

Carl Prescott and the Demon Queen

Chapter 1

Carl Prescott woke to the alarm on his smartphone. He turned it off and sat up on the bed. He stood, walked over to the window, and pulled the curtains open. A large school of silvery fish swam across the ocean just outside the secret retreat that Aida Whitehall had created on the Continental Shelf off the coast of South Carolina. He remembered his only other visit to this place more than a month ago. She told him if either of them were here, the other would know and could come join them. Carl had been here two days, but remained alone.

He had considered leaving an hour after he arrived, but quickly realized he had nowhere else to go. After a three-week vacation with his parents, both of them had returned to their duties in the CIA. If he went back to the Bertrand Aloysius Thorndike Academic Institution, he would eventually find Aida there. If she had chosen not to be with him, that was an encounter he was not ready to face. Perhaps his friends Burt and Grace would be there, but he felt like a third wheel around them. He sighed and walked into the bathroom to prepare for his day.

After he had taken a shower and changed his clothes, he walked into the main room. He sat on the couch, swung his legs up, and stretched out. He thought about the family trip to Disneyworld and the Caribbean cruise they had enjoyed. Now he longed for his family, but knew they had chosen other paths, as had he. Carl was the Invisible Hand, but at this moment, he was just a lonely boy on the cusp of his fifteenth birthday, a week away. A few tears filled his eyes and he wiped them away. That brought back the memory of the time when Aida's soul had taken refuge in his body after being stripped of her own. He smiled and longed for that sense of togetherness. He closed his eyes and tried to suppress the tears. As he was about to lose control of his emotions, he heard a bird chirp. He sat up. Birds chirping a hundred feet under the Atlantic Ocean was not possible. He walked over to the nearest window and pulled the drapes open.

The structure was still on the bottom of the ocean, but was now surrounded on all sides by dry land. The wall of water was a hundred feet away. A single sparrow sat on the ocean floor looking at him. Carl motioned with his hand and an opening formed in the wall of the structure. Carl walked outside and toward the bird, which continued chirping happily. The opening closed behind him. "Denise, is that you?"

The bird chirped, and the sounds resolved into words in Carl's mind. "Thank you for remembering me. I can tell you are as surprised as I am for our current situation."

"Why are you here?"

The bird flew up and landed on his shoulder. "I would have thought that was obvious."

"Did Aida send you?"

"I'm afraid it's a secret. Please be patient." The sky darkened above them as hundreds of sea gulls and pelicans flew down the open shaft and began to fly in circles around them.

"Aren't you going to join them, Denise?"

The bird shook its head. "I'm too small to help them. I'll just enjoy the ride with you."

Due to their speed, the birds were a blur of colors around them. Carl's feet lifted off the ground and he began to rise through the open shaft. They cleared the surface and rose higher. The open shaft slowly filled with ocean water.

"I've never been given a ride, Carl. This is fun."

"It is pretty cool, Denise. Can I ask you a question on the way?" The sparrow nodded. "The last time I was in a funnel, the birds were gossiping like crazy, and now they're so quiet. Is something wrong?"

"No, it's not surprising for gulls and pelicans. Didn't I tell you that gulls are introverted about everything but food?"

"Yeah, I remember that now, Denise."

"And I think I mentioned that the owls and pelicans were the smartest of the birds. Well, being shy, the gulls don't want to say something the pelicans will think is stupid. No one likes to be put down by others after all."

A few more minutes later, Carl's feet touched down on the ground, the birds left the funnel, and headed away. The sparrow touched its beak to Carl's cheek, said, "Thanks for the ride home," and flew away.

Since the sparrow said this was her home, Carl presumed he was back on the island that Aida transformed to look like the island where Cornelius Thorndike lived. When he was here before, he found the dining hall locked. Aida confessed she had hidden there from him and so he walked over to the door. He put his hand on the knob and turned it. He pushed open the door to see Clarisse and Aida Whitehall sitting with a man who looked very familiar.

Aida turned her head and saw him. A big smile filled her face, she rushed over, and into his arms. "I missed you so much, Carl." She kissed his cheeks and lips. "I'm sorry I couldn't meet you at our place." She took his hand and led him over to the table. As they approached, the man stood and smiled. "Do you remember who this is?"

