

BINARY AWAKENING



Chapter 18:
Connection with the Devil

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The bell over the door gave a tired jingle as Evan stepped into the roadside diner. The scent of grease and over-brewed coffee hung thick in the air, yet something deeper, far more intangible, struck him instantly. A tremor in the atmosphere. A wrongness.

He didn't just see the people inside—he felt them. Some of them carried that mysterious dark energy they had been searching. It clung to them like a residue, leaving behind a distress in their partially awakened souls.

To the untrained eye, it was a quiet, unremarkable establishment nestled along a forgotten stretch of digital highway. But to Evan, the simulation's veil had grown thin. Threads of life dimmed, frayed, and smudged by fear hung over the room like cobwebs. The moment he crossed the threshold, he sensed it: this was the place.

They had dressed for the part. Despite keeping their avatars in their mid-forties, the group had embraced their shared aesthetic as a rock band patched leather jackets, faded denim, and vintage band tees. They looked like wanderers from another decade, out of time, yet somehow right at home in this liminal space.

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Tina was radiant. Her eyes sparkled with amusement as she soaked in the ambiance, humming to herself as if the very walls were whispering melodies. She had always wanted the group to do things together, and even though this wasn't a concert, she treated it like one.

Sonia, on the other hand, tugged awkwardly at her clothing. She was brave in many ways, but stepping outside her emotional comfort zone was always a challenge. Tina, of course, noticed and teased her mercilessly.

"You look like you're about to be asked to sign someone's chest," Tina said with a grin.

Sonia rolled her eyes. "If anyone asks, I'm the sound engineer."

The waitress waved them in with a distracted smile and a nod toward the empty booths. "Sit anywhere you like," she said, her voice brittle around the edges. Only a family of four in the corner and a lone police officer nursing a mug of coffee shared the space.

As they slid into a booth, Evan whispered, "This is it."

The final location Tom had marked.

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The first two had been empty echoes, blind alleys in a digital eternity. But this one... this place pulsed with something different. It wasn't just the residual life energy there was a tremor of trauma, of recent pain.

Evan's companions could feel the shift, even if they couldn't name it. A collective breath passed between them, a silent agreement. This was Evan's moment to lead. Their role was simple: support him, no matter what came next.

A few moments later, the waitress approached. Her smile was mechanical, her warmth artificial but beneath it, Evan sensed the truth. Her soul was more alive than most, yet her emotional surface was cracked, trembling.

"Hello, handsome," she said, forcing levity into her tone. "What can I get you?"

Evan met her eyes and softened his voice. "Fried eggs and bacon. Black coffee for all of us."

"Good choice," she replied, her hands twitching around the notepad she didn't need. "Be ready in a minute."

As she walked away, Evan leaned in, his voice low. "She's not okay. She's afraid. And she's linked to something or someone with a similar resonance. I think... it's the officer."

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They watched as the waitress returned behind the counter, greeting the police officer with a guarded smile. The officer nodded at her. That nod wasn't casual. It was practiced, careful. Evan could see it now: a bond between them, unspoken and tense. Love, perhaps. But under siege.

Tina's fingers tapped idly on the table.

"Tina," Evan said, "do you know any romantic rock ballads?"

Tina raised an eyebrow. "You're kidding, right?... Name a decade."

"I need something soft. Something that makes the world feel safe. Something that tells people it's okay to feel."

Tina smiled, already sensing his intent. "Forbidden love?"

"Exactly."

"Got the perfect one."

The waitress returned, balancing four plates and coffees with the ease of someone who had done it for countless simulated lifetimes. She set the plates before them with mechanical precision.

"Here you go. Let me know if you need anything else."

"Actually," Evan said gently, "before you go... can I ask you something?"

She paused, uneasy. "Shoot."

"We're on a kind of creative pilgrimage trying to write songs that reflect real life. But we need feedback. We were wondering if you'd be willing to listen to one and tell us if we're getting it right."

She blinked at him, caught off guard. Her eyes darted to the kitchen window and to the officer at the counter. They both gave subtle nods of approval.

"Well..." she said, her smile softening a shade, "I've always loved the idea of live music in this place. Never thought I'd actually hear it. Sure. Go ahead."

"Thank you," Evan said. "There's something magical about playing a song for the first time in front of a real audience."

He meant it. And she felt it. The connection between them flickered, faint but genuine.

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Tina stood, cradling her acoustic guitar, and stepped forward.

"This one," she said, "is about love that wasn't supposed to happen but did anyway."

She began to play.

The first chords were gentle, wistful. The melody spilled through the diner like sunlight through dusty blinds. Evan felt the room shift. The shadows in the corners didn't disappear but they lightened. The threads of dark energy began to unravel.

The song told a story two souls who found each other in a world that told them not to. A love born in silence, grown in courage. As Tina sang, Evan amplified the emotional resonance, channeling warmth and safety into the listening hearts.

He focused on the couple, the waitress and the officer.

Their life energy had been poisoned, chained to a distant darkness. But the music reached them. He could see it. Feel it. The blackened tendrils loosened their grip. Their connection, though still shy and hesitant, burned brighter.

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By the final verse, the officer's eyes had softened. The waitress was crying.

"Oh my god," she whispered. "It's the most beautiful thing I've ever heard."

And for her, it was. Because for the first time in eons, her soul was clear enough to truly hear music.

The officer stepped beside her, placing a hand on her shoulder with silent reverence. Her voice cracked with emotion. "That was... really something. I think you captured what it's like here."

Evan nodded. "Thank you. That means more than you know."

They had done it. The dark energy had thinned to a threadbare whisper. Whatever wounds lingered would heal in time. The couple was free to love, freed from the unseen chains that had held them apart.

But Evan wasn't finished.

As the couple recovered from the emotional impact, finding solace in each other's embrace, Evan sensed their souls had settled enough—calm, open. It was the right moment to begin the investigation.

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"We were just brainstorming ideas for new songs," he said casually, throwing Sonia a mischievous glance. "Sonia was thinking of something a little darker. She always did enjoy dancing with the devil."

"You know it, asshole," Sonia shot back with a grin, picking up the cue. "I was toying with the idea of a tragic love story—maybe something like Bonnie and Clyde. Or a serial killer stalking victims along a desolate road... like crossing paths with the devil himself."

Her final words struck a chord in the room.

It was subtle, but Evan noticed it instantly—a shift in the air, as if a repressed memory had twitched awake. Faces tensed. Something dark had stirred. Evan saw it: a connection, metallic and black, linking some of them to... something. He'd seen these connections before—threads to people you never wanted to meet. But this one was worse. Twisted beyond anything he'd encountered. Whatever was on the other end wasn't just a monster. It was nightmare incarnate.

He didn't want to push these poor souls more than necessary. Over the years, Evan had refined his ability to read and sever such connections. Each person carried their own frequency, a unique resonance that he could lock onto once he spent enough time near them. After tuning in, he could trace that signal from anywhere in the digital world. And if the connection led to darkness, to torment, to evil—he could cut it.

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He was going to do that now. Break the link for good. Free these people from whatever that thing had left behind.

"Sonia," he said gently, "I think this place is filled with love today. Let's visit the devil another time."

Then he turned to Tina. "What do you say we end the night with our sweetest song?"

"Right, Boss!" Tina grinned, already reaching for her guitar.

As Tina strummed the opening chords and music filled the air, Evan closed his eyes and focused. Carefully, precisely, he worked his magic. One by one, he severed the twisted thread that bound them to the devil.

And just like that, they were free to live their lives—unshackled, whole, and loved.