



Drop Dead

DEMON

POSSESSIVE LOVE

B. RIPLEY

DROP DEAD DEMON

AN MM PARANORMAL ROMANCE

POSSESSIVE LOVE

B. RIPLEY

DROP DEAD DEMON © 2023 by B. Ripley

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, businesses, events and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or deceased, or actual places is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or otherwise without written permission of the author except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Cover art by Charli Childs/Cosmic Letterz

Edited by Raven Quill Editing LLC

Formatting by Delaney Rain Author Services

Thank you to Rikki Leighton, Jamie Luther, Riley Nash, Travis Beaudoin, Ashlynn Mills and Willow Thomas who stuck by me and kept checking in as I wrote this. I appreciate you all!

*For Gena, who made me keep going when the urge to chuck
this in the trash was almost overwhelming. Without you,
Brady, Roth and the rest of these misfits wouldn't exist and I
would be a very lonely barnacle.*

CONTENTS

[Content Warnings](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Possessive Love](#)

[Books by B. Ripley](#)

About the Author

CONTENT WARNINGS

This book features scenes of child abuse and neglect (paranormal in nature), dubious consent, and scenes of violence and gore.

CHAPTER ONE

You are better than them, you know.”

My eyes fly open, and I breathe heavily into the darkness. It’s back again. The whispers from the corner of this motel room that make my tummy ache and my head feel woozy. I pull my sheet up to my nose and stare hard at the darkness, trying to figure out if it’s real or a dream.

“You are better.”

“Leave me alone,” I mumble into my blankets. “Please. Go away.”

It doesn’t listen. It never listens. “You are better and smarter than them.”

“Go away,” I whisper back, not knowing what else to say. I’ve tried turning the lights on to see it but it’s never there when I do. I’ve tried pretending it isn’t there, and that it’s just my imagination making things up, but I don’t make the voice happen and I know it. It’s from the corner, not from me.

“You are stronger. You are special and they are not. Do you believe this?”

I nod fast, knowing that if I don’t nod, it will keep going until I agree with it. I don’t feel like I’m smarter or stronger or any of the things the voice says I am, but part of me likes hearing it. Stronger, smarter boys who are more special wouldn’t be trapped inside this awful motel with walls that seep water when it rains and smelly carpet that sticks to their feet if they don’t wear shoes inside.

“You must believe this to be true, Brady.”

I tilt my head to the side, heart thudding in my chest. In the week since the voice started talking to me, it's never used my name. "I don't... How do you know my name?"

"I know everything about you. I knew your birth and I know your death. I have seen the hour of both."

My hands clutch the blanket tighter at his words. "I'm dying?"

The voice chuckles, low and rumbly. "No. Not for a good while, and not at all if you make the right choices."

"I don't want to die," I whisper, as my heart stutters with fear. I'm only seven, I have so many things I want to do still.

"You are not dying, Brady. You will get to see all the things you wish to and do all of the things you want."

"You know the in-between parts of my life too?"

"Yes, and you must believe me when I say you are better than all of them."

"Better than who?"

"Everyone on this earth, Brady. You are better than all of them."

"I don't think I am."

"You are," the voice insists, a hint of a snarl at being disagreed with.

"Okay," I blurt, heart beating at a rabbit pace at its tone. "I believe you. I am."

The voice hesitates, and I can feel that I'm being watched. It's like that scary dog that lives down the street. It never snaps or barks, but it watches, and you get the feeling that if it weren't for the chain holding him back, he'd tear you to pieces with his teeth. Whatever is watching me feels like it also has teeth, and that makes me shiver on my mattress. Finally, after what feels like a long time, I tell myself I'm making things up again and force myself to lay down on my pillows. I always get in trouble for telling stories and making things feel so much better than they are. There's no reason this voice should

be any different. Once, I got the kids in class to believe the reason my dad wasn't around was because he was filming a movie with The Rock. Those two days where everyone treated me like I was better than the scary kid from the dirty motel I lived in with my mom were the best days of my life.

A soft shuffling noise rises from the corner, and I sit up again in bed, staring hard at the darkness.

"You didn't leave?" I ask, whispering so nobody can hear me.

"I will always be by your side. You are mine."

"I'm yours?"

"You are promised to me," the voice says. "What is yours will become mine, and I will take us places you can only dream of."

I pause, a bit confused about what it's saying, but also thinking of all the cool places I want to go. Across the ocean, there's a whole world I want to see filled with trees and jungle vines and elephants. I love elephants. And snakes! Oh, I love snakes. I once caught a garter snake and wanted to bring it home with me, but my mom said it was gross. She made me let it go, but I know it was a good snake.

"You were correct. It was a good snake."

I jump a little bit in my bed and pull my blankets up to my nose again, like that will somehow keep me safe. There are no adults here in this room tonight. My mom is at work, and I've been told to be quiet, keep the door locked and sleep good because I have school in the morning. If this voice is going to hurt me, I don't have anything to hurt it back with.

"I will never hurt you."

"How'd you know I was thinking that?"

"Aren't all snakes good snakes?" it asks, but that's not what I'm talking about.

"Not that. How did you know I was thinking you might hurt me?"

The voice giggles softly. “I know all there is to know about you, Brady Schiff.”

It knows my last name! My tummy bursts with butterflies, and I fidget uncomfortably on my mattress. “I don’t like that.”

“I do.”

My skin prickles with goosebumps as I sense more movement coming from the dark corner. “Don’t. Um. Don’t come over here, okay?”

The shuffling sounds stop, then it goes silent for a moment before the voice speaks again. “Are you scared of me?”

“Duh.” The word falls out of my mouth before I can even stop it, and I clap a hand over my lips as my eyes widen in fear. I’m shaking now as the movement starts again, my knuckles so white where they hold onto my blanket that they look like they’re glowing in the moonlight coming through the thin curtains.

“Don’t be scared,” the voice says, getting closer to me than it’s ever been before. “I am not going to harm you. I couldn’t even if I wanted to.”

“What do you mean?”

“You are meant for me.”

That weird statement again. I don’t understand what it means. “Like a friend?”

Everything stops at once before a soft giggle meets my ears. “Yes. I am your friend, Brady. I am always your friend.”

It shuffles forward, and the moonlight ripples over its form. It’s smaller than I thought. No more than a boy like me, skinny and short with pitch black hair atop its head. But its eyes. Its dreadful, glowing green eyes with pupils the shape of a sliver of almond. Like a cat, but not any cat I’ve ever seen in real life. It moves closer, and I can see its flat nose and tiny stumps of black protruding from the top of its head, nearly hidden by its hair. Are those... horns?

“What are you?” I whisper, reaching a hand from beneath my blanket towards it, even though I’m still shaking like a leaf

in the wind.

“I am Roth,” it says. *He* says.

“Roth,” I repeat, still reaching for him like by touching him I can make it feel more real. “But what are you though?”

I lower my hand as he pauses, lifting a finger to his lip like he’s thinking. His lips purse twice, and his flat nose twitches a bit like a bunny’s. I almost smile before I remember I’m scared of him.

“I am a boy.”

“You are not a boy.” No boys I know look like that.

“I am a special boy,” he corrects, flashing me a smile of shiny white sharpened teeth.

“Special like me?”

“Oh no. Not like you at all, yet... not quite so different.”

“Are you seven like me?” I just turned seven. My mom said it’s going to be a good year because it’s a lucky number. I wished for that to come true on the candle she put on the cupcake she brought home from the restaurant she works at.

“I am,” Roth agrees, his glowing eyes flickering in the darkness. “I was born on the day you were born. At the very minute.”

“Did you get a present for your birthday?” I got to spend five whole dollars at the dollar store, and I picked out a really cool dinosaur robot toy and a puzzle of a bright yellow Porsche sportscar with so many pieces I’m not sure I’ll ever get it finished. I love it though. Someday I’m going to have my own car and it’s going to be a Porsche one.

“Not a Dodge Viper?” Roth asks, ignoring my question about his presents. His eyes flicker again like he’s laughing at me, and I remember he can read my brain somehow.

“No, I like snakes to be snakes and cars to be cars.”

Roth tilts his head to the side like he’s thinking before he nods at me once. “That makes sense.”

I think I forgot that I'm scared of him. Roth feels friendly. He looks like a monster from a comic book, but he hasn't tried to eat me or hurt me.

Roth laughs, the sound starting as a low chuckle before ending in a higher pitched giggle. "I will not eat you. I don't eat children."

"Are you really my friend?"

"Yes, Brady."

"So, you're coming to school now? And you'll play with me?" I don't have any friends. Once, there was a new kid who was kind of my friend, but he learned quickly to avoid me like the rest of the kids do. They just don't like me for some reason. My teachers try to be nice to me but even they move away from me when I get near, like they don't want to be around me at all. I don't know why. I'm a good kid, I think, and I shower all the time at the motel, so I know I'm not smelly.

"I can't," Roth says, sounding a bit sad about it.

"Oh." I'm a bit sad too.

"But I will come at night when the moon is high and the skies are dark. We can play then. I would like to learn how to play."

"You can have my blue car," I offer. That's my best one. It's electric blue with bright green racing stripes down the sides. It was boring white before I painted it with nail polish my mom's friend gave her. She didn't like the colors for her nails, but they're perfect car colors.

Roth smiles, but his eyes are starting to fade. The flickering flames within them look like they're snuffing themselves out slowly and his face is drooping. "I must go. You need to sleep."

"I was sleeping before you woke me up," I protest, stretching my hand out to him again. I need to touch him so that I know this isn't a dream. "And I have so many questions you haven't answered. What kind of special boy are you? Where did you come from? Do you have a home? Do you

have parents? When I wake up are you going to be disappeared? Are those horns?"

Roth chuckles softly as he reaches out and takes my hand in his. His skin is fiery hot, and I flinch a bit as he grasps my fingers tight. Slowly, he leans forward and flattens my hand against his head, letting me feel the two small bumps that rest there. They're hard against my palm, but velvety soft like they're covered in downy suede. My mom had a pair of boots that felt like this before when we had a house we lived in, and I close my eyes as I run my hand over the soft nubs on Roth's head.

"I must go," Roth announces, pulling out of my touch. I open my eyes and see that the darkness in the corner has gotten even darker somehow. That shouldn't be possible, but it's true all the same.

"Will you come back?"

"Always," he promises, before turning towards the pitch-black corner where the light is being swallowed up. I stare as he disappears into it, blinking as I try to figure out what I just saw. In silence, I watch and wait for him to come back. Or at least to speak again. After a few moments, my eyes are drooping shut, though, and I lay back on my bed.

"You are better than them all, Brady Schiff," Roth whispers out of the darkness, his voice tired and gentle. "Believe me. We are meant for great things."

"I know," I say to the corner as sleep takes me.

CHAPTER TWO

Brady,” my mom calls out. “You better be fast asleep in there, young man.”

I quickly click my flashlight off and stuff the comic book I’d been reading under my blankets, laying back on my pillow so I can pretend to be fast asleep. I was tucked into bed a little while ago, but I’m not tired at all. There’re too many new sounds here and I’m not used to them at all. Besides, I’m waiting for someone to come see me and that’s more important than sleeping. The door to my brand-new bedroom creaks open slowly, and I can hear my mom’s footsteps sneak in. I squeeze my eyes shut and pretend to snore, just a little bit so she thinks I’m not awake.

“You’re a terrible liar, kid.” I don’t move, because clearly this is a trap to catch me awake. Even though we just moved into this new apartment today, and I’ve been excited all day about having my own bedroom for the first time in my life, I do have school in the morning.

My mom laughs softly as I snore a bit louder to prove that I’m sleeping, but she clearly knows I’m not. She grabs my ribcage and gives it a little squeeze. I jitter a bit as that one squeeze turns into a full-on tickle, then open my eyes and laugh, trying my best to escape her as her fingers chase my ribs across the bed. Finally, she stops, and I open my eyes to find her smiling face looking down at me. Mom’s been really happy today, her eyes brighter than they’ve been in a long time. She worked really hard to get us into this apartment, meeting with so many people to get money and sign leases and

get us stuff to put into it. Earlier today, she said that we're never going back to the motel, and I hope that's true.

I don't want to go back there. This bedroom I have now is painted a light blue, which is one of my favorite colors, and I have my own bed with a brand-new comforter that nobody else has ever slept in. My toys and comics sit on the floor in a box, but Mom has promised that as soon as her paycheck comes in, we can go to the thrift store and find a desk and some shelves so I have a place to put all my stuff. The landlord here will let us hang things if we're careful and don't put too many holes in the walls, so I might even see if I can get some cool posters. I've never had a space I could fill with stuff just for me before, and there isn't a musty scent on anything in this whole apartment.

"Can't sleep?" Mom asks.

I can't, but not for reasons I can tell her. I've never told her about Roth and how he comes to visit me late at night to hang out while she's at work. It feels like a secret I should keep to myself, but I'm pretty worried he's not going to be able to find me tonight. I told him the last time he came to see me that we were moving soon, and he says he can find me anywhere, but I'm just not sure. This apartment building is a far ways away from the motel, in the middle of a bunch of houses and stores with a park down the block that I can go run around in. Mom says one of these days that she doesn't have to work, we're going to take our baseball gloves and go play catch in the open green space, but I know it won't be the same if I don't have my best friend around. Instead of talking about Roth and my concerns he won't find me, I shrug and lay back onto my new, clean pillow.

"I'm not tired." I won't be tired until after Roth leaves because I want to show him my new room so badly.

My mom settles onto the bed beside me and smooths my hair with her hand. "You're going to have a long day tomorrow if you don't get some rest."

"Maybe I could stay home?" I ask. "Maybe I don't have to go to school."

She laughs softly, shaking her head. “I have to work, kiddo. I’d love to take a day too, but bills won’t pay themselves.” I nod because bills are things she worries about so much, and I know it means a lot for her to finally have a job that’s during the daytime now instead of the nights she used to work. She ruffles my hair with her hand for a second. “You’re a good kid, Brady. Get some sleep, okay?”

“Okay.”

Mom leans forward and kisses my forehead before making her way to the door of my room. She steps out of the doorway and grasps the doorknob, gently pulling it closed as a “love you” leaves her lips. I call out that I love her too as the door closes. The silence feels so loud as her footsteps carry down the hallway away from me and disappear. I swear I can hear my own heart beating as I lay in my bed and stare at the darkest corners of my new room.

“Come on, Roth,” I whisper, willing my friend to come see me. Another moment of silence comes before I hear a faint shuffling noise in the corner by the closet. Roth slowly comes into view, and I feel my heart relax inside me. “You found me.”

“I will always find you,” he whispers, though he looks different tonight. Roth shuffles out from the corner and makes his way to my bed wearing a pair of tattered black pants. His tail pokes through a hole in the back of them, and I grin as it whips through the air. I’m pretty sure my friend isn’t a human, but I don’t care. He’s frickin’ cool looking. I only wish I could tell the bullies at my school that I do have a friend and that my friend has a tail and horns and a neat bat nose that twitches when he thinks, but they’d probably think I’ve gone bananas. Besides, a piece of me knows that there is no way Roth could be real. I ignore that piece of me, because he’s the only friend I’ve got, and I don’t want to know he isn’t real because then that means I’m all alone again.

Even if I made him up, it’s easier than being alone all the time.

“How did you know where I was?”

Roth looks around the room with a small smile on his lips. “I can feel your heartbeat. It ripples inside mine like a butterfly.”

Roth’s awesome, but sometimes he says weird things like that, and I don’t know how to respond. It feels like the words are bigger than I could ever understand. Instead of words, I just nod like I get what he’s talking about.

“This is a good place for you,” he states, still scrutinizing my room. “Safer. Cleaner. What is mine should always be safe and clean.”

I nod again, at another loss for words. Roth hops onto my bed and turns to me, but his smile doesn’t reach his glowing green eyes. Adjusting how he’s sitting, I watch his face wrinkle and his nose twitch a bit like he’s got something going on inside his head.

“What’s wrong?” I ask as he pulls his tail around his waist like he’s hiding.

“Nothin’.”

“Roth. We’re friends, right?”

His green eyes meet mine and a small smile curls his lips at the edges. “We are more than friends, Brady Schiff.”

He’s always saying stuff like that too, and it makes me feel all warm inside like a hug. I nod. “Yeah, so what’s wrong?”

Roth looks away, and I can see his bat nose twitching again before he slowly picks up the end of his tail and holds it up to me in both of his hands. I lean forward, and though I can’t see much of what he’s showing me, I can tell that the skin that covers the end of his tail looks bloodied, like he’s got it slammed in a door or something.

“What happened?”

“I got feathers,” he whispers, looking at his tail forlornly. “They were beautiful feathers, and I wanted to show them to you, but... they’re gone.”

“Why?”

“My father does not like feathers. He says I should not have them.” Roth cups his tail between his hands and holds it up to his face. “He pulled them all out, but they were beautiful. I wanted to give you one to keep so you’d know I’m always going to be there for you.”

“Will they grow back?” I whisper, leaning forward to eye the rest of his tail as a longing for one of his feathers fills me. It feels almost like he’s offering me something special, a treasure of sorts, and I am so sad that his father plucked them all out.

If I had a feather, would he become more real to me? Would it confirm that Roth is real and not just my imagination running wild because I’m lonely?

“I don’t know if they will regrow.” He sighs, letting go of his tail. It hits the bed with a soft thunk and flicks a couple of times like he’s a bit angry.

“Does it hurt?”

“No, not too bad. It’s mostly itchy.”

I gently place my hand on his whip-like tail where it flicks around on the bed like an angry snake. It slaps my hand a couple of times before settling down, and I look up to see a small smile on Roth’s face.

“I do have something new to show you though, in place of a feather.”

Roth always seems to have new things to show me. His growing horns that sprout from the top of his head and tilt backwards, the thin tail coming out from the base of his spine, the sharp teeth filling in the gaps in his mouth. There’s always something new and unique to learn about him, and I can’t help but feel a tiny bit unimpressive when I’m around him. Roth is becoming something like a comic book creature, and I am growing up a regular old human, just like everyone else in the world.