Carl extended his hand. "You're Burt's dad, Bertrand the Ninth, right?"

Rather than shake his hand, the man pulled Carl into his arms and hugged him. "That's right. Thank you for saving me and my family."

Carl blushed and looked down. "You're welcome." He turned to Aida, "Did you restore him?" She nodded. "That's fabulous."

"I couldn't have done it without you, the headmaster, or Director Winston," she noted.

"How did he help?" Carl asked.

"We should all sit down," Bert said.

As he sat, Carl said, "It's good to see you, Dean Whitehall."

She smiled. "I'm happy to see you too, Carl. Since I was involved in the process, let me elaborate. In order for Nine to have his life back, we had to do things through official channels. That means we needed a legal order to exhume his body. Given the circumstances, that seemed unlikely, however, the director and others on that mission in Manila discussed their dreams about how you and Grace rescued them. When it turned out that all the recollections were the same, it was difficult for them to cope. Since all of them recalled you there, Winston reached out to Headmaster Dorchester.

"Unfortunately for them, the headmaster corroborated everything you did. According to Alex, Winston laughed at him. Then the headmaster asked him to check the status of America's and NATO's nuclear arsenal. Of course, many warheads were missing due to the demonic attack on the school. That discovery brought up more buried memories about those events. At that point, we were certain the director was going to see the light and understand these talents are real."

"Did he?" Carl asked.

She shook her head. "No, he did not. As you know, Those Who Sleep are deliberately oblivious to truths they choose not to believe. However, the headmaster was able to make the deal that led to Nine's presence here today. The headmaster promised to block those memories for them in exchange for getting the exhumation order approved. Winston told the authorities that CIA secrets had been stolen by foreign actors. That technology enabled them to induce suspended animation in a victim. Their body functions would be slowed to such a level that they appeared dead. Nine was a top secret double-agent, whose foreign handlers discovered his treason. That was why he was buried alive."

Carl smiled. "Then the Succubus talent was used to hide their memories, right?" Whitehall nodded. "But he didn't kiss them."

"No, of course not. He enlisted Barbara Conway for that particular job because my daughter is too young to be French-kissing adult men." She looked at Nine and nodded. Both stood. "Carl, I know you and Aida have been separated for quite some time, so Nine and I are returning to the school. Classes start again on Monday and I expect you both there, okay?"

"Of course, Dean."

"Yes, Mom."

The two adults walked out of the building.

"I'm sorry I couldn't come to the water house, but things have been hectic. What did you do on your break?"

He reached across the table and held her hands. "I really missed you. My family went on a three-week vacation. We went to Disneyworld and took a cruise. We also rented a beach house in South Carolina for a week. The whole time I was there, I thought about the water house and you. What did you do?"

"Well, the Thorndike reunion was two weeks long. At the end, Bertrand the First left with Manny. Then, my mom and I spent two weeks traveling around Europe, until the headmaster called us back to help with Nine's resurrection. When we got back to the school, Manny came back with One so he could spend time with his descendant. That was just yesterday. We came here this morning. Mom found Denise and asked her to get some birds for a funnel. I created the opening and moved the birds there and that's it. So, what do you want to do for fun?"

"Let's go for a swim." He stood.

"I don't have a bathing suit."

"You don't need one."

She blushed. "Don't be a jerk, Carl. It's not like you."

He shook his head. "I didn't mean it that way. Geez, what kind of animal do you think I am?"

She smirked at him. "Then what did you mean, exactly?"

"I thought we could be dolphins, or maybe blue whales. Yeah, blue whales would be awesome."

"How do you plan to do that, mister?"

He pointed at her and back at himself. "Invisible hand, remember?" He stood and pulled her to her feet. "Come on, it'll be fun."

Ten minutes later, they stood on the gravel beach. Carl had pulled off his shirt, shoes, and socks. Aida stared at him with her arms crossed. He looked up at her frown. "What's wrong?"

"You're just trying to see me naked, admit it."

He laughed. "Sure, that would be great, but it's also the furthest thing from my mind."

“Liar,” she replied and turned her back to him.

He walked around her and stood smiling. He handed her his shirt. “Take this.”

“What do I want that for?”

