

Hell On High: Chapter 2

By Holly Lisle

Chapter Two

24 Hours In North Carolina

Time Magazine Special Report

It has been two years since North Carolina nurse Dayne Kuttner changed the world. Two years since she prayed for a redemption so all-encompassing that it stirred the heights of Heaven and the depths of Hell—or so Dayne has said in her rare interviews. In the month of October two years ago, Dayne says she prayed, demanding that God give every damned soul a chance at redemption. All we know for certain is that, whatever she did, when she did it, Someone—or Something—was listening.

What happened next is beyond dispute, though its meaning seems destined to be endlessly debated. On that night in October, roughly sixty thousand creatures materialized in North Carolina. They claimed to be denizens of Hell, bound to North Carolina by a contract with God, and offered second chance at the redemption of their souls. First in North Carolina and then around the world, people stopped what they were doing as the news got out. They tried to understand what had happened. Some believed the Hellraised; others said North Carolina's plague came from outer space, or from Mars; psychologists claimed mass psychosis—at least until they traveled to North Carolina and discovered they could either diagnose themselves as among the psychotic or they could find another hypothesis. Fully twelve per cent of the population fled the state in the first year, temporarily devastating the economy. The end of the "Second Exodus" came when a Raleigh DJ proved that the Hellraised could be turned around; with the Great Devil

Makeover campaign came a migration into the state that hasn't stopped yet. Now North Carolina's economy is booming, and life goes on. In this special report, Time presents October 8th in North Carolina, Two Years Later. Join our correspondents from the Blue Ridge Mountains to Kittyhawk as they look inside the greatest enigma in human history.

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Lucifer, First of the Fallen, Architect of Damnation, Big Man in Hades, threw the scorched copy of Time aside, and blown-in subscription cards flew everywhere. Bad enough it took him seven months to get a copy of the article. Worse that the tone of the article was so self-congratulatory. Where was the respect Hell's denizens deserved? Where was the amazement at their presence in North Carolina—where, for that matter, were the interviews with Hell's denizens. The article skipped all of that, concentrating instead on the humans, and how they'd managed to work around what one of them had the balls to call "God's challenge to us."

Life goes on indeed, he thought. Smug little mortal bastards. They stood up there smiling, saying, See? Hell sends its worst and vilest, and we're still doing just fine, thanks.

He glowered at the magazine, and thought, We'll see how upbeat you are when you end up in my little corner of eternity.

As if in response to his thoughts, all the subscription cards and the magazine simultaneously burst into flame. And suddenly he realized what that niggling, impossible-to-pin-down annoyance was that had been irritating him all morning. Lucifer slammed a fist on the intercom and roared, "Pitchblende! Get in here! The damned air-conditioning is on the fritz again!"

His secretary appeared immediately, already in boot-licking mode. Pitchblende had once been a human named Adolf Hitler. He'd arrived in Hell with a sufficiently high evilness index

to guarantee him a place in management, and he'd risen to a spot at Lucifer's right hand, where he was damnably unhappy and perpetually terrified. If Lucifer had cared anything about the justice of the punishments meted out by Hell, he would have said that Hitler was getting what he deserved. Lucifer didn't give a damn about fairness, however. All he cared about were results.

The exec-sec groveled. "It's the demons, Your Excel--" he started to say.

Lucifer detested excuses, especially legitimate ones. Before Pitchblende could finish the syllable, the arch-fiend bared a claw and pressed it against the devil's throat. He felt the rise and fall of Pitchblende's Adam's apple when he swallowed—exquisite. "I made you responsible for the office," he said. "You're not about to tell me you can't handle the responsibility, are you?"

Pitchblende swallowed again, and a drop of ichor oozed from the puncture under Lucifer's claw. "No, your Hellaciousness," he gasped. "I was merely going to offer an explanation."

"How lucky for you. I'm sure," Lucifer added gently, "it will be a good one." He eased pressure on the single talon infinitesimally.

Pitchblende said, "I've checked into the matter, hoping that it was within my realm of authority, so that I could simply attend to the matter. Unfortunately, the problem lies not within the office domain, but in Transportation." The devil was keeping his voice admirably steady, though the shifting of his eyes and a pronounced nervous tic at the outside of his left eyelid told Lucifer that Pitchblende was merely putting on a confident act. He was still scared shitless. "Heaven has tapped too many of Maxwell's Demons go Topsy, and they're the only ones who know anything about molecules and heat. Unfortunately for our air conditioning, Transportation hasn't

been doing anything to block the assignments; and of course Transportation is under the direct command of the Fallen Angel Kathemius, who has stated in no uncertain terms that she doesn't answer to me."