“You are not like everyone else,” Roth corrects as that thought flits through my brain.

“I’m boring, though.”

“How could you say that? You are fascinating and wonderful. You can go places and see things up close that I only get to see in pictures. Brady, you can eat popisculls and panned cakes and go to beaches and stand on sand. Those are incredible things.”

I smile a little bit, recalling the trip to the beach I told him all about. My mom took me there for a whole weekend last summer, and though he gets the words wrong, Roth has been absolutely fascinated by popsicles, sand, and pancakes since I first tried to describe them to him. Still, I’m not convinced I’m as amazing as he thinks I am.

“You are. I promise. Besides, if you were not beautifully made, would I have put effort into learning how to be like you? Look what I can do now.”

I watch carefully as Roth shuffles off the bed, takes a step back and closes his eyes. I can’t help but move closer to him, sliding on my new sheets until I’m at the edge of the bed like I have no choice but to follow where he goes. I like being by him. Roth makes me calm inside and fills me with a fuzzy feeling I can’t quite put into words but know is a good thing. I probably moved too close because without even opening his eyes, Roth reaches out a hand and gently nudges me away. I can feel my cheeks burning a bit in embarrassment, but that’s forgotten as his entire face scrunches up, bat nose twitching and horns shimmering. He holds his breath, squeezing his hands into fists at his sides, and I get a bit worried he’s about to pass out on my bedroom floor. I’m about to stop him to remind him to breathe when I see it.

Slowly, his horns start to disappear like they’re being swallowed up into his head. His nose moves on his face, filling out and perking upwards the tiniest bit, like a human’s nose. Even his tail slowly shrinks until it’s no longer visible through the hole in his pants, and his ashen skin turns the color of peaches in the summertime as his hair brightens from its usual pitch black to a warm brown.

“Roth,” I breathe out as I stare at him. “You look like...”

“Like you?” he asks, sounding so hopeful, but I shake my head. He doesn’t look like me, but he looks human. He looks handsome, and I can feel my cheeks reddening the tiniest bit as I have that thought.

“You look good,” I settle on.

He seems to appreciate that word and gives me the biggest grin I’ve ever seen, normal human sized teeth showing in his mouth instead of the row of sharpened points he usually has. “I am glad you believe I look good. I learned it for you. For when we are older, and you take me to the beach.”

“Sure,” I respond, though I’m a little bit sad because what if I forget about him when I’m older and lose the ability to pretend he’s real?

“I am real,” Roth murmurs, closing his green eyes and shaking his head. “You’ll see. Someday. You’ll learn everything I know, Brady, and you’ll know that I would never lie to you.”

“Why can’t I know now?” I ask, as I’ve asked time and time again.

Roth cocks his head to the side, opening his eyes and staring at me like he’s weighing my request carefully. Finally, he sighs and shakes his head again. “You aren’t ready to believe me yet and if I tell you, you’ll send me away for good. I don’t want you to send me away.”

“I wouldn’t.” I know I wouldn’t. Roth is the only friend I have. The only one I can count on other than my mother. He might be make-believe, but if he is, my imagination has created a wonderful thing for me to have by my side.

“Tell me about the seagulls?” Roth requests, his human teeth flashing as he smiles at me. I grin back, because he loves the stories of seagulls as much as he loves the rest of the story about the beach. He thinks the noises they make are hilarious and sometimes laughs so loud at my impression that I think my mom might wake up and catch him in my room.

I move over in my bed, and Roth joins me, crawling up onto my sheets and settling down super close to my side. We

prop ourselves up against the fresh, clean light blue wall behind our heads and stretch our toes out towards the end of the bed. I glance over at him, and he smiles back at me, leaning in and nudging me with his elbow.

“I am so glad you’re mine,” he whispers.

“I’m glad I’m yours too.” I am glad to have a friend like Roth, who comes to me late at night and tells me how special I am. Who learned to look like me because he thinks I’m good even if I’m just a boring human and, even though he could be make-believe, would give me a feather if he had any to give.

CHAPTER THREE

Please, Father. Don't do this."

I struggle at the clawed hands wrapped around my arms, kicking my feet wildly in the air as my tail flicks angrily behind me. My screams echo through the granite throne room where my father stands at the window, pretending he can't hear me. He tilts his head towards the everlasting moon that hangs above Hell like a shimmering silver beacon, and for a moment, I think he's going to turn his head to me. He sighs and waves a hand instead. "Get on with it."

I shriek and kick and spit as I'm dragged away from him, across the shiny granite by two demons much larger than me.

I'm only a boy.

Just a special little boy.

I don't know what I've done to make this happen. I was good, I heeded his words and warnings. When he caught me a few days ago coming back home after visiting with Brady, he'd been so mad. I promised I wouldn't do it again and didn't even fight him when he carved the runes into my back that keep me from going near the portal, even though the thought of not seeing Brady until I'm older stings inside me like a wound. I didn't even cry as his hot knife carved into my skin. I was a strong demon, the way he raised me to be.

"Father," I cry out again, hoping to catch his attention. Needing him to look at me so he can see the terror in my eyes. He's never been a kind father, but he's always been a just one, and I don't understand why I've been yanked from my bed in the middle of the night.

Father doesn't turn to me once as I'm hauled from the great throne room and out into the clearing behind the only home I've ever known. I'm still kicking and spitting and trying my best to get away. These two big demons holding onto me won't budge an inch, though, and I am terrified.

I've been punished before, but not like this.

Never ever like this.

Maybe it's because I wouldn't let him take my feathers again. He came to pluck them when they grew back the morning after my last visit with Brady, and I slapped him right in the face, hard enough that my palm left a mark. He had looked as surprised by it as I had felt inside at that moment. He'd struck me back, twice as hard as I'd hit him, but his eyes had still looked bewildered as he'd left my room that night. Father spent the rest of that night and all of the next day in the seers rooms, listening to their predictions about the future and pretending I didn't exist, but didn't come for my feathers again as I'd thought he would.

And then today, I was ripped from my bed by the two demons that hold me and brought before my father in his throne room with no explanation.

It has to be about the feathers.

"You can have my feathers!" I shriek as I'm dragged across the clearing. "You can pluck them out again! I promise!"

No response comes as the doors to the throne room slam shut. I take a deep breath of the cool night air and tilt my head upwards to the same everlasting moon my father is staring at. It shimmers in the darkness, illuminating the dirty ground beneath me, but stops short when it reaches the edge of the clearing where the dead hollow forest that circles the castle begins. My heart races inside my chest as I look forward to see where I'm being taken. Ahead of me, I can see the hole in the ground, and seeing the expanse of black carved into the ash laden dirt makes me scream even louder. I am certain every single half soul in Hell can hear me but nobody comes to my rescue.

“Please, Legion,” I beg, turning my head upwards to the drones pulling me along. “Please, let me go.”

“I cannot,” both of the demons speak at the same time, in the same voice. Legion freaks me right out. I don’t understand how one entity can be spread across so many bodies. They’d be pretty fascinating if they didn’t make my skin prickle with unease. Last time I asked Miloriel, my brother, he said that Legion had at least a thousand bodies that all come together to share a single voice and a sole consciousness. Their work is supposed to be for the greater good of Hell and they are only as strong as their weakest body.

I can’t see how what they’re doing to me is the greater good.

“Where is Miloriel?” I demand as my feet bump over the dead grass and rocks beneath me. Maybe he can talk some sense into Father.

“Your brother cannot help you. He has been sent above with a lie in his ears I could not dispel. He is no longer your ally.”

I am stunned into silence as despair creeps further up my throat. Miloriel has always been a protector of mine, keeping me safe from the worst our father could dish out and sheltering me from his rage as best as he can. The fact that Father has sent my brother up to Earth and told him some kind of lie to make him turn on me makes my heart beat a little bit faster in my chest.

“What did I do that was so wrong? Father can have my feathers if that’s it. I will apologize for striking him in the face.”

“That is not the error.”

“What is it then?”

Legion stops walking forward, my arms clutched tight in its claws as both faces turn down to me. “You were born.”

Confusion trickles through me as they start walking again. How can my crime be that of my own birth? I didn’t ask for that. I didn’t call to Lucifer from the blood river and demand

for him to pluck my half soul out. I didn't beg for breath and bone, and I didn't ask for him to call me his Second Son. He did that. He named me Prince of Hell on my naming day beneath the everlasting moon and provided me with an earthly mate to stand at my side for all eternity. Lucifer chose to give me life, and I don't see how that is my fault. "I don't understand."

"It is foretold," the drones murmur as I'm dragged to the edge of the hole in the ground. In a single motion, they haul me upwards and dangle me over the darkened expanse below as I cry out in fear. "You will cause much ruin, little demon."

"Please, Legion. Please don't put me in there. I promise, I won't do whatever Father thinks I'm going to do. I promise."

"I must do this, Bezeroth. Do not seek to know why."

My head scrambles a little bit as I try to think of a new way to get him to let me go and then it hits me. "I'll go to Earth. I'll go above and I won't come back. I have a mate, Legion. A mate! He will be waiting for me to come back, and I must go to him. I won't come back here. I will claim him under the moon on our twenty-first birthday like I'm supposed to do, and I won't even come home to Hell ever again. I'll give up my title and my throne and everything. I just want my mate. Please, Legion. Please don't take me from what is mine."

Legion pauses again, staring into my face with two sets of their many eyes. Slowly, they pull me close, placing my ears beside their lips. It almost feels like a hug, this warmth and closeness, and I almost let myself believe it's over and that I will be let go.

"We will come for you," Legion whispers into each of my ears with two of their voices. "Be patient and silent. Give yourself to the ash and dust, and drink deeply the earth around you. Fill your lungs and marrow until there is no space for breath or blood. Sleep and rest, your work is not yet done. You will claim your mate. It is foretold."

Legion pulls me away from them and holds me out again, dangling my body over the hole in the ground like I'm no

more than a rag doll. They give me a small stern nod before loosening their grasp on my arms. I tumble downwards into the cold, dark earth, landing with a soft thud deep within the hole in the ground. Legion looks down at me from the top, the everlasting moon shimmering blood red behind their heads instead of the pure silver it usually is. This is not a good omen, and the sight of it makes my knees quake. I open my mouth to ask, but a look from the demons above makes me think twice. Slowly, each drone lifts a finger to their lips, reminding me to be silent. I nod as the first shovel full of dirt hits my upturned face, but Legion frowns, giving me a small shake of their heads. With both right hands, they quickly mimic a drinking motion, and I glance at the dirt around me, trying to figure out what the hell they're trying to get at.

“Drink deeply the earth,” I whisper, reaching down and sifting the ash and ruin through my fingers. It's colder than I expected, though it trickles like a liquid. I grab a handful and put it into my mouth, tasting the bitter grains of decay. Swallowing it down quickly before my stomach has a notion to make me spit it out, I turn my head upwards to see a small nod from Legion's heads.

He continues shoveling dirt down onto me, and I cram handful after handful of fetid dirt into my mouth, filling myself with earth as he has asked of me. I don't know why, but I know if I ask, I won't be given any answers, so I simply do as I've been told. Soon, the dirt is up to my head, and I am stuffed, my belly bloating beneath the ground that holds me. I'm not sure I can get more in, and I can't move my hands, but I start chomping at the watery dirt around me anyway, filling myself until the dirt feels as if it's about to pour from my eyes and ears.

Legion says nothing as they shovel the dirt down on me methodically, their eyes connected to mine as best as the two drones can connect with one being. They falter a moment, just a tiny split second, before shoveling down the last pile of dirt that will touch my body. The one that will cover my eyes and nose. Though I am rippling with fear beneath the earth, I hold onto their words about coming back for me so I can claim my mate.

As the last shovelful of dirt blots out the light of the crimson everlasting moon above, I close my eyes and think about Brady. About my friend who will someday be my love and the other half of my soul that rests within his heart. I can't feel his heartbeat beneath the earth, and without it fluttering inside my own, the emptiness inside me aches, the hollow where the other half of my soul should exist heavy like a lead weight. Not since I first tracked down my mate when we were just seven years old, have I felt this aching loneliness and despair. I want to scream this crushing loneliness out of me, claw my way out of this hole and rush to the nearest portal to go find him. To reassure myself that he is real and that his heart beats with mine still. I wiggle a bit in the dirt, testing out how much give it has, but I am well and truly stuck in this place.

I can hear the thuds of more dirt landing on top of me and in my mind, I can picture Legion above, shoveling it down to flatten out the spot in the clearing in the moonlight, but inside the ground it is nothing but dark. Dirt presses into my nose and ears, slowly trickling inside my body in inches the longer I linger beneath. I won't die down here, I am immortal, but lingering awake with the knowledge that I will not be able to claw my way out will be torture. I see now what Legion has asked me to do. The dirt this far below the crust of Hell is putrid, but I can sense something woven into it. A thread of something that's lulling me into calmness, my heart slowing and eyes closing as the ground cradles me in this tomb created for me. Magic, perhaps, though it feels ancient and scarcely used. If I don't fight it, I can let go. I can drift into the sleep Legion's told me of peacefully with hopes that they will come and wake me soon.

Fill my lungs and marrow. Drink deeply.

With one last thought of Brady, I open my mouth and let the dirt inside, filling up the only spaces left inside me. I hesitate as my throat fills with the fetid ash and decay but force myself to trust in Legion.

If I want to see Brady again, I must inhale.

If I intend on claiming him when we are of age, I have to draw the liquid dirt into my lungs, let it trickle inside and fill the spaces where breath exists.

I have to.

I must.

For Brady.

I inhale.

CHAPTER FOUR

BRADY, 13 YEARS LATER

“You look stunning.”

I smile and nod at the woman about to take my picture. She’s got that look people always give me, like they can’t quite believe I’m a real person. I’ve seen it time and time again and it never gets old. “Thank you.”

She swallows hard, her cheeks flushing pink. Raising her camera, she starts snapping images as I put on a stone face and make sure I tilt my head the slightest amount so that the overhead light catches whatever it can of my features so that the best parts of me are highlighted. My nose for sure, and my blue eyes. I may be shaped like a typical model, but I am anything but typical. This is something I have known since I was just a little boy growing up traveling with my mother from seedy motel to seedy motel. People used to avoid me, turn their nose up at me and edge away from me when I got near, but now?

They adore me. Can’t get enough of me. Would gobble me up with a spoon if I was ice cream. As I grew the features that were once awkward and uncomfortable have formed into a chiseled jaw and a body made of finely cut stone. I am a bit wider in my shoulders than most runway models and not quite as tall as others, but instead of those features getting me turned away from jobs, I have designers clamoring for me to wear their clothing and walk in their shows. Versatility is my strong suit, and my gorgeous features have carried me far in this career choice I made when I was basically still a kid. Much farther than I ever expected when I walked into my agent’s

office at the age of eighteen, clutching a portfolio of pictures that were taken on a cell phone camera anyway.

Do I understand it? No. Not in the least bit, but after a lifetime of being the outcast, I am so eager to be welcomed and wanted that the reason behind it hardly matters.

“What are you doing later?” the photographer asks as she wraps up the sequence of images.

“It’s my birthday,” I respond with a small smile that only I understand. This will be the first birthday of mine where there will be something happening. I’ve got plans with my best friend Milo and we’re heading out to a fancy nightclub to pretend we belong there. Maybe if I’m lucky, I’ll be able to schmooze with some actual celebrities along the way. I’m always on the lookout for opportunities and you never know when something will fall into your lap at just the right time. There will be no calls from family members with birthday greetings because there are no family members left. My mother passed away from cancer that crept up out of nowhere and silently cut her life short before either of us knew what was happening. She was gone only a handful of months after I signed my first contract with Felicity six years ago and my father has never been around, so birthdays have become quiet.

Last year, I was in Italy doing a shoot and there was no time for anything special aside from a bowl of gelato. Honestly, until I met Milo, it never occurred to me that I could celebrate myself on my birthday. Growing up, everything felt small and quiet—from the motel rooms my mom and I lived in, to the celebrations we had. Christmas was breakfast at a diner and a stocking filled with candy and dollar store toys, Easter was a handful of chocolate eggs in a basket and birthdays were greeted much the same. I’m not complaining. My mom did the very best she could, and all things laid end to end, I lacked for nothing in childhood. Sure, it looked different, and I spent much of my time alone, but I was fed and clothed and loved, which is more than some kids can say.

And in the moments there was nothing but silence, I knew Roth would come to me. My imaginary friend who whispered to me about how special I was always felt a little less like

something I'd made up and a little more like something real. I outgrew him and moved on from make believe shortly after my eleventh birthday, far later than most kids keep their imaginary friends around, but I think I needed him to be there when I had nobody else.

Sometimes, in the quiet, lonely moments, I still check the corners of rooms where he could always be found before, and it aches the tiniest bit that he's not there anymore.

"Well, happy birthday," the photographer says, breaking into my train of thought. "How old does this make you?"

I scowl the tiniest bit. I'm getting old for this industry and I know it. There are younger models coming up behind me, and soon enough, I'll be pushed aside in favor of their fresher faces. I've walked runways all over the world, and the thought that my career as I know it could be over soon is enough to rattle me up inside. I glance at the photographer who's still waiting for my answer.

"Twenty-four," I spit out, trying hard to not sound disgusted by it. In the grand scheme of things, it isn't old at all, but in runway model years I'm well into my twilight hours and there are younger, fresher models coming up behind me quickly. It won't be long before I start losing the jobs I get so easily now.

"You're beautiful," she murmurs as she takes a step towards me. She takes another step like she's being pulled in my direction and reaches out a hand like she's about to touch me. I back away from her quickly, pulling my arms around myself for protection like I've done thousands of times before. Aside from Milo, who is apparently immune to whatever is wrong with me, it always ends the same when people touch me. At first, they want to feel my skin and my warmth, but slowly their eyes grow wide in uncertainty and their smiles start to fade. Once, on a date with a guy I met online, all it took was a brush of my hand for him to start fidgeting uncomfortably in his chair. We didn't even make it to dessert before he bolted from the restaurant like the hounds of Hell were nipping at his heels. I never saw him again, and I've all but sworn off dating. I've learned that I can make do with

Milo for company and handling other needs on my own. As I move away, the photographer startles, then shakes her head like she's not certain what just happened. Her terrified eyes meet mine and her face pales beneath the blonde ponytail on the top of her head. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to. I'm so sorry."

