

BLACK HOLLOW

TO TRICK THE DEVIL



BLACK
HOLLOW

ROBBIE COX

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To Trick the Devil

By
Robbie Cox

To Trick the Devil

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To John and Leslie Howe, amazing people in this trick-or-treat world

Chapter One



JACKSON LANTERN GROWLED as he stepped up to the front door of Thirst Bar, staring at the obscenity through narrowed eyes. Someone had stuck a life-sized cutout of a jack-o'-lantern on the front doors with legs and arms bent in haphazard directions and flames flickering in his eyes. Jackson reached out and snatched the ridiculous image off the door, ripping it into tiny jagged pieces. He hated October. Hated Halloween. Hated the asinine images that went with the holiday. Hated them, because they were too close to the truth.

He sighed as he shoved the cutout into the trash bin beside the front door. With a deep breath, he turned, glancing around at the other nearby businesses—Hell's Brew, City Hall, The Fairy Garden, and even Stoney's Bar, his annoying rival—for the culprit who put the jack-o'-lantern on the door of his bar. Jackson knew the villain was there, watching his reaction, getting a good laugh out of Jackson's frustration. Four centuries obviously had not been enough time to get these asinine pranks out of the asshole's system.

"I really hate October," Jackson muttered as he turned back to his bar's front door, ready for another day of his mundane existence. Not life. No. He died centuries ago, but Heaven

refused him, and he was not welcome in Hell. Black Hollow was the only place his soul could find roots to continue, the town's magic pulling him out of the In Between and giving his soul substance again. Thirst was the only thing that gave Jackson purpose, a reason to wake up and slip out of bed, a haven where he could hide while he sought answers to questions that the centuries had thrust upon him—the biggest being, how could he die?

After flipping on the lights, he stood inside the bar, the doors closed as he soaked in his lady. Thirst was his love, the only thing that made him smile. He made sure his establishment was relaxed with a laid back environment. He kept the lighting low, and the country music, which played through the speakers in the ceiling most of the time, just as low, so people could hear the person on the other side of the table. He hated loud bars where you needed to scream to be heard. The interior of Thirst consisted of rich wood furniture, the chairs with deep leather seats, and along the walls of Thirst perched booths, some larger than others to accommodate different-sized crowds.

His gaze wandered to his favorite part of Thirst, the bar perched in the middle of the building, made with rich wood and containing a wraparound rack dangling from the ceiling with glasses and extra bottles of liquor. He spotted his antagonist sitting on one of the normal-sized barstools, smoking a cigar and sipping whiskey from a small glass, looking as if he hadn't a care in the world. He sported a slender frame and the darkest hair Jackson ever saw with a matching goatee and mustache. Jackson knew if he looked into the man's eyes, they'd be a deep red, able to see into men's souls, just as he saw into Jackson's so long ago.

Jackson sighed. He should have known the man would already be inside his bar, ready to rub it in. Again. Karma is a bitch, and Jackson had suffered its cruel consequences for almost four centuries. He shook his head as he started toward the bar. "I should have known you'd pop up again. Halloween being less than two weeks away," Jackson said as he walked around the bar, slipping under the wooden flap that separated the customers from the bartenders. "I hope you plan on paying

for that drink.” He pointed to the glass of whiskey sitting in front of the other man.

The dark-haired smiled, his teeth a sparkling white, as he lifted his glass and made a show out of taking a slow sip. With just as much dramatics, he set the glass back on the bar and shrugged. “As I remember it, I paid for quite a few of your drinks back in the day. I think you can spot me a whiskey or two, don’t you?”

Jackson shook his head as he stood there, staring at the man. “I take it you were the one who put that vile image on my bar door? Isn’t that little prank a bit beneath you?”

The man chuckled, his dark red eyes sparking with evil merriment. “I thought you were the king of pranks, Jackson.” He tilted his head a little as he grinned. “Are you saying ol’ Stingy Jack lost his taste for tricks?”

“I lost my taste for your tricks,” Jackson said, slipping his hands into his jeans pockets. “I would think you’d have better things to do with your time than pester me every October. It’s bad enough you created these symbols to remind me of my fate, but to make a special trip out of Hell just to participate in the rancid humor seems a little beneath the Keeper of Hades, don’t you think, Lucifer?”

The Devil shrugged. “I need something to break up the monotony of the screams down there. You seemed like a fun distraction. I promised I’d never take you to Hades, but that doesn’t mean I can’t bring Hades to you. I use tormenting you as a mini-vacation. I thought you’d be proud.”

“So nice to be a vacation spot for the Prince of Darkness,” Jackson deadpanned. “I still think you’d have better things to do than torment me.”

Lucifer downed the rest of his whiskey and then slid off his stool as he set the glass back down on the bar. “To be honest—and the Devil never lies—I’m not really here just to remind you of your fate. Picking on you was just a little bonus for my trouble. I have business to attend to, and souls to claim.” He turned and started walking toward the door, smoke curling up from the cigar he carried at his side between his fingers. Once

he reached the door, he turned, grinning at Jackson once more. “I know you’ll keep the fire burning for me, though,” he said. He then burst out in laughter as he shoved his way outside.

Jackson just watched the Devil leave, his anger causing his heart to thump hard in his chest. He turned and glanced down at his reflection in the silver of the wash sink, his eyes a fiery flicker to match the orange tint to his skin, a constant reminder of his misdeeds of the past and the price he had to pay for his deceptions, a price that raged within him, mocking him every time he looked in a mirror, a price that he was constantly reminded of every year at this time thanks to Lucifer. While his eyes were a constant flicker of flame year-round, Halloween drew attention to it more than ever.

Jackson hated October.

He grabbed the glass Lucifer used, setting it in the sink before he slipped out from behind the bar to straighten the stools again. He preferred everything in its place when he opened Thirst, giving his customers a welcoming experience right from the start. He wanted everyone to feel comfortable when they frequented his bar, an attempt—even if a sad one—to make up for his mischievous ways of the past. Taller barstools mixed with the more normal-sized stools to accommodate the smaller of the faeries, like the leprechauns, gnomes, and other faeries. Jackson knew the residents of Black Hollow thought he was an odd sort of fellow, keeping mostly to himself, choosing to forsake the typical bartender with an ear role a person found in most other bars. He didn’t want to hear their problems. He just wanted to be left alone to tend his bar until he could figure out how to end his miserable existence.

He straightened the last stool and then walked back to his office set in the far corner of the bar. Once inside, he flipped on the music that would talk about broken hearts, stolen trucks, and lost dogs. Oh, and beer. Country music kept him in his mopey space, which is why he played it all the time. Except on karaoke night, that is. Then, he had to endure people who couldn’t really sing trying to be rock stars, which made him really want to mope.

Turning back around, he stood in the doorway of his office, staring back out at his lady. Funny that he would run a bar, considering he was such a drunkard back then. Alcohol and his mouth got him into trouble. It took him four centuries to learn to shut his mouth, but he gave up the booze the day he died. He chuckled as he shook his head, moving toward the bar again. My life sounds like an eighties sitcom.

He slid back behind the bar, moving over to the sink to wash the glass Lucifer helped himself to. As he picked up the glass, he paused, turning to the front door the Devil passed through just a few moments ago. He could feel his brows bunch over his nose as he remembered Lucifer's parting words. I'm not really here just to remind you of your fate. Picking on you was just a little bonus for my trouble. I have business to attend to, and souls to claim. Whose soul was Lucifer here to claim?

Chapter Two



MEREDITH VANTH SLID from her bed at the sound of the coffeemaker beeping at her, her eyes still refusing to open even after her feet hit the floor. She sat there a moment, her head hung low, shoulders slumped, as she clutched the edge of the bed taking deep breaths in the hopes of jarring her senses to wakefulness. After a couple of moments, she realized the exercise was not going to work, and she forced her eyes open as she stood, forced to face the day whether or not she was ready. The truth was, she was more eager to face these current days than she was those of her previous years. Her life was simple now. A simple job as a waitress at the Fireside Grille. A simple scattering of friends. A simple day-to-day existence. She craved simple. Her past had been too complicated.

She paused in front of her dresser mirror on her way out of her room. *I crave life. I've had enough of death.*

She sighed, gave a sad shake of her head, and continued on to the eye-opening beverage she had fallen in love with the moment she stepped foot in the land of the living—coffee. Glancing at the clock on the bedroom wall before she passed out of her bedroom, she groaned, realizing she only had just over an hour before she needed to be at work. She was pulling

the noon to nine shift today, dreading it and looking forward to it all at the same time. Thursdays were a prelude to the weekend, not as busy as Friday and Saturday, but pretty close thanks to some direct deposits going into bank accounts early. Tips would be high, especially with the corset dresses made of dragon scales the owner of Fireside Grille, Pietr Drakki, made them wear. It surprised her how soft the dragon scales felt to wear. The first time she saw them, she feared they would slice her open. Surprisingly, they felt just as if she pulled on a tight shirt, and she was able to move around in them easily with no hindrance at all.

She stepped into the bathroom for her morning routine, thinking of her Thursday regulars she would see soon. Many would be in for a quick lunch, some for some afternoon fondue, and then the dinner crowd wanting wine and spirits, getting ready for the last day of the work week. Of course, it was her first day at work this week, so it wasn't all sunshine and roses. Still, she enjoyed her job, much better than her last one, so she looked forward to going to work every day. Seeing people smiling and laughing was much preferable to seeing them die over and over again.

Once she finished brushing her teeth, something she had to get used to doing now that she had a normal existence, she moved down the hall, through the living room on her way to the kitchen.

And to coffee. Had she mentioned how much she loved coffee? They didn't have coffee where she came from. They didn't have anything where she came from, actually.

She entered the kitchen, a bounce in her step, a song floating through her mind, ready to start her day, when she saw him and came to a sudden halt. How the hell did he find her? King said she would be safe. The Kings of Hell, at least three of them, would keep her presence a secret, help her live undetected in Black Hollow. So, why was Lucifer sitting in her kitchen?

And sipping her coffee!

She took a deep breath and then continued on her way to the coffeemaker. “I see you know your way around a kitchen,” she said as she passed him where he sat at her kitchen table. “You know in polite society people don’t just let themselves into someone’s apartment. They knock and wait for an invitation.”

Lucifer’s blood-red eyes twinkled at her as he lifted the coffee mug to his thin lips. He made a point of taking a slow sip, the steam from the coffee curling around his thin nose. He ran his tongue over his lips when he pulled the cup away, smiling at her. “We both know I don’t do well in polite society,” he said, setting the cup back down on the quaint table. “However, it seems you’ve done quite well for yourself. I should have known to check with King the moment you left Hell.” He shook his head. “Vanth, Vanth, Vanth, what in the name of my home were you thinking? No one leaves Hell. You have a job to do. You’re the harbinger of death. People need your help to die.” He cocked his head to the side as he gave her a questioning look. “Do you know how many people are still alive who shouldn’t be? How many need your special talents at doling out punishment?”

Meredith—Vanth—opened the cabinet and pulled out a ceramic mug with Alizon’s candy shop logo on it and poured herself a cup of coffee. It was too hot in Hell for coffee. She sighed. It was too hot in Hell for water, as well. It always wound up boiling. Thus, there was never anything to drink in Hell, especially rum. She had grown quite used to drinking rum from Fireside Grille’s bar. She didn’t want to give up rum.

After pouring herself a full cup, she held it with both hands, the heat insignificant to her flesh from the centuries she served in Hell, bringing souls to Lucifer. She leaned back on the kitchen counter, holding the cup in front of her. “I can’t do it anymore,” she said, her voice soft as she did her best to look Lucifer in the eyes. “I’ve been watching people die for eons, and I just can’t do it anymore. I needed something that shouted life. I needed a new beginning. I’m sorry.”

He waved off her apology. “Don’t be sorry,” he said, his tone placating, soothing. “Everyone needs a break now and

then. I mean, you have been bringing the dead to me for over a millennium. I can understand the need to unwind a bit.”

She stared at him, his slick, dark hair, his slender form, beautiful features. He understood? She shifted slightly against the counter. “Um, thanks,” she stuttered. “I didn’t expect you to understand. I thought you’d want to haul me back to Hell.”

He smiled at her. “Oh, I plan on hauling you back to Hell, don’t get me wrong. You have a job to do and you’re behind. I can’t punish people if you don’t bring them to me. I’m here to make sure you return.”

“But King said...” she began, bolting upright and splashing coffee everywhere.

“King—Raguel, that is—is one of the Kings of Hell, but he is just a demon, like you,” Lucifer said, his red eyes narrow slits as he glared at her. “I am the Angel of Death, the Ruler of Hell. I determine who can come and go. Me...and me alone. Don’t you ever forget that. Raguel gave that up when he wanted to open that silly coffee shop using my Kingdom as a branding tool.” He stood, his features tight against his face as he strained against every word he spewed her way. “I am Lucifer, Satan, the Devil. I rule Hell!” He hit her table, knocking his mug over, sending coffee spraying in every direction.

She yelped at his outburst, dropping her own cup to shatter on the floor as she jumped slightly. “Yes, your Evilness,” she squeaked as she bowed her head, arms straight at her sides, fingers splayed wide. Then, she glanced up at him, pleading in her gaze. “But please don’t make me go back,” she begged. “Please. I’ll do anything. I just can’t watch people die anymore. Surely, there’s someone else.”

He narrowed his eyes at her, cocking his head to the side as he studied her. “Anything, huh? You would really do anything to stay out of Hell and remain here in Black Hollow?”

She nodded emphatically. “Yes, anything. Anything at all. Just name it.”

He studied her some more, running his tongue over his lips. “I’ll need to think on it, but we might just be able to strike a deal, and you *know* how I just love a good deal.”

“Any deal you want,” she said, her words a rush as they passed her lips. “Just name it.”

“You, of all people—or demons—should know better than to agree to my terms before you’ve heard them.” He stood straighter, fixing his pristine button-down shirt as he preened in front of her. “Very well. I will take some time to think about it, and will tell you my terms. In the meantime, you may carry on with your newfound monotonous life.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, her voice trembling. “Thank you, sir.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” Lucifer said as he smoothed out his dark hair, which was truly unnecessary. “You haven’t heard my terms yet.” He grinned at her as he ran his finger through the spilt coffee on the table. He lifted his finger and sucked the liquid off his finger. Glancing down at the rest of the coffee spreading across the wooden table, he said, “I really should see about getting me one of these coffeemakers for Hell.” He glanced back up at her, his expression blank. “I’ll be back.” He then turned and left without another word.

Meredith watched him leave, her nerves a jumbled mess until she heard the door click shut. She wasn’t sure what scared her more—the fact that he found her, or the deal she might have to strike in order to remain in Black Hollow.

Chapter Three



JACKSON GLANCED AT the clock over the bar, hoping it was close to quitting time. He sighed. Nowhere near close. He grumbled as he glanced up at his karaoke stage, the ogres from Ogre Security doing a clumsy rendition of YMCA. Their arms were too thick and short to make the letters come out resembling anything close to what they were supposed to be. Jackson just shook his head and continued fixing Brandie Underwood's margarita.

As he set the glass in front of the tough blond, doing his best to ignore her ample bosom, Brandie's leprechaun boyfriend asked, "What's the story horse? You been in a right snit since we came in here tonight. We be used to your lack of personality on a normal basis, but you seem a little bit more surly than usual today."

Brandie took a sip of her margarita, her brows raised as she lowered the glass, obviously satisfied with the way Jackson made her drink. "Quinn's right," she said, after licking the excess moisture off her lips. "It doesn't take my detective skills to realize something is definitely eating at you."

Quinn O'Connor cocked his head to the side as he stared at Jackson. "Did someone stick one of those jack-o'-lantern cutouts on your door again? You know, if you talk to Nunk, I'm sure he could spare one of his ogres to guard Thirst when it's closed."

Jackson shook his head. "No need. I know who did it, and I've already spoken to them about it, not that it will do much good. This guy's notorious for ignoring people's wishes." *Unless he's forced*, Jackson thought to himself.

"Nothing straightens a person's crooked ways faster than putting them face-to-face with an ogre," Quinn said as he lifted his whiskey glass. "If the mere sight of them doesn't scare the maggot off, then trying to have a conversation with one of them would seal the deal."

"Be nice," Brandie said as she bumped shoulders with Quinn. Of course, she needed to lean down to do it as, even sitting, she was quite a bit taller than the leprechaun. "Nunk is highly intelligent. I love talking with him."

Quinn rolled his eyes. "And what about Gerst? The guy can't even form a complete sentence. It's like doing charades."

Brandie giggled as she lifted her glass again. "I think he feels the same about talking to you with your accent."

Quinn shot her a wide-eyed look. "And just what be wrong with me accent? I sound a lot more civilized than grating boulders, thank ya very much."

Jackson tried not to laugh, but a smile still crept up on his lips. He decided to leave the new lovers alone while he could make a clean break and got lost in straightening the alcohol bottles behind him. He could still hear them bickering, but could also hear the laughter in their voices. They were actually having fun giving each other a hard time, confident in their love for one another that neither would say anything to truly hurt the other person's feelings. Jackson was envious of their relationship, even though they had gone through fire to be together. He wanted someone like that, but then, who would want to be with a man cursed to wander the world even though he was dead, and that wasn't even the worst of the strikes

against him. The orange tint to his skin and the fire in his eyes didn't exactly shout attractive. He never realized the price he would pay for his pranks would be so severe, especially the cost of watching those he loved die while he remained the same. Now, he just longed for death himself.

He heard a stool slide along the wooden floor behind him and turned to take care of the new customer. He smiled when he saw Meredith Vanth, one of the rare few he grew to truly care about in Black Hollow. However, his elation was short-lived when he noticed her drooped shoulders and the frown upon her lips. He reached for a shot glass and filled it with vodka, sliding it in front of her when he was finished. "On the house," he told her. "Anyone who looks that grim needs a shot. Bad day at the Grille?"

Meredith snatched up the shot glass and downed the vodka in one quick gulp, setting the glass back on the bar again when she was finished and gesturing for another. "The Grille was fine," she said as she watched Jackson fill her glass again. "I love working for Pietr." She shook her head. "My trouble is actually with a former boss. He's not too keen on me leaving him and isn't accepting my resignation. He's trying to force me to go back."

Jackson leaned down on the bar, his arms crossed in front of him. "You must have been great at your job for them to take your departure so hard, but he can't make you return against your will. Just tell him to take a hike."

She shook her head. "Trust me, I wish it was that easy," she said. "However, my former job was the type of job you're usually stuck in for the rest of your existence."

"Really?" He straightened, glancing around the bar as he did. Quinn and Brandie stared at him, puzzlement pinching their brows. Jackson couldn't blame them. This was the most he had talked to a customer ever, preferring usually to hand them their drinks and move quickly away. Contact with others usually left him feeling drained. Meredith was different, however. Something about her felt familiar, drawing him to her, and it wasn't just the ample size of her breasts or the pout her lips formed at times. He ignored the couple and turned his

attention back to Meredith. “I’ve never known you to work anywhere besides Fireside Grille. What did you used to do?” Her eyes were a deep red, and he found himself drawn to them almost as if hypnotized. He just couldn’t bring himself to look away.

She sighed, biting her bottom lip a bit. Finally, she took a deep breath. “I’m not sure you’d believe me if I told you.”

He gave a soft chuckle. “Trust me, I’ve been around the block a few times. There isn’t much that would shock me, especially here in Black Hollow, paranormal capitol of the world.” He wasn’t sure how much Meredith knew about his background. He hadn’t exactly made many friends in Black Hollow. More like he forced himself not to make friends. Very few people knew him as the Jack-o’-lantern of Halloween legend. Even fewer knew how he came to be known as Jack-o’-lantern, and he preferred to keep it that way, especially with such a beautiful lady as Meredith. Of course, to the best of his knowledge, which, granted, was limited, not many knew Meredith’s story, either.

“You may hate me if you find out,” Meredith said, still hesitating about revealing her past to him, even though it sounded as if she truly wanted to open up to him. “A normal person would hate me.”

Jackson laughed again. “I’m not necessarily normal.” He shrugged. “You don’t have to tell me, of course, but I promise I won’t hate you. Obviously, you left that job for a reason, so you must not have wanted to stay and continue doing whatever it was you did.”

Meredith shook her head. “No, I didn’t. I couldn’t take it any more. All the screaming. The pain. *I* had nightmares, and that’s saying something.”

He stared at her with narrowed eyes. “Your job involved screaming and pain?” He tilted his head to the side. “You one of those dominatrices or something? Of course, you could have been a therapist or doctor. Perhaps a teacher? I’m sure students scream in pain at test time.” He tried to grin, but he wasn’t sure if she was serious or joking, or whether she

referred to some sexy sex business or something a little more sinister and possibly criminal.

“No, but I did have a guy once who seemed to get off on what I did to him,” Meredith said. “It took me forever to figure out how to punish him, because every twisted thing I did to him just got his cock hard.” She shook her head before taking another sip of her vodka. “Finally, I figured out that he just needed to be deprived of the pain in order to feel as if he was being punished.”

“Punished,” Jackson repeated, grinning. “So, you *were* a dominatrix.”

Meredith laughed at him as she shook her head, toying with the glass in her hands. “I’m sensing a theme with you. Anything you care to share?”

He winked at her. “Doesn’t everyone have the adventurous side? In the right circumstances, anyone could be open to just about anything with the right person.”

She grinned over at him. “I’ll remember you said that.”

He waggled his eyebrows at her. “Please do.” He then tilted his head as he stared at her. “So, what are you going to do about this former boss of yours? You could just ignore him. Like I said, it’s not as if he can force you to go back to work for him.”

She sighed. “He’s not the type to be ignored. He’s a rather persistent bastard.”

“Well, if I can do anything to help, just let me know.”

“I will, and thanks.” And her smile put a fire in parts of him other than his eyes.

Chapter Four



MEREDITH STEPPED OUT of Magical Delights Bakery, a large cinnamon roll in one hand and a black coffee in the other. She tried adding sugar to her coffee when she first left Hell, but the sweetness was more than she was used to in the underworld and turned her stomach. She forced herself to learn how to eat the cinnamon rolls, but the sugar was almost too much for her as well. Luckily for her, Starburst, one of the unicorns who ran the bakery, helped wean sugar into Meredith's system, fixing special treats for her at first that had nothing sweet about them and then adding sugar into the food a little at a time until Meredith craved the sugary icing that coated the cinnamon roll almost more than the roll itself. Of course, it had also taken Meredith quite a bit of time to get used to the unicorn with her purple hide and pale-green mane and tail, not to mention the way she glowed all the time. The inside of the bakery was a sharp contrast to the flames, molten lava, and rock Meredith became accustomed to in Hell.