He turned his back to her. “Wrap it around my eyes like a blindfold. I’ll stand here facing the other way while you get into the water.”

“You’ll just take it off and look at me.”

“No, I won’t. While you take off your things, keep your eyes on me. If I start to turn around, you can just disappear.”

“Do you swear you won’t peek?”

He crossed his heart. “I swear I won’t peek. I have to admit that I will see you naked as a fish though.”

She laughed as she tied the shirt around his head. “Okay, now don’t move.” He nodded. She quickly disrobed and then ran into the water. When the water reached her neck, she said, “Okay.”

Carl untied the shirt and set it on the beach. He undid his belt and was about to pull down his pants when he heard a squeal. He spun around to see a dolphin just offshore. “Is that you, Aida?” The dolphin nodded, turned, and swam away. He quickly pulled off the rest of his clothes and ran into the water. After a few minutes of frolicking in the water as dolphins, a group of sharks began to approach. Carl began to swell and change. Soon, both he and Aida had become eighty foot blue whales. They dived down into the inkiness of the ocean, their fins slightly touching.

An hour later, both had become dolphins again as they approached the beach. Carl morphed back into human form and swam toward the shore. When his feet could reach the bottom, he stood up in the neck-deep water. He took a few steps toward the land.

“Wait,” Aida called out. He turned around and she wrapped her arms around him and pressed her lips to his. She released him and took two steps backward. “Well, what do you think?”

“You are so beautiful. It’s no wonder I love you so much.” He embraced her again. “I’ll go ahead and get out.”

She held his hand. “Let’s go together. We have no secrets, Carl. My soul was inside you, and you’re deeply embedded in my heart.”

After dressing, they decided to return to the school. It was early Friday evening when they walked into the dining hall. None of the other students paid any attention to them. They went through the service line and then joined Burt and Grace at a table by the windows. As Carl set his tray down, he said, “Hi guys. How are you two?”

“Great!” Burt exclaimed. “I didn’t have any family, and now I have so many. And my dad is back too.”

“I’m glad to see you, Carl,” Grace added. “I was able to spend some time with Mom and Dad. They actually took me to the zoo again.”

Carl sat. “Did the animals follow you around again?”

“No, Carl. Now that I know better, I just asked them to be more discreet, like maybe to focus on someone other than me. We had a wonderful time.”

Aida sat and took a sip of her iced tea. “I could not agree more with you, Burt. That reunion was so amazing. And then my mom and I traveled around Europe, which she calls The Continent. So, what are you two up to today?”

Burt smiled. “As you know, our birth mom has moved into the Gratia Dei dormitory for now. In fact, she’s in the same room where Grace and Carl found her school uniforms. She said

she needs time to understand her feelings about my dad and uncle. Dad has moved into the sporting lodge, and so I'm going there for the weekend to reconnect."

"I'm staying here," Grace replied.

"That's great, Grace," Aida noted. "Now the three of us can hang out tomorrow and Sunday." Grace smiled back at her.

Dean Clarisse Whitehall entered the dining room. She saw her daughter and walked over to their table. "I'm surprised you made it home today, sweetheart. I thought you and Carl would want more time."

"I have to tell you about our day, Mom. Carl and I were blue whales, and swam to the bottom of the ocean. It was awesome!"

Whitehall's eyes showed surprise. "You two never cease to amaze me. I'm going to have dinner with the faculty. I'll see you after dinner at home." She walked away and stepped into the faculty dining room.

After dinner, Grace and Burt went to spend time together before he left. Aida went to her mother's apartment to discuss the day. Being alone, Carl decided to visit the hidden storage room in the Gratia Dei Hall. When he arrived in that wing, he noticed a doorway had been built into the wall. He walked up to the door and put his hand on the knob. A mechanical voice said, "Carl Prescott, please enter." He opened the door and stepped inside.

Headmaster Dorchester was standing nearby looking at some books in a bookcase. "Carl, welcome back. How was your break?"

"I had a great time with my family. Thank you for asking. I noticed you opened up this room."

Dorchester nodded. "It seemed the right thing to do. As an educational institution, we need to share the history of this place. I'm sure you noticed the lock on the door."

"It said my name."