My agent swoops into the scene and shoots the photographer the dirtiest look known to mankind. Felicity doesn't come to every single shoot, but today she called me early in the day to let me know that she'd be here, and at this moment, I'm not sure if that's a good thing or a bad thing. Probably good for me, terrible for the poor photographer who, like so many others, was drawn into whatever trap my body set for her while she was looking at me through her lens. Felicity's hazel eyes smolder with disgust and her lips are set in the thinnest line as she looks over the photographer like she's nothing more than a bug beneath the heel of her shoe. There's a reason I stay signed with Felicity, even though she has a reputation for being a difficult bitch, and that look is it. The photographer blanches and backs away slowly, like she's fearing some kind of unholy repercussion for moving to touch me.

"I'm fine," I murmur as Felicity turns her back to the photographer and stares into my eyes. She searches my face for a few moments before nodding curtly and turning around.

"Are you finished?" she barks at the photographer who looks like she's about to fall over. She wavers on her feet under Felicity's scrutiny, and I almost feel bad for her. The photographer nods, shaking a bit where she stands before backing away completely and crossing the room. She sits down on a chair and leans forward, cradling her head in her hands. I can see her fingers rubbing at her temples like she's getting a headache or something. Her assistant rushes over with a bottle of water, and I can see the stricken look on her face when she lifts her head out of her hands.

"Is she okay?" I ask, watching as the photographer wavers on her seat.

“She’ll be fine,” Felicity responds, dismissing the photographer with a flick of her hand. “You did good, Brady. There are some definite winners in there.”

“They’re just headshots.” That’s all this was supposed to be. Updating the images of my face and body from all angles so I can take them to castings and designers can remember who I am long after the moment has passed. I’m not even wearing anything fancy or flowery or designed. A simple white tank top and a pair of black jeans are all I have on my body, aside from the boxers hidden beneath.

“Not that you need them.” Felicity laughs, shaking her head. “You’re hardly forgettable. You’re a pretty special guy, Brady Schiff.”

I know.

I know this.

I’ve known this since I was a little child in a motel room all by himself with only voices in a corner to talk to.



“IT WAS SO STRANGE,” I shout to Milo over the loud music pumping through the nightclub. I’m still focused on all the weirdness at the photoshoot earlier today with the photographer trying to touch me even though I shouldn’t be. I’ve tried time and time again to explain this strange touch thing to Milo, but he’s never been affected by it and doesn’t understand.

“Dude, what’s really strange is that it’s your birthday and you’re not drunk yet.” Milo gives my rum and coke a meaningful look, a lock of his chin length platinum blond hair flopping in front of his stormy blue eyes. He raises a hand and pushes the offending hair behind his ear before glancing out across the packed dance club. Until I met Milo at a casting about a year ago, I thought that hair color only came from a box. He was delighted by that fact, knowing that paired with

his unique eye color, his hair made him irresistible. We both have something that makes us special, he'd commented at the time, and I couldn't help but agree. Milo is thin and lanky, as tall as a weeping willow, exactly as a model should be. He's hardly a pushover though. My best friend carries fire inside his belly that is rarely tempered and when he gets angry, it's less of a passing thing and more of an all-consuming rage. I've talked him off many ledges over the past year and will probably continue to do so, because despite being hot headed, Milo always has my back.

"Drink," he comments, tapping my glass with his fingertip. I dutifully lift the cup to my lips and swallow what's inside in a few short gulps as he nods approvingly. "And now we go for another."

"How drunk am I getting tonight?" I laugh, placing the empty cup on the table in front of us.

"Until you can't see your own feet. Let's go."

My laugh carries us over to the bar, Milo dragging me by the hand like I'm some child, though it's necessary if we don't want to get separated. We sidle up to the crowd at the bar and wait our turn to order, though I know it won't be a long wait. Already people are starting to move from where we stand, pushed away by the discomfort I seem to cause wherever I go. Around us, the music booms and thuds, some song with heavy bass crashing out of the speakers. I revel in it, my body moving with the bass ever so slightly where I wait for the bartender.

"I want to dance," I comment, leaning into Milo's ear so he can hear me.

He nods and is about to say something in return, but the bartender makes his way over and draws his attention. Milo orders for both of us, his bottle of beer and my rum and coke. He makes a face as he hands my drink to me when the bartender has finished making it. Despite having a sweet tooth, Milo drinks beer. That's it, that's all. If I'm going to get drunk, though, it's not going to be on bitter beer. My choice is always something much sweeter, laden with sugar and flavor to hide

as much of the alcohol taste as possible. I grab the straw with my lips as we make our way out of the crowd in front of the bar, and sputter slightly as I swallow down the burn.

“A double?”

Milo grins and nods. “It’s your birthday, and drunk is much more fun than sober.”

If he keeps feeding me these, I’ll be well on my way soon enough. As it is, I’m wavering where I stand the littlest bit, but that could be because of the music rippling through my body like water. Without even asking if he’s coming, I make my way to the dancefloor and stand on the outskirts to finish my drink before I make my way out through the crowd of moving bodies.

Milo comes to stand beside me, sipping at his beer, but I don’t take much notice. I’m busy scanning faces on the dancefloor, seeing who’s out there and searching for celebrities to rub elbows with. La Noir isn’t a club I’ve ever been to, but Milo made sure we were on the list for the night. I’m not sure how because it’s a very exclusive place, and the line up outside was already wrapping around the block when we arrived. He has connections that I don’t have, I suppose. Milo’s been in the industry longer than me, though he has never told me how much longer. He’s cagey when it comes to his age as well. Whenever I ask, he laughs and tells me, “older than you,” and refuses to expand. It’s a bit heartening, though, to hear that he’s older than me and can still find consistent work. Gives me some hope that just because I’m aging out of the typical runway model range, that doesn’t mean my career is over just yet. My looks could carry me a bit longer as Milo’s unique features have carried him, and I can always lean further into fitness modeling if I really need work. In some ways, I’m built for it more than high fashion anyway with my broader shoulders, and I’ve done a handful of fitness shoots for athletic companies over the years.

The music fades out for a moment, and I can feel Milo tensing beside me a little bit. I glance at him and see that his jaw is ticking beneath his skin and his pouty lips are pursed like he’s suddenly angry by something. His body is tightening,

and when I follow his line of sight, I find the subject of this sudden rage bubbling off him.

Sheer across the dancefloor, nearly tucked into the corner, stands a man. A tall, well-built man with eyes that seem to glimmer out of the darkness. His outfit doesn't seem to fit in with the dazzle and glitz of a nightclub on a Saturday night. Instead of something tight and showy, he wears a pair of dark pants and a hooded sweatshirt, the white strings peeking out of the hood catching in the overhead glow and illuminating where they trail down his chest. It's strange to see among the rest of the people dressed in heels, tight pants, and glittery tops. He's staring right at Milo who is staring back in return.

"Think he wants an autograph?" I nudge Milo and grin, but he barely smiles back at me, his gaze laser focused on the man across the dancefloor.

"He's not supposed to be here," Milo murmurs, like he's talking to himself instead of me.

"Do you know him?"

Milo doesn't answer, but the way his lips purse tells me there's a story here I've not been told about. I can't help but glance in the man's direction again as I try and come up with a story for how he could know my friend and why he's apparently been looking at me all night. Ex-boyfriend maybe. Most likely. Slowly, the man's eyes move from Milo, and I can tell he's watching me now. My stomach quivers a bit as he looks me over, a small smile curling his lips at the corners. Everything else around me seems to slip away as he keeps looking me over. His eyes appear to trail down my body, and I feel at once as if I'm being appraised at a casting for a show right here in the middle of a dance club, even though I have no idea who this man is. The strobe lights flicker over his face, yet he does not move save for moving his eyes off me and back to Milo's body. He does not shy away from Milo's tight-lipped stare but he also doesn't linger long on my friend. When he flicks his gaze to me again, connecting his eyes directly to mine this time, I am nearly knocked to the ground by the weight of it.

“Oh, fuck,” I mutter as my knees go weak.

“Are you okay?” Milo asks, reaching down to stabilize me.

My body is as confused as my head is and I’m still wavering. Maybe I’m drunk. Maybe that’s what’s happening to me because for a split second, everything about his face became crystal clear and I thought I recognized those eyes. Those dreadful, beautiful green eyes.

Roth.

Those are Roth’s eyes, as impossible as it seems. As ridiculous as it is.

“Are you drunk?” Milo asks, giving me an out as I tremble inside and nod, grasping that answer and running with it. I don’t want to have to explain that I think I saw the invisible friend from my childhood at the dance club. Milo will take me to the hospital for sure, certain I’m having a breakdown of some kind. I look up across the dance floor to find that the man has disappeared, and almost laugh out loud.

Maybe I am having a breakdown or maybe I am getting drunker than I was before. There’s no way that was him. Roth was a make-believe monster created by a lonely child who just wanted a friend, not a real being that exists in this world. I shake off the thoughts and memories as best as I can, then down the last of my drink in a couple of gulps.

“Dance?” I ask Milo, finding him staring at the spot the man had just been standing. His nostrils flare and his eyes are sharp. He ignores me completely, slowly inhaling a deep lungful of air through his twitching nose. I nudge him and he glances at me for a split second, before turning away and scanning the crowd like he’s looking for someone. “Milo? Dance?”

“Maybe we should go,” he murmurs, his voice low and borderline dangerous. I’ve never heard him sound like this and it’s churning my stomach a little bit. I look out over the room quickly, trying to catch a glimpse of the man causing him to be this way, but find nothing.

“Who is he?”

“Someone I haven’t seen in a very long time.”

“Is he dangerous?”

“Very,” Milo answers, surprising me. He didn’t look it from across the room, but I have no clue who that person was. For all I know, he could be a serial killer or a puppy kicker. Or an abuser. I turn to my friend, watching as his body nearly shakes with how tight his fists are balled at his sides, the way the muscles in his neck are twitching as his eyes scan the room again and again, searching for this mystery man. Did he hurt my friend at some point in the past?

“Who is he?” I ask again, hoping for an answer.

“My brother,” Milo spits out, sounding less than pleased.

Surprise ripples through me at the admission from my tight-lipped friend. He scowls as his head swings side to side, his shrewd eyes scrutinizing the crowd carefully. If he’s this uncomfortable with the thought of his brother, then he’s definitely someone I don’t care to run into.

“Let’s go then,” I say, grabbing his hand and giving it a squeeze in my own.

Milo’s skin is cool and clammy, but he gives me a squeeze back, and I let him lead the way through the crowd of bodies heading for the door. He pulls me along with a bit more force than necessary, but I let it go because I can feel his hand trembling in mine. As we move though, I can’t seem to shake the thought that Milo’s brother had Roth’s eyes, and I find myself checking every darkened corner we pass by, just in case.

After all, Roth always liked corners the most.

CHAPTER FIVE

He is beautiful.

What is mine is as beautiful as I imagined he would be. He is lithe and strong, muscled, and perfect. Not a blemish sits on his porcelain skin, and I am fond of the quirk in his lips, one side lifting slightly higher so that every smile looks like a smirk. I will find much pleasure in putting that smirk to good use when I have claimed him.

It has been far too many years since I have seen Brady in person, and though I've tried my best to learn who he's become, the internet I have been able to scurry through while I've been stuck in bed for a week at the behest of Legion can only carry me so far. He is a model, but that is the bare minimum of who my mate has become. There are layers I want to peel back and know of him. I want to know who he is inside. What makes his heart beat faster, what kind of ice cream is his favorite and if he remembers me. I hope he remembers me, because despite everything I've been through, I haven't forgotten him. My heart knows his again now that it is above ground and seeing him is the best birthday present I could think of for myself today. The cost I'm paying now for my recklessness though is tremendous. I should have heeded Legion's warnings and stayed in bed to recover a little while longer, but I couldn't resist the pull of Brady's heartbeat any longer.

My lungs ache as I move through the night, the remnants of the soil I was buried in still tickling at my throat, though it has been two weeks since I escaped Hell and the house of my father. I pause beneath a streetlight, coughing like I've caught

a plague and expelling more quicksand earth into the gutter. To anyone else, I appear to be a drunk, expelling his guts onto the pavement, but the acrid scent of ash and rot would give me away in an instant. They'd know there was something not quite right with me despite the human shaped glamor I've pulled on from the small bit of strength I've managed to regain since leaving Hell behind. When I'm finished coughing up the fetid dirt, I tilt my head to the sky and inhale a deep breath of pure, crisp air.

How long has it been since I've smelled something so fresh? So clean and untainted by fire, decay, and burn? Not even the clean air inside my new home is quite as lovely as the air outside is to my aching lungs.

I inhale another deep breath before the coughing starts again, ash and dirt crawling up my throat to create a cloud of pitch black on the pavement at my feet. Everyone will pay for what they have done to me. Every single one of them who had a hand in seeing me banished to the ground will learn that though I am younger, that does not mean I am weak. I am pure of blood, and they will rue the day they buried me beneath the hellscape. Lucifer claimed to be scared of me then?

He should be even more terrified now that I have vengeance burning in my bones. Burying me in the ground when I was still a child is one thing but keeping me from the other half of my soul is a whole new level of spite and malice, and he will pay dearly for separating us.

My handsome mate.

Brady has become everything I knew he would. He is all that was promised to me on the day of my birth.

Our birth.

His from womb and mine from fire and brimstone.

If it wasn't for my darling brother clinging to him tonight, I would have already swooped in and taken him for myself. I scented Miloriel's muddled copper stink mingled with Brady's sweet honey from across the club, and I almost lost every ounce of my composure. How fucking dare he sneak in and

get close to what is mine after he abandoned me to fester in the ground? I had known the manner of his intentions towards Brady the moment his eyes met mine across the club, the challenge issued as clear as if he'd spoken the words aloud.

Come claim him, I dare you.

Sadly, I am in no shape to be fighting with my piss-faced big brother tonight. Not with the remnants of Hell still lingering in my body and the exhaustion taking hold. I am weaker now than I have ever been, but that will not last. When I am stronger, I will do exactly what he's dared me to do. I will take and claim what is mine, and then I will rip him apart piece by piece with my own bare hands.

As I stalk through the night, heading away from the club, I am prickling with irritation, but also excitement and an arousal that I know I will not temper by my own hand. Not tonight. I will let it simmer like a slow burning fire until the moment I sink my teeth into Brady's flesh and lay waste to everything he thinks he knows about himself.

I will release him from the prison of loneliness he has lived in since his birth and take him to all of the places I promised when we were just children.

He will be free, and so will I, from the emptiness that lingers inside both of us. I know he can feel it, the loneliness that clings to him and the feeling that something isn't quite right. It is because of that loneliness that I used to sneak through the portal in the basement of my home in Hell to seek him out when I learned of his existence as a child. I stopped being able to do that when I was buried, but those few years were the best I can recall in my memory. Even sitting alongside him on his bed while we read comic books and played with his cars and robots was enough to give me a small reprieve from the aching, desolate emptiness inside me.

And soon I won't feel it ever again.

Not since I was lifted from the pit by my father's hand and exalted to sit at his side have I been so excited, though the joy of seeing him is tempered by the silly whispering in the back of my mind that Brady still has free will and could put up a

fight. Not a good one, mind you, but he could try to keep what is inevitable from happening.

I hope he doesn't. What a waste of time that would be when so much time has already been wasted.

The sky above is a dark expanse of black dotted with starlight as I move through the streets, trying to remember how to get back to my brother's home. I thought I'd memorized the route fine, but I was so intent on following the pulses of Brady's heart that nothing looks familiar. I can still feel his heart inside mine, pulling me back towards him, but I have to ignore it for now. I stop walking and glance at the road signs above, noting I'm at the corner of second street and Oakvale Avenue. None of this makes any sense to me at all.

Shit.

I dither in the overhead streetlights, glancing from storefront to storefront but none of this is familiar. There's a neon sign glimmering in the window of what appears to be a place to buy flowers, but it reads "closed" as does the sign in the front of most of the shops along the road. The only one that appears to be open is an eating establishment of sorts, but it is filled with humans, and I don't have much strength left to keep my human form much longer.

I may have to crawl into one of the darkened alleyways to let my demon shape take form so I can regain some strength. Perhaps I could nestle myself behind a garbage can until the sun comes up, then go to one of the shops and ask to use their internet. Legion spent a bit of time showing it to me during the last week while I was stuck in bed, and I am certain I could use the google well enough to find the location of my new home. That is a good plan. It isn't perfect, but it will have to suffice. I will not tell Legion about this, though. Being lost is embarrassing and they will take this as a sign that I am not ready for what is to come yet when I know I creep closer to it every single day.

Just as I'm about to make a move down the block, a sleek black vehicle pulls over to the curb and my body tenses. The passenger window rolls down and I peer in, readying myself

for some kind of altercation but all I see is the stern face of one of Legion's many bodies. This one is built like a brick shithouse, muscled and broad with short cropped dark hair and copper-colored eyes.

"Get in," he growls, glaring at me though his eyes look far more relieved than angry. I pull open the passenger door and throw myself into the seat, slamming the door shut behind me as he winces a little bit. "Please be careful with my car."

"How did you find me?" I ask as he pulls away from the curb.

"Check your pockets."

I reach into the pouch on the front of the hooded sweater they gave me, the only clothing I own at the moment, and feel around with my fingers until I find a tiny slit cut into the fabric. Delving into it, I come in contact with something hard and smooth. "What is this?"

"It's a tracker," the demon beside me grumbles. "Legion believed you'd do something like this and also knew you'd get lost."