Meredith turned left once outside the bakery, passing the butcher shop and Stoney's Bar on her way to The Fairy Garden. Woodland fairies ran the florist, but in the back there was a small conservatory where they grew many of their own

plants and birds flitted around from branch to branch. They set benches around the plants and small trees, making the small area seem more like you were out in the woods than in a florist. Meredith loved to come there and just sit, watching the birds, breathing in the heady aroma of the flowers and foliage. When she first arrived in Black Hollow quite a while ago, her senses were filled with the thick sulfur odor of Hell, her ears rang with the screams of her victims, and her skin radiated the heat of the flames that forever burned down there. Seraphine suggested she visit the florist every day, at least for a while, until the fragrant aroma of the fairies' garden overcame the stench of the world she left behind. It worked, but even though the stench disappeared, Meredith continued her ritual, now basking in the quiet and peace of the small sanctuary.

Seraphine was the one who truly helped her, getting her acclimated to the small town after King helped Meredith escape Hell. Seraphine was the one who helped Meredith get a job at Fireside Grille, who helped keep her secret of being a demon, and who made sure Adam scrubbed the Web of any mention of Vanth, her true demon name, in the hopes that Lucifer would never find her. He had, of course, but still, Meredith had enjoyed a little time in the world above, enough so that she didn't want to leave.

She smiled at two of the small woodland fairies putting together a potted arrangement as she weaved her way through the small florist to the conservatory in the back. None of the people in Black Hollow knew who—or rather, what—she was, so she never had to tolerate the disgust she knew came with the knowledge. King, of course, knew, and Seraphine, but so far, neither of them had judged her.

Meredith sighed as she pushed her way into the conservatory and walked around the back wall to a stone bench that gave her access to view the entire area. She sat down, sipping her coffee as she set the cinnamon roll on the bench beside her and took a deep breath through her nose, the fragrance of the lilacs strong this morning, calming her nerves.

She couldn't believe she came close to telling Jackson her secret. She had ventured into Thirst several times, enjoying

watching the ogres sing karaoke, but never before had she truly spoken to Jackson. He always seemed so aloof and distant, keeping to himself, serving drinks and then rushing off before anyone could even ask him a question or start to share something that weighed them down. Weren't bartenders supposed to be that unofficial, unbiased shoulder for people to spew their problems, like a therapist with booze? Yet, Jackson never before seemed to care about anyone else's problems, serving their drinks, taking their money, and walking off.

Until last night, that is.

Last night, he stood there, leaning on the bar, and listened to everything Meredith said, not judging her, not tuning her out while he thought about what he needed to restock, instead. He actually heard everything she said, even teased her about some of it. He didn't share anything about himself, of course, but still, he cared enough to give her the shoulder he refused others, and she appreciated it. She hadn't realized how much she needed to unburden herself until she started talking. No one at Fireside Grille knew who she truly was, so there was no one there she could share her morning visitor with, and she hadn't been able to get over to see King to warn him that Lucifer was in town. Had Lucifer even done it? She doubted it. Lucifer only cared about Lucifer and the deals he could force upon people, which reminded her, he had a deal for her, one that would allow her to remain in Black Hollow and not return to Hell. He just hadn't told her what it was, yet.

She sighed as she lifted her cup to her lips, taking a sip. The liquid would have scalded anyone else, but it was barely lukewarm to her. Centuries in the pit of Hell kind of made one immune to heat.

What would Lucifer want from her that would keep her from being forced back to Hell? Whatever it was, she knew it would have to be big, something major equaling her desire to remain in Black Hollow, but what was there she could offer him that had the same value in his eyes? She watched him make some nasty deals with people through the ages, tricking them into giving up their very souls in order to attain something they *thought* they desired: love, fame, or fortune.

Their wishes usually fell within those three categories. However, Meredith didn't want fame—she wanted to be left alone in anonymity—or fortune—she was quite happy living day-to-day from her salary at the Fireside Grille—and she highly doubted anyone could ever love her once they knew what she was and what she had done. She also knew she didn't have a soul. That was reserved for humans and the like, not demons. So, how would Lucifer try to trick her? All she wanted was to live out her days in Black Hollow, away from the misery of humans who had enjoyed their earthly existence more than they worried about their afterlife. To her, that was worth more than love, fame, and fortune combined.

Still, she knew nothing was ever straight forward with Lucifer. Millions tried to best him, but very few ever succeeded. Even those who did had paid some price in the end. Would it be worth it? Would she be willing to pay that price when it came due?

She sighed as she reached over to her cinnamon roll, picking it up and setting it in her lap. A small cardinal flitted down from one of the branches of a small philodendron to sit on the stone bench beside her, his tiny head almost twisting off as he eyed her treat. Meredith smiled at the small bird, breaking off a tiny piece of her roll and setting it on the pale stone beside her. The bird scooped it up in its beak and flew off. A couple of other birds joined him, fighting a little for his special treat, but the cardinal guarded it with his life until he devoured every morsel.

Meredith watched, realizing she watched part of her answer. She had to do the same with her life now as that cardinal did with the small piece of cinnamon roll. She would guard this existence in the land above with everything she had, with every ounce of her being, until she had savored every last morsel of life she could devour. She would live, and Lucifer be damned if he tried to take it away from her. This was her life, and she refused to give it up so easily or be tricked out of it. She had seen all his tricks. She knew his ploys and gambits. She could overcome him. She *would* overcome him.

She broke off a piece of her breakfast, savoring the sugary morsel as she chewed. She had come to relish so much of what the humans had already. How could she ever give any of that up? She wouldn't. She couldn't. She would accept whatever deal Lucifer wanted her to make, giving him what he required to keep her grip on this world, on this life, her life. There would be no cost too great to have this, no price she would not pay. She was alive. How could she be expected to return to the land of the dead until she finished living?

Chapter Five



JACKSON STUFFED HIS hands in his pockets as he walked down Main Street, avoiding the gazes of those around him. Halloween decorations hung from every lamp post along every street, and the town center was smothered in hay bales, scarecrows, and even jack-o'-lanterns scattered around the gazebo and benches. These people loved Halloween, and any visitor who somehow managed to get sucked into town believed the residents of Black Hollow lived for Halloween year round. In a way, they would be right, thanks to all the paranormal beings who lived there, none of them caring about being in their true forms. A yeti ran the ice cream shop, leprechauns managed the bank, and a witch made the town's candy. Even the town inn was run by the Sandman, the *actual* Sandman. This was the best place for Jackson to live, to be accepted, and he should be happy to be here. Usually, he was, but not in October. He hated October. Hated Halloween. He turned and stared at one of the jack-o'-lanterns near the gazebo, the reason he truly hated Halloween.

And the reason was back in town.

He glanced around the area as if Lucifer would jump out from behind a bush at any moment with one of those

cardboard cutouts he had stuck on Thirst's door yesterday morning. Luckily, though, the Devil was scarce. *Probably tormenting whoever else he was in Black Hollow to harass.* Jackson sighed as he glanced up at the noonday sun. He felt sorry for whoever was in Lucifer's crosshairs, knowing that Lucifer always won, one way or another. Maybe not at first, but eventually, he always won. Jackson knew that firsthand.

"Jackson!" a voice called out from behind him.

Turning, he saw Silver DeTourney walking toward him, a smile on the man's face. Jackson took a deep breath, forcing himself to be social when all he wanted was to be left alone. "Silver, how are things at the paper?" Silver worked for Adam on the town newspaper, the Black Hollow Gazette, and had only been in town a short period himself. Of course, being in Black Hollow even for a little while seemed like years.

Silver just smiled at him, nodding. "Good. We're getting ready to launch the special Halloween edition, and Adam has me running around making sure we have everyone's ad for Halloween." He gave a slight shrug. "I saw you walking this way, so figured I'd head you off."

Jackson shook his head. "You know I don't do Halloween in any form. Find me closer to Christmas."

Silver just stared at him. "But, it's almost like a Federal holiday here in Black Hollow. You sure you don't want to get a slice of the pumpkin pie? Sebastian has a nice ad for Stoney's. I'm sure he'll draw a large crowd with what he's doing."

Jackson just glared at him. "Not really a big pumpkin pie fan, thanks. And I don't really care what Sebastian is doing with that dive bar of his. He's blocked out a major customer base with his prejudice against anyone who isn't a shifter. He probably even has a drink called the Fur Ball."

Silver stared at him with wide eyes, his mouth slightly agape, obviously unsure what to say to Jackson's little tirade. Jackson didn't blame him. Silver had no way of knowing about Jackson's hatred for Halloween or the reason behind it.

Jackson took a deep breath. "Sorry," he said, almost with a sigh. "Halloween and I just don't get along. See me around Thanksgiving, and I'll run an ad then." He said goodbye and then turned and continued on his way. He knew he should feel bad about how he acted, but this time of year put him on edge more than any other, and he was pretty surly the other eleven months as it was. Of course, the fact that Lucifer was in town only added to his misery.

Jackson finished his trek down Main Street and shoved his way into Thirst. There were only a couple of day drinkers in the bar at this time of day, and luckily for him, Piper agreed to open the bar that morning. Jackson only had a couple of employees, Piper Erickson and Webster Waterhouse, knowing he would be maintaining the bar himself for the most part, not wanting a life of his own. Thirst was his life, his lady, so to speak. He had been around long enough to know what happened if he fell for someone, and after enduring that pain a couple of times, Jackson decided matters of the heart were not for him. He was immortal and having to watch his loved ones age and die over and over was more than he wanted to deal with ever again.

Piper glanced up at him from behind the bar, smiling a good morning, but then her lips took a quick downturn as she took in his appearance. "Rough night?" she asked as she leaned on the bar, watching as he circled the bar to slip through the small opening on the side.

"Rough day," Jackson answered, flipping the flap back into place once he was behind the bar. "It's going to be a rough month, I'm sure."

Piper nodded her understanding, her lips pressed into a thin line. "It's almost over, though." She was one of the few people who knew Jackson's story and the reason behind his surliness this time of year. "You just look a little more stressed than usual. Something else happen?"

Jackson turned and leaned back on the bar, his arms over his chest as he cast a glance at a leprechaun at the end of the bar. "My tormentor is in town and has made his appearance

felt already. I came in yesterday to a jack-o'-lantern nailed to the front door."

"He's a little earlier than usual," Piper said. "Halloween is still two weeks away. Was he that bored?"

Jackson shook his head. "Apparently, I'm not the main reason he's here." He wondered once more with whom Lucifer came to Black Hollow to negotiate. With all the creatures in town, some like him with a checkered past, it could be anyone. "I'm just a little side bonus," he said with a shake of his head. "Lucky me, huh?"

She gave him a weak smile, her dark green eyes sympathetic. "Well, at least Lucifer has someone else keeping his focus. You just might get a little reprieve this year."

"I'm not sure that's any better," he said with a sigh. "I know what it's like to be in Lucifer's crosshairs. I don't envy his latest target."

"Have you thought about warning this person?" Piper asked as she tucked a loose strand of her long red hair behind her ear. Most of her hair was kept in a tight ponytail, but every once in a while some strands escaped and floated around her ears. Jackson had always thought the wisps of hair cute, but Piper only said it was annoying.

"By now, I'm sure they know," he told Piper. "Lucifer rarely wastes time when he's up to something, like torturing someone."

"Well, hopefully, they're prepared," Piper said. "As much as anyone can be prepared against the trickery of the Devil."

Jackson nodded. "Truth." He pushed himself off the bar, giving the interior of Thirst one more look-over before moving toward the flap leading out. "I'm going to be in my office going over last night's receipts. Call me if you need anything."

"Will do, Boss," Piper said as she moved down the bar toward the leprechaun.

It was Friday, so the quietness wouldn't last long as people cashed their checks and sought out some start to their weekend. Jackson would take what he could get for now, his

mind drifting back to Meredith and what she shared with him last night. *What did she do that caused people pain?* He shook his head as he opened his office door and slipped inside. If she had been a dominatrix, he kind of wanted to know. He plopped down in his leather desk chair, leaning back as he stared at the dark wood wall. Then again, maybe he was better off not knowing. There was no chance the two of them would wind up together, so no sense uncovering her bedroom secrets. If only the image of her in costume would leave his mind.

Jackson leaned forward in his chair, hands clasped in front of him on his desk. Piper said he was lucky that Lucifer had his sights set on someone else, but Jackson didn't feel that way. He wasn't sure why, but he didn't want to see anyone else bamboozled by the likes of the Devil. Jackson wanted people to have their freedom, to be able to enjoy the life they had made for themselves in Black Hollow, like he did. Satan would screw that up for sure. It was his specialty.

Jackson sighed as he plopped back in his chair, running a hand through his dark brown hair. *Why do I even care? Nothing good ever comes from getting involved in other people's problems.*

Yet, Meredith told him about her troubles last night, at least some of them. Why? Why had she confided in him so easily? Why did he even listen? What was Jackson missing?

Chapter Six



MEREDITH ENTERED HELL’S Brew, the aroma of strong coffee and the loud chatter of conversations hitting her senses and making her pause a moment. The atmosphere was a sharp contrast to the quietness of the outside streets. She didn’t have to be at work for another hour, so she decided to go to a possible solution to her predicament—King, the one who helped get her to Black Hollow.

The coffee shop was packed as usual, which made sense since it was lunchtime, and most would need a quick bite and pick-me-up to finish the day. Meredith glanced around the interior, doing a quick scan for King. The gargoyle twins, Pascal and Toussaint sat in a corner sipping coffee and sharing a bagel while near them sat Dr. Larson chatting merrily away with Josephine, the tooth fairy. In another corner, Penny tried to read while her son, Christopher, was lost in some game on his phone. Everyone seemed happy in their own little worlds, none of them paying any attention to anyone else. King, however, was nowhere to be seen.

“Can I help you?” a female’s voice asked, causing Meredith to turn.

Behind the counter stood a tall, dark-haired woman with deep chocolate eyes and a slender frame. Her smile was inviting as she stood there, fingers poised over the cash register to take her order. Meredith returned the woman's smile as she moved closer. "I'm looking for King. Is he here?"

"Vanth?" King's voice came from the back as a door whooshed open. He cocked his head to the side as he stared at her, a puzzled look on his face. "What brings you by? It's Friday; I figured you'd be working already."

Meredith smiled at the woman behind the counter and then quickly moved to intercept King before he came too far out into the main part of the coffee shop. "I had a visitor yesterday," she said, her words strained and low, eyes wide, hoping that King would catch on without her having to fill in too many of the blank lines. "He's insistent I return... Home."

King arched an eyebrow at her, the only sign indicating he knew to whom she referred. "Well, it took him longer than I thought to find you." He gestured for her to follow him, leading her away from the ears of the other patrons and into a small corner where they could whisper without being overheard. "Did he say when he expected you to return to your duties?"

"Well, yes and no," she said with a sigh. "That's my problem. He wants me to return immediately, but then he said he might have a deal he can make with me that would allow me to remain in Black Hollow. He hasn't told me what that deal is yet, however."

King shook his head. "Doesn't matter," he said. "You're not taking it. You know as well as I do that any deal Lucifer makes always comes with some catch no one can see. He never lies, which means the loophole is in plain sight, but people are usually too caught up in getting what they want to realize it's a setup. He'll own you either way in the end."

Meredith nodded. "I know, which is why I'm here. Can't you do something? You two are family. Don't you have some say in Hell? You helped build it, after all."

“You already know the answer to that,” King told her, his tone soft, almost sympathetic, at least as sympathetic as a King of Hell could be, which really wasn’t much. “Lucifer does things his own way. He thrives on proving people are as vile as he is if only given the chance. No one is innocent.”

“But I’m not just people,” she stressed. “I’m a fallen angel just like the two of you. Hell, I’m practically family. Can’t you help out a family member?”

He glared at her, the darkness of his narrowed eyes penetrating her. “I wouldn’t push it if I were you, Vanth,” he growled. “I helped you get out of Hell and gave you a new name. You and I both knew it would be a risk, and you could be found and made to return. You’ve had time to enjoy things up here. Savor that and return to your duties as the harbinger of death. I’m sure there’s a major backup. Don’t take Lucifer’s deal. You’ll get burned in the end, and we both know it.”

She pushed herself back away from King’s fiery gaze, knowing she came too close to pushing her luck with the King of Hell. “Yes, sir,” she said softly. “I was just hoping...” She stopped before she said anything else, noticing the storm brewing behind King’s eyes. “I’m glad you found what you want out of life and can enjoy it with Hitchcock. I was just hoping the same for myself, that’s all.” She started to slide out of her chair. “I won’t bother you any more.”

She turned to leave, but King stopped her. “Vanth, take my advice,” he said, his tone a warning. “Do not take Lucifer’s deal, no matter what it is. He may never lie, but he rarely plays fair.”

She just nodded as she turned and left King sitting there, his words echoing in her mind, words she planned to ignore. She was not going to return to Hell, no matter what King said. She made a life for herself in Black Hollow, and she refused to give it up. It wasn’t fair that King could enjoy his life outside of Hell while Lucifer forced her to return. She wouldn’t do it. Now, she just had to figure out how to trick the master of tricksters.

Meredith pushed herself out into the afternoon, trading the cool air-conditioning for the warm air outside. She glanced across the street at Thirst, wondering if she could convince Jackson to help her. She had hoped he would volunteer last night when she unloaded her troubles upon him, but it wasn't like she actually told him who her former boss was. He probably didn't even know she knew all about his dealings with the Devil, seeing as how Jackson never acted as if he recognized her. However, how could Vanth be a demon of Hell and not know about Stingy Jack, the man who tricked the Devil, not once, but twice? She didn't know how he did it, of course. Lucifer would protect that knowledge with all his power. However, Jackson also remained silent on the matter, keeping his secret to himself, never sharing it with anyone else. Meredith often wondered if that was part of the deal they made or if Jackson didn't want anyone else suffering the fate he now endured.

She glanced at her watch. Almost time for work. She sighed, no longer wanting to continue with her day, the effects of the fairy garden were gone, and she was no closer to finding a solution to her problem. The only plus to her day was that Lucifer hadn't shown up yet with his deal.

However, she knew it was coming. Of that, she had no doubt. As she started walking toward Fireside Grille, she wondered what Lucifer would require of her for her to remain in Black Hollow. What would be worth it to him? What was there in Black Hollow that the Devil would even want? This was the perfect community for him. Even his brother loved it in Black Hollow, so why would Lucifer want her to earn her freedom there? It made no sense.

But then again, neither did Lucifer most of the time.

Her mind drifted to Jackson. He had changed since the first time she saw him, but then again, he had been human then. He had also been defeated, shoulders slumped, expression fallen as he stood at Hell's door, begging admittance. She wanted to meet him from the first time Lucifer told her of a cocky con artist in the world, but Lucifer kept Stingy Jack, a name given to him by the Prince of Darkness, to himself, forbidding the

harbinger of death from carrying out her duties. That she wound up in Black Hollow with Jackson was more than sheer luck; it was fate. Yet, when she first met Jackson, with his fiery eyes and orangish flesh, he didn't recognize her, and she couldn't bring herself to tell him who she was, afraid he would connect her with Lucifer, and she would lose the little bit of connection with Jackson she possessed. Still, she saw no other way if she were to gain his help, and she desperately needed his help. She entered her workday at Fireside Grille wondering how she could break through Jackson's stoic exterior. Her future depended on it.

Chapter Seven



COUNTRY MUSIC BOUNCED off the walls of Thirst as Black Hollow residents sat around celebrating the end of another week. Jackson slid around Piper as he set a rum and Coke in front of Arden McCarthy and moved to fix the leprechaun's girlfriend, Kerry Underwood, a Midori Sour.

“When am I getting my beer?” Basgi, the brownie from the Daydreamer Inn, pounded on the top of the bar from where he stood on his barstool. Jackson glanced down the bar at the crotchety brownie, glad that of all the faeries in Black Hollow, he had ignored the brownie's height issues. “How much longer do I have to wait?”

Jackson turned to Piper and sighed. “Can you take care of the little pipsqueak? I've had enough of his yelping for one night.” He noticed a wisp of her red hair sticking away from her head and fought the urge to reach out and tuck it behind her ear, knowing how she liked to remain prim in public.

Piper laughed as she reached up to do what he wanted, tucking the strand of hair behind her ear as if she read his mind. “But he's so cute in a creepy-crawly kind of way.”

Jackson looked back down at Basgi, who still bounced up and down on his stool, glaring at them. Brownies were smaller than leprechauns, with dark brown skin and long, pointy ears that stuck straight out the side of their bald heads. They had bony limbs and sinewy hands with stick-like fingers, dark, thin lips over sharp, yellowish teeth and beady, dark eyes. Cute was not a word Jackson would have used. Creepy, however, definitely. Jackson glanced back at Piper and shook his head. “I can’t wait to see who you wind up marrying.”

“Jackson!” Piper said in a harsh whisper, wagging her finger at him. “It’s all about what’s on the inside of a person, not what the shell looks like.”

Jackson slipped under the bar flap and then turned to lean on the top of the bar as he looked across at Piper. “Speaking as someone who has a warped outside as well as inside, I can assure you, it’s neither. It’s better to be alone. Less likely to get hurt that way.”

Piper leaned across the bar, smiling at him. “Getting hurt sucks, I agree, but you kind of need to go through the pain sometimes to find that one person who makes it all fade away. Surely, you’ve had someone like that in your life at some point or another.”

He just smiled at her before turning and walking to the surrounding table to gather up some of the empty glasses and bottles left behind by departing patrons.

“I’m still waiting for my beer!” Basgi yelled as he hit the top of the bar again.

Jackson just shook his head as he walked away, leaving the little man to Piper’s charming personality. If he was honest with himself, however, Basgi wasn’t the only reason Jackson left the bar in the middle of Thirst. The truth was, he needed to get away from the conversation. For over four centuries, he walked the planet, and he knew love during that time—twice, as a matter of fact—but in the end, no one could live as long as he could. His mates died, his friends died, everyone around him died, leaving him to wander the world on his own, lost and alone until he found Black Hollow. Or rather, until

Seraphine found him and brought him to Black Hollow, and while there were still plenty of supernatural beings in the town who would live a long time, none would live as long as him. He would always be alone. Always. Loneliness was to be a side effect of his curse for...well, forever. He sighed as he stacked glasses into each other from a table. *And people wonder why I'm usually grumpy.* Would there ever be a companion for him?