"Yes. Due to the age and condition of some artifacts, I thought it wise to control access. Only one person can enter at a time, and the door must recognize and log in each person. The doorjamb also tracks any items taken from here. Borrowing items for further study is welcome, but we must not lose anything."

Carl nodded. "Yes, that makes perfect sense."

"As well, we did remove a few pallets of papers that were left here from prior classes. We considered those personal items and not for general consumption. Of course, we kept everything and have made an archive of all items." Dorchester returned his attention to the books.

"I understand, Headmaster." Carl turned and walked away. He found his way back to the chair and footstool.

Barbara Conway was sitting and reading a book. When she noticed his approach, she closed the book and put it in her lap. "Welcome back, Carl."

"Thanks, Barbie. How are you?"

"Glad to see you. I know how crazy things got, but maybe now you can teach me and my friends some new talents."

"I'd be happy to try."

She stood up. "Let me make this easy for you. We'll trade. I'll teach you something and then you teach me."

"Okay, what are you going to teach me?" Carl asked.

She picked up the book she had been reading and turned the cover to him. "This book is so amazing. It's where I read about a talent call Ghost Walking."

Carl recognized the cover of *Gadson's Talent Checklist*. "I didn't know you could read Latin, Barbie?"

Her eyes widened and she looked at the book cover. She gasped and dropped it to the floor. "That isn't possible. I don't know Latin at all."

Carl picked up the book and set it on the footstool. "Don't worry. There's another talent in there called the Linguist. If you have it at an advanced level, you can read, write, or speak any language. It's cool that you can. I have it too."

"You're serious?"

He nodded. "Yeah, I had the same experience with that book. Which talent do you want me to train you on?"

"Floatation, no doubt about it. I want to fly like a bird."

"How about two for one?" He took her hand and they disappeared.

They appeared on a small hill, half a mile from the school. "What the heck was that?"

Carl smiled. "That's called the Teleport talent. You can go anywhere instantly. Of course, you have to be sure where you're going."

Barbie looked down. "Just the Floatation for today is more than enough." She looked around the area. "Why did you pick this place? So we can be alone?"

Carl coughed. "No, not that. To learn this talent, being outside is easier to start due to the breeze. Now, you stand here and put your arms out to your sides." That's good. "Now close your eyes."

She closed her eyes and puckered her lips, as though expecting a kiss. "I'm ready."

"Barbie, you know that I'm with Aida Whitehall. Stop playing around."

She opened her eyes to see Carl ten feet away. "Sorry, but you know I'm a hopeless flirt. I'll be serious now, I swear."

"Now close your eyes and feel the breeze. Don't force it, just relax and let the breeze lift you off the ground."

A minute later, a look of frustration was painted on her face and a few tears leaked out of her eyes. "I'm too stupid and untalented. It will never work. I'm wasting your time."

"Barbie, don't be silly. Open your eyes and look at me."

She opened her eyes and discovered she was floating twenty feet over Carl's head. She screamed and plummeted downward. She stopped in midair, five feet above Carl and slowly descended into his arms. He put her down on her own feet.

He smiled. "You did a lot better than I did the first time. And now that you know it's possible, you'll be an expert in no time."

"It was really me? You weren't helping me?"

"Well, I told you how to do it, but I did nothing to get you up into the air, although I do admit to stopping you from crashing to the ground."

"Okay, now it's my turn."

"What was that talent you are going to teach me?"

"It's called Ghost Walking. Now watch what I do." She stepped back a few feet, stood with her feet together, and her arms at her sides. She closed her eyes and then put both arms fully extended over her head, with the palms pressed together. Then she brought her arms down with fingers pointed up until her fingertips were just below her chin. She bowed and then vanished.

“Wow! That was cool. Where are you?” He felt her warm breath by his ear.

“I’m right here.” She kissed his cheek.

Suddenly, one of her hands was on his crotch and Carl bent over. “Whoa! That’s not cool.” She swatted him on the butt. “Ouch!”

Barbie appeared three feet in front of him. She laughed uproariously. “Sorry for being a tease but you already knew that about me, right?”

Carl walked up to her, grabbed her hand, and they reappeared in the storage room. “Next time, please respect my boundaries, Barbie.” He turned and stormed out of the room.