"You put a tracker on me?" I pull it out and wrinkle my nose at the smooth disc with an apple engraved on it. "Wait. Aren't you Legion?"

"I was. The rest have been called back to Hell. I have been removed to watch over you, and as soon as you have claimed your mate, I will be enfolded back into the collective." He doesn't sound pleased about this fact though; a hint of derision accompanies his words, and I cock my head to the side.

"Do you not want to go back to them?"

He snorts a wry laugh, shaking his head before stopping abruptly. Swallowing hard, his head shake turns to a nod as his eyes dart to mine quickly before returning to the road. "I wish to serve. It is my purpose and my duty."

"Smells like bullshit to me, pal."

"It is my duty, and it is an honor to be chosen by Legion to join the many voiced one."

I roll my eyes, sinking into my seat as I turn the tracker over and over in my hand. Humans are fascinating creatures with all the things they've created to narrow their world right down. I remember being told stories of people wandering off into the wilderness, getting hopelessly lost and, out of desperation, striking a deal with a devil to be found again. With things like the disc I hold in my hand available, the likelihood of that happening is probably slim to none. Beregor, the crusty, old demon who preys on souls of the weak and lost, much be supremely pissed off about these new developments.

I turn to the large demon beside me, watching the overhead streetlights play on his face as he drives us back to the abandoned mansion Legion placed me in when they retrieved me from the ground. "What do I call you then?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I can't call you Legion if you're not Legion. What is your name?" I pause for a moment, eyeing him carefully. "Actually, do you have a name?"

The demon shakes his head. "I was not given a name of my own. I do not deserve a name of my own and do not need one for I am returning to Legion as soon as my creed and oath have been fulfilled."

That's quite possibly either the stupidest or the saddest thing I've ever heard. Either way, calling him "hey you" and "guy" is bound to get really annoying. If he doesn't have a name, I'll give him one. "Creed."

"What is creed?"

"Your name. You are called Creed."

"I do not deserve a name, nor do I need one." I glower at him out of the corner of my eye, watching him pale a little bit. I may be a renegade demon who was buried and forgotten about by his father, but I'm still one of the two Princes of Hell last time I checked. He swallows hard, then nods like he gets it. "I apologize. You may name me if you wish to."

"I do wish to. Your name is Creed."

He nods once, his attention turning back to the road ahead, but I can see his lips curling into the tiniest smile. Creed has probably never had anything of just his own before, and though I am a demon, I am not without heart. Not like my father, in that aspect at least. While I find Legion fascinating, I can't imagine what it would be like to have my individual personality stripped away and my head filled with thoughts shared amongst a thousand other bodies.

I go back to examining the tracker in my hand as Creed continues smiling to himself in the driver's seat. "I can't believe Legion put this on me."

Creed laughs softly, shaking his head. "How else was I going to find you? You have only been above for a week, Bezeroth, and you have been unwell. They were certain you'd do something foolish and seek your mate before you were healed."

"Roth. Call me Roth. Also, I would have been fine." He seems to smell the lie as soon as it leaves my lips and shoots me a meaningful look, filled with incredulity and irritation. I sigh, offering a small smile. "Okay, so perhaps I would have been lost for a time. I would have found my way soon enough though, there was a plan being formed."

He snorts a laugh, shaking his head. "And what was your plan?"

"Rest in an alleyway until the sun comes up, find an open shop and use their internet to locate home." Laughter meets my ears, and I am slightly irritated that this is so funny to him. "It was a good plan."

"You have so much to learn of the world, little demon."

I do. This place is foreign to me, and while I indulged in learning things before I went into the ground, I am not knowledgeable in things that have occurred over the last thirteen years. Perhaps Brady will be a good teacher for me after I've taken him as my official mate. He was the one who taught me about beaches and seagulls when we were little after all, opening my eyes to a world that existed beyond the harsh brimstone and granite I lived in. I would much rather learn

things from him again, perhaps sitting side by side on his bed while eating panned cakes.

“You were supposed to wait, Roth.” Creed sighs. “You still don’t know why Lucifer had you buried alive, and Legion doesn’t have all the information, though not for a lack of trying. Your father keeps many secrets, and we need answers to questions unanswered since you were just a child. Legion is working at it below.”

“I need my mate.” I don’t give a single shit why Lucifer had me thrown into the dirt. Not at this moment anyway. I can’t focus on anything except for Brady’s heart thrumming inside mine, calling to me from the distance that’s growing between us now that I’m traveling away from him. I wonder if he feels it, this pull of his heart and half soul towards mine.

“Did you find him?” Creed asks, breaking into my thinking as he drives us through the streets.

“Yes.”

“And?”

“He is beautiful,” I murmur, Brady’s handsome face popping to my mind. I can feel myself warming as I think of him, his body strong and formidable, his eyes sparkling with joy and his lips quirked into the little smirk of a smile. Only the memory of that abomination he was with sours my mood. “And he is with my brother. Did Legion not know that Miloriel is at my mate’s side?”

“I was not made aware,” Creed offers with a frown of his own. “And I believe Legion didn’t know either. Miloriel’s dealings have become... shadowed as of late. Lucifer has not spoken with him in well over a year’s time.”

That is interesting news. I have missed out on so many things and clearly more than I ever imagined has happened since I went into the ground. Creed and I sit in silence until he pulls the car into a quiet street tucked into the back corner of the city. This house Legion acquired for me is rather quaint, though comfortable for the moment. The small house goes up rather than out, and I have always liked homes that do that.

My father's castle is made of many rooms that span many acres of hellscape, and I have always wanted a house filled to the brim with staircases and hidden levels. Perhaps when this is all over and I have taken my throne in Hell, I will maintain this home as my own for when Brady and I travel upwards.

Our own, actually. I wonder if Brady will like this tall, brick house that goes up. I hope he is not a "house that goes out" person, but if he is, I suppose renovations can be made.

Creed pulls the car into the small, attached garage and we make our way into the house through the door that links to the ancient kitchen. Legion called it rustic, but I know old when I see it. I'm not sure who he got this place from, or even how, but I imagine they weren't exactly modern thinkers. The brown flower-patterned linoleum on the kitchen floors combined with the yellowing floral wallpaper tell me that this place hasn't been renovated since at least the 1970's. The orange carpet in my bedroom says as much as well and will be the first thing to go once I've regained my ability to compel humans to give me the things I need.

"I will take my leave," Creed says, giving me a nod that almost looks like a bow before heading down the hallway on the main floor as fast as his feet can take him. I watch him move, his large body somehow as sleek and strong as a panther's as he heads down the darkened passageway. A door opens in the darkness and the sound of a television murmur meets my ears.

Once I'm alone, I head for my own bedroom upstairs and make quick work of peeling every last stitch of clothing off my body. I was not meant for these long days trapped in my human form, and I can already feel my horns and tail prickling beneath the facade I wear out in public. Standing naked, I roll my shoulders, then loosen my grip on the human pretense I learned how to create when I was growing up in Hell. It is a glamor of sorts, some kind of magic that exists within me that I can pull upon to disguise my true form, but it is hardly comfortable to use. My horns spring from my head slowly, rising upwards to the sky from either side of my skull before curving backwards the slightest amount. They are shorter than

other demons' and I have always loved them for that. My father has a whole mess of horns that sprout from his head and curl around his ears like a rams. When mine started growing in, my biggest fear was that I could end up looking like him someday, though I didn't say as such out loud to him. The shape and curve of his mark him as Ruler of Hell, but I secretly think they're ugly as shit. My shorter, smoother horns are far prettier, as is my long, thin tail. It flicks behind me as I stretch, the soft feathers that emerge at the end of it swooping over the grey carpet beneath my feet. Despite having them plucked out time and time again, my feathers always grew back, and I love them as much as I love my horns. They are silky, black, and beautiful, and when I think of them, I am reminded that I promised Brady a feather once upon a time. Perhaps that will be a lovely gift for him now that I am above ground.

With a pleased sigh, I head for the small den across from my bedroom to watch some TV. Humans are fascinating with all their made-up stories, but I have become quite fond of shows about food and cooking over the last week. Clicking the TV on, I find the channel I prefer, then sit down on the couch in my glorious nakedness and revel in the feel of the soft leather against my skin. I am far more comfortable without clothing on and would much rather live as I was intended but humans are such prudes these days. My cock rises, angry and hot, from a thatch of pitch-black hair at the crux of my legs, begging for attention and release, but I choose to ignore it. I've been aroused since I saw Brady at the club, a foreign feeling if I'm being honest. When I went into the earth, my body had only just started to wake up in those ways, but I will not indulge in a quick and dirty orgasm tonight. I will let the anticipation build, save my next release for him, and bide my time. It will be worth it, I know.

Soon, I will have Brady beneath me, his skin in my teeth, my name on his lips, his moans in my ears for all eternity.

CHAPTER SIX

I wake with a start, body pulsing and warming beneath the sheets as I grip the covers in my fist so tightly that my knuckles ache. The tension ripples out of me like a tidal wave as a low groan leaves my lips. It's one hell of a beautiful feeling to wake up to, but my face burns bright red as I come back down and slowly realize it's happened again.

Fuck me, that's embarrassing.

"Aw, shit," I whisper as I take a deep breath, panting into my quiet bedroom. My racing heart slows to a steady beat again, and I wipe sweat off my face with the edge of the blankets that cover me as. The thought hits me that maybe it was just a dream, even though every single day before it hasn't been. Lifting the sheet and peering beneath to confirm with my eyes what my body's been up to while I've been fast asleep, I see the wet mark on the crotch of my boxers and sigh. I haven't done anything like this since I was just a little kid with puberty on the horizon, but this past week leading up to my birthday, these wet dreams have come back with a vengeance. All I've been able to remember about said dreams after I've woken up is just a handful of moments. There are feathers and green glowing eyes, hands skating down my torso and flicking at my nipples. I shiver in my bed as I recall the scattered pieces of last night's dream, my brain giving me a memory of a tongue snaking down my inner thigh and a sharp toothed grin peering at me from the darkness before my cock is engulfed by the slick heat of a mouth.

It's Roth, I know. I don't need my memory to give me that information because I know the sexually charged dreams are

about my imaginary childhood friend. I would google what that means, but I'm fairly certain the answer is that I need therapy of some kind. A lot of it. Or I've been holding onto this virginity of mine for far too long and my body is starting to revolt in the only way it can. Not that I'd be able to find someone to take it away from me anyway. People can't even seem to touch my arm without running, my neglected cock is right out of the question. Other than Milo, that is, and I'm not about to hop into bed with my best friend. He's attractive, of course, but I don't really think of him that way at all. In fact, my entire body rejects the idea of even kissing him, let alone allowing him to plow me into the mattress, giving me strange chills and disgusting stomach rolls that leave me almost throwing up.

With an irritated huff, I pull myself out of my bed, boxers clinging to my cock. I glance down at the sheets again as I pluck the soaked fabric off my body but see that none of it has spilled this time. Yesterday morning was the worst, and I'd had to change my bedding, but it looks like today I'm safe. Small blessings, I guess. I pad barefoot across the bedroom, holding the crotch of my boxers away from my skin. I'm fairly certain I resemble some kind of awkward duck as I waddle, and stripping everything off once I hit the tile floor of the bathroom brings me a huge sigh of relief.

I start the shower and step back, standing in front of the mirror while the water heats up. My reflection looks tired, but what catches my eyes the most are the ugly blotches of red that wrap around my torso, almost like someone has trailed their hands down my skin, hard and purposeful. I stare at them for a moment, head cocked to the side as I wonder whether or not I'm doing much more to myself when I sleep than dreaming of being touched and orgasming into my sheets. If I'm touching myself all over while thinking of my imaginary friend, that's a whole other level of weird I'm not prepared to deal with today.

Or anytime soon.

Or ever.

Pushing the strange awakening to the back of my mind, I turn from the mirror and step into the bathtub to clean myself off, certain that wicking the drying cum from my legs will help my brain move on. I have far too much to do today to get stuck in trying to figure out these weird dreams. There's a yoga class Milo's talked me into attending with him since we didn't get half as drunk as planned the night before, and since Felicity purposefully didn't schedule anything for me today, I have a day off. I would love to say I have plans on doing fun things with the free time, but really, I'll be doing a bunch of boring adult stuff like laundry and cleaning my apartment. If I find a moment, I do want to slip down to the comic shop a few blocks over to see if they have anything new. It's been a while since I popped in and I'm sure I've missed out on new editions of some of my favorites. As I've grown, my love of comics and reptiles has grown with me and I have quite the collection hidden inside the closet in the hallway of my apartment. Hot water sluices down my spine, wicking away the last of my body wash, as I plan my busy day out inside my mind. Thinking things through, I realize with a slight grumble that I should probably get groceries today as well. I sigh, then start making a shopping list in my mind. My cupboards are pretty bare, and if I don't get some food into this apartment today, I'm not sure when I'll have the time and energy to do it, but I hate grocery shopping.

As I'm stepping out of the shower, squeaky clean and ready for the day, I hear the front door of my apartment slam shut. The suddenness of it trickles through me, sending prickles down my spine, even though I know it's likely Milo coming to pick me up for yoga. Wrapping a towel around my waist, I step out into the short hallway and head for the main living area to find him standing in the entryway, caught in the act of picking something up off the floor beside my door. His eyes are stone cold as he turns to me, pulling whatever it is behind his back.

"What's that?" I ask, walking from the mouth of the hallway, through the living room and into the open galley kitchen where the front door to my place is. I love the openness of this apartment, the free-flowing space feels much

larger than it is without walls dividing everything into separate rooms. It was one of the reasons I moved here in the first place when I left my mom's home behind. She'd offered to let me stay longer at the apartment we lived in for the bulk of my youth, but I was an eighteen-year-old kid with a career already underway and a whole world to explore. This apartment was step one of that journey and though sometimes I regret not living under the same roof as her for the last year of her life, I do love having my own space.

Milo opens his mouth, then closes it and shakes his head, his lips drawn into a thin line as he scans my apartment like he's looking for something. I try to peer around him, but he moves so I can't see what he's holding behind his back. "Seriously?"

"It's nothing."

"Well, clearly that's a lie." I laugh, shaking my head, though I'm growing a bit irritated by this game of kindergarten keep-away he's playing. "What is it? Someone leave a bag of dog shit outside my door or something? You're being really weird, dude."

Milo swallows uncomfortably, still hiding whatever it is he's plucked off my floor. Slowly, he pulls his hand from behind him, frowning at what he holds like if he could he'd set it on fire with his gaze alone. My breath catches in my throat as he holds out a pure black feather to me, an acid green ribbon tied around the root of it.

"Where did you get this?" I ask, reaching out to take it from him, snatching it a bit harder than I intend to from his grasp. I hold it up, heart rocketing in my chest, stomach bursting with uncertain butterflies. It's beautiful, so dark it almost swallows the light around it, and downy soft as I run my finger down the edge of it.

"It was shoved beneath your door," Milo says, his voice carrying a hint of disgust and more than a little bit of anger.

I turn the feather over and over in my hand, the weight of it somehow more than a feather should have. The ribbon is something else entirely. It says that it was left on purpose. That

this feather is a gift, and though I know better, though he was only make-believe, I can't help but know who this beautiful present came from.

Roth. Or at least someone I've told about my imaginary friend from childhood who had always wanted to give me a feather from his tail.

My head spins and I take a step back, eyeing Milo carefully. Would he be the type of person to mess with me like this? He's the only one I've ever talked about Roth with, and I hadn't thought he'd be the kind of asshole to make fun of someone for something they did as a lonely kid, but maybe I was wrong. He offers a confused look back to me, his stone-cold blue eyes staring back at me harshly.

"What's your problem?" I ask, holding the feather up.

"What?"

"If this is a joke or something, it's pretty fucked up."

"It's not a joke," Milo implores, his eyes softening as he reaches out and places a hand on my shoulder. Milo, the only one who can touch me without squirming and moving away. "I promise. It was beneath your door. Do you know who it's from?"

Roth.

Roth.

Roth.

"No," I say, shaking my head. I sigh, deflating a bit out of the sudden strange irritation that took hold of me. "Maybe one of the kids in the building left it or something. They're always showing me dandelions and shit from the park whenever I run into them."

"I'll throw it out then, it's probably infected with germs or something. Bird flu, maybe." Milo holds his hand out for the feather, and I suddenly want to scream at him and smack his hand away so he can't take this precious gift away from me. He stares at me meaningfully, asking for the feather he is certain is just trash from the playground outside the apartment

building, and I carefully hold it out, though actually getting my fingers to let go of it is a challenge. I stare at it hard, the feeling that it is mine and it is meant for me to keep churning my stomach in anger and frustration at being made to let it go. Milo frowns at me, his shrewd eyes peering deeply into mine like he can tell I'm growing angry with him for making me hand it over to him. Slowly, I force myself to let go of the feather, but watching Milo drop it into the trash can beneath my sink makes my heart scream and ache, tears springing to my eyes at how wrong that act feels.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

First the strange wet dreams and now I'm almost in tears over a feather?

It felt like a joke before, but maybe I do need some serious therapy.

Milo turns to me, an uneasy smile plastered on his face as he washes his hands in the sink above the cupboard where the feather rests in the garbage. "Yoga?"

"Yeah," I choke out, nodding. "Yoga."

"You cool?"

I nod again, but as I slip into my shoes, I can't stop staring at the trash with the feather inside. I'm not okay. I want it back in my hand so bad, I'm tempted to shove him out of my apartment so I can get it out of the garbage can and hold it tight. I tear my eyes away as Milo pokes my ribcage, making me jitter and jerk away from him. I scowl as he laughs. "Go get dressed and let's get going. I want to get there early so we aren't stuck at the front of the class."

I head to my bedroom and throw clothing on, not even paying attention to what I've chosen for the day's outfit. It's a T-shirt and sweatpants, but whether they match is beyond me. My head is thrumming with memories and feathers and green eyes glistening in the darkness, and when I meet Milo in the front of my apartment again, he looks concerned.

"You okay?"