“And here I thought you'd be all cheerful with a bounce in your step,” the man's voice said as Jackson drew nearer.

Looking up, Jackson wondered how he hadn't realized Lucifer was even in his bar. Of course, with the ability to just pop in and out at will, the Devil probably wasn't there a minute ago. *This month just gets better and better.* “I thought you had someone else to torment,” Jackson said as he reached for a plate on the table beside Lucifer.

“Now, Jackson, you know I always have time for my favorite trickster,” Lucifer said as he twirled his whiskey glass on the top of the table. Jackson narrowed his gaze at the glass. *Had that been there a moment ago?* “Besides, I've already visited King, and well, let's say that bored me. I mean, really, why would anyone give up being a ruler in Hell to run a coffee shop of all things? Talk about a demotion. He could have at least opened another bar in this weird little town. I mean, how about a place that caters to everyone?” He cocked his head to the side, his dark bangs swishing over his forehead. “I never saw you as the prejudiced type. Why close your bar off to half the town's residents? No animal shifters allowed? Isn't that bad business?”

“Saves time vacuuming,” Jackson said simply. “And why do you even care? Doesn't discord fit in with your agenda? You are here, after all, trying to do that exact same thing to me, aren't you?”

Lucifer shrugged. “I don't care, not really. King is all sappy happy with his new love and his boring business. At least, he kept Hell in the name. Of course, I think I should get some sort of royalties on that, since I helped create the place.” He tilted his head upward, his eyes pinched in thought. “I wonder what

I would do with money. It's not like I really need it." He glanced back at Jackson, his eyes narrowed as he stared. "As far as why I am here using you as my entertainment, don't you think you owe me? After all, not everyone can say they've tricked the Devil, not just once, but twice. You've always fascinated me, Jackson." He then shrugged, lifted his glass and drank. Setting the glass back on the table, he smiled at Jackson, winked, and then vanished, the glass remaining on the table.

Jackson stared at the glass, his anger at the Devil coursing through him. He should have known better than to play games with Satan. No one ever thinks beyond the immediate when agreeing to one of Lucifer's deals. They never saw the hidden agenda behind his slick words. The Devil made lawyers and car salesmen look like priests.

Reaching for the glass Lucifer left behind, Jackson paused, staring at the orange-brown tint to his hand. He hadn't always looked this way. Once, centuries ago, he had been as normal as any other human walking the planet. That is, until he came face-to-face with Lucifer on the night the Devil came to claim Jackson's soul. Desperation caused Jackson to play the only card he possessed, which gave him what he wanted at the moment, but in the end, left him to wander the world alone.

Jackson stumbled out of the inn, one hand aiming for the doorframe to keep him from falling to the ground, but missing completely, sending him into a spin as he tumbled from the wood planks to the dusty road. He stopped himself from spinning just as he heard some man cackling behind him. Turning, he leaned forward, hands partially on his hips as he eyed a thin dark-haired man staring at him, smirking. "And just who you be to be laughing at me?" Jackson asked.

"Why, Jackson Lantern, you should be honored," the man said, his arms over his chest as he stared at Jackson. "It's not everyone who gets to meet the Devil before being taken to Hell. There are others who do that after all."

Jackson's eyes went wide as he stared at the man, the effects of the alcohol quickly abating. "Lucifer, himself," he

stammered. "Well I'll be. My time upon this earth is over." Jackson shook his sodden head. "I suppose I deserve it."

"Suppose? You suppose you deserve it?" Lucifer laughed even harder. "From what I've heard, you're the most despicable man walking these streets. You've manipulated and deceived and, basically, become a scourge on society. I just had to see for myself the man everyone spoke of with such disdain."

Jackson swayed where he stood, one hand slipping from his hip only to be shakily returned. He nodded his head, but the movement only made him dizzy so he stopped. "True enough. True enough." He then held a finger up, his arm swaying back and forth. "However, if this be my final night on this planet, do me the courtesy of allowing me one final pint."

Lucifer stared at him a moment, studying him for motive. Finally, he nodded, standing straighter. "I don't see why not. One final bit of ale to coat your throat before the flames of Hell scorch the breath from you." He then gestured to the door Jackson had just exited and followed the stumbling man inside.

Jackson entered, motioning to the barkeep for another round. Lucifer sat at the table beside him, the two of them talking about how devious a man Jackson was as they sipped their ale. When it came time to pay, however, Jackson had one more deception up his sleeve.

"You know, since it is my final night to enjoy this fine ale, it would be a right honor if the Devil himself bought my farewell drink," he said as he stared down into his pewter mug. He then glanced up at Lucifer, a tilt to his head as if contemplating an idea. "You know, you wouldn't even have to use real coin. You can transform yourself into anything you want, so if you change into a piece of silver, we can pay our bar tab, and then, you just wait until the keep isn't looking and transform back. That be how I would do it if I had Satan's powers. How about it? Want to join me in one of my tricks?"

Lucifer laughed, shaking his head. "Now, I've seen the bottom of your depravity. Why not? Would be a laugh to join a

conman in one of his cons.” And just like that, Lucifer shifted into a silver coin on top of the table.

Jackson grinned, but instead of paying his tab, he slipped the silver coin into his pocket where he kept a small wooden crucifix his dear old mother left him before she died. The presence of the crucifix kept Lucifer from being able to shift back, trapping him in Jackson’s pocket for the time being.

Jackson pulled a coin out of his other pocket, paid his bar tab, and slipped out of the tavern, Satan in his pocket, and his soul spared for the moment.

Chapter Eight



MEREDITH WASN'T SURE how exactly Jackson tricked Lucifer. All the Devil would tell her is that he was trapped in Jackson's pocket. He feared anyone—even one of his demons—having the knowledge of how to kidnap Satan, the Prince of Darkness. Eventually, Jackson grew tired of listening to the Devil threatening him and released him, but only after some serious negotiation. They struck a deal that Lucifer would leave Jackson alone for another ten years if Jackson released him. Satan grudgingly agreed, and Jackson released the Devil, walking away feeling safe and sound for the time being. When Lucifer left, he was far from pleased at being the recipient of one of Jackson's tricks and, entering Hell, Lucifer swore that Jackson Lantern would rue the day he ever tried to make a deal with the Devil.

Lucifer glared at Vanth. "Ten years. Ha! That simpleton is more of an idiot than he realizes. Ten years is nothing to me. Nothing! He impressed me before, and I would have gone easier on him than others, but now he has earned the full weight of my wrath and anger." Lucifer shoved a finger at Vanth. "And you have ten years to come up with the most sinister ways to torture him. I want him to scream from the

moment his soul arrives down here until eternity passes away. His screams will be my music.”

Vanth bowed her head, her long, dark tresses dangling from the sides of her head. “Yes, sir. I will make sure it is so,” she said, eager to meet the cocky bastard who bested her master. But already, Vanth wanted out of Hell, tired of the constant wails and suffering. A demon who didn’t delight in being evil was worse than a contradiction; they were the true ones who suffered endlessly in Hell. She only hoped Jackson used his ten years to figure out a way to defeat the Devil once more, knowing full well Lucifer would not permit himself to be tricked the same way twice.

She stared across the small park in the center of town, watching as Sarah and Adam walked hand-in-hand around the center’s edge. Meredith wondered if she would be able to avoid returning to Hell long enough to experience a love like theirs, enduring the harsh choices they had to face and still finding their happy-ever-after. She also wondered if Sarah would appreciate knowing her ex-husband was in Hell paying for his domestic abuse against her. Meredith sighed as she shook her head, straightening her purse strap on her shoulder as she continued to walk. Why bring up a painful past? Sarah was happy now that she finally found true love. There was no need to dredge up an excruciating period in the woman’s life. Meredith just wanted that type of happiness, a happiness that gave her hope.

“A bright Saturday morning, don’t you think?” Lucifer slid in beside her as she walked, his hands clasped behind his slender back. “I do say, days like today make me want to make some deals. How about you, Vanth? Interested in a little deal to save your skin? Or rather, to determine your future?”

Meredith took a deep breath, her nerves suddenly causing her to want to vomit. She gripped her purse strap tighter as she kept walking. “What do you want?” she asked, her voice trembling slightly. “And my name is now Meredith.”

Lucifer laughed. “You want your name to be Meredith, but you haven’t earned that yet. Until you do, I will use the name I gave you when I made you the harbinger of death—Vanth.”

Meredith nodded, knowing better than to argue at that point. Not until she had what she wanted at least. Lucifer's deals usually involved tricks of some kind, but he never lied. If he promised you something, and you delivered on your part of the bargain, then he always kept his word and gave you what you requested. Sometimes, it was to the letter of the request, however, which always left people in more trouble than when they started. Jackson was a prime example.

"Now, that's a good demon," Lucifer said. "I've thought long and hard about this. You want to stay in Black Hollow, so the deal should be something as equally valuable as losing my best demon to this town. I've finally come up with the perfect thing." He stopped, turning to face her. "You want Black Hollow. I want the founder of Black Hollow. If you wish to stay here, then you must give me Seraphine. Once you do, then you are free to dwell here as long as you desire."

Meredith felt her eyes go wide at his words. "You want Seraphine? Lucifer, I can't give you a soul that still lives. That's not something I've ever done. Besides, Seraphine doesn't deserve to go to Hell. Why would you even want her?" Her nerves twisted, but for a whole other reason now. Seraphine was innocent. She didn't deserve to be dragged into Meredith's drama.

"I'm the Devil," Lucifer said with a smirk. "I want what I want, and what I want is the one person who keeps all these vile supernatural creatures happy. Give me her, and you go free. That's my deal." He then grinned at her as he tilted his head to the side. "What do you say, Vanth? Are you up for it? How bad do you wish to remain here? Bad enough to give up the one woman who truly made it possible for you to have a home where you were accepted?" He straightened, slipping his hands into his front pockets. "I'll give you twenty-four hours to decide, but decide you will. This is the price. Pay the cost or not. I win either way." He slipped a hand from his front pocket and gave her a small finger wave. "Tootles." And then he vanished.

Prick.

Meredith just stood there, staring at the empty spot. He wanted Seraphine. Why? Why would he want the one woman who kept Black Hollow going, kept all the supernatural creatures safe? Hell, his own brother lived here and thrived.

And that was her answer. Lucifer was jealous. His brother left Hell behind, found a mate, runs a business, and is truly happy. He didn't need Hell's trappings or responsibilities. He created a life for himself right here, right where Meredith wanted to create one as well. She didn't know what Lucifer's other brothers, Elias and Micah, were doing, but since he hadn't mentioned them, she could only guess they also lived happy lives as well. Everyone had created a life for themselves except Lucifer, and now he was here to drag the only one he could control back to Hell to be with him.

Unless Meredith brought him Seraphine.

She glanced down the street toward Seraphine's Disguise. The fact that Lucifer wanted the only one who kept Black Hollow running didn't surprise her. However, how the hell did he expect her to do what he wanted? How does someone—anyone—trap such a woman? Seraphine possessed powers no one knew about, had premonitions that helped her see into people's futures, guiding them to outcomes they never would have seen otherwise. Surely, the woman would know about the deal Lucifer wanted to make with Meredith. Surely, she would have prepared for it.

Running her hand through her dark hair, Meredith sighed. It didn't matter. She couldn't do what he asked, anyway. She would not send another soul to Hell, not even to gain her own freedom. She needed to come up with another way.

Turning, she glanced back down the street in the opposite direction toward Thirst Bar. Jackson had done it before, tricked the Devil. Meredith needed him to do it again, but how would she convince him. She took a deep breath. There had to be something that would make Jackson help her. She just had to figure out what that something could be.

Looks like it's time for a liquid lunch.

Chapter Nine



JACKSON STARED OUT the window of his apartment at the woods behind the structure as he sipped his third cup of coffee. He stood there, one hand in the pocket of his pajama pants—why do pajamas have pockets again?—wishing Halloween was over and Lucifer was out of Black Hollow. Running his tongue over his lips, Jackson sighed. Only one week to go. At least, only one week if whoever Lucifer came for surrendered quietly, not that they ever went quietly. It was Hell after all. Either way, Lucifer would be out of Jackson’s hair for at least another year. Jackson only wished he had a way to keep Lucifer from returning to Black Hollow ever again.

He sipped his coffee again as he watched a hawk drifting through the air over the tops of the giant ash and elm trees behind the apartments. Jackson wanted to be as free as that hawk, but how? Surely, the Devil wouldn’t fall for one of his tricks a third time, not after losing so bad the last time they faced off.

For the longest time, Jackson carried a bag of crucifixes with him wherever he went, just because he knew that one day Lucifer would return. However, ten years was a long time, and

a man's memory is not so strong, especially as Jackson returned to his drinking and carousing. Alcohol makes short work of one's mind and the memories that reside there. Soon, though he carried the bag, he forgot the reason why.

And then, the ten years were up, and it seemed to have gone way too quickly.

Walking home one evening along a dusty road, the night sky clear as the crescent moon hung low in the sky, Jackson's only thoughts were about where to get some coin for his next bit of ale. He wasn't thinking of anything other than his next drink, so when Lucifer appeared, leaning against an apple tree, on the exact same day as when Jackson conned him ten years earlier, Jackson felt his face flush as fear gripped him. How could he have forgotten? His life was now over, and he had once again squandered it on reckless drinking and deceiving the people around him.

"You know, Jackson, I would have really thought once you had a second chance, you would have lived your life better," Lucifer said with a sad shake of his head. "You really are a pitiful excuse for my father's creation, and the whole reason we created Hell."

It was the truth, and Jackson knew it. Oh, for the first few years—okay, months, really—fine, days—he tried to live a better life, tried not to trick people, tried to give up alcohol, but old habits are ingrained, and no matter how hard one tries to break them, they are a part of who they are. Jackson's were no different. "I tried," he whispered as he stared at the man leaning against the tree, the man who came to finally claim his reward. "I wanted to be different."

Lucifer shrugged. "And yet, you weren't." He took a dramatic deep breath. "Ah well, all good things come to an end, as they say, whoever they are. Your time is up, and I am here to claim what you promised me ten years ago. I would ask if you were ready, but no one ever is, so let's just skip the formalities and be on our way, shall we?"

Jackson dropped to the ground, his hands on his knees as he sat there staring at everything around him, his bag

sprawled on the ground beside him. He would lose everything. Never again would he feel the night breeze on his cheeks, or the sun on his face, or feel the grass beneath his feet. He'd never enjoy another drink, another morsel at his favorite inn. He glanced at the apple tree Satan stood against, knowing he would never taste another apple. Hell would have none of these things.

"Please, I know I must go with you," Jackson said, his chin against his chest as defeat swallowed him. "I deserve it, I know." He glanced up at Lucifer, hope in his eyes. "But, before you take me, please, may I have one last apple to savor before we go, one last memory to keep me while I pay for all of my lies?" He pointed to the apples at the top of the tree as he spoke.

Lucifer looked up at the tree, spying the requested fruit, and then back at Jackson, looking for another trick, Jackson knew. "What game are you playing?"

Jackson shook his head. "No game," he said, sullen and beaten. "Please, will you just get me the apple before you do with me whatever you have planned? I'm too weak to climb." He shook his head, his lips down-turned as he corrected himself. "Too drunk, to be honest. Please, just one apple, and then I'm all yours."

"Pah!" Lucifer said as he shoved himself away from the tree. "You're mine either way, but since I'm not transforming into anything, I see no reason not to give you this one last request." He pointed to Jackson. "But then, we're leaving, and there will be no more delays. I have a demon just itching to punish you."

Jackson just nodded as he watched the Devil turn and start to climb the tree, his focus on the apple several branches up. As soon as Lucifer's attention was aimed upward, Jackson leaped from the ground, grabbing the bag as he did. The reappearance of the Devil brought everything back to him, including what was in the bag. While Lucifer climbed, Jackson circled the tree with the crucifixes he carried, making a ring that the Devil would not be able to cross. He then stood back and waited, his hands in his pockets, the bag at his feet.

The Devil plucked the apple from the limb and then started down, but just as he was about to leap down to the ground, he froze, unable to go any further. He jerked his attention down, noticing the crosses around the tree. Turning his head back to the sky, Lucifer screamed his frustration, the sound echoing over all the nearby land for miles.

Jackson just braced, worried that the Devil had found a way around his little trick, but as Lucifer hung there, glaring at him, Jackson knew he won the day once again.

Lucifer growled down at him. "I will make you suffer for an eternity for this."

Jackson smirked as he shook his head. "That was my mistake last time. I won't make it again. This time, if you wish to be free, you have to promise to never take me to Hell." Lucifer looked as if he was about to argue with him, so Jackson pressed his point. "No loop holes. A straight-up deal. I can stand here as long as you can stay perched up there, or I can walk away and leave you stuck there. What will it be?"

Lucifer growled again as he glared at Jackson, but finally he acquiesced. "Fine. You have a deal. Let me down from this infernal tree, and I can assure you, you will never, ever, set foot in Hell."

Jackson nodded as he slipped his hands from his pockets and proceeded to move the crucifixes.

Lucifer leaped down in front of him, and at first, Jackson feared some type of retribution, but the Devil just glared at him some more. "Mark my words, you will regret the deal you made here today." He cocked his head to the side. "I always keep my word." He shook his head. "May I never see you again." And then Lucifer simply vanished.

Jackson stared at the spot where Lucifer stood just a few seconds ago, trying hard to discern whether he left something out of his bargain or not, but nothing came to mind. He tricked the Devil again and survived. This called for a drink.

In the end, that had been Jackson's fatal problem—drinking. Eventually, he drank himself to death, and he stood

in front of the gates of Heaven ready to claim his part in the afterlife. However, Heaven wouldn't take him because of his deceptive lifestyle and the way he hurt so many people. He lived like a denizen of Hell, and Saint Peter told him he would have to go to Hell where he would pay for his misdeeds.

Jackson sighed as he drifted down to the land of the Devil, fearing that, after all he had done, Satan had won in the end.

Taking another sip of coffee, Jackson thought about how the Devil ultimately had the final card to play in their little game.

Lucifer laughed hysterically. "Are you serious? After begging me to not take you to Hell, you're actually standing on Hell's doorstep, begging for admittance? Oh, this is the definition of poetic justice."

Behind Lucifer stood a dark-haired demon, a female wearing the blackest corset which amplified her already ample bosom and voluptuous hips, dark hose that disappeared inside thigh high-boots with stiletto heels, and who possessed lips that on any other day, Jackson would love to kiss as he roamed his hands along her body. On any other day. Today, he just wanted to get inside and out of the In Between.

"Lucifer, it seems as if you've won after all," Jackson admitted, and the words were like gravel in his mouth. "I'm all yours."

"Oh, but dear Jackson, I told you years ago, assured you even, that you would never, ever, set foot in Hell, and I always keep my word," Lucifer told him. "You are not welcome here."

Panic gripped Jackson. "But Heaven won't have me, either. Where else am I to go?"

Lucifer reached into the air, and suddenly, a fiery ember from Hell perched between his fingers. "From now until the end of eternity, you will dwell only in the In Between." He pushed the ember into Jackson's chest. Fire raged through him, scorching his being, what was left of his soul, burning upward through his chest and into his mind until a fiery light

flickered from his eyes, flames dancing where his irises used to be.

“You will serve as a warning to all,” Lucifer said as he removed his hand from Jackson’s chest. “No one tricks the Devil.”

And thus, the jack-o’-lantern was born.

Chapter Ten



MEREDITH WALKED INTO Thirst still not sure how to convince Jackson to help her, but knowing she had no other choice. Without him, she would be stuck with Lucifer's deal, which was no deal at all.

The Saturday afternoon crowd was small, and she didn't mean that only in size, even though Basgi and some of the other Brownies sat—or rather stood on barstools, one barstool actually—at the other end of the bar, irritating Piper. Meredith assumed cleaning duties complete over at Daydreamer's Inn. She turned her gaze away from the brownies, scanning the bar for Jackson. In a dark booth off to the side sat the Underwood sisters with Arden and Quinn, giggling over something while sipping colorful cocktails. Meredith stared at them for a moment, suddenly remembering Brandie Underwood owned her own detective agency, one she moved to Black Hollow when she fell in love with Quinn, one of the leprechaun managers of End of the Rainbow Savings & Trust. Perhaps...

Meredith glanced around the bar again, but Jackson was nowhere in sight. She turned back to the others. Might as well give it a shot. With a deep breath, she steeled her nerves and walked over to the table where the others sat.

Smiles on their faces, hands on their drinks, they all turned to Meredith as she approached them. “Hey, Meredith, how’s your Saturday going?” Kerry asked, brushing her long blond hair off her shoulder as she turned slightly to face Meredith better.

“Not working today?” Quinn asked as he lifted his ale to his lips. While Arden remained in his more human form, Quinn preferred his true leprechaun appearance. Meredith could only imagine the fetish Brandie had with little people.

“Not until later,” Meredith said as she grabbed a chair from the closest table and pulled it over to join the others, not waiting for an invitation. “And I’ve had better Saturdays, which is why I’m here.” She took a deep breath, noticing the serious expressions the others now wore. How to begin? She took another deep breath and blew it out. “I have a problem, and I’m hoping you might have an answer for me. Or, at least, be able to point me in the right direction.”

Brandie leaned forward, hands clasped in front of her. “Okay, shoot.”

“I need to trap the Devil somehow,” Meredith said, bluntly. “He wants me to...somehow...kidnap Seraphine in exchange for my freedom. I need a way out of it.”

The others just stared at her, their expressions blank, eyes blinking.

Okay, so maybe this wasn’t a good idea. Meredith shook her head, making a pleading gesture with her hands. “Any ideas?”

Brandie cocked her head, her brows pinched in confusion. “You’re serious? The *actual* Devil wants you to kidnap Seraphine? There’s an actual Devil?” She sat back and shook her head. “Of course there is. Why wouldn’t there be? I mean, after all, we have Medusa and a yeti. Why wouldn’t we have the Devil in Black Hollow as well.” She turned to Meredith, her eyes narrow slits. “Has he been here the whole time? How did I miss him? I mean, someone like him should stand out, don’t you think?”

