey, please, don’t, okay? Please! *Please?*” Trace tested his bindings again, forceful enough he nearly fell over.

“I have to do this before the gasoline dries.” Wally bent down and lit the gas on the floor. A large swath of flames erupted across the floor so rapidly, Wally had to jump back. He narrowly avoided getting set ablaze himself. The fire spread up the side of the nightclub’s walls, then traveled the length of the bar. A set of curtains dissolved from a blanket of orange light as it flowered across the ceiling.

“Place is going up like it’s made of straw!” Wally cried out. “Beautiful!”

With a last glance at Trace, he darted out the front door, not bothering to close it. There didn’t seem to be time. Wally was right. The club was fully aflame in seconds. The fire had already reached Trace’s feet.