“Weird morning.” Weirdest morning in the history of weird mornings, actually. Milo nods, looking for a second like he’s going to say something else, but he stops himself short of letting loose any words and instead gestures towards my front door. We head out of the door and make our way out to his car, but I know that as soon as I am back home and I am alone, I will pull that feather out of the garbage and hold it in my hands because without it, they feel emptier than they have ever been.



IT’S like watching a car crash in slow motion.

The incredibly hot guy I’ve been eyeing since he walked into the yoga class walks out of the door of the studio, heading for the place on the concrete where Milo and I stand, chatting about getting a cup of coffee. He grins at me, and I smile back. Friendly. Hopeful. Wanting to know his name and perhaps, what he does. As much as he caught my attention, I know I’ve caught his.

He steps closer and Milo takes a tiny step away from me, indicating we aren’t together beyond friendship, and I turn to face him directly as he walks over. His eyes are caramel brown, lit up from the sunlight overhead and he lifts a hand to run his fingers through his short deep brown hair. His skin is perfectly tanned, and his teeth are so white I think he may be a model as well. Handsome and lithe, his body full of promise and possibilities.

Then the world screeches to a halt as he holds out his hand and says, “Hey, I’m Jeff.” I hesitate, knowing that this is when the accident starts. The mistake I’m about to make is already unfolding like a memory from my mind because this has happened time and time again, yet I keep doing things the same. I take his hand and he jerks, his eyes confused, his grin fading. He shakes my hand, then pulls out of my touch as quickly as he can, tucking his hand behind his back so I can’t

possibly touch him again if I want to. My own smile falters as hope dies inside me the tiniest bit.

“I’m Brady,” I offer, but it’s too late. Sweat is beading on his upper lip and his face is turning pale beneath the tan.

“Um,” Jeff mumbles, glancing between me and Milo like he can’t figure out what is wrong, but knows that something definitely is. “I just wanted to say... um. You forgot your pass at the front desk.”

I didn’t, but I nod anyway as he scurries away from me as fast as his legs will carry him. He makes it halfway down the block before he glances back to show me a look of pure relief tinged with confusion, and I lift my hand in a sad farewell.

Thanks for trying, Jeff. See you never.

“Don’t pay attention to him,” Milo murmurs, slipping his arm around me. “He’s a fuckface.”

“He’s hot.”

“He’s a hot fuckface.”

Milo gives my shoulder a squeeze, and I snort a small, derisive laugh into the air between us before a sad sigh leaves my lips. Twenty-four years old and nobody has touched me save for my mom and my best friend. The loneliness is staggering and as I watch Hot Fuckface Jeff walk away down the block, it aches inside my bones so hard that I feel wrong and ugly inside. “Why does this keep happening to me, Milo?”

Milo sighs, giving me another squeeze from my side. “Maybe he thought you were someone else and realized his mistake too late?”

I nod, but I know it’s bullshit. Jeff spent the class eye-fucking me from the front row, turning around on purpose to offer me smiles and winks. That wasn’t a mistake. It was just... me. As always. “Am I gross or something? Like up close and in person?”

“Brady, no,” Milo says. “Not at all. You’re a model for fuck’s sake.”

Yeah, but maybe everyone's wrong about that. Maybe, I've got a face meant for magazines and fashion shows and that's it, because in person, I'm hideous and wrong.

"Am I going to, like... be alone forever?" Great. Now I'm spewing all the thoughts I usually keep locked inside my head where nobody can see them. Insecurity isn't a pretty look on someone who has my face and body, and I know it. I once expressed my worries to Felicity and she stared at me, telling me that with looks like mine, nobody would take me seriously if I talked about my fears over being lonely forever. Nobody will get it, she'd said at the time, and I guess she's right because even as the words leave my mouth, I feel gross for saying them.

"You won't be," Milo says, giving me yet another shoulder squeeze. "I'll always be around. I promise."

"Yeah... but..." It's not the same. I want to be loved and touched and held by someone. Someone who wants to be romantic with me and can stand touching my skin without wanting to scrape theirs off.

"I'm sorry, Brady. I've tried to make this right, I promise. I just... I can't find a way."

"What are you talking about?"

Milo sighs. "I don't know. Don't mind me. I just hate that you feel this way, that's all."

I sigh and try my best to shake off the melancholy that is stirring inside me, but I'm failing at it today and I can tell. My memory flies back to the feather in my trash can and how good and right it felt to hold it in my hand. "I think I'm going to just call it a day and head home."

"It's not even noon," Milo protests. "Come on, let's go get a smoothie and hit the grocery store. I need chickpea crisps."

"Those are gross." They're grainy and bitter. I have no idea why he loves them so much, but he goes through boxes and boxes of them every month.

Milo pokes me in the side and grins. "Grossly underrated, you mean."

I let a small chuckle loose and shake my head like that will somehow clear the cobwebs of loneliness out of my brain. “Smoothie, then grocery store?”

Milo nods but leans over and gives me another squeeze around my shoulders. “I promise you, Brady Schiff. I am trying my best to fix this.”

“Fix what?”

“Your broken heart,” he offers back, giving me another small squeeze.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Stay away from him.”

I glance up from the newspaper spread out on the table in front of me and eye my brother carefully. “Hello, Miloriel. It is so good to see you.”

He scowls down at me, and I can see the fire that runs through his veins flickering a warning inside his eyes. It’s a warning I don’t intend to heed. He may bring his fire to me, and I will meet him with the poison that rushes through my own bloodstream. I am not without my own gifts and talents, and though my venom isn’t quite as flashy as his hellfire, it has the ability to incapacitate while it chews through flesh, bone, and marrow.

“Stay away from him,” he repeats.

“So you’ve said,” I reply with a sigh. “What are you doing getting so chummy with my mate, dear brother?”

“How did you get out?”

“My question first.” I glare and look meaningfully at the seat opposite mine. It’s the middle of the night and this diner I’ve found is empty, but I didn’t come to people watch. I can see right into Brady’s apartment from this booth and can feel his peaceful heart soothing away the need and urge to be close to him that lingers inside me always.

Miloriel slides into the bench seat and glares at me like that’s going to do anything to stop me. The waitress comes over and without even asking, pours him a cup of the same coffee I’ve been drinking for the last few hours. Despite Creed

trying to get me to stay put inside my home and recuperate even more, I can't get myself to settle well enough to let that happen. After spending the day wandering around the house aimlessly with the TV on in the background, I gave up and came here to ease my needy soul. The coffee isn't great, but it is hot, and the waitress is rather nice, even though I'm certain she'd prefer that I pay my bill and leave. She assumes she won't get a tip from me, but she will. Shit, for continuing to serve me cups of coffee with a smile on her face and a soul free of wickedness, she'll get one hell of a good tip. Creed persuaded a hapless human with a mind full of evil to hand over his wallet earlier and with access to his funds, I have more money than I'll need for the moment.

Miloriel picks up the ceramic mug and takes a sip of black coffee, then makes a face. I shove the sugar container across the table at him, raising an eyebrow. He snatches it off the table and dumps an unhealthy amount into his cup, then grabs his spoon to give it a quick stir.

"Always with the sugar," I murmur, watching him sip at his sickeningly sweet coffee. Since we were children, Miloriel has had a sweet tooth. He used to sneak into the kitchens and steal trays of honey cakes intended for our father from right under the cook's nose. I much preferred the savory treats, pies filled with pitboar meat were my favorite, though the flesh was tough if not cooked right. Creatures from the pit cultivated to feed the masses of demons that crowd Hell are not the easiest to chew, but they are delicious when prepared well.

"I need you to keep your mouth shut and listen," Miloriel says, putting his mug down and leaning over the table slightly like he's issuing a challenge. "Stay away from Brady. Don't leave any more little trinkets at his door and keep your distance."

"He got my feather then?" Though it pained me to once again pluck a feather from my tail, leaving it for Brady to have made my heart sing.

"Stop smiling. I threw it in the trash, but it almost broke him to see it. He is better off not knowing of you."

“It is a gift I promised him when we were children. You had no right to touch it.”

“Yes, well. Leave more trash at his door and I will do the same. Stay away from Brady.”

I sigh, shaking my head. My gifts are not trash, especially my beautiful feathers. “He is mine, Miloriel, and I will have what is mine.”

Miloriel’s eyes flicker again at my words, and I don’t give a shit. He can be as mad about it as he wants to be, but I will claim my mate.

“He is a person, Bezeroth. With hopes and dreams and free will. You can’t just... take him. Demand him like he is a plaything to own. Brady is a living human, not some hellhound hand raised to be a pet. You cannot own him.”

“And you cannot deny him what is his right to have,” I snarl back, my anger growing inside me. “Do you enjoy watching him suffer? Is that what you wish for your friend? To be a half-souled human who will never know true love because other humans can’t stand to touch him? To even be near him? You know they can sense something is different and uncomfortable about him, that he doesn’t feel quite right when they get close. I saw his face today when that asshole walked away from him, Miloriel, and while I am pleased that I will not have to rip that human’s head off his shoulders, I could see the hurt inside my mate. It is foul and empty, what clings to him, and it can only be filled by me. By my claiming and my cock. We will be whole when we are together, and you would deny him this?”

“I would see him free of all of it,” Miloriel snaps, slamming his hand down on the table and rattling the mugs. “I would find a way to give him the half a soul he is missing without having to tie himself to a demon such as you.”

I pause, cocking my head to the side in question. “Such as me?”

“I know what you are, you foul and wretched beast. I know who you became in the days before you went into the ground

where you belong.”

“What the everlasting fuck are you talking about?”

Miloriel is rapidly growing unstable across the table from me, his hellfire flickering in his eyes and lighting up the tips of his fingers. I hope he won't loosen his grip on it in the presence of the poor waitress who is standing at the counter, wide eyed and staring at us, but as the seconds tick by, the more I'm uncertain. I already know I'll have to try my best to scrub her memory of this night before I leave, but I'm not yet strong enough to repair all the damage Miloriel will cause if his fury takes over.

“Calm yourself,” I warn, reaching out and tapping the back of his hand with my fingertip. He jerks his hand away from my touch and rolls his shoulders, closing his eyes for a moment while he takes a deep breath. I meet eyes with the waitress and offer a sheepish smile, then add a shrug and an eye roll. She visibly relaxes at my dismissal of what's happening, offering a hesitant smile back to me before I turn my attention to Miloriel. He is calmer, but still perches at the very edge of his rage. “Explain what the hell you're talking about.”

“Your eleventh birthday.”

“Yes, I do recall having one of those a handful of days before I was thrown into the fucking ground, buried alive, and forgotten about. Please do go on.”

“Kazmeus was found battered and bloodied in his cave,” Miloriel states, his voice as cold as ice. “His horns ripped from his head, his tail almost yanked from its base and his eyes gouged out. It took him months to regrow what was lost and his agony rattled all through the hellscape.”

Not an uncommon thing to happen in the deepest places of Hell where chaos demons like Kazmeus ply their trade. He must have pissed off some bigger demon somehow along the way. They are a volatile lot with very few brain cells to rub together between all of them. Chaos demons are only meant to deliver the eternal rewards earned by the most wicked souls; torture, mutilation and the like. Kazmeus was a child when Miloriel and I first met him by the blood river. We were just

children then as well and I remember being utterly fascinated by his red tinged lizard-like scales and forked tongue, but he and my brother crafted a close friendship that I was on the outside of. “That is unfortunate. What was his crime?”

“You did it.”

“I most certainly did not.” Attack a chaos demon for no reason? Did I look particularly stupid? Even as a child, Kazmeus could have torn me apart with his bare hands.

“You did,” Miloriel snarls. “You lost control, and you ripped him to pieces. You’re volatile and dangerous, exactly who Father always worried you would be. That’s why you were buried, dear brother, for your crimes against my best friend and the fear that in the future you’d do the very same to your beloved mate. You were meant to suffer beneath the earth, unable to crawl out and breathe fresh air, yet alive and aware for all eternity. Bezeroth, you are made for ash and ruin, and if you touch one hair on Brady’s head, I will send you back below faster than you could blink your eyes.”

“I did not touch your friend.”

“You broke him!” Miloriel shouts, slamming his fist on the table again, cracking the surface of it. I see the waitress jump and scurry towards the door that presumably leads to the kitchen, and I swear I can already hear the sirens of the police on their way to take us both to jail. What a pain in the ass that’s going to be. I sigh as Miloriel continues screaming at me across the table. “You ruined him. He is half the demon he once was, scared of his own shadow, unable to venture out of the cave he lives in. Legion brings him food but he does not eat. He does not sleep. He doesn’t even speak. He just sits, staring at the walls of the home he is too broken to leave. He was mine and you took him from me!”

Stunned, I reel back where I am sitting as the story comes full circle. “And so you seek to take what is mine away from me.”

Miloriel’s jaw tightens beneath his skin and his steely blue eyes meet mine, the flickering of his hellfire lighting up his

pupils. “I will not let you harm Brady and ruin him like you did Kazmeus.”

I pause for a moment as the police sirens I’ve been expecting ring through the air in the distance. The waitress peers out through the window of the kitchen door at the table where Miloriel and I sit, her face pale and a phone pressed to her ear. “We must leave. You have caused a scene.”

“Fuck you, Bezeroth,” Miloriel spits, rising from his seat. He makes a move to leave, but I stand and grab him by the arm. He whirls around, raising his fist in the air as if he means to strike me but I grab his hand before it can reach me.

“You have been lied to,” I murmur, looking right into his eyes so that he can see my truth. “The reasoning you have given me for my entombment does not match the reasoning I was given that very night by Legion themselves, who were tasked with my burial by our father. Think on who would benefit if you believed me to be a monster and know that I would not harm my Brady. You say Kazmeus is your best friend? Brady is mine. I have missed him for so many years. I have longed for him, ached for the lack of his touch and the loss of his smile. He is my purpose and my fate. If he has free will, let him use it. Let him choose me for himself and then you will know that I will never harm what is mine.”

The sirens grow louder as Miloriel breathes hard into the air between us, his face a mishmash of pain and anger. I let him go with a tiny shove because I am still fuming at the accusations he’s thrown at me, then I reach in my pocket and pull out a handful of bills. I throw them down on the table for the poor waitress just trying to do her job, then stalk past him and out of the diner into the cool night air. Police vehicles round the corner, their lights flashing and lighting up the sky with colored halos of red and blue, as I slip into the alleyway behind the diner and tuck myself beside a garbage can. I’m alone for a few moments as the officers step out of their vehicles before Miloriel slinks around the corner. He sidles up next to me, a questioning look on his face that shifts into something surprised as he gets his answers from my inaction.

“You cannot summon a portal.”

“I will be able to soon enough.” The ancient magics that helped me slumber beneath the ground instead of suffering as I was apparently meant to do are leeching out of my body day by day. I no longer have coughing spasms and dirt no longer clings to my stomach, throat, and lungs. Soon enough my abilities that have been suppressed will come back and I will have everything within my grasp again. I will be able to summon portals to travel through, compel others to do my bidding and slip suggestions into their minds without a single audible sound. My venom will be potent and ready for claiming my mate and until then, I will keep watch over him because distance feels like more torture when I have already suffered so much.

“I don’t know what to say,” Miloriel admits.

I glance up at Brady’s apartment, feeling the thrum of his heart peaceful and calm within my own. He is sleeping, I’d imagine. The lights are off inside his home and the police cars haven’t woken him up. I hope he is dreaming good dreams, if he is a person who does indeed dream. I swallow hard before turning to Miloriel. “I need him.”

“He is important, Bezeroth,” Miloriel whispers, sounding a bit shaky. “He is my friend.”

“And he is my mate. I will not harm him. I will claim him and fill him with myself until his soul sings with joy at being whole for the first time ever. I will give myself to him and he will give himself to me. There is no other way, and if you put yourself between us, I will do to you exactly what I am accused of doing to poor Kazmeus.”

Miloriel swallows hard beside me, and I rise to my feet, heading away into the darkness of the alleyway and the city beyond.

CHAPTER EIGHT

B eady eyes seem to track me as I walk into the cool, dark building tucked into a corner of the zoo. I do a cursory glance around the place like I don't already know what to expect from every single glass fronted enclosure, before heading for the right-hand side of the building where the bigger snakes live. A group of school children ahead of me make loud noises that make me cringe, and I can't imagine what the poor reptiles are thinking inside their glass fronted homes. At least the group ahead seems to be on their way out soon enough, carrying brightly colored balloons and bags of popcorn and cotton candy while being herded like sheep by a couple of frazzled looking adults. One of the adults at the back keeps looking around like he's about to be attacked by something hidden in the shadows, and I totally understand that feeling. The reptile house is always my favorite place to be, but the cool darkness is off-putting and can be a bit ominous. Even when I was little and my mom brought me here the first time, I had felt uncomfortable, like I was intruding on a world that I didn't belong in.

How true is that sentiment when it comes to the sum of my life, though?

Since a handful of days before my birthday, I've felt even more off kilter than usual, like the world has shifted a few inches to the left and I'm stuck alone in the middle to try and figure out what feels different. Between the strange feather that's currently tucked into the pocket of my sweatpants, the sexually charged dreams I've been having, and the feeling that I'm being watched that rises every now and then, it's hard to shake the restlessness and discomfort that clings to me like

wet blanket. If I was able, I'd throw myself into work and push everything else to the side, but my calendar for this week is fairly empty save for a casting call tomorrow morning.

The blank spaces on the calendar are also adding to the shitstorm of unease this day is made from. I've worked in this industry long enough to understand the cycles of feast and famine, and I rationally know that I am wanted by many designers and casting directors, but something about seeing empty days in my schedule makes my brain go to places it shouldn't go. I can get stuck pretty easily in believing I'll never work ever again because nobody wants me anymore if I don't distract myself with things. Milo does a great job of talking me out of the funk that I can sink into when I have no work on the horizon, but he hasn't answered his phone since last night, and this afternoon I find I can't seem to settle.