Kerry shrugged as she attempted to explain away her sister's questions. "Sorry, we're still getting used to the whole supernatural, mythological reality of things here."

Meredith just closed her eyes and sighed. *Humans.*

Arden leaned forward, one hand on his drink, the other under the table on Kerry's thigh. "Why would the Devil go to you for this? What does he have to do with your freedom?"

"And why Seraphine?" Quinn asked, shrugging. "Why would anyone want to hurt her? She's done so much for Black Hollow. Hell, for paranormals in general." He glanced around the table at the others. "It just seems right daffy to me."

Meredith glanced around at the four seated with her. She wasn't sure telling them about her connection to Lucifer was the right course. Black Hollow may be an accepting community for the most part, but even supernaturals had their limits. "I don't know why he wants Seraphine, but somehow I need to stop it," she said, deciding to skip over Arden's question. "I was hoping a detective might have an idea or two how I could manage that."

"Just don't give him what he wants," Brandie said with a shrug. "And if I were you, I'd tell Seraphine what's happening. She, at least, should have a heads up about Lucifer's intentions."

Meredith shook her head. "It's not that simple."

"And why is it not that simple?" Arden asked. "You're not telling us something. I'm not a detective, but even I can tell that. What's the Devil have over you that he would be in charge of your freedom."

Meredith sighed. "Let's just say I escaped Hell, and Lucifer wants me back. Now, can you help me?"

"Escaped Hell?" Quinn said, his eyes wide under his bushy red brows. He reached up and stroked his beard. "How does someone escape Hell?" He then narrowed his eyes at her. "Does that mean you're really a ghost? Hob goblin, that's a switch."

"I'm not a ghost," Meredith sighed.

“Then that means...,” Arden started, but stopped suddenly as he stared at Meredith. “I see your dilemma.”

The Underwood sisters bounced their gaze around the others, their faces a mask of confusion. “What dilemma?” Kerry finally asked. “What do you see?”

Meredith sighed again, her shoulders slumping, already regretting the admission she was about to make, fearing the judgment that would naturally follow. “I’m a demon. I used to work for Lucifer as his harbinger of death, bringing souls to him. I was also his top punisher before I couldn’t take it anymore and left.”

“And now, he wants you back to work,” Brandie said, still looking as if she didn’t believe what Meredith just told her. “And the price of you not returning to Hell is to give him Seraphine.” She shook her head. “I’ve never gone up against the Devil before. I wouldn’t have a clue as to how to trick him. Has anyone ever done it before?” She glanced over at the leprechauns for answers.

Arden and Quinn, however, looked at Meredith. “Have you talked to King about this?” Arden asked. “He is one of the Kings of Hell. Shouldn’t he be able to intervene, talk his brother out of this craziness?”

Meredith felt her shoulders slump even more, feeling the noose tighten around her future. “King refuses to help me, probably not wanting to rock his own happy boat. He told me to cherish the time I’ve had here and return to work. Easy for him to say, since he possesses the power to enjoy the life he’s built for himself.”

“I wish I had an answer for you,” Brandie said. “If I think of anything, I’ll definitely let you know.”

“And you really need to tell Seraphine,” Kerry said. “She’s involved whether or not she knows it, and she might very well have an answer of her own. I’ve only known her a short time, but there doesn’t seem to be anything that woman can’t do.”

“True,” Meredith said. She still wasn’t sure she wanted to admit to Seraphine Satan was using her as a negotiation tactic

in his ploy to get Meredith back to Hell. She let out another sigh. “Thanks, anyway.” She slid from her chair, the others wishing her good luck as she turned to leave, still without a clue as to what she would do.

She crossed the bar to where Piper stood fixing drinks. She’d at least ask Jackson for help before going to Seraphine. Maybe he would take pity on her, having been on the wrong end of Lucifer’s deals before. Somehow, she doubted it, though. “Piper, do you know where Jackson is? I need to talk to him.”

Piper shook her head, her ponytail swishing across her back. “He comes in late on Saturdays, since he’s usually here all night until closing. He sometimes eats lunch at Scales ‘N Tails. You could try there.”

“Thanks,” Meredith said as she turned back to the front door.

She slipped back into the cool autumn afternoon, turning toward the mermaids’ restaurant, already forming a plea for help in her mind. If Jackson turned her down, she had no idea what she would do. She was a demon, *the* demon at one time, and even she didn’t know how he tricked the Devil. She needed Jackson’s help, his wiliness. She just prayed she could convince him to pull one more fast one over on the Devil.

Chapter Eleven



JACKSON WALKED THE main street of Black Hollow, doing his best to ignore the Halloween banners hanging from the light posts, as well as the activity in the center of town around the gazebo as everyone prepared for the big celebration on Halloween. Thirst would be empty during the festival, but full once it shut down, the revelers moving for more adult entertainment once the kids had been appeased.

“Jackson,” a voice called out to him. “Want a free sample?”

Jackson turned and saw Saroj standing outside the ice cream store, a tray of small cups in his hands. Jackson eyed the yeti suspiciously as he deviated from his course to see what the giant offered. The yeti was famous for coming up with unique concoctions for his ice cream, some a little more bizarre than others. “I bet you’re enjoying the cooler weather,” Jackson said as he neared Saroj, the yeti’s body covered in a fine coat of white fur.

Saroj grinned. “It definitely beats the heat of summer, that’s for sure.” He held the tray out to Jackson. “Have one. I made these especially for the holiday.”

Jackson stared down into the cups at the orange ice cream, already deciding he wasn't going to sample the yeti's treats. He glanced up at Saroj. "Are you telling me this is pumpkin ice cream? You want me to eat pumpkin ice cream?"

Saroj looked at him, baffled. "What's wrong with pumpkin ice cream? Everyone loves King's pumpkin spice lattes at Hell's Brew. I thought this would be a great holiday ice cream. Was I wrong?"

Jackson just shook his head, turned, and walked away. *God, I hate October.*

"What's wrong with pumpkins?" Saroj called after him, but Jackson just kept walking, not even bothering to explain the yeti's insensitivity. He probably wouldn't get it, anyway.

A few minutes later, Jackson walked into Scales 'N Tails, hoping to be surrounded by more mundane things like mermaids, pirate ships, exotic fish, and water, far away from anything that resembled Halloween or pumpkins. He just wanted a quiet lunch.

He wasn't going to get it, however.

The hostess stand, normally shaped like a treasure chest with gold coins spilling out of it onto the floor, now had small skulls and pumpkins covering the area in front of the stand. Jackson glanced up at the bottom of the ship in the ceiling and noticed cobwebs full of spiders and other eerie creatures dangling from the hull while the fish and crabs that decorated the walls wore masks and some even had capes. The skeletons that helped decorate the interior were also dressed in costume, one even made to resemble a jack-o'-lantern.

"Jackson, good to see you again," Nerissa said as she seemed to float from the back to the hostess stand. "Your usual?"

Jackson took a deep breath. "No, thanks," he said. "I've lost my appetite." He turned his back on the glimmering mermaid, not even allowing the lure of her translucent scales which covered her legs to entice him to linger. He'd much rather eat at home. *What the Hell is wrong with this town?*

He shoved his way back out into the afternoon sun, growling at the decorations that surrounded him and the Halloween mindset that filled everyone. As if Black Hollow didn't celebrate Halloween enough as it was, this was ridiculous. He sighed as he stood there, hands on his hips, and stared at the happy people enjoying their Saturday.

“Well, I do believe that was the fastest lunch in history,” the familiar voice sounded beside him.

Jackson turned to see Lucifer leaning against the front of the restaurant, his slick black suit coat open to reveal his dark red shirt and thin black tie. “Aren't you just a little too formal for the afternoon?” Jackson asked as he cocked an eyebrow at the Devil. “I thought you had someone else to pester. Why are you following me around?”

“Well, aren't we the arrogant one,” Lucifer said with a pout. “Who's to say I wasn't just standing here, minding my own business when I noticed an old friend come sulking out of this fine establishment? What happened? Did they overcook the chips again? Perhaps their tartar sauce was a little to tartary? Come, Jackson, do tell. What made you leave Scales 'N Tails in such a rush?”

Jackson took a deep breath, shaking his head. Without giving Lucifer any of the smartass answers the Devil so badly desired, Jackson turned and headed back to his apartment. He would not play Satan's mind games.

Jackson turned left at Stoney's Bar, deciding he didn't need to deal with the roundabout being turned into some corn maze with game booths and food trucks. The less he had to deal with the town's festival preparations, the better. He'd cut through the park and the library's parking lot to his apartment complex, avoiding as much of the town as he could. Of course, parts of the town were easy to avoid, Lucifer not so much.

“I've made my deal,” the Devil said from a park bench at the entrance of the park, his arms stretched out along the back of the bench. “Now, I have a night to myself while she figures out what she wants to do.”

Jackson had taken a couple of steps past Lucifer, but stopped, turning to face him at the last part of his sentence. “Her? You came to make a deal with a woman?” Then the light bulb flickered. “You’re here for Meredith.”

“Vanth,” Lucifer sighed. “Why do people insist on changing their names? Raquel wants to be called King—and they say I’m narcissistic—Vanth wants to be called Meredith. I mean, really, what’s the point? A name doesn’t make us who we are. Oh, no, that comes from deep within, and for Vanth, that deep within is as dark as the deepest pits of Hell.” He then cocked his head at Jackson. “You do remember Vanth, don’t you? She stood behind me when you came begging to be let into Hell. She came to welcome you, and by welcome, I mean torture, of course. That’s what she does. She punishes people, and she’s quite good at it, too. She seemed eager to get her hands on you.”

Jackson stared at Lucifer, his hands on his hips. He allowed his mind to drift back to that dreaded day when he stood on Hell’s doorstep, waiting for his eternal damnation after being forbidden to enter Heaven. Lucifer hadn’t been alone. A demon stood behind him. A female demon. She had dark-hair and voluptuous hips with ample breasts that begged for attention. He also remembered her lips, lips Jackson would have loved to kiss for hours on end. That demon was Meredith? How had he not recognized her before now? Why had she never said anything?

Lucifer laughed. “So, you do remember her. I can tell by the stiffness in your pants. I dare say, perhaps, I should have given you admittance into my domain, if you know what I mean.”

“Go to...” Jackson stopped what he was about to say, which only made Satan laugh harder.

“A conundrum, isn’t it?” Lucifer said through his laughter. “Where do you tell the Devil to go when you’re pissed? Really, though, I’m surprised the two of you haven’t hooked up. I mean, Vanth has enough toys to keep you gasping for hours. I should know; I gave them to her.”

Jackson growled, but chose to remain quiet. Instead, he just turned and started walking toward the back of the library. Meredith was Vanth. She knew all about his past with the Devil and chose never to say anything to Jackson about it. Why? Furthermore, why had she been so eager to punish him for his sins? What did that say about their friendship now?

He stuffed his hands into his pockets and continued walking. He thought they were friends, and he didn't have many of those. Lucifer frustrated Jackson so much that he forgot to ask what deal he had struck with Meredith, not that he truly cared at the moment. The woman knew his secrets and never had the decency to tell him she knew. She probably laughed behind his back, knowing why he was in Black Hollow with no other recourse for his future. How could she have done that to him?

He walked around the library, making his way to the front and the apartment complex across the street, his heart heavy with a sense of betrayal. This is why he chose not to get close to people. People sucked. People were his punishment for being a scoundrel centuries ago.

He sighed as he stared at the front of his apartment building. He thought Meredith was different, though, but he should have known better. Humans were all the same. He should know; he was the worst of them at one time in history.

“Jackson!” a female voice called out. “Jackson, wait up. Please. I need to talk to you.”

He turned and watched as Meredith Vanth walked briskly toward him, but the time for talking was over. She had nothing Jackson wanted to hear.

Chapter Twelve



JACKSON WASN'T AT Scales 'N Tails, but Nerissa said he had made an unusual appearance. "It was weird," the mermaid said. "He's always said he loves it here, but this time, he gave a disgusted look and just turned around and walked out." She shrugged her teal shoulders. "Strangest thing."

Meredith glanced around at the decorations in the restaurant, knowing exactly why Jackson left in such a hurry. "Did he say where he was headed?"

"He didn't even say goodbye. He did turn to the left when he rushed out of here, if that helps."

Meredith thanked her and rushed out of the place, turning the way she hoped Jackson turned. She popped into Hell's Brew and the Rotten Meatball, but still no sign of him. The only other place she hoped to catch him would be at his apartment, though she had no idea which one was his. Still, it was the only place she could think of to look on a Saturday with the town ramping up for Halloween, which was only a few days away.

As she turned down his street, she noticed him walking out of the library parking lot, heading to the front door of his

apartment building. “Jackson!” she called out. “Jackson, wait up. Please. I need to talk to you.”

He stopped, but the closer she drew to him, the more annoyed he appeared. Lucifer must have played another one of his tricks on Jackson and soured his mood, she assumed, or else the festivities and decorations all over town were truly getting to him. Hopefully, that wouldn’t keep him from coming to her rescue.

“Hey, thanks for waiting,” she said as she neared him, her breathing heavy from her rush to find him. When she reached him, however, his expression made her pause. *Is he glaring at me?* “I need your help.”

“With your deal with the Devil?” he snarled at her, his hands stuffed in his pockets.

She stared back, her brows pinched. “How did you know about that?”

“He told me,” Jackson said, and his voice never sounded colder. She had known him to be sullen and distant, but never outright cold. Something had happened to him. “He seems to have made it his mission today to tell me things, such as your eagerness to punish me the first time he came to collect my soul.” He cocked his head as he glared at her. “Funny how you never mentioned that you even knew about my history before or your delight in my demise.”

She just stared at him, his accusations like a punch to the gut. “I...I didn’t mean to...I thought you wanted your privacy, so I never said anything. You always avoided any conversation about your past, so I wanted to respect that.”

“Telling people is one thing,” he snapped. “But you already knew. Did you have fun knowing about my agony and keeping it to yourself? Did it make you feel like you were pulling one over on me? I trusted you.” She saw him take a deep breath. “I liked you.” He shook his head. “I actually liked you.” He turned and started to cross the street.

Meredith panicked, reaching out and grabbing his arm before he left her standing there. “Jackson, it’s not like that, I

swear. Whatever Lucifer told you, he's just trying to mess with your head. He knows you're the only one who can help me, and he's trying to drive a wedge between us."

Jackson snatched his arm out of her grasp. "He didn't drive a wedge between us, Meredith; you did. All he did was tell me what I was too stupid to remember. What? Did you think if we became close, you could use your toys on me, the toys he gave you, your toys of torture?"

Panic filled her, but more so the fact that Jackson thought she betrayed him. "I didn't mean to hurt you, Jackson. You have to believe me. I left Hell, remember? I didn't want to be that person anymore. I *don't* want to be that person anymore, and without your help, he'll turn me right back into Vanth. Please, I need you." She took a deep breath, trying hard to quell her anxiety. Leave it to Lucifer to fuck with her only chance at escape. "Look, I can explain everything. I will explain everything, but right now, I need your help. The deal he's offered, it doesn't just involve me, and it's impossible to accomplish. I need your help to trick him the way you did centuries ago. Please. I'll tell you anything you want to know, just help me with this so I don't have to return to Hell, so I don't have to do those atrocities again."

He snorted a laugh. "Another deal. You'll tell me what I want to know *if* I help you defeat Lucifer." He shook his head.

"That's not what I meant," she said, her voice sounding more like a whine. She took a deep breath, trying to slow her panic. "I'll explain everything whether or not you help me. I didn't trick you. I tried to respect you. It's not the way Lucifer says. You know him. You know how he's always fucking with people's minds."

"I do, and I won't participate anymore," Jackson told her. "I shouldn't have participated then. You've had your laugh; now, just leave me alone. Both of you just leave me alone." He turned and walked off, crossing the street toward his apartment complex.

Meredith could only stand there and watch him leave, her only hope to beat the Devil at his own games. She hadn't

meant to hurt Jackson, truly wanting to respect his wishes for privacy. She swiped at a tear running down her cheek. She cared for Jackson, truly cared for him, and now, by trying to give him what she thought he wanted, she may have lost him forever, she may have lost everything forever.

She watched as Jackson yanked the door to his apartment building open and vanished inside. She tried and failed. What she would do now, she had no clue, but she had to come up with something. She thought about going to Seraphine, but how do you tell a person you were ordered to kidnap, that the Devil wanted them for his own pleasure? She took a deep breath. No, she was in this alone now, at least until tomorrow. Then, it would be over one way or another.

She turned to leave, not even sure where she would go, but Lucifer stood right behind her. She yelped, jumping back a step, hand to her chest. “What the hell?”

“Interesting turn of phrase,” Lucifer said with a chuckle. He then turned toward the apartment building across the street. “Seeing an old friend?” He shook his head as he turned his focus back to her. “It actually surprised me he didn’t remember you from all those years ago. You must not have made a very good impression, which is surprising with how sultry and wanton you appeared back then.” He cocked his head as he grinned at her. “What kind of impression are you making now?”

She shoved past him, walking down the street toward Main Street, his laughter ringing in her ears. She crossed her arms over her chest and kept walking, doing her best to drown out his laughter. His ridicule wasn’t what was about to make her vomit, however. No, her stomach churned at the fact that Jackson probably hated her now. That she couldn’t swallow, but she had no way of making it up to him if he wouldn’t give her a chance to explain. She needed to explain.

She thought about going to The Fairy Garden and trying to calm her nerves, but she doubted even the woodland fairies would be able to soothe her nerves right then. Instead, she needed something that would love unconditionally, so she made her way to Cuddles, Black Hollow’s pet store, to visit

the puppies. The twins, a brother and sister team who ran the pet store, were retired Grim Reapers who opened the pet store to counteract the centuries of death they were a part of with the energy and unconditional love of puppies and kittens. It must have worked as Meredith had never seen the two, well, grim.

As she walked into the store, Vasily waved at her, his light brown hair a mess and a squirming beagle in his arms. “Oh, Meredith, just in time,” he said as he rushed across the floor to her. “I’m trying to get this rascal to take his meds, and he is absolutely not participating. Please be a dear and help a fellow out.”

Meredith crossed the room, taking the beagle from Vasily’s arms, the dog instantly squirming so he could lick at her face. “Misha not here?” Meredith offered the puppy her chin, laughing at the pup’s enthusiasm. “He’s adorable,” she said. “How old is he?”

Vasily grabbed the dog’s mouth, opened it, and shoved a pill inside. He then clamped the dog’s mouth closed and rubbed his throat. “He’s about two months, and he’s looking for a new home. You should think about becoming a dog owner. Look at how he takes to you. And, no, Misha isn’t here. She’s at the roundabout helping with the decorating.”

“I wish I could take him home,” she said, knowing her time in Black Hollow was now limited. “I would love a pup to greet me when I come home, tail all wagging and happy just to see me.”

Vasily stared at her a moment. “Now that sounds like someone who is feeling a little unloved. I’m sure you make a lot of tails wag, if you catch my meaning.” He then looked at her with narrowed eyes. “You doing okay?”

Meredith nodded. “Yeah, I just needed to hold something that didn’t want anything but my attention for a while.”

“Well, feel free to hang out all you want with this fellow,” Vasily told her. “I’m sure he could use the attention, and I know I could use the break.” He laughed as he turned. “Call if you need anything. I need to restock the shelves in the back.

Misha will kill me if I haven't accomplished anything by the time she returns."

Meredith thanked him and then held the beagle at face-level in front of her. She smiled at the dog as he squirmed to get closer to her, his tongue lapping at the air as he tried to reach her. This is what she needed right then, love, pure and simple, no deals. For a while, she just wanted to forget about Lucifer and his games and feel something.

Chapter Thirteen



JACKSON WIPED DOWN the bar, taking out his frustration on the wood with how vigorous he worked the bar towel over the top. He felt tricked himself with the way Meredith kept the fact that she knew all about his past. Then, she had the audacity to ask him to help her trick the Devil to save her skin. The balls on that demon. He growled as he tossed the rag into a bucket under the bar, making Web cock an eyebrow at him.

“You doing all right?” the man asked as he slid a beer in front of Basgi. Did that brownie ever work?

“I’m fine,” Jackson said, with a huff of breath. “Just had an annoying morning, that’s all.”

The front door of the bar swished open as if a storm entered, and everyone turned as Alizon blew into the bar, heading straight for Basgi. “You little piece of cow poop!” she screamed as she crossed the wood floor. “What the bloody candy dish do you think you’re doing telling people my chocolate is cheap?”

Basgi turned, eyes wide. “I never said you sold cheap chocolate. Whoever told you that is a liar.” He turned back to

his beer. "Now, leave me to drink in peace." He shook his head, mumbling, "Crazy witch."

Alizon didn't seem convinced, however. "You told Kerry Underwood the chocolate Arden gave her was cheap," she hissed as she stood beside his stool. "He bought that chocolate from *my* candy store."

"Oh," the brownie said, eyes wide once more. "Well, then, um, this is kind of awkward. Have you changed your recipe, because those weren't what I had grown accustomed to from your store?" He shrugged. "I just assumed Kerry brought them with her from wherever she came from. Maybe it's time to up your game a little." He lifted his beer to take a sip. "Change can be good."

Alizon growled. "You miserable little dung heap." She jerked her hand out, sending a magical burst of power into the brownie's ass, making him yelp as he hopped up, clutching at his backside. She then turned and stormed out. "I'll show you a new recipe."

Jackson watched the witch leave, wondering if he could ask her around more often to put Basgi in his place. The rest of the people in the bar just laughed at the brownie's misery as the little man glared at the door, rubbing his backside.

"She's an emotional sort, isn't she?" Basgi said, his head tilted to the side as he stared at the empty spot where the witch stood just a few seconds ago. "I kind of like a woman with fire."

Jackson glanced at Web and just rolled his eyes. Somehow, he thought the feud between witch and brownie just took a turn. With a shake of his head, he turned back to the bar, reaching for a bottle of water he kept underneath for his own needs. He took a long swig as he hoped the cool water would chill his nerves and mood. He wasn't sure what to do about Meredith. She was the one true friend he thought he had in Black Hollow, but even she had run her own con on him by keeping her knowledge of him to herself. He wondered what it would be like to have had someone with whom to share his misery, someone who wouldn't judge him because of his past

actions in a life so many years removed he barely remembered it anymore, someone with whom he could be completely honest. He sighed, lifting the water bottle to his lips for another drink. Now, he'd never know.