Pitchblende could call that an explanation all he liked; to Lucifer, it still felt like an excuse. The Lord of the Pit balanced the pleasure of rending Pitchblende limb for limb and molecule from molecule before getting really creative with the torture against the bother of training a new secretary. It was a near thing, but he sheathed his claws. A more amusing idea occurred to him. "Let me solve this dilemma," he said softly. "You may tell Kathemius that you now have oversight over Transportation—though of course you must still stay on top of your regular duties here, as well. Deal with this problem immediately. I'll not accept any blame of Heaven for continued problems, and I will hold both of you responsible for any delays or failures. Understood?"

Pitchblende turned a delicious pale shade of gray-green and nodded. "Yes, Your Hideousness." He straightened his shoulders and tucked his wings back at parade rest, waiting to be dismissed. A little mannerism that remained from Pitchblende's human days, Lucifer supposed.

Well, let the whiner stew for a few minutes. Literally, in the frigging heat.

Lucifer returned to his previous train of thought. He wasn't at all satisfied with the state of Hell's affairs in North Carolina. Soul collections had begun trending back up with the opening of the Devil's Point theme park, but they weren't hitting the levels he'd expected. There was no quantum leap, not as there should have been. Meanwhile, the Big Meddler had kept his own hand well-hidden in dealing with the mortals, eschewing any visible sign of his realm's existence, and still souls were soaring Heavenward at an alarming rate. Lucifer needed to put someone on the problem who had a feel for both

sides of the issue.

He frowned.

Both sides both sides.

And then he knew. He needed to put the bitterest Fallen Angel in Hell on the job. Aerial. His lawyer, back in the days of that first Misunderstanding.

Lucifer smiled. Aerial hadn't believed he'd been right, but she'd stood up to God to defend him, insisting that in a fair Heaven, Lucifer would be able to try his theories on the mortals. God hadn't seen things her way, and when Lucifer Fell, Aerial went crashing down with him.

And bitter, bitter she had been—bitter as wormwood; bitter as pain. Too proud to apologize or to give God the admission that he wanted—that she had been wrong to defend Lucifer's easing of mortal travails—she had suffered in Hell since the Fall, convinced that she was there unjustly. She'd twisted nicely in that time but though she considered herself wronged by Heaven, she still retained her view of herself as an Angel of Light. She'd been a thorn in the side and a pain in the ass for millennia. Now, though, her weird point of view might come in useful.

"Pitchblende," he said, "Before you go about your reworking of Transportation do a little something for me. Fetch me Aerial."

"Yes, Your Hideous Evilness," the devil said and vanished.

Pitchblende should have returned instantly, Fallen Angel in tow. He didn't, though. That he permitted actual time to pass before his return signaled to Lucifer that the problem he'd discovered was of frightening magnitude. When he did reappear, he was alone, and he was almost white, and his lips trembled and his eyes rolled. "Your Malevolence sir " he whispered,

“she’s not here.”

Lucifer stared at him. Pitchblende was talking nonsense. “Of course she’s here. Where in Hell else could she be? She hasn’t repented—I would have felt that.”

“She’s not in Hell at all,” Pitchblende said. He paused. “I cannot find any record of her leaving, but I I think, Evil One, that that Transportation let her go Up. Only there’s no sign of her on Earth, either.”

The news stunned Lucifer—shook him to the marrow—but he didn’t let Pitchblende see that. He surreptitiously brushed the dust away from the furrows his claws had just dug in his red lacquered desk and said, “I’ll have her hide for slippers. Transportation failed to make a record of her passage Topside, eh?”

“So so it, um, appears, Of Magnificent Fiend.”

“Bring me Kathemius. And my favorite peeler. And while I am solving our transportation problems, make a list for me of the Fallen who have demonstrated effectiveness in their dealings with North Carolina in the past two years. I’m going to put together a Task Team.”

Pitchblende nodded so hard his head looked like it had detached from his body, vanished, reappeared instantly with Kathemius in tow and the peeler in hand, and vanished again without a word.

Fear did so much to maintain office efficiency, Lucifer thought. He smiled at Kathemius. “Lovely creature,” he said. “I’ve been told you have been remiss in your duties.” He ran one talon along the curved tip of the peeler and sighed. “Unforgivably remiss.”

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