So, instead of going home after hitting the gym this morning, I've come to visit the snakes and sit alone in the quiet stillness of the reptile house.

Ahead of me, the school children leave, filing out of the building and taking their cotton candy scented shouting with them. I sigh in relief as I start making my way around the enclosures, feeling a lot like I'm checking in on old friends. There's a boa constrictor that's been here for as long as I remember her, though I'm sure it can't be the exact same one I grew up watching. She would have already been an older girl when I was just a kid dragging his mom past all the furry, cute animals to the scaley, spooky ones in the darkness.

"Because you're better than them," I whisper out loud to the snake behind the glass. It's a beautiful thing, long and caramel brown spotted with darker chocolatey rings. It rests on the branches, its little tongue flicking in and out of its mouth as it looks back out at me. When I was little, all I ever wanted was a snake, and I still have plans on someday getting one for myself. The right way, though. Captive bred and meant to be kept as a pet. I won't go snatching snakes out of the wild and making them be pets when they should be roaming free. Not like I would have done as a kid who didn't know any better and tried at least once to bring one home to be a pet.

“That was a good snake,” a voice murmurs in the darkness, causing me to jump where I stand. I whirl around, searching as my heart crashes in my chest and my alarm bells rattle in my ears. I didn’t hear anyone come in after me and I’m certain that there was nobody here before besides the group of children.

Was there?

“Who’s there?” I ask, peering into the darkest corners. “Hello?”

A beat of silence permeates the space and my heart leaps to my throat as a figure steps from the shadows along the back wall that hosts all manner of spider species. I swallow hard as I stare at him, the yellowy glow from the dim overhead lights casting shadows on the planes of his face, though I know instantly who it is.

Milo’s brother.

The one from the club on my birthday. My heart thrums inside my chest as I stare at him, taking in his pert nose and broad body. Instead of the hoodie and jeans he wore the first night I saw him, he’s dressed in a pair of black pants and a simple navy blue V-neck T-shirt that clings to his chest like a second skin. He’s handsome, like the guys on the covers of the romance books my mom read when I was little, but even that word seems to fall short of describing his beauty. It’s almost as if he is a model himself, the way he’s shaped and formed with perfect symmetry in his features. I can see no trace of my thin, lithe friend in his brother, but they are both stunning people.

He steps towards me, holding out a hand like he’s about to introduce himself to me with a handshake but I hesitate, recalling the way Milo behaved that night at the club even as something inside me wants me to get close. My fingers flex at my sides like they themselves want to touch him so bad and the rest of me seems totally on board with that idea. The need of it thrums inside me like a second heartbeat, upsetting the thudding of the one that rests inside my chest. I bite my lower lip and stare at his hand for a few moments before turning my face up to his, wondering at this pull and urge and want

rippling through me. I have always craved touch, but this feels like a whole new level of desire kicking up inside me. If he backs away once he shakes my hand like everyone else has done my entire life, I know I will be devastated. He laughs softly to himself, grinning at my reluctance to shake his hand.

“You can touch me,” he murmurs. “I am made for you to touch.”

“That’s weird as shit.” I clap my hand over my mouth as his laugh echoes through the space around us. I didn’t mean to say that out loud but at least he found it funny.

“Maybe it is weird as shit, but it’s true all the same. I am made for your touch, I won’t back away from you, and I won’t hurt you.”

“Milo says you’re dangerous.”

“Milo?” He snorts, dropping his hand to his side. “So that’s what he’s called himself. Interesting.”

“Is that not his name?”

He shakes his head, giving me a crooked grin that shows off teeth almost too white to be real. “He is called Miloriel. At least, that’s what he is called back home. Here, I suppose he could be Milo. Whatever he calls himself, don’t believe him. He’s always been a bit of a lying shit. I’m not going to hurt you. I could never hurt you, I promise.”

My head spins a bit as I stare into his green eyes, captivated by the glimmer of them in the dim light. I somehow know the measure of this man in front of me, but I want to know more of him.

“I’m Brady?” I offer, the introduction sounding like an uncertain question as it leaves my lips. I’m shaking inside still, though I’m not sure if the butterflies are excited or scared.

“I know who you are,” Milo’s brother murmurs, stepping close and offering his hand again. “I have known you, Brady Schiff. Always. Am I so different now you don’t remember me?”

“I don’t know you,” I whisper back, though my feet move me towards him, and my hand reaches for him like they’ve grown their own minds.

When I close the distance between us, stepping into the shadows alongside him, my breath catches in my chest. As light from overhead illuminates his features, his plump lips complete with a cupid’s bow become clear, as do the peaks and valleys of his cheeks and chin. He is stunningly perfect, and I can’t stop looking at him in wonder, though the thought that he could be dangerous thrums in the background of my mind. Nothing this perfect is ever safe, but Christ, does he ever feel like safety.

He reaches out and takes my hand, grasping my fingers gently. He slips his soft hand into mine then lifts my hand to his lips, pressing a kiss to my knuckles that sends a jolt down my spine. I don’t have time to process that feeling before he lowers my hand and gently pulls me towards him. Without question, I go, gravitating into him like a planet pulled from its orbit. My body warms as I move closer like a fire has been lit inside me, my eyes wide and lips parted like I would like to say words, but I can’t seem to find any. This stranger holding my hand smiles at me, his carved cheekbones rising high in his perfectly tanned skin and his green eyes glimmering at me from beneath a head of thick, mussed up chestnut hair. He’s tall, just as tall as I am, and broader by far. He holds me gently in his hand, but I don’t get a sense of true softness from him at all. What I do get through his touch on my skin is wild and untamed, a sense that I’m being cradled in the arms of a feral animal as he pulls my body into his and wraps himself around me. I shiver like he’s someone I should fear, but I don’t.

I don’t fear him at all.

“Because you know me,” he murmurs, his voice like liquid honey as it trickles into my ear, answering the question I haven’t asked out loud. “You do know me, Brady.”

“How?” I ask, unable to stop myself from wrapping my arms around his waist, resting my head on his shoulder, and breathing in his peppermint spice scent. It wraps around my senses, lulling me into a place that’s made of pure comfort and

bliss, and I sink further into his embrace. The world slips away around me, my entire mind focused on this stranger holding me and the way it feels so right. So perfect, like this embrace was meant to happen, and I am owed this touch after so long without any of it.

“You know me like you know the breath in your lungs. Like you know the beats of your heart. I have always been yours and you have always been mine. You know me like you know seagulls and panned cakes and blue toy cars painted with nail polish.”

Green eyes across a crowded nightclub. The feather in my pocket. The dreams I’ve been having since my birthday. “It can’t be you.”

“It is me, my Brady. My best friend. My heart. I have come back to you.”

“Roth?” I whisper, though I already know. As impossible as this is, I know the man holding me is my imaginary friend from childhood.

He relaxes at once, sinking into my body, leaving no space for even breath between us. “Oh, my Brady. I have missed you.”

My heart leaps into my throat as his arms tighten around me, pulling me closer where others would push me away. An errant tear slips out of my eye, and I inhale him deeply into my lungs again. It feels so real. He feels so solid holding me like this, but I know it can’t be truly happening. Maybe I’m starting to crack under the pressure of my career at long last, or maybe I have slipped between being wide awake and fast asleep somehow. I don’t remember going to sleep, but there has to be a rational explanation for these things I can’t make sense in any other way. I’ve dreamed of the reptile house before, and standing here in this embrace, I can’t say for sure that I know I’m absolutely awake with the cotton candy haze of comfort blurring everything inside my head.

I pull back and lift my head off his shoulder, my entire brain at war with itself as my cock thickens in my pants. Arousal and want thread through me like a knife, drawing lust

out of the deepest parts of me where its kept. Roth smiles at me, teeth glistening and eyes glowing green, exactly as I remember them in the dark corners of motel rooms, but this is different. This is thick with promise and heady with an almost feral need for more of him against my skin. I have felt this before, in dreams, when he comes to me and draws orgasms out of me, leaving me quaking alone in my bed.

“I’m losing my damn mind,” I mutter, shaking his hand away from mine as I wipe my teary eyes. He reaches up and cups my face in his hands, and I lean in helplessly, letting him finish the job of wicking tears off my cheeks. “This is another one of those fucked-up dreams.”

“You have been dreaming of me?” Roth murmurs, stepping closer. He slips behind me, splaying his fingers over my hip bones and pulling me backwards into his warmth again. His lips meet my earlobe, and he captures my skin between his teeth for a split second before letting it go. “Tell me. What have you dreamed of me?”

I can’t find words to explain the things he’s done to me in dreams before this one. He has touched me, tasted me, and filled me with himself in places nobody has ever been before. Roth has consumed me and left me wrung out and aching in my bed when I wake up. His hands press against my front, fingers dangerously close to the bulge that’s growing beneath my sweatpants. I can feel his own hardness behind me, pressing into my ass like a threat or a promise, but I don’t move. In my dreams, I never move away. I simply want and need and give and take, letting myself have what I cannot when I am awake.

“Have you dreamed this?” he murmurs, trailing his hand down to cup the front of my sweatpants. My cock kicks against his hand and he huffs a soft laugh into my ear. He holds me for a few moments, before moving his hand upwards to the tie that holds my pants on tight. “Is this what you have dreamed of, my sweet little human?”

I nod dumbly as his fingers deftly untie the knot, surrendering to where this dream wants to take me, because it has to be a dream. Roth’s hand slips into my pants, then my

underwear until his hand is on my hardening length. I shiver as a single fingertip strokes me torturously slowly and far too gently.

“What other things do we do in these dreams, my Brady?” Roth murmurs as his finger skirts up and down my cock. I’m trembling where he holds me, one hand still on my hip and his other inside my pants. I could move away, I know, but I don’t want to. I need this. I need him. My body feels like a firework, primed to go off at any moment, and I want to explode.

“More,” I murmur, closing my eyes and tilting my head backwards onto his shoulder. “Please more.”

“I will give you everything you have ever wanted.”

A dangerous thing to say to a man who has never been touched like this outside of hopes and wishes that come to him in these dreams. “I want it all.”

“It is yours, Brady Schiff. Everything I am and will become is yours. I swear this to you.” The hand on my hip moves upwards to my chest, fingers splayed over the T-shirt I wear, pressing me backwards and making me jut my hips out the tiniest amount. I’m struck by the thought that if he moves, I will fall over backwards, but he stays close. The hand in my pants stops teasing my flesh, and I gasp softly as fingers wrap around my cock. Roth strokes me once and another soft noise leaves my lips. The rest of the dream fades out of existence as his hand continues to move on me and I am lost to my pleasure.

CHAPTER NINE

Brady's skin is soft and smooth against my palm, his cock slipping in and out of my fist as I stroke him fast. I had intended to talk more with him, but I couldn't resist touching him, holding him, and taking this little piece of him for myself. I am very intrigued about these dreams he's been having of me, and though he keeps mumbling now that this is just a dream under his breath, I am determined to prove him wrong. The soft panting noises he makes as I move my hand on him sound like a chorus of success, and I can feel him leaning against me as his head tilts back to hit my shoulder.

This.

This is what I have wanted for so long. Brady in my arms, my body giving him pleasure and sounds of arousal falling from his lips. Aside from sinking my teeth into him and feeling the snap of our half souls aligning to become whole, all I have wanted was to hold him, touch him and please him. I tighten my grip the tiniest amount, though I'm growing irritated by these clothes he wears. They're loose, but not loose enough for me to touch him as I want to. The soft fabric inside his boxers is rubbing against my knuckles as I stroke his cock, and I know I could do better for him without them. I have to do better for my mate. I let go of Brady and he makes a strangled noise at the back of his throat.

"No." He pouts, his eyes snapping open. "I was so close."

"I am not done with you yet," I purr into his ear. He shivers, and I grin behind him as goosebumps ripple down his exposed neck. With both of my hands, I slide his pants downwards, low enough that his cock springs free from the

confines of his boxers and sweats. It curves upwards towards me, the mushroomed head pearling at the tip with beads of precum. I have never seen such a lovely thing in my entire life, but I am struck with the notion that I want his eyes on me as well. I want my mate to see me, to know my body and to watch as I pull pleasure from both of us. I step from behind him, and he wavers on his feet a little bit before getting his balance back.

“Huh?” he murmurs, confused eyes meeting mine. I offer a grin back, staring at the place his lip quirks up, wondering if I can make that happen when I give him release. His hand reaches for his cock like he can’t help himself, and I make quick work of slipping my own clothing down to my knees as he begins offering himself the pleasure I should be the one to give. His eyes go wide as my own cock is freed from the pants I wear, thick and long where it juts from my pelvis.

“What the hell?” he whispers, reaching for me now as he lets go of himself. He places his hand under it, like he’s capturing the weight of it, and I feel a bolt of pride ripple through me.

“Are you pleased?” I know it is a thing of beauty as everything about me is. As everything about him is. I was created to draw humans close to me, to make them want to be by me in every way so that I can twist and turn them easily to my whims, and in that, Brady is my match. He doesn’t know this yet. He has no way of understanding that the great beauty that has given him his career and his money is a demon’s trap gifted to him when my father claimed half of his soul before he was even born.

Brady’s wide eyes meet mine and he moves his hand away from my cock. He snickers a tiny bit under his breath and then shakes his head, letting his hand fall to his side. “My dreams make me generous.”

“Your dreams,” I murmur as I step forwards, grasping his cock again and giving him a quick stroke as soft noise falls from his mouth. “You are not dreaming, Brady. My cock is as real as I am.”

“Sure,” he whispers back like he doesn’t quite believe me. Yet. He will, when I have wrung every last bit of pleasure from him with my hand and he does not wake up from the dream he isn’t having.

I let go of him and take myself in hand, placing my thicker cock alongside his. He glances downwards as I open my hand and take us both into my palm. My fingers wrap around us as best as they can, our skin sliding against each other as I stroke us both a couple of times. Brady’s eyes do not stray upwards to my face, instead he appears to be laser focused on my hand, his hips pressing forwards ever so slightly and causing his cock to slip against mine.

I take my other hand and place it at the back of his neck, drawing his attention upwards to my face. His eyes meet mine, pupils blown wide with arousal and cheeks flushing crimson red. He keeps my gaze for a moment before I lean forward and place my forehead against his, feeling the heat rising off his body against my own cooler skin. My eyes flick downwards to where my hand moves, each stroke of my palm sending jolts down my spine that feel like lightning in a bottle ready to be freed.

Brady lets loose a small noise as his eyes slide shut, his hips jutting forward faster as I stroke us both with purpose. I can feel the rippling of my own orgasm stirring inside me as his noises spur me closer to the edge. His beautiful cock slides against mine, his tip leaking precum that slicks the space we are connected.

“Close,” he murmurs, like I didn’t already know that.

I grip the back of his neck a little bit tighter as I stroke us hard and fast, my own hips now pressing forward to meet each thrust of my palm. I am tempted to close my eyes and give myself over entirely to my own pleasure, but I know that if I miss watching Brady’s face at this moment, I will regret it. A moan reaches my ears, and I grin as his body jerks a little bit, his hips stuttering as he comes to the edge of orgasm.

“Come,” I murmur. “Come on my cock, my sweet Brady.”

A deeper noise leaves his lips, and I can feel his body tense in front of me, his dick pulsing against my hand. I take my forehead away from his and watch as his head tilts back, his lips falling open as he pants softly into the darkness that surrounds us.

“Fuck,” he sputters as his body releases, white cum shooting from the tip of his cock, his body jittering and shaking with every pulse of his orgasm. My hand slicks with his release, and I keep stroking us, drawing out the last of his pleasure and drawing my own orgasm closer. He breathes heavy into the air, chest rising and falling as his face relaxes. I have never seen such a beautiful sight.

I let go of his cock as his hips appear to move back but tighten my grip around myself. Slicking my length with his cum, I stroke my cock faster than before, taking care to rub the spot beneath the head of me that almost has me seeing stars. I have done this a handful of times, but having Brady’s eyes on me is sending me even higher into arousal, and I know the spiral downwards will be incredible. I can feel the tension rising inside me, my balls drawing up and lightning shooting through me until finally, everything lets go. I groan softly and close my eyes, watching spots appear behind my eyelids like fireworks bursting in my mind as my orgasm rattles through me like a freight train, stealing breath from my lungs and leaving me panting. I stroke myself through the aftershocks, hand slicked with our combined releases, then inhale a shaky breath and open my eyes.

Brady’s eyes are open and as they meet mine, I offer a gentle smile. He takes a step back from me, tilting his head to the side like he’s confused by something. I let go of myself and glance down to my hand where our releases are mingling on my skin before looking back up at my mate.

“And now I wake up,” Brady whispers, touching his cheek as he stares at me.

“You are not dreaming.”

Brady smacks his cheek gently. “And now. I wake up.”

“Brady,” I murmur, wiping our release on my jeans. Pity. I would have liked to taste us, but my mate is slowly growing more worried and that is where I must place my attention. I quickly lift my pants and do up the button and zipper, then reach for him to do the same, but he takes a step away from me, softening cock swinging as he moves.

“And now,” he murmurs. “I wake the fuck up.”

I reach for his hands to stop him from hurting himself because each slap to his own face makes my heart ache. He steps further away from me, his eyes wide in panic and his hand smacking at his cheeks and forehead like that will somehow wake him out of the dream he isn't having.

“Wake up,” he whispers, unfocused eyes ping-ponging around my body as he tries to make this make sense. “Wake the fuck up.”

“You are not dreaming. This is real. I am real and you are awake.”

I can hear the panic creeping up his throat, his breath fast and shallow as Brady stares at me hard. “You can't be. You're imaginary. I made you up. I made you up and now you come to my dreams and touch me, then I wake up in my bed alone. That's how this goes.”

I shake my head, offering a gentle smile. “I am real. I have always been real.”

“Nope.”

I laugh softly and shake my head again. “You can't just say nope and make this not real.”