Even if he wanted to help her, he doubted it would work. There was no way Lucifer would allow himself to be tricked the same way a third time. For better or worse, Meredith was on her own.

The front door to Thirst opened and King came strolling in with Hitchcock right beside him, both looking like they had no care in the world. Had Meredith gone to King for help? Surely, the man—okay fallen angel turned demon—would be able to intervene with his own brother. Jackson followed them with his gaze as they took a booth in the back, a dark booth, Jackson noticed.

Web moved to take their orders, but Jackson stopped him. “I got this one,” he said as he lifted the bar flap and eased out from behind the bar.

While King was one of the brothers of Hell, his mate, Hitchcock Drakki, was deep into the diamond trade and part of the Drakki family, who had their own dramas going on that sometimes spilled over into Black Hollow. The two of them were a perfect pair—a demon from Hell and the twin brother of a mob boss. The fact that they owned a coffee shop just seemed—odd. Both had dark hair and muscular bodies, which made sense since Hitchcock was a dragon underneath his olive complexion. Neither were to be trifled with, but that didn't deter Jackson. What could they really do to a man already cursed by Satan himself and unable to die?

“King, Hitchcock,” he greeted the two men. “What can I get you tonight?”

“I'll take a rum and Coke with a shot of Fireball,” King ordered.

“Margarita for me,” Hitchcock said, settling back in his side of the booth.

“Be right back,” Jackson told them, and then, he turned to fill their drink orders. It didn’t take him long as he ignored the others at the bar, something everyone was used to him doing, leaving them to Web’s care.

When Jackson returned, he set both drinks on the table, asking if they needed anything else. Both men said no, but Jackson didn’t leave. “Your brother’s in town,” he said to King.

King arched an eyebrow at him. “So I heard. I bet that’s been fun for you.”

“Not as bad for me as it has been for Meredith,” Jackson said with a shrug. “Do you know what Lucifer’s up to?”

King narrowed his eyes at Jackson, and Hitchcock squirmed in his seat. “Whatever my brother is up to is his business, not yours,” King said. Then, he shrugged. “Or mine, really. I’d think you, of all people, would want to stay as far away from him as possible. You lucked out last time. I wouldn’t push that luck if I were you.”

Jackson shook his head. “You helped get Meredith out of Hell; I’d think you’d want to help her stay out.”

King gave a snort of derision. “Why in the world would I want to do that? That would mean going up against my brother, and as much as I enjoy irritating Lucifer, I’m not about to upset my life here by starting a family feud.”

Hitchcock just sat there, his hands around his drink as he tried to ignore the conversation going on around him. Obviously, there would be no help from him on the matter.

“She sees you as a friend,” Jackson said.

“Then, she is a fool,” King snapped. “And so are you if you keep this conversation going. Vanth is a part of my past, one I’m not overly eager to return to at present. She knew there was a chance of this happening. If she didn’t make provisions for it, that’s on her. Now, she has to face the consequences of her actions.”

“And you don’t for helping her?” Jackson pressed, his hands on his hips as he squared off against one of the Kings of

Hell. “Doesn’t exactly sound fair, does it?”

“Why do you care?” King asked. “I thought you were intent on shaking off the restraints of emotions for others? Sounds to me like Vanth slid past your defenses. You care for her, don’t you? Admit it.”

Jackson just stared at the dark-haired man, his words bouncing around in Jackson’s mind. What King said may have been true yesterday, but today, Jackson knew that Meredith played one over on him, and that sapped any romance he may have felt for her. “I care about someone being ripped from their home, and no one being willing to do anything to help her.”

“Hell is her home,” King said with a shrug. “Besides, aren’t you better capable of helping her than anyone? Why don’t you do exactly what you’re standing there asking me to do? You wouldn’t be a wee bit chicken, would you?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Jackson saw Hitchcock lift his glass and take a sip. “You helped her once,” Jackson said. “I hoped you would help her again.”

“And you haven’t helped her at all,” King said, piercing Jackson with his gaze. “Perhaps, you should examine your own motives, rather than mine. You want to help Vanth, then it’s time you gave up your isolationist mindset. Now, leave me alone before I take my business to your competition.”

Jackson just stared at the demon king a moment, not sure there was anything left to say that would convince the demon to help Meredith. Finally, he surrendered the argument. “Enjoy your drinks.” He turned, leaving the two men alone as he sulked his way back to the bar. He couldn’t help Meredith, and not just because of her betrayal. If he helped her, he would have to admit he cared for her, and that was the first step down a painful path he had walked before and refused to walk again. Until he figured out how he could die, he wouldn’t risk his heart again. He refused.

He started fixing more drinks, doing his best to ignore the fist of pain gripping his heart.

Chapter Fourteen



MEREDITH ENTERED THIRST Bar, immediately looking for Jackson. Only a few hours remained before she needed to give Lucifer an answer, and she still had no idea what to do. She spent a restless night, tossing and turning, but every plan required Jackson's help, help he refused her. She would force him to help her, refusing him any other option but *to* help her. The only other choices she had were either trying to kidnap Seraphine or returning to Hell, and neither of those were options she even wanted to consider. First off, how in the hell did Lucifer expect her to kidnap Seraphine? Besides, don't you kind of have to be dead to go to Hell? Seraphine was very much alive, had been for no one knows how long, and showed no signs of aging or slowing down. How do you kill someone who seemed immortal? And if she didn't kill Seraphine, but rather took her to Lucifer alive, what would he do to the woman? He lived to punish evil-doers. Seraphine was anything but evil. What did he want with her?

Once inside the bar, Meredith took a moment to allow her eyes to adjust to the dim lighting before venturing inside any further. Piper stood behind the bar, refreshing the supplies from the Saturday night crowd, her long red hair pulled back

in a tight ponytail. Meredith glanced around, looking for Jackson. The man always worked, deciding he had no other real purpose in life, so Meredith didn't doubt that he was there. Somewhere. The question was where.

Giving up her search, she made her way over to the bar, leaning on it, hands clasped in front of her. "Where's Jackson?" she asked without preamble.

Piper blinked her dark green eyes, her head tilted to the side as she gave Meredith a confused look. No one ever came into Thirst looking for Jackson. "That seems to be a repetitive question coming from you. Something wrong?"

"Slightly," Meredith said with a burst of aggravation. "I need to talk to your boss. Where is he?"

Piper shrugged. "Not sure. During October, he tends to hide more than other months. He hates Halloween, you know. I'd wager he's either on his way here or still holed up in his apartment."

Meredith nodded as she shoved herself off the bar, turning, and heading for the front door again. She'd walk to his apartment and either catch up to him on his way to the bar or find him at home. Either way, she had to find him.

"You sure there's nothing I can do to help?" Piper called after her.

"Not unless you have a few tricks up your sleeve," Meredith said just before she shoved her way back out into the cool October morning.

Lucifer knew Meredith knew about Jackson's tricks, even if she didn't know the mechanics of them, how a drunkard duped him not just once, but twice. He would be expecting her to try the same tricks, if, that is, she could convince Jackson to share his secrets with her, secrets he had never revealed to anyone. She was sure he would have helped her, shared his means of escaping Satan's clutches if she could have gotten to him before Lucifer did. Yet, Lucifer had done his damndest to make sure Jackson wouldn't want to help her. She needed to convince him somehow.

She didn't pass Jackson on her way to his apartment complex, which meant, if Piper was right, he'd be hiding in his apartment. Meredith hoped that was the case. She didn't have time to waste wandering around town searching for him, having only about four hours to give Lucifer her decision before he made it for her. Meredith *would not* go back to Hell, not after she had tasted what it actually means to live.

She scrolled the mailboxes on the first floor of the apartment complex, hoping Jackson's name was on his. She was in luck. Lantern - 408. She made her way to the elevator and headed up, trying to figure out how she would convince Jackson to help her. What could she offer him? What did he want? He never seemed to want anything, not even friendship, especially with her right then. So, what did that leave her? She didn't have a clue, but she determined to find out.

The elevator dinged, and the doors slid open. Meredith made her way down the hall until she came to apartment 408. With a deep breath, she knocked on the door.

She could hear shuffling on the other side of the door, and a few seconds later, she heard the lock slide back and the door open. Jackson stood there wearing nothing but a pair of gray pajama pants while holding a steaming cup of coffee, the aroma filling the hall. She stared at his broad chest, his muscular arms, and strong shoulders, forcing herself not to sneak a peek at anything lower, although she very much wanted to look. Now was not the time, though.

He was already glaring when he opened the door, so he must have peeked through the peephole. "I said no," Jackson said as he stood there holding the door open, not permitting her to enter. She waited for him to say more, but he just stood there, staring.

"Jackson, you're the only one I know who's stood up to Lucifer and won," she said, seeing no sense in wasting time with formalities. "I need you to help me do it again. You don't know what he's asking me to do in order to remain in Black Hollow." She shook her head. "I can't do it. Hell, I don't think anyone could do it."

“I don’t care,” he said. “The last time I tricked the devil, it cost me my afterlife, making me a laughingstock for all eternity. I won’t risk it again.” He started to close the door. “Good luck to you.”

Meredith reached out, keeping the door from closing. “Please,” she begged. “I know you’re angry with me, and you may even have a right, but just hear me out. Who knows? Maybe we can make this work for you as well.”

Jackson turned around, shaking his head. “You’re right. I do have the right to be angry.” He sighed. “Meredith, every deal comes with that small writing at the bottom of the contract. He always gives you what you want, but it’s not really what you want. He finds a way to screw you in the end and make it look like you’re the one who asked for it.”

She felt the twist in her stomach, seeing every hope she had crash down on the floor around her. If Jackson refused to help her, she had no clue what she would do. “Jackson, I have nowhere else to turn. Please, you just have to help me.”

Jackson sighed. “I don’t have to do anything. Why not just give him what he wants? Then you win.”

Meredith shook her head. “He wants me to give him Seraphine.”

Jackson just stared at her. He lifted the coffee cup to his lips, taking a sip. When he lowered the cup, he ran his tongue over his lips, wiping away the remnants of his coffee. She couldn’t take her eyes off him, the way his tongue glided across his lips. She remembered him standing at the gates of Hell, remembered how much he attracted her even in his lost condition. Lucifer twisted that attraction into something sinister, hoping to put a wedge between Jackson and her. So far, it seems to have worked.

Jackson narrowed his eyes as he stared at her. “Give him Seraphine? Why does he want Seraphine? For that matter, how in the world does he expect you to get her for him? Don’t people who go to Hell kind of need to be dead?”

She nodded. “They do, thus my problem. Now do you see why I need your help?”

“I see why you need help,” Jackson said. “Just not necessarily mine. Seraphine’ll have your head on a pike if you try to go after her. You’ll probably be the latest decoration on her iron gate. Not a very good look and still not my problem. Again, I wish you luck.” He then shut the door on her, leaving Meredith standing there staring.

How could he ignore her situation? Why would he be so stubborn and not want to help her? This was ridiculous. He had the answers she needed, but refused to share them. That’s not how things were done in Black Hollow. People helped each other. Hell, look at what happened during Sarah’s bachelorette party when her cousin’s dog destroyed all the wedding decorations. All the men who attended Adam’s bachelor party showed up at the apartment to try to recreate all the decorations. Even Cupid attempted to remake the wedding cake. He failed miserably, but at least he tried. That’s what this town was about. Helping others. Why didn’t Jackson see that?

She sighed as she turned and walked off toward the elevator. Jackson had no true friends, that’s why. He had his bartenders and his customers, but he never allowed anyone to get close enough to him to call them a friend, and the one person he did get close to, he thinks betrayed him. She pushed the button on the elevator and the doors slid open. Why didn’t Jackson allow people to get close to him? He had lived in Black Hollow longer than Meredith, and in that time, he had no one he would hang out with, go for coffee, a movie, nothing. Why?

As the doors slid closed in front of her, she stared down the hallway at his apartment door. What kept Jackson from letting people in? Perhaps, that’s what she needed to discover in order to make him help her. She sighed. She may never get the chance now.

Chapter Fifteen



JACKSON HATED TELLING Meredith no, but what choice did he have? Nothing ever went as planned when you tried to pull one over on the devil, and if Lucifer was dragging Seraphine into the equation, Jackson knew things would hit the fan and leave a foul odor in their wake.

He walked over to the coffeepot, refilling his cup, and then moved back over to the window and stared out, his hand on the frame, holding him up. He sighed as he lifted the cup to his lips. Of course, that wasn't the only reason he told her no. It wasn't even the fact she betrayed him, making him look like a fool. He had been a fool often enough over the centuries. He couldn't risk getting close to her, couldn't risk his... attraction...to her. Hell, how could he not be attracted to her? She was gorgeous with attributes that couldn't be ignored. Every time she stood close to him, Jackson felt parts of him stir that hadn't stirred in centuries.

Taking another sip of his coffee, Jackson wondered what Lucifer wanted with Seraphine. The woman had done nothing to warrant a place in Hell or the Devil's attention, so what was his infatuation with her? Something wasn't adding up, unless of course, Lucifer just picked something so complicated that

Meredith would inevitably fail, forcing her to return to Hell as his top punisher and harbinger of death. The deal itself was impossible. Still, with stakes so high, it would also reveal Meredith's character. Would she sacrifice an innocent person for her own future?

Jackson shook his head. Lucifer put the demon in a terrible position. Did Seraphine even know Lucifer was bartering her for another's freedom? Jackson glanced down at the ground below his apartment, the lush green grass sprawled out before him. Seraphine possessed an annoying habit of knowing everything, so Jackson found it unlikely that the woman wouldn't know about Lucifer's plans. Still, maybe it was time to have a talk with her, just to feel her out. If anyone could help Meredith, it would be the eccentric Seraphine. That would then free him of the risk of attachment. And pain.

Deciding his next course of action, Jackson moved to his bedroom and slipped into some normal clothes. He downed the rest of his coffee, rinsing the cup and putting it in the sink, and then headed out the door. No need to tell Meredith what he had planned. She'd only get her hopes up that he forgave her and decided to help her, and that would only lead to complications. Jackson didn't need complications.

The Sunday morning air held a crisp chill to it as he stepped out of his apartment complex and into the world. The town had decorated for Halloween, no matter how much he dreaded it. Of course, he supposed he couldn't begrudge the rest of the residents of Black Hollow their holiday fun as much as he craved to, but while the town seemed to embrace Halloween all year long thanks to the nature of its citizenship, the month of October seemed more overboard with the decorations and festivities. There would be costumes, trick or treating, parties with candied apples and even more grotesque costumes. Stoney's Bar would jump on the bandwagon, of course, but not Thirst. Not Jackson's bar. He kept Halloween as far from his bar's doorstep as he could, and his clientèle came to accept it.

Jackson stepped out onto Main Street, turning left toward Seraphine's Disguise. He knew why Lucifer wanted Meredith

back in Hell; he hated to lose. Vanth leaving Hell to become Meredith and enjoy a normal life—as normal as any paranormal creature could make it, that is—sent the wrong message to the rest of his demons. If she succeeded, then others might follow suit, and then, Hell would just be another vacation playground for the afterlife. Instead of eternal punishment, people would be stretched out by the fire pits, basking in the warmth as they celebrated their vices, vices which weren't permitted in Heaven. Lucifer would then be reduced to a concierge, and that he wouldn't be able to stomach.

Jackson entered the costume shop, gawking at the people who packed the place, rifling through the racks in search of the perfect costume for the upcoming holiday. He sighed as he saw the madness inside of Seraphine's Disguise, rethinking his plan to talk to the owner right then. How he could have forgotten that people would be out shopping for the celebration was beyond him. Meredith had already distracted him more than he wanted to admit. He needed to get that under control.

He also needed to get out of the costume shop.

Jackson turned, ready to make his escape back out the front door, when someone called his name. Turning, he saw the dark-haired Victoria Drakki walking up to him, the smile she wore making her violet eyes sparkle like the gems her family sold at Drakki Diamonds.

"I'm shocked to see you in here," she said, her voice a bubbly giggle. Draped over her arm appeared to be a wench costume from centuries ago, something that would definitely draw attention to her bustier attributes. Her cousin, Tobias, was sure to have a fit with her choice of costume. "Is the ever recluse thinking of attending the big Halloween party at the roundabout? That would be epic."

Jackson shook his head. "No, the recluse is not. I'll be behind my bar or in my office on Halloween."

Victoria's lips shifted into a pout as she stared at him. "Now, that's no fun at all." She sidled up beside him, bumping

his hip with hers in a suggestive manner. “You sure I can’t change your mind? I’ll even help you pick out a costume.”

“Well, Jackson, how are you doing?” Seraphine asked as she materialized from behind a rack of furry costumes. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you inside my costume shop. I thought you hated Halloween. Good to see you getting into the spirit of things after so many centuries.” She tucked a wayward strand of her blond hair behind her ear as she stared at him. No one really knew what type of paranormal being Seraphine was, nor did anyone have the guts to ask her. Jackson assumed she was some type of Seer with the way her eyes were two different shades, one violet, the other emerald. Of course, that could merely be contacts in this day and age as well to give everyone a sense of mystery about her. Jackson didn’t know, and he was one of the ones without the balls to ask her. To each his own, he always thought. She gave him refuge in her town when he needed it, and he would always be grateful for that. It was also one of the reasons he wanted to warn her about Lucifer’s plans.

That, and the fact he wanted to help Meredith.

He sighed as he made that last admission, even if it was just to himself. “I’m actually here to see you if you have a free moment.” He glanced around the shop. “Although, it looks like you’re rather swamped right now.”

Seraphine just smiled as she looped her arm around his. “Nonsense. I always have time for you.” The older woman then glanced over at Victoria. “Say hello to your cousins for me, Victoria. I’m really curious to know what they think of your costume choice. Make sure they know you picked it out all on your own now.” Seraphine then led Jackson toward the back room and out of the melee of shoppers.

Once they were out of earshot, she said with a slight chuckle. “I wager, she’ll be back this afternoon to exchange her costume. I hope so. I really had a nice Red Riding Hood outfit saved just for her.”

Jackson chose to say nothing. He had heard that Seraphine preferred picking out each costume for her customers

personally, believing she had the gift of matching outfits with what people needed at the time. Jackson didn't doubt the woman's gift or skill.

As soon as they were in the backroom and the door closed behind them, Seraphine turned to him, still smiling. "Now, what brings you across my threshold after so long a time?" She stood, her hands clasped in front of her as she stared at him.

Jackson took a deep breath, deciding it best to jump in with his problem. "Lucifer is in town."

Seraphine nodded. "I thought I smelled an unusual amount of sulfur in the air." She cocked her head to him a little, studying him. "However, doesn't he make an appearance every year to torment you? Why does this year see you coming to me about it?"

"Because he's not just here for me," Jackson explained. "He's here to force Meredith—Vanth—to return to Hell and resume her responsibilities."

Seraphine's brows pinched above her nose. "And you're here to intervene for her? That's...unusual of you. I thought you'd be glad his attention is on someone else this year."

Jackson shrugged. "He shows up, makes life miserable for a few weeks, and then leaves. He never tries to change my life, just reminds me why I'm still walking the Earth. With Meredith, it's different. He's not just harassing her; he's wanting to take her away from her home, and apparently, he has the power to do it."

"Vanth always knew there was a chance of that happening," Seraphine said. "Has she tried to get King to intervene on her behalf?"

"I honestly don't know, but that's not the whole issue. I did talk to King, however, and he's not crossing his brother." Jackson took a deep breath, unsure whether he would seal Meredith's fate with his next statement or not. He hoped Seraphine would have a way out for the demon. She always seemed to have a few tricks up her sleeve, and Jackson needed

new tricks. He highly doubted Lucifer would fall for his a third time. “Lucifer struck a deal with her, your life for hers.”

Seraphine’s eyes went wide. “My life? Why in the world would he want my life? I haven’t spoken to him since...” She nodded. “Okay, maybe that is why he wants my life.” She waved off the unasked question. “Nothing I wish to discuss. It’s all history now. Or, at least, I thought it was. Really, some people can hold a grudge.” She then looked at Jackson with another tilt of her head and narrowed eyes. “And why are you bringing this to me?”

He blew out a heavy sigh. “Because, she came to me for help, and I just can’t do it. I risk getting close to someone again, and I can’t go through that again. I’ve seen too many people I love die already because I can’t die with them.”

“Oh, my dear Jackson, you’re not thinking right,” Seraphine said with a giggle and a shake of her head. “Let’s have some tea while I remind you how demons don’t die. Meredith may just be the person for you after so many centuries.”

He just stared at the woman’s back as she turned and walked away, his brows pinched together. *The person for me? What the hell is she talking about?*

Chapter Sixteen



MEREDITH TRIED EVERYTHING she could come up with, but in the end, there was no way out of making this deal with Satan. As always, Lucifer would win, getting what he wanted. There was just no way Meredith could sacrifice Seraphine for herself, no matter how desperately Meredith wanted to remain in Black Hollow. She couldn't allow Lucifer's jealousy of Seraphine to ruin the town, and Meredith knew if something ever happened to the founder of their community, it would have drastic effects on the whole town, quite possibly ruining the protective spell around Black Hollow. Meredith would not allow herself to be the cause of such a catastrophe. She had come to care about the townfolk too much for that.

Meredith walked over to the gazebo at the roundabout and sat down. She had no doubt that Lucifer would find her here for her decision, nor did she have any qualms about returning to Hell now. She lost any chance she had with Jackson, thanks to the Devil's machinations, stealing the joy she would have found in Black Hollow. She couldn't shake the look of bitterness on Jackson's face when he closed the door on her earlier. That look would haunt her throughout eternity, her own punishment.

She glanced around at the decorations, absorbing the festive air around her as people used this Sunday to fill in the missing decorations. Even Saroj was out, his height a great asset to hanging lights and decorations on poles. She thought it was funny how paranormals, who themselves were walking Halloween costumes, could get so caught up in a holiday that sensationalized their existence. Yet, there wasn't anyone who didn't pitch in or participate, except Jackson, that is, and when the festival happened on Halloween night, the roundabout would be filled to capacity. Each year, the event seemed to get bigger and bigger, Seraphine being the driving force behind it all. She hated the fact she would miss it this year and every year thereafter.