He walked out of the Gratia Dei Hall and headed for the main building. Once there, he went to the secret room in the bell tower of the school. His anger at Barbara Conway was starting to ebb, so he sat on the couch and held his head in his hands. “What a mess!” He stood, walked over to the windows overlooking the atrium, and stared into the encroaching darkness. “Who does she think she is?”

“Woman problems, Carl?” a familiar voice replied.

Carl turned around and saw Bertrand Aloysius Thorndike the Eighth sitting on the side chair. “What are you doing here?”

“Just wondering how you are. That was quite a commotion a month ago, right?”

“Commotion? We were attacked with nuclear bombs, Eight! If it hadn’t been for Aida and your ancestor, Victor may have won.”

“Who’s Victor?” Carl smirked at him. “Oh, was that the real name of the demon?”

Carl rolled his eyes and walked up to the man, who then stood. “What kind of crazy maniac are you? You buried your own son alive and allowed that monster to rip Aida’s soul from her body. Are you even human?”

Eight held up his hands in contrition. “Let’s just try to settle down there, Carl. That demon was manipulating me too.”

The temperature in the room soared. “That’s not what I heard.”

“Heard from whom?” Sweat poured down Eight’s face and he wiped it away with his sleeve.

Carl thought for a moment. “Forget it. Are you here to apologize or something?”

“Can we open a window or something? It’s so hot in here!”

Carl and Eight reappeared in the center of the atrium. “Sorry about the heat. I guess my emotions are on edge tonight. Now, why are you here?”

Eight grinned. “Carl, as you may know, I keep track of my dear father’s thoughts, so I know what my ancestor told him happened in that room during the battle. If he is right, that means my ancestor and the girl are the Invisible Hand as well, right?”

Carl laughed. “Don’t be silly. I spread my power among the three of us to defeat the demon. The beast could only defend himself against one at a time.”

“I don’t believe you, Carl.”

“I don’t care what you believe, Eight.”

Eight turned and walked several steps away. He turned back. “Then we are all doomed, Carl. After being around the demon, I learned to sense his presence. Well, now I can sense at least three more on Earth.”

“What do you mean? Three more demons? How can you know that?”

“They know how I helped the first, and so they have been speaking to me in my dreams. So far, they are unaware of the presence of each other, but that won’t last long. If there were more Invisible Hands, perhaps humanity would have a chance. Since it’s just you, I guess I need to

join forces with them. Nighty night, Carl.” A bolt of lightning struck Eight and showered the atrium with sparks. When it faded away, Eight was gone.

When Carl arrived at the door to his room, he saw a note asking him to go to Aida and Grace’s room across the hall. He walked over and knocked. Grace opened the door and moved aside so he could enter. He took one step and stopped cold when he saw Barbara Conway sitting on the couch with Aida. Conway’s face was red and wet with tears.

“It’s okay, Carl,” Aida said. “Barbie explained what happened.”

Conway raised her head. “I’m so sorry. I know I’m a flirt, but what I did was wrong.”

Carl walked over to one of the desks, turned the chair around, and sat. “It will be okay. It’s already just a memory.”

Aida shook her head. “It’s more than that. I don’t think she did those things alone.”

Carl pointed at himself. “You think I wanted that to happen?”

“No, I don’t. I get the sense that someone or something is pushing her to do more and more outlandish things to you.”

“But who?” Carl asked.

“Come on, it hasn’t been that long,” Aida replied. “You remember how Headmaster Greenleaf was doing horrible things due to the Beast nearby. I think it’s like that.”

Carl’s eyes grew wide. “I was just talking to Eight about that!”

“He was here?” Grace gasped.

Carl nodded. “We need to talk to the headmaster.”

“Carl,” Grace began, “you need to French kiss Barbara to find out who it is.” Conway put her hands against her face as more tears flowed.

Carl turned red. “No, that isn’t necessary. The Book always said that those rituals and baubles were crutches for those who refused to accept their greatness.”

Conway removed her hands. “What book?”

“That’s not important right now, Barbie,” he replied. “Let me sit next to her, Aida.” Aida stood and walked behind the couch. Carl sat next to Conway. “Don’t worry. Everything will be okay.”

“I trust you, Carl.”

“Now just lean toward me a bit. Our foreheads should touch. That should be more than enough.”