Brady's lips part slightly, and his hand comes to rest on his flailing chest. It's then that I realize he's worse off than I realized. His face is rapidly growing pale, and his eyes are screaming panic and fear towards me. I want to step forward and gather him into my arms so I can soothe it all away, but I'm sure that would make it worse. I know it would. “You have to breathe, Brady. I will explain it all, but I need you to breathe with me.”

“This can’t be real,” he sputters before his eyes roll back in his head and his body goes limp. Alarmed, I step forward and grab him before he can crash to the tile completely, easing him downwards carefully. When he’s settled, I take a step back and eye him carefully, making sure he’s still breathing.

Well, fuck.

That was probably a mistake. Creed had cautioned me that humans were fragile before I left to find Brady today, eager to let him know that I’ve returned to be by his side, but I hadn’t assumed my mate would be one of them. He was made for me, and that he’s passed out is worrying. Creed had mentioned that I should have a conversation with Brady, introduce myself slowly so I wouldn’t overwhelm and frighten him and maybe I should have done that instead of letting my urge to touch and hold take over. Perhaps I shouldn’t have done the things I did, but I wouldn’t really take it back if I was being honest. My heart feels fuller than it has for so long and I can’t regret that feeling at all. When he comes back to himself and sees that I haven’t disappeared, Brady will know I’ve told him the truth and then I can tell him all the things I probably should have started with instead of taking his cock into my hand. What I am and what we are. I reach down and carefully tuck his soft cock into his underwear and pants the best I can, wanting to give him some dignity but also hiding what is mine from view.

I snicker as I gaze around at the enclosures along the walls. An audience of reptiles wasn’t exactly the plan for the moment when I first touched my mate, but it seems somehow fitting. He’s always loved creepy crawly things, and I’m not surprised at all that I found him here in this reptile house talking to the snakes. It took very little effort to lock the door on my way inside so we wouldn’t be interrupted. I settle on the floor, picking up his head gently and placing it onto my lap so he’s not resting entirely on the cold floor. I stroke his cheeks with my hand as I glance around at the creatures inside the glass fronted cages, wondering the tiniest bit what Brady would think of Kazmeus’ scaley snakeskin and forked tongue. He’d probably be fascinated by the way most demons look, but Kazmeus would be his favorite, I bet. The reminder of what has happened to the poor demon sours a bit in my throat.

What my brother accused me of pissed me off, it's true, but that Kazmeus was injured so badly that he is no longer himself aches a little bit. Miloriel's care for him runs deep, I know. I couldn't imagine what I would do if someone injured what was mine in that way.

Not that they'd ever get the chance to even try harming him. I'm not sure if we are in danger, but I have to think we are, and I am prepared to defend what is mine with my life. My father may not know yet about my escape. Creed says to the best of his knowledge, Lucifer isn't aware, but that won't last long. He will learn of it at some point and will likely send some of his lapdogs to try and separate us. Or raveners. He could send raveners to capture me and drag me back to Hell. A chill runs through me as I think of the tainted, horrid creatures he keeps within the depths of the castle's basement. Raveners are at their best Lucifer's favorite pets and at their worst, sharp toothed, long clawed feral beasts with fast reflexes and very little sense. Miloriel and I watched Father feed lesser demons that had pissed him off to the raveners, and the pained shrieks that echoed through the basement were the soundtrack to many of my nights in Hell. I am immortal and can heal most wounds, but that doesn't mean that I can't be killed with enough effort. I know a ravener could do the job in a split second. I'm not sure why I wasn't fed to them instead of buried in the ground, but perhaps Lucifer felt at the time that I had earned more torment with my crime of being born than a ravener could unleash on me. A death by tooth and claw would have been excruciating, but it would have been quick, and as Miloriel has said, I was meant to suffer.

Brady mumbles something, drawing my attention away from my worries over what my father could send to reclaim me and down to his beautiful face. His jaw moves against my hand, then his eyes slowly flicker open as his forehead wrinkles in confusion. I smile down at him, still smoothing fingertips over the planes of his face. I anticipate he's going to have a thousand questions and I am ready for them, though I will take us out of here to answer them. There are so many things we have to discuss, and I'm not quite certain this dark, cool reptile house is the best place for it. I'd like to show him

my horns and tail, to prove to him even more that he knows who I am in this itchy human skin and outside of it, but soon enough humans will arrive to unlock the door.

“What happened?” he mumbles, blinking slowly as his eyes dart around the room. His anxiety, though lessened, is still causing his heartbeat to spike but I don’t think he’s going to faint again.

“I think I scared you,” I respond, feeling incredibly guilty for doing that to him. “I am very sorry.”

Brady’s forehead wrinkles deepen, and his eyes continue to dart around us as he sits up, taking his head off my lap. He scoots around to face me, staring hard into my eyes through the haze lingering from his fainting spell.

“You’re still here,” he murmurs, blinking slowly at me, his blue eyes filled with wonder and confusion. I know he wants to be as close to me as I want to be with him, and I’m not surprised when his hand reaches for my face. He skates his fingertips over my cheekbones, touching my lips, then chin. “It wasn’t a dream. Holy fuck.”

“It wasn’t,” I agree, reveling in his touch on me, my entire body almost purring with joy at being in his hands. He continues tracing my features, and I let him explore me with his hands as his head fills with questions I can hear inside my own, thankful that my ability to catch what he’s thinking has returned to me again. As a child, I learned that while I should have the ability to focus on any human and delve deep into their thoughts to find pieces of them to twist and manipulate into evil deeds, my ability is focused solely on Brady. I can hear him wondering at how I looked when I was just a child versus how I look now, and questioning if he imagined my tail and horns or not.

“I have a tail and horns,” I respond, catching him off guard. His hand falters on my face, fingertips pressed into my cheek. “In my real form, I mean. Remember what I showed you I learned how to do when we were little? I always wanted to look like you. You are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen, and I just wanted to be soft like you were.”

“You have a tail. And horns. That wasn’t just a Halloween costume you were wearing when we were kids. You really have them.” His voice is flat and dripping with disbelief. I can see his logic and it would be a fairly reasonable assumption to make, if it were true. His hand drops from my face and he pushes himself to his feet, taking a step away from me.

“I do.” I rise to my feet as well, though I let him have his space. I am worried about frightening him again and having him pass out once more, even though his thoughts tell me that he isn’t scared of me. Not anymore. Instead, he’s focusing on trying to piece things together while shame at the pleasure I pulled out of him lingers in the background, waiting for its turn to be addressed.

He purses his lips slightly, frowning at my insistence. “Hypothetically, let’s pretend that’s not bullshit. What are you then? I mean, unless you were a kid with horns and a tail who lived in the same places I did growing up, you have to be something... else? Right?”

“I am a demon, Brady,” I offer, finding no reason to lie. “I am a Prince of Hell, Lucifer’s second son.”

“Uh-huh. Sure, you are.”

“I swear by the everlasting moon that I would not lie to you.”

“The everlasting moon?” Brady shakes his head, snorting a wry laugh. “This is wild. Just fucking wild. I thought I was dreaming, but I’m not, and now you’re telling me you’re a demon?”

I nod.

“And, hypothetically, if you’re Lucifer’s kid, that means that Milo is...”

“His first child. Yes, but Miloriel doesn’t matter. He stopped mattering when he left me behind to rot in Hell when I was just a child. What is most important for you to know is that I am not just any demon, Brady. I am your demon.”

“My demon?” He sounds a bit bewildered now, his voice pitching higher than his usual tone. “I have a personal

demon?”

“You have a mate. You were meant for me. Since the hour of our birth, we have been connected. We are intended for each other, fated to be together forever. I am your demon, Brady.”

Brady stares at me, scanning my body from the top of my head down to my toes as he crosses his arms in front of his chest. He raises an eyebrow at me, lips set in a thin line before he meets my eyes with his cold, blue gaze. “Prove it.”

CHAPTER TEN

Prove it,” Roth repeats, sounding a bit bewildered.

“Yes. Prove it. Prove that these things you’re telling me aren’t bullshit, because, dude, all I’m thinking is I need to phone an ambulance and get you some help because clearly, you’re not well at all.”

Roth’s lips curl into a small smile, like he knows that’s not the whole truth, but he doesn’t call me out on it. I am thinking he could need help, but I’m also thinking a lot of different things while I try to piece together what he’s telling me, along with the knowledge I have of our childhood together. It makes sense to a part of me, and that fact is terrifying. If Roth is really a demon as he says he is, and he is meant to be with me, then what the hell am I?

While that scary piece of me exists, the more rational part reminds me that for all I know, he’s a regular human who thinks he’s being cute or something by telling me tall tales about being a demon. That theory doesn’t exactly explain how he looked when we were little, but I just need one thing to make some damn sense, so I’m clinging to it. Maybe he was really into Halloween costumes or something back then and has grown up to be a strange dude who believes he’s a demon. I could make that make sense.

“Proof,” Roth repeats, like he’s expecting me to say I’m just kidding and that I believe the wild claims he’s made without question.

I nod curtly. “Make with the tail and horns, bud.”

“I didn’t want to do this here,” he offers as he starts to take his clothing off.

“What are you doing?” I ask, alarms rippling up my spine as he drops his shirt to the floor.

“What you’ve asked. Showing you proof.”

“Naked?”

“Of course,” he says with a smile. “Have you ever tried to grow a tail in a pair for pants? It’s uncomfortable as hell.”

“Dude, this is a public zoo. Anyone could walk in here at any moment.”

“They won’t.”

“How do you know?”

“I’ve locked the door.”

I’m about to remind him that things like keys exist, but he turns away from me, going right back to stripping his clothes off, so I just sigh and let him get on with it. I asked for this, after all, and if someone walks in, sees him naked and has a freak out, I suppose he’ll learn a valuable lesson about public nudity. I take a step away from him though, glancing at the apparently locked door to the reptile house just in case I have to bolt for freedom. I feel very much like I’m being torn in half, a part of me desiring nothing more than to stay and watch whatever he’s going to do, and the more rational part, insisting that hanging out while Roth gets naked in front of me could lead to terrible things happening to me.

More terrible than the things I’ve already let him do to me, that is. My cheeks burn as I consider that I was just jerked off in the reptile house, at the zoo of all places, by someone I hardly know. Or at least someone I haven’t seen since childhood, anyway. How sad and desperate is that? Not to mention embarrassing as all hell. I swear I can sense the judgment coming from every single enclosure, though there’s no way the snakes, lizards, and spiders can comprehend what just happened in front of their eyes. Right?

“The boa constrictor knows,” Roth offers, like he’s read my thoughts again.

“What?” I sputter, face heating even more as I glance at the beautiful boa. It’s curled in the corner of its enclosure now. I can just see its snout sticking out from beneath the rock and branch hide in the back. “Now you’re telling me you can talk to snakes or something?”

Roth laughs, pushing his pants down as I turn my head to see him again. “I’m just teasing. Your thoughts are the only thoughts I can hear, and I can’t talk to snakes. I think some of the demons back home might be able to, but not me.”

“Home as in…”

“Hell.”

“Right.”

Soon enough, Roth is naked in front of me, a picture of perfection that makes my entire body start to wake up again. His thick, long cock swings between his legs as he moves closer to me, and I can’t stop staring at it. I was pretty up close and personal when I thought this was a dream but watching him stand there with everything on show fills my head with obscene thoughts that I will definitely keep under wraps. What a mess I’ve made of my afternoon that was only supposed to be filled with peace and quiet thoughts.

“Ready?” Roth asks, drawing my gaze up from his dick to his face. He’s grinning at me like he knows I was staring, and my cheeks burn even more, though I’m not sure how because they already feel like they’re on fire.

I nod, taking another small step back because I’m still not entirely certain what’s about to happen. Maybe nothing. Maybe everything he’s promised he is. My brain is a mixture of belief and uncertainty, and my stomach is churning with anxiety and excitement. I take a deep breath as Roth closes his eyes, and then it happens.

Slowly, Roth’s skin darkens, turning a dusky grey that makes the green of his eyes even more vibrant in contrast. His facial features alter, bones shifting beneath his skin ever so

slightly as his nose flattens out to the bat-like nose I remember from childhood. How fucking cool did I think that was when I was younger? I recall being absolutely fascinated by the way his nose curled and twitched as he processed his thoughts, but Roth's change is not complete. I watch in awe and wonder, my heart slamming in my chest, as two magnificent horns rise out of his head, nestled somewhere in his head of thick, inky black hair. They are beautiful and haunting at the same time, pitch-black and spiraled with rings to the very tips that curve slightly backwards.

“Holy shit,” I breathe as I stare at his head, trying to rationalize what I've just seen and failing miserably at it. I glance down at his face to see a satisfied smile on his lips, then looking down catch a flick of movement behind him. I know exactly what that is, though it seems impossible. Even more impossible than the horns somehow.

Roth opens his eyes, grins, and draws his tail forwards, capturing the end in his hands. He holds it out to me like he wants me to see, exactly as he did when he was little on the night he arrived to show me where feathers had been plucked from his bloodied skin. My heart pounds in my chest, though I am filled with warmth and fondness as I lean forward to look at the beautiful, glossy black feathers that line the tip of it. He'd been so saddened when they'd been taken away, and despite him claiming that they always grew back, he was never able to show them to me. His father kept plucking them out, leaving his poor skin bloodied and raw. Now, his tail is filled with them, and I can't stop the smile from creeping across my lips. Until I notice a spot where one is missing, the skin boasting a tiny bump where a feather should be placed in line with the rest, that is. Stunned, I reach to my back pocket where the feather gift I was left rests. I carefully pull it out and with shaking hands, rest it against the feathers still in Roth's skin, watching as it disappears into the rest of them like it's meant to be there.

“My feather,” I whisper, carefully taking the loosened feather out of the dark patch of embedded ones. “You did leave it for me.”

“They are all your feathers,” Roth murmurs, the tip of his tail flicking in his grasp, feathers shimmering in the dim overhead light. “Everything I am, is yours. Is this the proof you’ve asked for?”

I take a step back again, staring at Roth’s form from top to tail again, my eyes not entirely certain that this isn’t my imagination, but something deeper inside me is telling me that it isn’t. That this is Roth as I have always known him, though bigger and stronger now as an adult. I take a deep breath, holding it for a few moments before blowing it out of my lungs, reality crashing into illusion and leaving me reeling the tiniest bit. “Christ on a bike, I think... you’re real.”

“As far as I’m aware, he never rode a bike.” Roth grins, his eyes twinkling at me from the depths of his grey skin. He winks at me, and my heart stutters in my chest. “Do you believe me now, my mate? Do you see I would never lie to you?”

I nod slowly, eyes ping-ponging around his new features. Horns. Tail. Nose. Horns. Tail. Nose. I have never seen something so attractive, yet so terrifying in my entire life. I keep resisting the urge to look at the length hanging between his legs but find my eyes straying there anyway. Dusky grey with a darker tip, shaped much like it was before, though now somehow more vulgar with the new shade of skin covering it.

“Am I...” Roth trails off, snapping his lips shut as his own cheeks appear to grow a dusker shade of grey. Is that a blush? What the hell could he possibly have to blush about? If anyone here should be embarrassed, it’s me with my boring human body. I feel as unimpressive as I did when I was a little kid comparing my soft edges to his fantastic horns and tail and bat nose.

“You are beautifully made. Do not think for one moment that you are not the loveliest creature that walks this earth, Brady Schiff.” His eyes burn holes into mine, and I can see his nostrils flaring like he’s growing angry at me for thinking I’m less than him. “Am I?”

“Are you what?” I ask.

His tail leaves his hands and curls around his thigh, giving it a tight squeeze before relaxing, still looped around him. It's adorable, like it's soothing him somehow, though I'm not sure he notices. Roth looks into my eyes, his own almost pleading me to say yes to whatever he's about to ask me without him having asked it yet. "I am not as pretty as you, but... am I pleasing like this? Do you find me... attractive?"

"Very," I choke out as I glance over his entire form again before meeting his eyes.

Roth smiles, the curl of his lips warming me inside, though I have about a thousand questions pouring through me about hell and mates and why Milo hasn't told me any of this when I've known him for so long already.

"When we were nine, you asked me to tell you everything I knew about what we are. Do you remember that? Do you remember what I told you about the things I know?"

I nod, remembering two very human looking boys sitting side by side in a brand-new blue bedroom, and what one boy said to the other. I have held on to those silent moments in my head when the loneliness strikes me the hardest. Milo is a great friend, but Roth always felt like something... more. "That I would make you leave if I knew the truth."

Roth swallows hard, nodding back at me. "Miloriel would not dare tell you the things we both know. He seeks to separate us, but it cannot be done. We are meant for each other, two halves of a whole. The truth is this: I am your mate, Brady Schiff. I was created to be yours as you were created to be mine. Apart, we are half empty, but together, we will be whole and nothing will be able to stop us."

That's a lot to take in at once, but I try to swallow all the information as he speaks. A mate. A demon. My best friend then and his brother as my best friend now. I land on something else entirely, though, in my head. "What do you mean whole?"

Roth's nose twitches like it did when he was little, and I know he's thinking. Finally, it stops, and he offers a small smile. "You know how people shy away from you? How

nobody can touch you without moving away like they're been burnt by your touch?" Stunned, I nod as Roth exhales a breath that looks a bit relieved before speaking again. "You don't feel right to them, Brady, because you were never meant to be here."

"What?"

"You weren't meant to ever draw breath," he continues, speaking softly like he's placating a wild animal. "Your mother sought all avenues to save your life when you were still in her womb, and one of her pleas for mercy fell upon my father's listening ears. In exchange for half of your soul, he gave you life and breath and heartbeat. And beauty. He gave you great beauty as well as part of the struck deal."

"Half of my soul?" I squeak out, head rumbling with a freight train of confused thoughts. "And that's why nobody can touch me?"

"You feel wrong to them, Brady. They can tell something isn't right, but they don't know what. Their instinct to protect themselves pushes them away from you."

"And my mother did this?" My mother loves me. She has always protected me and supported whatever I wanted to do in life. When I came tumbling out of the closet as a young teenager, she was my fiercest supporter, and when I came home from the mall filled with wild notions that I could make it as a model because of my stunning features, she was behind me all the way.