She also hated that she'd be leaving Black Hollow with Jackson thinking the worst about her.

"Now, now, why so glum," the familiar voice said beside her, making her jump with his sudden appearance.

She turned to Lucifer, sucking in a deep breath as she did. "You know people hate it when you do that, right? Can't you just walk up like a normal person?"

"But, my dear Vanth, we both know I am far more interesting than a normal person," Lucifer said as he crossed one leg over the other and rested a hand on his knee. "Now, come on, time is up. What have you decided? I'm eager to hear which way the demon swings, and I don't mean that in a sexual way. Of course, if you have something there you want to share, by all means; I'm all ears. Bare your soul to me, so to speak." He sat there grinning at her like some deviant needing a fix, and it took everything she had not to scream at him.

With a deep breath, she decided she might as well just spit it out and finish this miserable ordeal. "I can't let you hurt Seraphine. She's an innocent in all this, and I won't be an accomplice to you hurting her."

Lucifer cocked an eyebrow at her. "Seraphine is far from innocent, I assure you," he said. He waved his hand at the town around them. "She has the entire community fooled, thinking she's some all-powerful whatever they think she is.

Well, she's not. She's one of the most vicious creatures I know. Are you sure you want to do this? Sacrifice your happiness here for hers?"

Meredith—Vanth, she might as well get used to the name again—nodded. "I can't permit you to hurt her. I won't allow it."

"Please, my dear, you don't have the power to allow or not allow anything that concerns me," Lucifer said.

"Be that as it may, I won't be a part of it," Meredith stressed. "Ever."

Lucifer rolled his eyes as he blew out a breath. "Fine. Be that way. So boring with all this self-sacrificing stuff, but I guess it is your call after all. Still, you know the rules. I need you to say it out loud. Tell me you accept your part of this deal. Or rather, you forfeit the deal in this case. Makes it all nice and tidy, and we can get you back to work."

Meredith took a deep breath as she glanced once more at the surrounding area, soaking in the decorations, the cool crispness of the air, the feeling of family that permeated the place. When she turned back to Lucifer, she surrendered to the inevitable. "Fine, I..."

"Meredith! Wait!"

She turned and saw Jackson racing across the faded grass of the roundabout, heading straight for her. She pinched her eyebrows as she watched him, confusion filling her. Why was he there? He made it quite clear he wanted nothing to do with her.

"Aw, how sweet," Lucifer said. "Stingy Jack has come to say goodbye. And here I didn't think you two would patch things up. Love conquers all, I suppose. How utterly sickening. Please make it quick. No sense dragging these things out."

Meredith ignored him as she kept her attention on Jackson.

Once Jackson reached them, his strong chest heaving with the exertion of his run, he glared at Lucifer before turning his

attention to Meredith. “You didn’t give him your answer, did you?”

“She was just about to when you did the whole white knight thing across the park,” Lucifer said, appearing bored. “I swear, it almost reminded me of one of those Hallmark Christmas movies.” He shook his head. “I’m not sure why you’re here. I can only assume it’s to say goodbye, so let’s say it and allow us to be on our way.” He turned to Jackson, sneering. “I assume you want me out of Black Hollow, leaving you alone.”

Meredith couldn’t miss the scolding look Jackson sent the Devil before turning his attention back to her. “Accept the deal,” he said, hands on his hips as he took a deep breath to slow his breathing down.

Meredith looked at him, disbelieving. “You want me to offer up Seraphine? Are you crazy? How is that anywhere near the right thing to do?” She shook her head. “I can’t drag her into this.”

Jackson moved slightly, doing his best to put his back to Lucifer. “Seraphine can take care of herself. Just accept the deal.” His eyes went wide as he spoke, almost like... He wanted her to hear something he wasn’t saying. “We’ll figure it all out later. Just accept the deal.” He then spun around, facing Lucifer again. “Halloween night.” He pointed to the gazebo. “We’ll meet you there with Seraphine. Meredith will bring you Seraphine, just as you asked.”

“What are you...?” Meredith started, but Jackson held up his hand, stopping her from finishing her question. What the hell was he thinking? First, he didn’t want anything to do with her, and now, he’s telling her to accept the crazy deal and turn Seraphine over to the Devil. What wasn’t she getting?

“Agreed?” Jackson asked Lucifer again.

Satan looked back and forth between the demon and the wandering man, his brows pinched as he studied them. He pointed to Meredith. “She didn’t know you were coming. That’s obvious. She doesn’t even know why you’re here. I can tell that by the look on her face now. So, why are you here?”

“To keep Meredith from making a big mistake,” Jackson said. “She doesn’t deserve to go back to Hell. Do we have a deal?”

Lucifer blew out a snort of derision. “I don’t make deals with you. They tend to backfire on me.” He glanced over at Meredith. “Does he speak for you, Vanth? Are you accepting my deal?”

Did she? She stared at Lucifer a moment before shifting her gaze to Jackson. He must have a plan. He wouldn’t just throw Seraphine to the Devil. He wasn’t that type of man even with his grouchy demeanor. So, why make the deal? How did he even expect to get Seraphine to Lucifer? None of this made sense.

“Well?” Lucifer asked again. “Halloween is only a couple of days away. Are we doing this or are you joining me in Hell?”

Meredith kept her gaze on Jackson, who stared back at her with pleading eyes. She took a deep breath. She needed to trust that he knew what he was doing, even if she didn’t. She turned to Lucifer, nodding. “I accept the deal. We’ll bring Seraphine to the gazebo Halloween night.”

Lucifer stared at her a moment, then shifted his gaze to Jackson. “There will be no tricks this time. I don’t want *you* anywhere near the gazebo that night. Just Vanth and Seraphine. Is that understood?”

Jackson shrugged. “Fine by me. I hate the whole Halloween thing, anyway. The further away from it I am the better.”

Lucifer stared at him some more, his brows pinched over his nose, eyes narrowed. Meredith could only watch as the two faced off. She didn’t blame Lucifer for doubting Jackson. After all, the man did play the Devil for a fool twice. Finally, Satan nodded. “Fine. Halloween night.” He then pointed at Jackson. “But no tricks. I mean it. I want you far away from us when this deal goes down.”

Jackson held his hands out to his sides. “Promise. I won’t be anywhere around.” He shrugged. “You’re going to have

your hands full with Seraphine as it is. You won't need me causing you more of a headache."

Lucifer turned to Meredith. "Halloween night, and don't disappoint me." Then, he was simply gone.

Meredith sprang from her seat, hitting Jackson on the arm. "What the hell was that all about? We can't turn Seraphine over to him."

Jackson shrugged. "It was her idea," he said.

Chapter Seventeen



WHEN JACKSON LEFT Seraphine's Disguise, he feared he wouldn't reach Meredith in time, that she would forfeit the deal, allowing Lucifer to take her back to Hell with him. He hadn't run so hard in his four centuries of living, trying to reach her before she made the biggest mistake of her life, before she sacrificed herself and he lost her forever. He hadn't even realized he was worried about losing her until he talked to Seraphine. Now, it was a constant in his mind.

"What did we just do?" Meredith asked no one in particular as she hugged herself, pacing back and forth in Jackson's living room. "We can't possibly turn Seraphine over to Lucifer. Why did we even agree to it?" She spun on Jackson, glaring. "Do you have any idea what he'll do to her down there? The torture he'd inflict on her? Why did you say we'd give her to him?"

After Lucifer left, Jackson told her to hold all of her questions until they were alone. He then led her to his apartment, locking the door behind them, not that locks would keep Lucifer out if he truly wanted in, but Jackson assumed that since the deal was made, Lucifer would make himself

scarce until Halloween night. As soon as Jackson locked the doors, Meredith started in with her tirade.

Jackson shrugged as he stared at her, her full lips, her voluptuous hips, and ample bosom, struggling to stay focused. She was just the way he remembered her when he saw her that first time standing behind Lucifer at the Gates of Hell minus the outfit she wore back then. How he had missed it these past few years, he had no idea. “I told you, it was Seraphine’s idea.”

“Why? Why would she agree to sacrifice herself for me?” Tears welled up in Meredith’s eyes, and Jackson could see her body trembling. She came one sentence away from winding up in Hell again, and now she worried another soul would pay the price for her freedom. He understood her confusion, but with Seraphine, not everything always made sense at first.

“She’s not sacrificing anything,” he assured her. “She’s just buying us time to work this out.” He took a deep breath as he moved over to her tense body, placing his hands on her upper arms. “Look, I was wrong to treat you the way I did. I felt hurt, angry and, of course, we’re talking about Lucifer, so that just escalated everything in my mind.” Her expression remained taut, her pouty lips looking more like she wanted to smack him than their normal alluring sexiness. “You’re right; I never gave you the chance to tell me you knew who I was, and I was too sunken into my self-imposed exile to recognize you.” He felt the corner of his mouth turn up into a lopsided grin. “And that really was stupid of me, considering how gorgeous you looked back then. You still look amazing.”

He watched her brows furrow as she stared at him, confusion masking her face. “Jackson, I...” She blew out an exasperated breath. “None of this makes sense. All we’ve done is prolong the inevitable.” She fell into him, her head on his chest. “What are we going to do?”

He held her, running his hand up and down her back softly, hoping to soothe her. It seemed like forever since he held someone in his arms like this, and he inhaled deeply of her scent. “We’ll figure it out. We still have a couple of days.” He kissed the top of her head. “I talked to King about your

problem, but he made it abundantly clear he wasn't interested in helping."

"Yeah, I tried going to him as well." Meredith squeezed him tighter as she took a calming breath. "He told me to savor my time here and move on."

Jackson nodded, his cheek sliding across the top of her head. "He also made me realize I was asking for help to a problem for which I already knew the answer." He pulled away from her, but didn't let her go as he stared into her eyes. "I never should have refused you. I'm sorry." He shrugged. "Meredith, I've watched everyone I care about die. I feared getting close to anyone and having that happen all over again, and I definitely didn't want to watch it happen to you."

She gave him a cocky grin. "You do know demons are immortal, right? We can be trapped, bound, even sent to other dimensions, but we can't be killed. I'll be alive as long as you are."

He nodded. "Something Seraphine was quick to point out to me earlier when I went to her."

"That's right; you went to Seraphine about Lucifer's deal with me. How else would she even know to offer herself as a sacrifice in my place?" Meredith looked at him with wide eyes. "Why did you go to her exactly? You didn't want anything to do with this."

He gave her a sheepish shrug, suddenly feeling sillier than he did with Seraphine. "Because, while I feared getting close to you, I still didn't want to see you leave Black Hollow." He smirked, the flames of his eyes flickering. "Besides, we can't allow Lucifer to win, right?"

She grinned up at him, and the sight melted his heart. "I didn't mean to hurt you. You have to believe me."

He returned her smile. "I do. Promise. If I had been thinking clearly, I would have realized that from the start. I'm a little dim at times, even with these fiery eyes."

She placed a hand on his cheek. "I happen to like those fiery eyes."

He grinned down at her. “Just wait until you see me in a bathing suit with this orange tint of mine. The ladies can’t seem to keep their eyes off me.”

She raised her eyebrows. “I’m going to be beating some women away with a stick, am I? They’re probably attracted to your brooding demeanor and loner disposition. I hear that attracts certain women.”

He chuckled; he couldn’t help it. She was absolutely adorable. How could he have ever been mad at her? “I truly am sorry for how I acted. I’m obviously behind on social norms since I’m not really...well...social as you know. With you, it was different. It *is* different.” He smiled at her again. “We’re going to figure this out. I think Seraphine already has a plan. I just need you to be patient and trust me.”

“I do trust you,” she assured him. “That doesn’t mean I’m not scared as hell or even still confused.” He watched her shoulders rise with a deep breath, as did other, larger parts of her, drawing his eyes downward to her chest. He closed his eyes, giving himself a mental shake. “So, you’re wanting me to go to work as if nothing happened? Just carry on like normal?” she asked, the disbelief in the idea evident in her tone.

“For the next couple of days until I work everything out.” He took her hands in his, squeezing them. “And I promise, I will work this out. Lucifer won’t win this time.”

She nodded, squeezing his hand as he did hers. “I’ll do my best, but it won’t be easy.” She took a deep breath. “Jackson, about what Lucifer said...”

He shook his head. “Don’t,” he cut her off. “There’s no need to explain. It was a different time.”

“It was, but he twisted everything. He was right in the fact that I was eager to see you, but not in the way he made it seem.” She took another deep breath. “From the first time I heard about you, I wanted to meet you. You had the balls to trick Lucifer. That takes confidence. Guts. Oh, you really pissed him off that first time, but god, when you did it the second time, he was absolutely livid. He stormed around Hell

for years, throwing things, giving the souls in his keeping extra punishment, swearing to exact his revenge on you one day. I couldn't show my excitement about it, not to him, of course, but it made me want to meet you all the more. That's why I was with him when you showed up that day. I knew he wouldn't permit you entrance, and it was the only chance I would have to see you. I had to see you. Your confidence was the most attractive thing I had ever seen and..." She grinned at him, her eyes tempting. "Well, let's just say it was the most aroused I had been in centuries."

He grinned at her, feeling even more turned on at that moment than he had been in...well, in forever. "Hopefully, my actions of late haven't diminished that arousal."

She cupped his cheek with the palm of her hand. "Are you kidding me? You're doing everything you can to save me. You're going up against the Devil again for me, the man who cursed you to an eternity in the In Between. How could that *not* excite me?"

He stared at her, his gaze bouncing down to her lips. She stepped closer to him, sliding her hand from his cheek to behind his neck as she pulled him down to her. He slid his hands around her neck and as his eyes closed, their lips pressed together, and he felt the fire within him burn, only this time it wasn't in his eyes. Tighter, he pressed her against him, and he was sure she could tell the effect she had on him.

When they finally broke the kiss, he took a deep breath. "This is going to make us real late for work."

She chuckled as she patted his chest. "Act normal, remember? That means we need to get to work."

"Come to the bar afterward then?" God, let her say yes.

She grinned. "Well, that *would* be normal, right?"

He nodded. Being normal was going to be so hard.

Chapter Eighteen



WHEN SHE SAID acting normal would be difficult, it was the understatement of the year. She went to work, serving customers as she always did, doing her best not to spill dishes on people or setting the fire pits too high and scorching Saroj's arm hair. Or his chest hair. Or leg hair. She sighed. This night would never end.

"You know, that's the third glass you've broken tonight," Shayla, the hostess at Fireside Grille, said. "Not that I'm counting or anything. You sure you're all right?"

Meredith nodded. "It's been a stressful day, is all. I'll get past it." As she said it, she tripped, almost knocking the hostess stand over. "Damn it!" she snapped. She took a deep breath, glancing over at Shayla. "Sorry. I swear, I'll stop screwing up."

Shayla reached out, placing her hand on Meredith's wrist. "Sweetie, we all have bad days. Take the rest of the night off. Get some rest. It's all good." She glanced around the restaurant. "We're slow tonight, anyway."

Meredith glanced around the place. Shayla was right. Fireside Grille was almost empty, and the dinner rush was

already over. Turning back to Shayla, she asked, “Are you sure?”

“Of course,” the other woman assured her. “I’ll cover it with Pietr. You go on and take care of you.”

Meredith thanked her, knowing it wasn’t exactly acting normal—she hadn’t called out or left early since she started working there—but knew she would only make things worse if she stayed. She slid her apron off, rolling it up in her hands, and made a hasty exit before anything else could go wrong.

The funny part was, it wasn’t the deal with Lucifer or the fact they somehow had to get Seraphine to Lucifer without actually giving her to him that had her so on edge. No, those were scary, but she trusted Seraphine and Jackson to handle that. What had her so on edge was the turn her relationship took with Jackson. That, and the way she left his apartment with every hormone screaming for her to stay and finish what the kiss had sparked. She had waited centuries to feel Jackson’s lips against her, to be in his arms feeling his passion pressed into her, that leaving when she finally had what she dreamed of for centuries was like slamming on the brakes when the car was going over a hundred miles per hour. Needless to say, it left her with a severe case of sexual whiplash. It also told her where she would go now that she was off work, even if it was earlier than normal.

Thirst. Jackson.

Fifteen minutes later, she pushed her way into the bar, the country music a subdued background as she weaved her way through the Sunday night crowd. Most of the tables were full, and only a couple of stools around the bar were empty. She made a beeline for one of the stools.

Piper, who worked behind the bar, saw her and offered her a smile. “Having a better day?” She laid a napkin in front of Meredith and then leaned on the bar.

Meredith smiled at the redhead. “I am, thanks.” She glanced around the bar, trying not to look too obvious. “Where’s Jackson?”

Piper smiled at her. “And why do you want to know?” she asked in a sing-song voice and a bounce of her eyebrows.

Meredith squirmed in her seat as she took a deep breath. She shrugged. “I just usually see him here, that’s all.”

Piper smiled at her, not buying what she said, but not pressing the topic. “He’s in the back grabbing some more tequila. He’ll be back in a minute. Can I get you something in the meantime? You know, so you can at least pretend you’re here just for a drink.”

Meredith swallowed the embarrassment that filled her. She came into Thirst all the time, so she wasn’t sure what made Piper pick up signals Meredith didn’t mean to emit. Of course, she had come in several times recently specifically looking for Jackson, so there was that. She decided to ignore the woman’s teasing and just ordered. “Sure, how about a rum and Coke?”

“Coming up.” Piper tapped the bar and walked to the middle of the bar to fix the drink.

Meredith took the time to glance around the interior of Thirst. The ogres took up one corner, their bulky bodies overpowering everything around them. Next to them sat the Underwood sisters with Arden and Quinn, and off in the other corner sat Cade and Silver. There were others scattered around, some she knew, some she didn’t. Black Hollow wasn’t a large town by any stretch of the imagination, but there were still quite a few residents.

“Hey there,” Jackson said from behind her, causing her to spin around a little quicker than she should have for a casual friendship.

She caught Piper smirking at her from the corner of her eye, but ignored the redhead. “Hey, I got off work early, so I thought I’d just come and see how your night was going.”

Piper laid the rum and Coke in front of Meredith. “That’s the story she’s going with, anyway,” the redhead teased. She winked at Meredith before walking off to take drink orders from a couple of mermaids at the other end of the bar.

Meredith felt the blush heat her cheeks as she stared down into her drink. “Sorry,” she whispered. “I suppose I was a little too anxious asking about you when I got here.”

Jackson chuckled as he shook his head. “Don’t worry about it. I like that you were anxious to see me.”

“Not typical, though, if we’re still going with the whole act normal plan.” She lifted her drink and took a sip, her eyes widening at how strong Piper made it. “I’ve always found normal pretty boring until I moved here, and then, I tried to blend in with normal just to fit in.”

Jackson tilted his head to the side a bit. “I like you just how you are,” he told her. “And I already told you what I thought of you back then. So, whatever version of you is you, that’s the one I want.”

She gave him a sheepish look. “What if I don’t know what that is exactly? What if I like both versions, the more recent human as well as the vivacious demon? What if I can’t decide?” She felt at a loss. Jackson knew about her past, but could he really be attracted to who she was back then?

He just grinned at her as he leaned down on the bar, resting on his elbows. “Well, maybe we try both versions and see which one you like the best,” he suggested as he waggled his eyebrows at her. “I have it from a sketchy source that you brought your own toys with you. Anything fun in that bag of tricks?”

Her face flamed red with her embarrassment this time as she ducked her gaze away from his, slumping her shoulders a little, biting her lower lip. With a small shrug, she said, “I may have a few gadgets we could experiment with if you’re feeling up to it.”

He reached out, taking her hand in his, and the heat from his touch sent shivers throughout her body. She glanced around quickly to see if anyone watched them, but Jackson didn’t seem to care. “I’m up for exploring anything you wish.”

She blushed even more as she grinned at him. God, this was even more than she fantasized about. Yet, would they be able

to have it in the end, or would Lucifer actually win.

The rest of the evening went by quickly. The ogres convinced Jackson to turn on the karaoke machine at one point and all four of them, Nunk, Ruck, Gerst, and Bob, got up on the stage and did their best to sing the Village People's Macho Man. Everyone in the place just laughed as the ogres put their own dance routine to the song, which looked more like a mini-avalanche than a real dance number.

Jackson sent Piper home once the crowd started dying down, so Meredith had less of his attention than earlier as he took care of customers by himself, but she didn't mind. She liked watching him work. He seemed content, lost in the customers as he either talked them up, which was unusual for him, or ignored them, like he did constantly with Basgi, who didn't stay long once Jackson told him Alizon would be in at some point. There was something different about Jackson that night, something a little more... alive, and it made her smile.

By the time last call sounded, the only ones left in the bar were the ogres, possessing a stronger constitution, enabling them to drink longer and consume more than most, which made Jackson smile at their bar tabs. Finally, however, it was just the two of them, and Jackson slid the deadbolt on the front door in place. When he turned to look at her, he bounced his eyebrows at her, a mischievous grin pushing up the corners of his mouth.

She cocked an eyebrow at him. "Something tells me nothing good lies behind that smile."

His grin grew. "Oh, it's good and bad all at the same time." He reached her, turning her around in her stool to face him, sliding between her thighs as he slid his hands around her waist, her hands going to his arms. His smile softened as he stared into her eyes. "For centuries, I only wanted one thing," he said, his tone soft, almost melancholy. "To die. I grew tired of being the floating lights in the bogs, the bogeyman come to light the way to the afterlife for naughty kids, and then a scary Halloween decoration. Then, Seraphine found me and brought my spirit to Black Hollow, the town's magic giving me substance and making me whole once more. I thought that was

the answer to all my prayers. However, I didn't take into account that I was technically already dead, so I would never die again, which meant I lived while I watched those I grew close to grow old and die. Even though many paranormals live for ages, most still die. I decided I couldn't handle that pain any more, so I remained distant, pushing everyone away and throwing myself into Thirst." He smiled at her. "Then, you walked into my bar, and even though I tried to keep you at arm's distance, I found myself drawn to you more and more. So much so, that even the Devil himself couldn't drive me away from you. Meredith, I don't want to die any more. For the first time in decades, all I want to do is live, and I want that life to be with you."

She caressed his arms as she smiled over at him. "I want that as well," she told him. "I have from the first moment I heard about you. You give this demon life and hope, and I want our future to be together."