Conway forced a smile, leaned in, and closed her eyes.

Carl leaned forward slowly until their heads met.

Carl felt a cool breeze and opened his eyes. He was lying on top of a large cloud. All around him, hundreds of scantily-clad women were lying near him. All had their eyes focused on him. The women got onto their hands and knees and moved toward him. Those closest began to run their hands over his head, arms, legs, and torso. Carl tried to move back, but he was surrounded. More climbed on top of him and he struggled to move or breathe. “Enough!” he shouted, and the women began to move away. The cloud beneath him dissolved, and he plummeted downward. As he fell, he could see the women around the opening waving and blowing him kisses.

He managed to flip over and see the rapidly approaching surface. He braced for impact, but instead, fell through the earth like it was air. The temperature was rising fast and the rock around him was beginning to liquefy. When he thought the heat would kill him, he emerged in an underground cavern. Seconds later, he smashed into the floor.

Oddly, he felt no pain. He climbed to his feet and looked around. There were several pools of magma, and the heat of the molten rock gave the chamber a dull reddish light. He noticed activity in front of him and moved forward. After a short distance, he could see demons throwing screaming people into the pools of magma. After a few seconds, glowing red human skeletons crawled out of the pool and laid on the dark ground. After a short time, the organs, muscle, and skin of the victims reformed. The victims rose to their feet and ran away. The demons would then catch them again and toss them into the lava.

Hysterical laughter rose not far away. Carl turned in its direction to see a massive pillar of rock. A golden throne sat at its peak. Satan was sitting on the throne and seemed to enjoy the repeated slaughter of the damned. Carl walked toward him. As he approached, several demons tagged along.

Carl stopped at the bottom of the mound. "What do you want?"

Satan noticed the boy and waved. "Hi, Carl, what brings you to Hell?"

"Which one of your servants is trying to attack my friends now?"

Satan stood, flew up into the air, and then landed behind Carl.

Carl spun around to see a man who looked remarkably like Manny, except his shirt and tie were red.

Satan put up his hands in a sign of contrition. "Don't blame me for Victor. He's not one of mine. You'll have to talk to Manny about that." He stuck out his hand. "You can call me Luce."

Carl shook his hand. "Luce is short for Lucifer, right?"

Luce shrugged his shoulders. "If that's what you want to think, okay." He grinned. "Of course, nothing is ever that simple. Someday, you must let me explain it to you. So, you're saying one of my children is doing a Victor too?"

"Yes, the demon is infecting Barbara Conway." Several of the nearby demons chuckled. "What's so funny?"

"Don't get them wrong, Carl. To be frank, the Incubus/Succubus thing is one of our best ideas. Enslave them with a kiss, pretty romantic when you think about it."

"Why are you allowing it?"

Luce chuckled. "You already know the answer to that one, Carl. Neither Manny nor I stop our kids from acting out, as long as there's a likelihood of stopping them. Victor got away with too much, I agree. Since you're the Invisible Hand, I suppose it's your fault."

"It's my fault he tried to blow us up?"

"Carl, making the transition from ordinary human to Invisible Hand is clearly difficult. If you had learned sooner, you could have stopped all the pain and suffering the people of Earth are having nightmares about. Perhaps it's your parents' fault, or Headmaster Dorchester's. I'm not here to judge you, yet."

"So I have to do it again, right? There's no chance you'll help."

Carl heard an angry hiss and turned around. He was facing a female demon. Her body and face were the same as Barbara Conway's, except her skin was red, she had horns, and a pointed tail.

"Sylvia, I'm glad you could stop by," Luce said. "Why don't you come home and stop bothering the humans?"

"Stop telling me what to do, Dad! This is my time. You stay here with your good sons and daughters and let me have some fun for once."

Luce put his hand on Carl's shoulder. "What did I tell you? Kids, go figure."

Sylvia glowered at Carl. “You should stay out of my way, Carl Prescott. I’m not as nice and forgiving as Victor.” She grabbed Carl and pushed her tongue into his mouth. Then she grabbed him by the arm and tossed him through the air and into a pool of lava.

As his body touched the molten rock, Carl opened his eyes and sat up on the couch next to Conway.

“What happened?” Conway asked.

“I think I was just in Hell.”