Jackson leaned down, kissing her, his breath along her cheek as their warm lips pressed together, his tongue slipping between her lips, tasting her, savoring her. She felt his fire, felt it burning into her as they remained pressed against each other, locked in an embrace that only held one possible ending.

When they broke the kiss, Jackson grinned at her. "You know, there's something I've never done in this bar."

She wiggled her eyebrows at him as she slid her hands over his chest. "I say it's past due to break it in then, right?"

He sucked in a breath, his chest puffing out as his eyes went wide. "Long overdue, but the perfect time as well."

She felt the blush warm her cheeks at his words and leaned in to kiss him again, her hands sliding down his chest to the bulge she felt in his jeans.

Chapter Nineteen



JACKSON ROLLED OVER, an arm draping across Meredith's bare side as he snuggled up against her. They had spent another hour inside his office, making amazing use of his desk and desk chair, before they made their way to his apartment where they found themselves locked within each other's arms once more. They both had centuries of pent-up desire that, once unleashed, wasn't about to be put out with a quickie. Finally, about five in the morning, they collapsed in his bed, snoring contentedly.

It was Monday, and while Jackson usually opened Thirst, he left a note for Web that he would be in late, if he showed up at all. Jackson intended to make the most of every minute with Meredith, feeling the need to make up for lost time.

He felt her grab his arm, pulling him tighter against her as she snuggled into him, his morning erection already begging for her honey. He nuzzled into her neck, kissing her shoulder and then her ear. "Good morning," he whispered, his voice still groggy with sleep. "I don't know about you, but I slept amazingly well."

She pushed back onto his cock, wiggling her ass. “So did I, although I think I have the impression of a few paperclips in my ass cheeks.” She giggled. “I wonder what Web will think if he goes into your office. We really should have put everything back on your desk, instead of leaving it strewn across the floor from your swipe to clear off the desk.”

Jackson chuckled, picturing the scene in his head again, his cock throbbing at the image. “What can I say? I grew impatient to be between your legs.”

“As well as other places,” she said with a moan as she pushed back against him again. “Is that rod pushing into my ass my morning coffee?”

He nipped her ear. “Definitely the first cup.” He slid his hand up her stomach to her breasts, feeling the hardening nipples with his fingers and tweaking them a little.

Meredith moaned, her body tightening in his embrace. “Please,” she begged in a husky voice. “I want it.”

Jackson held her tight, his hands devouring her breasts as he slid his hard cock between her legs to the entrance of her heat. He kissed her neck as he spooned her, and just as she was about to beg for his manhood once more, he thrust deep inside of her, burying himself balls deep into her wetness.

Meredith’s cries bounced off his bedroom walls as she clutched to his arms, pushing her hips back to him, driving him in even deeper. “God, yes, Jackson. More. Please, more. Harder. God, take it.”

He pounded into her, his face buried in the crease of her neck, his arms pinning her back against him as he gave her what she begged for. Over and over, back and forth, he drove into her, nibbling her neck, licking her ear, pinching her nipples.

“Harder,” she moaned. “Pinch them harder. Bite me. Oh, god!”

He felt her body tense as he did everything she asked, his cock buried deep inside of her, throbbing, nearing his own release. Then she pushed back onto him, her body tightening

in his grip as she screamed out, one arm shooting out, her fist clenching the sheets. “God, yes!”

And then he felt his own orgasm rip through him, filling her with his passion as he pinned her back against his cock, his hips meshed hard against her ass. When their orgasms subsided, they both collapsed in a heap, still clutching to each other, their heavy breathing filling his ears. He doubted he would ever let her go. This was the life he never knew he was missing.

She pulled him back against her, snuggling into him again. “They always say that first cup of coffee in the morning is the best.”

He chuckled as he kissed the side of her head. “I guarantee the rest won’t be nearly as good.”

She groaned as she kissed the arm around her. “Do we have to leave this bed? I could stay here with you forever. Let’s just tell everyone we quit and stay here.”

He laughed as he swatted her ass. “Trust me, I’d love to, but we still need to finish this. Then, perhaps, we can spend a weekend in bed having cup after cup of this coffee.”

She rolled over, his arms staying wrapped around her as she did, until she gazed into his fiery eyes. “Have you figured it out yet? Do you know how we’re going to trick him and save Seraphine? Save me?”

Jackson kissed her nose. “I told you to trust me,” he said as he pulled away. “I got this. You just need to meet Lucifer and Seraphine in that gazebo Halloween night.”

Her face pinched with confusion. “But he told you to stay away,” she said. “How are you going to do whatever it is you do to trick him if you aren’t there?”

He smiled at her, wishing he could take away her concern, but knowing it was best if she didn’t know his plans. She couldn’t inadvertently give anything away if she didn’t know anything. “Now, does a good magician give away his tricks?” He squeezed her to him. “You trust me, right?”

She nodded without hesitation. “More than anyone.”

“Then trust that I have this, and neither you nor Seraphine will be going to Hell on Halloween night.”

She sighed, obviously not happy with his answer, but resigning herself to the fact that he wasn't about to tell her anything. “Fine,” she said with an exasperated breath. “I don't like it, though.”

“Duly noted,” he told her, smiling. “Now, how about some breakfast?”

She grinned at him, a twinkle in her eyes. “Want me to whip up some pumpkin pancakes?”

He groaned, but instead of being filled with disgust, he just shook his head, laughing at her. “I think I'll have some more demon for breakfast.”

Her eyes went wide as she pressed against him, rubbing her pussy against his hardness. “I think that can be arranged.” She then leaned in closer and kissed him hard, one hand sliding down his back to smack his ass.

Jackson yelped, eyes wide. “What was that for?”

“Foreplay,” she said, doing her best to look innocent. “I need to get you prepared for my bag of toys, remember?”

He cocked an eyebrow at her. “I may need to rethink the whole toy thing.”

She bit her lower lip as she just grinned over at him.

They finally dragged themselves out of bed, showering together, their hands soaping each other up, which led to another round of bumping hips before they finally made it to the kitchen to start the actual coffee. Jackson wasn't sure he even needed it with how energized he felt right then. Meredith made him feel more alive than he ever had, even when he was actually alive, and that feeling was better than caffeine for a morning pick-me-up.

Meredith made breakfast, and none of it tasted like pumpkin.

“Do you work today?” he asked her as he picked up a slice of bacon.

She shook her head as she finished swallowing a forkful of eggs. “No. I was actually thinking of popping over to the park at the roundabout and seeing if there was anything I could do to help with the decorations.” She gave him a sheepish look. “Would you be all right with that? You know, with your distaste for Halloween and all?”

He shrugged. “Actually, I’m finding myself feeling okay with a lot of things today.” He reached over and took her free hand in his. “I made myself miserable, and by association, I made those around me miserable as well. I did this to myself, if you think about it, and so I can’t blame the rest of the world for the consequences of my actions. I permitted Lucifer to irritate me, but again, that was me giving him that power over me. It’s time I took that power back.”

She squeezed his hand. “I’m proud of you.”

He shook his head. “Don’t be. You’re the one who helped push me to this. I would have been content being a miserable grouch forever. You made me see the power of positive thinking, of having someone in your life with whom to love and share your existence. That, I’ll never be able to repay.”

She gave him a cocky grin. “Good thing we have all of eternity for you to try, huh?”

He just laughed as he bit into his bacon. “Truth,” he said.

An hour later, they stepped out of his apartment building and into the late-morning sun. The air still felt cool, and autumn scented the breeze. At Main Street, he gave Meredith a kiss, telling her to be careful, but have fun, and then he turned toward his bar. As he passed Yeti’s Ice Cream, he paused a minute, staring at the giant cone on top. With a nod and a grin, he stepped inside. “Saroj, I think I’ll try that pumpkin ice cream you offered the other day if you have any left.”

The giant yeti gave him a puzzled look. “I thought you didn’t like pumpkin?”

Jackson shrugged. “I honestly don’t know if I do or not. I’ve never tried it.” There were a lot of things he hadn’t tried. Now was the time.

Chapter Twenty



MEREDITH WATCHED JACKSON walk down Main Street toward Thirst, her eyes drifting to the way his jeans cupped his firm ass as she bit her lower lip. God, what a night. Centuries she had waited for a chance to be with Jackson Lantern, and the one who kept her from him wound up being the one who threw them together. Too bad she had to trick Lucifer as payback for finally bringing the two of them together.

Turning, she crossed the street to the roundabout park and the bustle of activity already taking place. She glanced around at all the busy hands—Misha and Vasily stacking bales of hay, Pascal and Toussaint hanging lights from poles and trees, even the Underwoods shoving more scarecrows into the ground while Gerst organized a pumpkin patch. Booths were being erected for games, and a corn maze set off to the side for those needing a little spooky mystery to their night. Meredith looked around for someone in charge and spotted Seraphine by the gazebo, clipboard in hand. *I should have known*, Meredith thought with an inward chuckle.

She stared at the other woman a moment, worried if she had the guts to talk to Seraphine knowing she was the one who sent Jackson to stop Meredith from making the deal with

Lucifer. In the end, she took a deep breath and started making her way to Seraphine. She owed the woman for what happened. There was no way she could avoid her now.

“Wendell, I want a giant stack of those cornstalks put to the side of the gazebo,” Seraphine said as she pointed to the spot she meant.

Cupid just stared at her. “Why are we using cornstalks again?”

Meredith approached Seraphine, arms over her chest as she fought the nerves that suddenly threatened to undo her. Meredith stood off to the side, waiting for the chance to speak.

Seraphine didn’t even glance at Wendall as she replied, “Because, dear, I want them to be part of a symbolic ritual on Halloween night. As it’s the night of the dead, a time when lost loved ones can roam the world for a few hours, I thought it would be nice to use the cornstalks as a symbol of respect.” She shrugged. “Maybe not the prettiest, but I think it fits the holiday nicely. Each person can choose a stalk, and then we’ll stack them around the gazebo, thinking of those who are no longer with us.”

Wendell just looked at her, his head tilted to the side. “Why the gazebo?”

Seraphine shrugged. “Because it’s already here, and I thought the stalks would look festive encircling it.” She then turned to Meredith, smiling. “Don’t you think so?”

Meredith, caught off guard at being addressed, gave a slight jump, but then nodded. “I think so,” she said. “The light brown colors of the stalks will offset the white of the gazebo, giving it all an autumn feel to it.”

Seraphine nodded. “My thoughts exactly.” She then turned to Wendell. “See? It’s all about aesthetics.”

Wendell shrugged, shaking his head. “What do I know? I’m usually surrounded by reds and pinks.” He then walked off to gather the cornstalks.

Seraphine turned back to Meredith, her clipboard pressed to her chest, a pen in her right hand. “And what brings you our

way, dear Meredith? You holding up all right? Jackson told me what a terrible few days you've had." She then cocked her head to the side as she studied the other woman. "Although, you do seem to have a special glow about you this morning." Her grin grew. "Should I assume the two of you worked out your little issue?"

Meredith felt the blush warm her cheeks, not even sure how Seraphine could tell anything about Jackson and herself. "We did, thanks. He also told me about how you told him that I should make the deal with Lucifer." She took a deep breath. "I'm not sure what to say. Why would you do that for me? What will that do to Black Hollow?"

Seraphine smiled over at her, then motioned for Meredith to follow her as Seraphine turned and entered the gazebo. Taking one of the benches along the edge, she motioned for Meredith to join her.

Once they were seated, Seraphine turned to her, clipboard now in her lap. "I told Jackson to have you accept Lucifer's deal because I couldn't see the two of you apart to be honest. He came to me, worried about you. Jackson hasn't worried about anyone since I've known him. That told me I needed to do something."

Meredith clasped her hands together, placing them in her lap. "Why you? What does Lucifer want with you? I've racked my brains trying to figure it out, but all I can come up with is that he's jealous of what you've accomplished here in Black Hollow, but that still doesn't make sense to me. I don't get it."

Seraphine shrugged, a crooked smile on her lips. "Not all men can take no gracefully, sweetie."

Meredith just stared at her, still confused. What does that have to do with...? Then her eyes went wide as the proverbial light bulb clicked on over her head. "You mean Lucifer and you...?"

Seraphine blew out a snort of derision. "He wishes," she said with a shake of her head. "No, he wanted to do the bump and grind with me a few times, but really, a lady has to have some standards, right? I turned him down. Several times." She

shrugged, “But he kept coming back, hoping I’d change my mind, which, of course, I didn’t. Finally, he gave up, but as it turns out, he never forgot.”

“So, he came to me, threatening to take me back to Hell, knowing I’d want to stay, just so he could make this deal.” Meredith sighed, shaking her head. And she fell for it, hook, line, and sinker. How could she have been so gullible? “He wanted you ultimately, but either way, he wins.” She then shifted in her seat as she faced Seraphine more. “But we can’t let him win. Black Hollow needs you; your family created this town, and honestly, I don’t think the town could handle losing you.”

Seraphine reached over and patted Meredith’s leg, her face a mask of serenity as if she weren’t about to be given to the Devil and hauled to Hell. “I appreciate you worrying about me, sweetie. Really. But, Lucifer is a pouting bully, and the only way to deal with those type of people is head on. I have no intention of going to Hell.”

“But, how are you going to get out of it?” Meredith still didn’t understand. Jackson said for her to trust him, but she would have a much easier time doing that if he would at least give her an inkling of what he had planned. “Jackson says he’ll work it out, and you don’t seem concerned at all, but truth be told, I’m a nervous wreck.”

“Well then, dear, you need to get yourself something to drink as well as something to do to take your mind off what it is you don’t know.” Seraphine pointed over to where Kerry and Brandie Underwood filled an area with scarecrows. “I think the Underwoods could use an extra hand. Why don’t you see what you can do over there?” She patted Meredith’s leg again. “And, sweetie, relax. Halloween is a time for fun and games, tricks and treats.” She then winked at her. “I bet if you give Jackson some treat, he’ll make sure to have a trick or two for you.”

Meredith nodded, swallowing the protestation she knew would be useless to utter. “Thanks,” she said. “And again, I’m sorry.”

“Whatever for?” Seraphine looked at her like she was being silly. “None of this is your fault. Lucifer is behaving like a spoiled, entitled rich kid, and I won’t allow him to force anyone in my town to do something they don’t want to do. Now, you go on and help the Underwood sisters. Everything will be just fine. You’ll see.”

Meredith stood, doing her best not to wring her hands as she walked away. Seraphine always possessed an answer for everything. She seemed to always know what people needed and when to give it to them and had as many tricks up her sleeve as Jackson, who had already avoided Hell twice. Still, that didn’t mean he could do it a third time, especially since he wasn’t allowed anywhere near her that night.

“Wendall, we’re going to need more corn stalks,” Seraphine called out behind Meredith. “Can you pop over to the Fairy Garden and see what the woodland fairies can spare? I’m sure Cora and Willa will be able to help you.”

Meredith heard Cupid grumbling as she continued to cross the park. “Someone needs an arrow up their...”

“I can hear you, Wendall,” Seraphine called out.

Meredith just giggled. Then she took a deep breath, her mind once more going to Halloween night and the possibility of things going haywire. She just had to trust those around her to make it all work out. Seraphine seemed determined, as did Jackson. They also seemed positive it would all work out.

Meredith only wished she could harness some of that positivity for herself.

Chapter Twenty-One



“ARE YOU SURE you want to do this?” Meredith asked him for the fifth time.

Jackson just smiled at her as he slipped his jacket over his shoulders. “Yes, I’m positive. I even closed Thirst for the festivities, so no one would have to work the bar.” He shrugged. “They’re used to me working it while they go to Seraphine’s parties, so I didn’t want them to miss out just because I decided to live a little.”

Meredith wrapped her arms around him, kissing his chin. “Well, aren’t you the generous boss?” Then she pulled back and stared at him, a sadness in her eyes that pulled at his heart. “But Lucifer made it clear you weren’t to be around when he shows up to claim Seraphine.”

Jackson shrugged. “So, I won’t be around. That doesn’t mean I can’t enjoy the beginning of the night with my lady and have a little fun, right?”

Her worried expression turned into a smile as she squeezed him. “Your lady would love that.” Then she cocked an eyebrow at him. “And are you going in costume?”

He grinned as he stepped back. "I'm always one burst away from being in costume," he told her, and then with a deep breath, he fanned the flames inside of him. His eyes grew a brighter orange, the flames flickering, casting shadows in his eye sockets as the rest of his body turned a darker orange and his hair a darker brown like the stem of a pumpkin. When he opened his mouth, flames flickered from inside, giving him an eerie glow over his teeth. "What do you think?" he asked, arms out at his sides.

Meredith chuckled as she shook her head. "I guess no kisses for you tonight."

Jackson put his hands on his hips. "I hadn't thought of that. Hmmmm."

She stepped up to him and kissed his chin. "I love the way you look. Don't change."

"And what about you?" he asked. "If I'm making my Halloween debut, you have to get into the spirit of things as well. What are you going as?"

She patted his chest. "Wait right here," she told him as she moved over and snatched up a small duffel bag from the couch.

He watched as she left the living room and slid into his bedroom, waggling her eyebrows at him before she vanished from sight. He had no idea what she had planned, but it thrilled him that they were together.

A few minutes later, Meredith sauntered out of the bedroom wearing a black corset that pushed up her large breasts, thigh-high boots with stiletto heels, black mesh hose, and black shorts that cupped her ass making his cock twitch. Her long, obsidian hair was pulled back in a tight ponytail, and she wore a dark shade of red lipstick that brought out her full, pouty lips. He could only stand there and stare, eyes as wide as the grin on his face, his cock stiffening in his pants. If she had worn this outfit when she arrived in Black Hollow, he would have recognized her right off the bat. This was the demon who stood behind Lucifer the day Jackson begged admittance into Hell.

He swallowed, raking her with his gaze. “Wow,” he finally said. “I mean, just...Wow. You look absolutely amazing.”

She blushed, seeming a little timid for the first time ever. “Not too much?” she asked, her hands clasped in front of her.

He crossed the room, taking her in his arms. “I think it’s perfect.” Then he grinned down at her, a wolfish glint in his eyes. “And suddenly, I don’t want to go to the festival.”

She smiled, blushing even more. “Well, lucky you then, because this demon gets to come home with you after the party.”

He kissed her nose. “I hope the party goes quick.” Taking a deep breath, he added, “It’s going to be hard to keep my hands off you all night.”

“Who said I want you to?” she asked with a wink. Then, her face turned somber. “You promise there will be an after the party?”

He took her cheeks in his hands, tilting her head so he could kiss her forehead. When he pulled away, he whispered, “I promise, sweetness. Everything will be fine. Trust me.”

She nodded. “Then, let’s get this over with, so you can come home and see the outfit without the shorts.”

He bounced his eyebrows at her. “I love how you think.” Taking her hand in his, he led her to the front door and out into the crisp October evening. This was the first time he had ever celebrated Halloween, and he couldn’t wait to share it with Meredith. They were who they were, and both of them finally accepted that fact. Perhaps, that was their problem all along. Neither one wanted to be who they were, Jackson regretting his life choices and ashamed of his In Between existence, and Meredith desiring to hide her true nature in order not to offend anyone or draw attention to herself. However, people could never truly like you or accept you if you kept part of yourself hidden. That was a truth Jackson finally came to accept. There would be no more hiding. He was the Jack-O’-Lantern, destined to love a demon. He just hoped she wore that outfit more often.

By the time they reached the park at the roundabout, the place was abuzz with activity. People played games at the booths, bought food from the various vendors, and showed off their exotic costumes. Eerie lights lit up the park, strung from lampposts and trees as party music filtered from speakers set up in various places. The food vendors consisted of all the specialty shops and restaurants in Black Hollow. Jackson noticed Fireside Grille, The Rotten Meatball, Hell's Brew, Yeti's Ice Cream, Magical Delights Bakery, and even Alizon's Sticky Fingers Candy Store, which had a long line of brownies in front of it with Basgi at the head. Jackson just chuckled as he shook his head. Even Stoney's Bar had a booth set up selling adult beverages to whoever popped over. Thirst never participated in any of the Halloween shenanigans because of how Jackson felt about the holiday, something he might have to change in the future. It surprised him Sebastian served everyone, since the rule at his bar was no fairies or witches of any kind. He sighed. Perhaps other things needed to change as well.

Everyone greeted them as they made their way around the circuit, kids running in all directions playing games and collecting candy.

"Well, this is a first," Vasily said as he dropped the cowl to his monk's costume. "Good to see you out and enjoying yourself, Jackson." He then turned to Meredith. "Of course, I can see why you would be with this lovely lady at your side." He gave Meredith a playful wink. "You know," he said to her, "a certain puppy still needs a home. Perfect for cuddles and keeping the house full of young energy."

Jackson turned to Meredith, a puzzled look pinching his brows. "A puppy?"

She blushed. "I felt pretty down the other day, so I went to Cuddles for some puppy love. Vasily has a cute little beagle full of energy that I couldn't stop holding." She giggled as she shook her head. "I swear, he almost licked me to death before I got out of there."

Vasily laughed, too, as his twin sister, Misha, stepped up to join them. "Well, there's plenty of those special kisses at

Cuddles,” he said. “I’m sure he would love another visit.”

Meredith nodded, smiling. “I’ll make sure to stop by.”

“It’s our turn to play the cakewalk,” Misha informed her brother after saying hello to the others. “Come, brother dear. I want a carrot cake.”

Vasily just rolled his eyes. “Ah well, a brother’s duty is never done. You two have fun, and Jackson, it really is good to see you out here.”

“Thanks,” Jackson said as he waved at the others as they walked off, Misha’s arm looped around her brother’s, already telling him her strategy on winning the cake she wanted.

Jackson turned to say something to Meredith when he spotted Lucifer sitting on the bench in the gazebo. A cold annoyance gripped Jackson’s chest as he stared at the Devil. “Looks like someone is here to collect his prize.”

Meredith followed his gaze, and Jackson heard her sigh. “I’m surprised he waited this long to show up,” she said. “Can we put this off?” she asked, turning back to Jackson. “I feel like I just got you. I don’t want to lose you if this goes south. I still can’t let him take Seraphine.”

Jackson kissed the side of her head, lingering as he squeezed her to him. “I told you; no one is going to Hell tonight but Lucifer,” he assured her as he pulled away. “We might as well finish this.”

“But you’re not supposed to be there, remember?” He couldn’t miss the stress on her face.

Jackson shrugged. “I’ll just go say hello. Then, we’ll see what happens.” He gave her a wink.

She still didn’t look convinced.

Together, they walked over to the gazebo, hand-in-hand. Lucifer cocked an eyebrow as Jackson approached, his head tilted to the side as he obviously expected a trap of some sort.

“Here comes Seraphine,” Meredith whispered.

“Then the show begins,” Jackson said as they neared the Prince of Darkness.

“Stop right there,” Lucifer said, standing and holding his hand out. “You’re not to be here, Jackson. That was the deal.”

Jackson shrugged as Seraphine joined them. “I just came to escort my lady over, that’s all. I’m leaving.”

“Really, Luci, you sure are carrying this jilted lover thing a little too far,” Seraphine said with an exasperated breath. “You would think no one ever turned you down before.”

Lucifer glared at her. “They haven’t.” He then turned back to Jackson. “You escorted her. Now, leave.”

“You are an untrusting sort,” Jackson said with a shake of his head. “You act like you’ve been tricked a time or two.” He turned, kissing Meredith on the forehead. “I’ll see you when all of this is over.” He then gazed into her eyes, the flickering flames of his eyes bouncing off her face. “I love you, Meredith Vanth.”

She embraced him, desperation in the way she squeezed him. “I love you, too, Jackson Lantern. I have for centuries.”

“Oh my father,” Lucifer groaned. “Can we just finish this?”

Chapter Twenty-Two



MEREDITH WATCHED AS Jackson moved into the darkness away from her, and she had never felt so alone in her entire existence. She didn't think she could go through with this without Jackson by her side.

“Really, Luci, you act as if time is an issue for you,” Seraphine said as she stepped into the gazebo. Meredith moved to follow her, but the other woman stopped her with a glance. “This is as far as you go, Vanth.” Seraphine told her with a smile. The ancient woman then turned back to Lucifer. “I have one more thing to do tonight, and then, we will see about how disappointed you'll be with me in your possession. I hope you don't think this gains you what you're panting for, because I have no intention of playing tiddlywinks in the pits of Hell with you.”

Lucifer grinned, and the sight made Meredith shiver. “Just do what you have to do so we can be on our way.”

“Eager like a high school boy getting his first piece of ass,” Seraphine deadpanned. “I expected more from you.” She sighed, shaking her head and turning to the crowds from the first step of the gazebo. “My fellow residents of Black Hollow,

my family, please gather around.” She stood, waiting as everyone left wherever they were at the moment and made their way to the gazebo. Seraphine waited patiently, her hands clasped in front of her.

Meredith watched as everyone surrounded her, wishing they would move slower to prolong what she knew would take place after Seraphine’s ritual.

Seraphine swept her gaze around the crowd. “Tonight is All Hallows Eve, the time the veil between the living and the dead is open for loved ones to visit their surviving family. It is a time for reflection and memorial, and this year, I wanted to honor our lost loved ones with a tribute.” She gestured to the piles of cornstalks Wendell had stacked. “As you make your way to the cornstalks, graciously put together and donated by the woodland fairies, choose one, and then with thoughts of those who have left us, place your cornstalk around the gazebo, quietly, respectfully. Tonight, this small white structure is a memorial to those we miss and would see again if we could.” She turned to Meredith. “Will you please start us off, Meredith?”

Meredith just stared at the other woman a moment as Lucifer rolled his eyes behind her. When Meredith didn’t move fast enough, the Devil shooed her into action with a flip of his wrist.

Meredith glanced back at Seraphine, wanting to scream to the others around her what was to happen afterward, but she didn’t. Jackson said trust, so she would trust.

Walking over to the cornstalks, she chose one, thinking of all those she had tortured in Hell during her time as the harbinger of death. She walked back to the gazebo, a tear trickling down her cheek. When she finished, she stepped to the front of the gazebo again, hands clasped in front of her, and waited.

She watched as the Underwood sisters with Arden and Quinn walked over to the pile and chose their cornstalks, following Meredith’s example. The ogres followed them and then the brownies, followed by the Drakkis with Victoria in a

luring Little Red Riding Hood costume. Meredith could only stand there and watch, begging everyone to move slower. The line continued—Piper and Web, Starburst and the other unicorns, Derrick and Raveena, Saroj, Sandie, Sebastian, Nerissa and the mermaids. Her eyes widened as she watched Hitchcock and King join them, even though King didn't pick up a cornstalk. He still followed Hitchcock over as the dragon laid his offering at the base of the gazebo.

“Even you, King?” Lucifer asked with a sad shake of his head. “You, out of all these people, should know what superstition this is.”

King just shrugged his shoulders.

Finally, it was Seraphine's turn.

As the older woman moved to the remaining cornstalks, Meredith glanced around, hoping to catch sight of Jackson somewhere in the darkness, sure his flickering eyes would give him away, but he was nowhere to be seen. *When is he going to do whatever he has planned?*

Seraphine stepped back. “Now, a moment of silence as we think of those...”

“Enough!” Lucifer roared. “You're just dragging this out to postpone giving me what rightfully belongs to me. You're coming with me, Seraphine.” He moved to the gazebo steps, anger boiling in his eyes.

“No!” Meredith yelled, but as soon as Lucifer went to step over the entrance of the gazebo, something threw him back.

Meredith just stared, her brows pinched with confusion.

Lucifer moved to leave the gazebo again, but was stopped by some unseen force.

“My turn,” Jackson said from behind the crowd, everyone sliding to the side as he made his way forward.

Meredith watched as he walked over to the cornstalks and picked up the last one. As he moved over to the gazebo, he peeled the leaves of his cornstalk back, revealing a crucifix in the center. He glared at Lucifer as he laid it at the steps of the

gazebo on top of the others, then moved back to stand beside Meredith, his arm sliding around her waist.

Lucifer glared at Jackson, then shot his gaze to Seraphine and Meredith. “What is the meaning of this? We had a deal!”

Seraphine shrugged. “We had a deal from a bully trying to force his base desires upon us. Not really a fair deal, so we took it upon ourselves to make a new one.”

Meredith just gawked at the other woman. Seraphine knew about the crucifixes. Meredith glanced around at the surrounding crowd, their faces all full of rage and disgust. They all knew about the crucifixes, even King. That’s why he didn’t pick up the cornstalk. He knew there was a cross in its center.

“You can either stay in the gazebo for...well, ever,” Jackson said, glaring at Lucifer, “or you can agree to leave Seraphine and Meredith in Black Hollow, never to return again to harass any of our residents. If you want your freedom back, you have to promise never to set foot or even send one of your minions—or several at once—to do your bidding in our town.”

“You tricky little firefly, you,” Meredith said, truly impressed.

He kissed the side of her head. “I told you to trust me.”

Lucifer roared. “You cannot do this to me!”

Jackson shrugged. “Oh, but I did.” He then glanced around the gathered crowd. “We all did, actually.” He turned back to Lucifer. “And what’s more, they all know how I tricked you now, so knowledge will spread if you ever return to Black Hollow.”

“I’ll make sure to spread the Internet with that information, as well,” Adam said from somewhere in the crowd. “I’ll make sure our newspaper posts articles about it and sends it out constantly.”

“So, what say you, Lucifer,” Jackson asked. “Do we have a deal?”

Lucifer turned to King, glaring. “You knew about this?”

King shrugged. “I did. I don’t like my happy home fucked with, especially by family.”

Lucifer shook his head as he glared at the crowd in front of him. Finally, he turned his glare to Meredith. “You better pray you never land on my doorstep or leave this community.”

She squeezed Jackson to her. “I have everything I need right here. I don’t see me going anywhere ever.”

“So, do we go about our night with you as the centerpiece everyone can gawk at all night?” Jackson asked. “Or do you agree to our terms?”

The Devil glanced at Seraphine. “You don’t know what you’re missing,” he told her, leering. “We could have so much fun together.”

Seraphine gave a sad shake of her head. “I highly doubt that. We walk two vastly different paths, Luci. Yours is darkness, and mine is light. Make the most of what you do have and stop yearning for what you can’t—or ever will—have.”

“Lucifer, last...” Jackson started, but Lucifer cut him off by shouting, “Fine!”

Satan looked at Jackson. “I never should have let you out of my kingdom.”

“No, you shouldn’t have.” Jackson then turned to Meredith, and the smile he gave her warmed her most special of places. “But, I’m glad you did.”

“Disgusting,” Lucifer said. “Fine, we have a deal. Now, let me out of this infernal town.”

Jackson nodded, walking over and removing the crucifixes. The others joined him, and soon, the Devil was once again free.

Lucifer said nothing else. He merely popped out of sight.

Those gathered around cheered, and Seraphine told them to return to their festivities as she walked over to Jackson and Meredith. “I told you it would all work out,” she said to Meredith as she gave the woman a hug. She then turned,

glancing at the spot where Lucifer stood just a few seconds ago. “Still, it would have been nice if he had just came out and asked for another date.” She turned back to the others. “He wasn’t a bad kisser after all.” She winked and then walked off, leaving the two of them alone.

Meredith turned, still not believing that it all worked out. “You did it. You actually tricked the devil a third time.”

Jackson shrugged. “Well, Seraphine was great at making me see how I needed more people in my life. Being a loner wasn’t really working.” He kissed her, softly, his lips warm on hers. She could feel the heat from his eyes as he held her. When he pulled back, his facial features softened. “I never want to live like that again, Meredith. I’m sorry it took Lucifer almost stealing you away for me to see it.”

“I’m glad you did,” she told him. “And, I’m glad we both finally opened up to each other about who we are. I don’t want any more secrets. Ever.”

“Deal,” he said with a wink.

Meredith groaned. “And let’s vow never to use that word again.”

Chapter Twenty-Three



JACKSON STACKED BOTTLES of whiskey under the bar, Jimmy Buffett playing in the background as he swayed a little to the beat. Once the whole nightmare of Lucifer was over, Meredith and he had enjoyed the rest of the night bouncing from booth to booth, playing games and gorging themselves on the tasty offerings available. It was the most fun Jackson had since he could ever remember, so much so that he gave Piper and Web the day off, knowing if they felt anything like him, they'd need to recuperate.

"I'm surprised you were able to get up so early," Meredith said as she entered the bar. "I also noticed the new sign on the front of the bar. Open to all, huh? Tired of your feud with Sebastian?"

Jackson shrugged. "It's a new day, so it needs new rules." A scratching came from the back. "I want to be more available to people."

Meredith glanced to the back, her brows pinched over her nose at the noise as she continued to the bar. "And you had to get up early to put up a sign? I kind of enjoyed being snuggled

up together. The bed felt cold once you left, taking your heat with you.”

Jackson laughed. “I think that heat came from what we did before we crashed in exhaustion.” He winked at her. “We definitely need to get you in that outfit more often.”

She leaned on the bar, grinning at him. “Wait until you see my toy bag.”

He leaned on the bar taking her hands in his. “I can’t wait.”

A whining sounded behind him, and this time, Meredith couldn’t ignore it. “Do you have Piper locked in your office? Should I be jealous?” She released his hands and walked around the bar toward his office.

Jackson followed her, slipping out of the bar flap to join her at his office. “There’s no one I want besides you.”

“So, who do you have locked up in here?” She glanced over at him. “I thought we said no more secrets?” She opened the door and was almost knocked over as a tiny beagle leaped through the open door and hurled himself at her.

“We did, but surprises are not secrets, really.” Jackson knelt down beside her as Meredith dropped to the floor, the beagle going straight for her lap and chin. “I left early this morning to pick up this fellow. Now, you can have cuddles when I’m working.”

Meredith couldn’t stop laughing and the sound melted his heart. He did something right for a change. He reached out and stroked the beagle’s head. “Little fellow needs a name.”

She kissed the puppy, the beagle squirming in her lap trying to get at her face with his tongue. She laughed even harder before cutting her eyes to Jackson. “How about Satan?”

Jackson rolled his eyes and groaned. “Please, anything but that.”

The door to Thirst opened as Basgi stormed inside. “I want a beer!” the brownie shouted.

Jackson shook his head. “I think we need to teach this dog to attack.”

Meredith just laughed, the beagle licking at her face as Jackson slid down on the floor beside her. “I hope this dog appreciates he’s the first furry critter in here.”

Jackson nodded, kissing the side of her head. “It’s a new life for all of us.”

“Where’s my beer?” Basgi hollered.

Jackson just shook his head. “Well, most of us.”

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April McCray merely wants to enjoy spring break, avoiding the crowds of rambunctious children attending the circus. However, the Powers That Be yank her banshee from her peaceful evening, shoving her into the nightmare of a dark-haired stranger as she tries to warn him of a loved one's soon demise. Once she's safely back in her own home, April can't stop thinking about the man with the pale-red eyes.

Wyatt Compton refuses to be anyone's fool, especially whoever is murdering his family. He has to uncover the killer before he strikes again, this time killing Wyatt's grandfather, but how can he do that among a group of shapeshifters?

The circus comes to Black Hollow, bringing a killer along with it, thrusting April and Wyatt together in a race to save his grandfather. Can they stop whoever desires to kill the ringmaster, or has the circus finally met its end?

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April's Fool

One



April McCray stared at the stack of essays turned in by her literature class, regretting having assigned the essays in the first damn place. Twenty-five kids meant twenty-five essays, each five pages long. What the hell was she thinking? *This is going to require some wine. Lots of wine.* She ran a pale hand through her long red hair. *At least I have all of spring break to read through them.*

Pushing herself away from the table and those infernal essays, she made her way to the kitchen and the bottle of Merlot screaming her name on the counter. She desperately needed this break. The school year had been long, and the students rowdier than normal, especially Brady O'Leary, one of the leprechaun teens who seemed to think his lucky charms highly sought after by some of the female students. That boy disrupted April's class more times than she could count and sent some girls into a sexual heat, some of them literally, considering the paranormal nature of Black Hollow's residents.

After April poured herself a glass of wine, she took a slow sip, savoring the dry, slightly sweet taste as it slid past her lips and over her tongue, her eyes closed. Peace. Quiet. This, she desperately craved.

Her cell phone went off, slicing her quietness. April smirked as she shook her head at the intrusion, moving back

over to the table where her phone rested. Reina. April took another sip of her wine as she picked up the phone, sliding the call button to answer it. “What’s up, lady? Not working tonight?”

“Not tonight,” Reina answered, her voice a giggle of excitement. “And a new batch of guests popped into Daydreamer’s Inn. It’s a perfect night for a little wailing outside their windows. I bet some of them have never heard a banshee keening before. You in?”

April took another sip of her wine. Ogres sang karaoke; banshees picked on the guests at the quaint inn run by the Sandman. Everyone had to get their fun somehow, April supposed. She ran her tongue over her lips as she pulled the glass away from her mouth, contemplating Reina’s offer for a mere half-second. Tonight, however, all April wanted to do was settle back with more wine and a good book. “Not tonight, Reina, sorry. I’m starting my spring break by doing absolutely nothing. I’ll reach out tomorrow.”

She ended the call before the other woman could guilt her into changing her mind. She slid her phone back onto the table as she lifted the wineglass once more, her world once again quiet. It wasn’t that she didn’t enjoy tormenting the guests at Sandie’s little inn. On any other night, she’d be more than happy to join Reina and the others, keening and wailing, tempting the guests to open their windows to give them entrance. Not that walls could keep them out; they were banshees, after all. However, it was the deal struck with Sandie to respect the boundaries of his inn. Of course, if the guests opened the window then the banshees saw that as an invitation, and the banshees rushed in to wreak even more havoc. None of the guests ever opened their windows, of course, so April wasn’t really sure what the banshees would do with a guest if they did open the window, but still it was fun practice for their keening. It was an enjoyable break, considering when a banshee usually wailed, it was to announce the possibility of someone dying. April had done that enough over her existence, and she had even made use of her keening when a student tried to disrupt her classroom.

Still, tonight, April just wasn't in the mood to see humans scared into petrified sheets of terror.

She sighed as she lifted the wineglass to her lips, savoring the dry taste of the Merlot. As she lowered the glass, she glared at the pile of essays. *Forget it. I'm not spending my first day of spring break doing more school work.* She forced herself away from the table and moved toward her back porch. Massachusetts still held a slight chill in the air as winter tried its best to hang on as long as possible, but the coldness was bearable.

The sky outside shifted from dusk to dark as she settled down into one of her chaise lounge chairs, ankles crossed as she held her wineglass with both hands in her lap and stared up at the twinkling stars. This is the type of night she lived for, quiet, calm, clear, a brisk chill in the air, and a blanket of stars to mesmerize her. She craved nights such as these, because rambunctious teenagers filled her days as they came in and out of her class. She breathed out a contented sigh as she lifted her glass to her lips, perfectly at home on her back porch and alone, hidden from the outside...

The pain gripped her, her wineglass falling from her hands and spilling out onto the lounge chair as she doubled over, clutching at her head. No! Not now! Not tonight! She felt her body shake, felt herself lift off the chaise lounge and into the air, the glass shattering on the concrete below her chair. As she rose from her seat, her clothes shredded from her body, replaced by a drab gray rag of a dress, torn at the bottoms and frayed at the sleeves. Her red hair paled into ash-white locks as it flowed in the air around her by some unseen breeze as a force she had never identified, but which left her no choice, pulled her upward and out over Black Hollow, ripping a wail from her lungs that echoed in the night. As she flew, a vision of a shaggy gray-haired man with bushy brows filled her mind. A paunch belly shouted excess as he waved his arms, a black top hat in one hand, as he seemed to call out to people April couldn't see. He had red cheeks from the joy that seemed to fill him and a twinkle that sparked his eyes, a sparkle that soon turned dim as the redness of his cheeks faded, replaced by the grayish tint of death that blued his lips and stole his joy. She

watched as the man fell, his body limp, his arms crumbled underneath him as blood trickled from the corner of his mouth to stain his cheek. April's wail grew louder as she knew the only outcome. Death. The man was dead. Or would be soon.

The forces pulled her through the night air, yanking her over towns and even states until they shoved her down into a dark trailer. Pulled through the small rooms inside, she soon found herself hovering over a younger, more fit man about half the dead man's age. He slept soundly, his mouth parted slightly, his breathing shallow and calm. That calm was about to end.

April hovered at the foot of the man's bed, her arms outstretched, her hair drifting around her head as if she floated underwater instead of in midair. She stared at the man a moment, deep in peaceful slumber, his square jaw relaxed, his dark hair mussed with sleep. Under other circumstances, she would have become lost in the pale-red eyes that peeked under his slightly open eyelids. Tonight, however...

She screamed. Wailed. Keened. She had to warn him, warn this unknown man that someone he loved was about to die.

The man shot out of bed, his eyes wide with shock as soon as he noticed her, yanking the covers up around his shoulders, just under his chin. He screamed as he attempted to shove himself through the headboard of his bed and away from the apparition floating above him.

April drifted closer, warning him of the other man's impending death. She shouted everything she saw, the man with the top hat, the jovial demeanor he expressed, and then his sudden fall and demise. She did her best to relay the facts, to tell the man in the bed the severity of her visit, but all that escaped her mouth was the loud keening of the banshee. This man would never know who she was sent to warn him about, who he needed to help if he was to save his life. She tried to make herself known as the silent breeze upon which she rode pulled and tugged at her ash-gray dress, billowing the fabric to match the floating of her hair. For several long minutes she hung there, gesturing, screaming, doing everything she could to make herself understood, but knowing the man could

comprehend nothing, might not even believe her visit was anything other than a nightmare brought on by an undigested meal.

Then, the forces who controlled her yanked her out of his small trailer, back out into the inky night. The forces left her frustrated as they shoved her away from the man and back toward her own home, her arms outstretched as she strove to hold on to the man, continue to warn him. Her mission was done, however; she had left a warning, even though the warning was gibberish to the man in the bed. There was nothing else she could do, nothing more she could do to warn him of someone he cared about being the victim of a cruel end. That was the curse of the banshee, and April knew she would spend a sleepless night tossing and turning with visions of the older man's death as well as the younger man's shock at seeing her.

Soon, the forces that be shoved her back into her chaise lounge chair, the dark gray dress clumped around her as she swallowed deep gulps of air. Her white hair shifted back to her deep red, her skin fading from gray to a healthy pale. The night seemed colder, darker, as she sat there, her body shaking at the visions she saw. She never knew their names, never knew if the visions thrust upon her came to fruition or not, although she knew deep down they did. That was the calling of her kind, after all. To warn others of their loved one's demise.

Her body shook with the aftermath of her flight, her head screaming in pain. She swallowed another deep breath as she sat there, trying to calm her shattered nerves. *I need more wine.*

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Acknowledgments

If you've ever attended an author event where I'm signing, then you've seen me surrounded by three amazing ladies: Charleen Cox, Teri Edney, and Sarah Mick. These women are the driving force behind my success and the reason I can accomplish all the fun things I get to experience in this life. They've helped me overcome some of the scarier things in life, and together, we've made a family that cannot be discouraged, defeated, or destroyed. They give me hope, joy, and a reason to keep doing what I do constantly.

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There are many who encourage and support me in my writing endeavor, friends old and new, family, and especially the readers who keep picking up my novels. I appreciate each and every one of you. It is for you that I keep at the keyboard. Thank you.

Review Request

Did you enjoy [*To Trick the Devil*](#)? I hope so! I would also greatly appreciate it if you took a couple of minutes and left a review on any of the retailers where the story can be found.

Thanks in advance for taking the time to help me out!

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About the Author

Author of the popular series, *Destined Mates*, Robbie Cox started writing to escape—escape his teachers, escape his fears, even to escape his insecurities and doubts. However, his stories of seduction and adventure, not only allowed him to hide in the lives of his characters, but also captivated those who wanted to escape with him. Now, he enjoys a full-time career as a storyteller and novelist, creating rich worlds of fantasy adventure, paranormal action, and steamy romance. He invites readers to run away with him - to escape, getting lost in the seduction of adventure.

When not writing, Robbie is often found on his back porch enjoying a cigar, a scotch, and a good story. He derives pleasure from his large family and his crazy group of friends who provide the inspiration for his blog, *The Mess that Is Me*.

His series include, *Destined Mates*, *The Warrior of the Way*, *The Cauldron Coven*, *The Witches of Savannah*, and *The Bull Creek Chronicles*.

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