"She does love you," Roth offers. "So much that she wanted you to live."

"By giving away half of me."

"Half of your soul," he corrects, placing his hand on his chest. "I carry the other half."

Stunned again, I glance at his hand, then up to his face. "What?"

"I have told you since we were children that I am made for you as you are for me. All demons are born with half a soul, but I was created to be your other half. We are a match, Brady."

When I claim you as my mate, our halves will connect, and we will be unlike we've ever been. No more loneliness. No more discomfort. Only the warmth of being complete."

He reaches for me, and I take a step away, my heart stuttering in my chest. This is all too much. Far, far too much. I am still getting used to the notion that my imaginary childhood friend is real, let alone everything else he's told me about souls and being whole. It's jumbling together in my brain, and I can't pick my way through it.

"Are you going to faint?"

"No," I respond, taking a step away. "I just... this makes no sense, Roth. It's a lot. It's too much."

"It is a lot," he agrees, offering a sad smile. "Now you see why I could not tell you what I knew when we were children."

"You're telling me that I'm damaged. That I'm some freak who will never be loved or wanted because my mom sold half my soul to the goddamn devil?"

"You are wanted, my mate. I want you. I need you. I know this is not what you expected, but I am yours and you are mine. What we have been given is a gift, Brady."

No, it isn't. How could it be when it takes away everything I have always wanted? I have no options here if what he is saying is true. I am either alone or with him, and I'm not sure I can handle any more loneliness. It already aches inside me like a wound whenever I consider that in my twenty-four years, nobody has so much as held my hand with purpose, let alone kissed me. "It's a curse."

Roth looks wounded, his face falling where he stands. Slowly, he seems to sink down into himself, and I feel a tiny twinge of remorse for speaking that out loud. "I'm sorry. I just... I don't understand how it's a gift."

"I am made for you," he whispers, shaking his head sadly. "You are the only purpose I have ever known. Do you not feel it? The pull and urge to be with me as I feel for you?"

I swallow hard, his melancholy reaching inside me and making me want to go to him and soothe it away even as it

keeps me standing away from him. “I don’t have a choice, do I? It’s either you, or loneliness until I die, right?”

“I don’t see what is so wrong with me that you would consider loneliness a viable option.”

I cringe, shaking my head at myself for speaking again without minding my words. Everything is coming out all horribly wrong. I hadn’t meant that he was a bad option, but that there really were no other options if he’s right about what I am and what we are. And that thought sounds terrible too as it flits through my brain. Fuck. I don’t mean it to be hurtful. I just want time to think. To process and understand everything I’ve learned today. Is that so wrong?

Roth opens his mouth like he’s about to answer my unspoken question, but his eyes drift away from me. He glances at the boa constrictor’s enclosure, then leans in scrutinizing the insides. I reach out to him as he starts tapping on the glass, a bit irritated that he’d ignore what I believe is a very important fucking conversation to bother the poor thing.

“Stop,” I say, grabbing at his hand. “What are you doing?”

“It’s not moving,” he responds, shaking my hand away and tapping at the glass again.

“What?” I get close to him and peer into the enclosure myself, seeing that while the snake is still present inside its hide, its tongue dangles out of its mouth in mid-air. Roth taps at the glass again, and nothing changes. The snake doesn’t move an inch to draw its tongue back into its mouth, nor does it even appear to respond at all to what I know has to be a loud noise in its ears. “Did it die?”

“I don’t think so,” Roth murmurs, looking towards the next enclosure. He moves to the glass front beside the boa constrictor and peers inside. I know there’s another snake inside, a little western hognose. Roth taps at the glass once, then turns to me, his face filled with concern though his eyes widened in fear.

“What’s going on?” I ask, sidling up to the hognose’s enclosure. Looking in, I can see that this snake too appears

frozen in place where it sits on top of a rock, its glassy eyes open, but tongue not moving in and out of its mouth.

“There is only one being I know that can freeze time like this,” Roth murmurs, sounding a lot like he’s talking to himself. He offers a glance my way before grabbing his clothing off the floor and quickly sliding into it as his horns and tail disappear right before my eyes. When he’s back in his human skin, he turns to me and moves my way, drawn to me as I find I’m drawn to him, despite still trying to piece everything together in my head. Before I have time to process what’s happening, I am being pulled into his arms and my traitor heart is singing joy inside me. I go willingly into his embrace, inhaling his peppermint spice scent into my lungs as I wrap my arms around him like that is exactly where they should be. Roth smooths his hands down my back a few times, his body shaking the tiniest bit in my arms, though nothing but the comfort of being touched by him permeates deep into me. “I know you believe I am a curse, but I need you to trust that I would never hurt you and do as I say.”

My heart aches and I wish I’d never used that word. “I didn’t mean you’re the curse. I meant—”

“It’s all right,” he says, stopping me from saying more. “Listen and trust. You’re going to walk out of this house and head for the trees that line the path as fast as you can. Run. Run so fast, and don’t let anything out there stop you. Close your eyes, cover your ears, and stay hidden until I return to get you. If I have not returned to you by the time the zoo starts moving again, get to your vehicle and go to Miloriel. Do not go home, Brady. Go straight to my brother and do not let anyone stop you. I will do my very best to distract him and make sure you stay safe until he’s gone.”

I lean back to look into his eyes, seeing his fear rippling through the green irises. “Who’s out there?”

“My father, and I do not think he is alone.”

“What does he want?” I ask, feeling the discomfort rippling from Roth’s body now.

“Me.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Run,” I whisper, reminding Brady what I have asked of him.

“I will,” he confirms as I let him go. My arms ache, and I desperately want to gather him up again, but the only way I can keep him safe is by leaving him and turning myself into the sole target for whatever is beyond the walls of the reptile house.

I creep towards the locked door to the reptile house, unlocking it as quietly as I can before pushing it open the slightest amount. Through the crack, I scan what I can see of the surrounding area, finding that while I know Lucifer, and likely some of his laptops, are around somewhere, they don't appear to be close by. Turning back, I nod my head to Brady, mouthing the word “run” at him again, waiting for his returning nod to let me know that he will do as I've asked. I know that running alone won't save him, but if I offer myself as sacrifice and make a distraction of my presence to my father, he can escape unscathed.

I hope, anyway.

With a deep breath, I slide the door open enough that Brady can get out, but instead of slipping past me as I've intended, he hesitates for a moment. I turn to him, urging him on with my eyes, but he looks conflicted, and I want to yell at him and shake him and demand he get moving before we run out of time. I frown, nodding my head at the bushes and trees beside the snake house, giving him a tiny shove towards them, but he frowns right back at me.

“Go,” I hiss, fear and dread creeping through me like a snake.

“I never meant you were a curse,” he whispers back, grabbing my face in his hands and turning my head so all I can see are his eyes. “I am sorry for my words. I just need a moment, Roth. You’ve had years to consider this information and you can’t expect me to understand all of it in seconds flat.”

I nod, though I don’t really understand. I had thought that once he knew of me, he’d want me as I’ve always wanted him. When I was little, I’d been made to think that he would simply believe what I was telling him and let me claim him without question. That he’d be thankful for me and desire me as I desire him without hesitation. His reaction stings when I run the words through my head, but sitting here stuck in the sadness creeping up inside me won’t help keep either of us safe. I’ll save it for later, when we are out of this situation and the world is moving again.

“Hey,” he murmurs, digging his fingers into my skin the tiniest bit to recapture my attention. “Give me time to think, okay? That’s all I ask.”

I nod again and he leans forward, tilting my head down and pressing his lips to my forehead gently. The affection is surprising given what he’s just said of me and our bond, but if time is what he needs to understand, I will give him as much as he needs.

Releasing my face, Brady darts for the trees that skirt the reptile house on the left, and I turn my attention to the path that leads towards the rest of the zoo, knowing my father is out there somewhere. My skin is heated, and my heart is as full as it’s ever been, bolstered by the press of lips on my forehead and the notion that in time, Brady could see me as I have always seen him.

No. Not could. Will. Brady will know me as his best friend and his mate, and there is nobody that can stop me from believing in that. I will give him his first kiss, because I know

he has not yet had one, along with everything else my fucking father stole from us when we were kids.

Swallowing hard, I welcome the burning anger at my father and his actions against me into me knowing it will serve me well should he attack. My heart thrums with the heat of my rage and the strong beat that is Brady's, my fists clenching as I scan the path leading to the rest of the zoo. A bird lingers mid-flight in front of me, and a group of frozen children with frazzled looking adults linger on the grey brick walkway, one of them stuffing his wide-open mouth with cotton candy and another looking at a map through glassy eyes. Not even the breeze moves in this space, yet the air is rippling with something foul, and I know he is close. There's a revulsion that comes from being near Lucifer, yet it's tempered by his looks, and demons and humans alike crave to be close to him. As a child, I sought to always be at his side, enamored with his presence and beauty before I learned the brutality he is carved from.

The strange thing is that even though I can sense him as I move through the silent zoo, I can't see him. Everywhere I look, my father isn't there, and all I can see is the frozen stillness of animals and people littering the pathways. I step around a family pushing a toddler in a stroller, scanning my surroundings as the foulness permeates everything around me. I grow more and more confused.

"Where are you?" I murmur to myself as I continue to move through the zoo, sidestepping people as I go on my way towards the fountain I know sits at the very centre of the branching pathway. I move through a few more clusters of families before I'm stopped by a hand grabbing at my arm. Whirling around with my fist in the air, ready to attack whatever is grabbing onto me, I find myself face-to-face with a human man wearing a button-down plaid shirt and pair of jeans. Their eyes are the only thing that give away their true nature, the shimmering golden orbs with cat-like pupils blinking slowly at me as the being holds their hands up like a signal to me that it doesn't mean harm.

“Legion?” I ask, hoping I’m right. The man nods, taking a step back as his caramel curls bounce on top of his head. This body is much smaller than other bodies I’ve seen within Legion, though lithe and strong with their surprising youth, corded muscles running down their arms that tense and flex as they move even closer to me. I have never seen such a body contained within Legion before, this one must be a newer member. I open my mouth to speak, but they shake their head, putting a finger to their lips. Catching the hint, I nod my understanding, closing my lips again.

Legion reaches into the pocket on the front of their shirt and pulls out what looks like a folded scrap of old paper. He holds it out to me, and I take it, giving him a questioning look. I make a move to unfold it, but Legion stops me, placing their hand on mine before patting the pocket on the front of their shirt. Understanding, I tuck the paper into the pocket of my jeans and Legion nods approvingly. They take a step closer, leaning into my ear.

“You must claim him,” Legion whispers, their breath cold against my ear. “It is the only way to keep you safe.”

“Is my father here? I can feel him.”

“No, I come with Behemut. Lucifer still fears what you will become.”

“What will I become?” I still don’t understand it, save for knowing that my father fears whatever it is enough to have buried me beneath his feet. Knowing that he hasn’t even come, yet I can feel his presence, is unnerving as well. I’m not sure what to think of that either. Perhaps the presence of Behemut, an ancient demon loyal to Lucifer, is what is causing the air to thicken with the foul stench of Hell.

Legion takes a step back without answering, shaking their head at my question. They tap their empty shirt pocket once and my hand moves to my own as I understand. The answers are there. Some of them anyway, I don’t think the entire truth of Lucifer’s fear could be contained on a single scrap of parchment, but what I have in my pocket is at least a piece of it. Legion gives me a small smile before turning and making

their way away from me, disappearing into the crowd of frozen people.

“Who was that?” a voice whispers from behind me and I jump, turning to find Brady standing there, his eyes wide and his face paler than I’ve ever seen it.

“Why are you not hiding?”

“I don’t... I’m supposed to be... here?”

Confused, I turn to him, watching as his own uncertainty plays out across his face. “What do you mean you’re supposed to be here?”

Brady shakes his head like he doesn’t know how to answer, but he tries anyway. “A feeling inside me. I just... I’m supposed to be here. By you. I can keep you safe? I don’t know. I was in the bushes hiding like you said, but this... feeling inside me pushed me to move. Like a whisper inside my head that said I can keep you safe if I’m near you.”

“I’m a demon. I’m stronger and bigger than you. You should have stayed hidden. How could you keep me safe?” He is a special human, but still just a human with all the frailties that his mortal body carries. If anyone here is suited to keep the other safe, it’s me.

“I don’t fucking know, okay?” he snaps, glaring at me. “I don’t know. I was just trying to have a nice, quiet afternoon at the zoo and now all of this is happening. I’m doing the best I can, okay? All I know is that I need to be here so you’re safe, so that’s what I’m doing.”

“Okay,” I whisper, feeling his distress and discomfort. “You’re okay. I am sorry, my mate. If you have the feeling you can keep me safe, then stay with me.”

“Don’t patronize me,” he grumbles, still glaring at me.

I’m about to respond that I didn’t mean to, but the air ripples around us and I can sense Brady’s heart quickening in his chest. He reaches for me, but I push him behind me, turning to face the portal that is slowly opening at the edge of the crowd. I can sense that he’s not pleased with me for putting

him at my back, but I don't give a shit. I am meant to keep him safe always and I intend to do just that.

The portal cracks through time and space, and I crouch low as Brady places a hand on my shoulder. I'm readying myself for attack, tensing and flexing my muscles so that I can burst upwards and catch whatever is about to come through off guard.

"Calm the fuck down." Miloriel sighs as his head pops through the opening. "It's just me. Legion sent a body to warn me about what's happening. You said you'd keep him safe, Bezeroth."

I don't deign to respond to that accusation. Instead, I rise to my full height and turn to face Brady knowing what I have to do. The portal Miloriel has opened is his way out of this, but I will find a different route. It's likely that time beyond the bubble of the zoo still moves forward—my father is powerful, yet not powerful enough to freeze time across the world at once—and when I find the edge of it, I will make my way home by foot. Brady glances over my shoulder to see Miloriel, then turns to me, tilting his head in question. "You have asked for time. I will give it to you. Go with Miloriel, he will keep you safe."

"What about you?" he asks, reaching up to cup my cheek with his hand.

I grasp his hand in mind, turning his palm to my lips and pressing a gentle kiss to his soft skin. "I will be waiting for you. Go."

Brady doesn't seem to want to move, so I gently nudge him in front of me, watching as Miloriel glances between us with concern written into his eyes. He narrows his eyes and extends his hand to Brady, who slowly takes it into his own. Brady steps out of the zoo into the portal, but before he is gone completely, he turns back to face me.

"Be safe," he whispers, eyes suddenly brimming with tears.

"Always."

The portal closes and he disappears, taking my heart with him. I reel on my feet in the loneliness and vast emptiness that being by him had filled the tiniest bit. Bereft, I take a deep breath, tilting my head towards the stagnant sky. I inhale a few breaths, listening to them rattle in my lungs before I glance back down at the silence around me. Despite everything bubbling up inside me, I have to get out of here. Behemut is still skulking around somewhere, I'm certain. Though Legion is likely keeping him occupied and away from me, lingering here will only lead to me being discovered.

Heading for the gate of the zoo makes the most sense, so that's what I do, my steps heavy and body exhausted from everything that has happened today. Slowly, I plod towards the front of the zoo, scanning as best as I can for the edge of the time bubble. Finally, it appears ahead of me like a thin film cast over the world, and I can see Creed pacing on the outside of it, his face worried and his zippy little sports car parked at the curb.

I smile at the sight of my newest friend, clearly having come to find me yet again. Pushing my way through the edge of the bubble, I burst into the open air, feeling the cool breeze and freshness of the air sinking into me.

"Roth," Creed murmurs, rushing over to me. "I couldn't get inside. I tried. Are you all right?"

"I'm okay," I respond as Creed looks me over from head to toe. "Lucifer sent Legion and Behemut to reclaim me. He is aware that I am no longer beneath the ground."

"Where is your mate? Is he inside still?"

"He is with Miloriel. He came to get us out." Creed opens his mouth like he's about to ask another question, but I hold up my hand to stop him. "It has been a long day, Creed. I don't have more words to offer. I need rest and food."

Creed nods, heading for the driver's side of his car. I flop into the passenger seat as soon as the door is unlocked, curling in on myself a little bit as the emptiness I thought would be filled by Brady sits inside me like a lead weight.

“I will make you pancakes,” Creed offers. “With strawberry syrup. And sprinkles.”

I nod, offering him a small smile of gratitude before turning my face towards the window so he can't see the turmoil I am certain lies within my eyes.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I step through the portal, leaving Roth behind, and find myself in the middle of Milo's sparse, white living room.

My head is throbbing, and I can't seem to stop the tears from trickling down my face. Milo puts his arm around me and leads me to the white leather sectional that sits on top of his furry white area rug. I slump down onto the soft cushions, curling into a ball as an ache starts eating away at the very inside of me.

"What did he do to you?" Milo asks, sounding concerned as he lowers himself onto the couch beside me.

"Nothing," I mumble, wiping tears away from my face with a hand.

"He didn't hurt you? Harm you?"

"Not at all. Why? Should he have?"

"No," Milo responds with a relieved sigh. "Forgive me. I'm out of sorts right now. He kept you safe, as he promised he would."

"I kept him safe," I offer without considering it. I know I did, though I don't know how. That whisper inside me and the urge to go to Roth and keep him out of harm's way lingers inside me, gnawing at the back of my mind.

"You kept him safe?" I nod slowly as Milo stares at me hard, his head tilted to the side in question. I shrug as much as I can from my position laying on the couch and turn away from him. "Don't ask me. I don't know shit about anything. All I know is that I kept him safe somehow."

“That’s very interesting,” Milo murmurs like he’s deep in thought, but I have other fish to fry here.

“You owe me an explanation.” I tilt my head so I can see my best friend. The person I thought was... well, a person. Like me. Narrowing my eyes, I am met with an apologetic smile. “You’re one of them too. A demon. Unless I hallucinated literally the entire day.”

Milo sighs, then closes his eyes. Two thin, pure white horns spring from his head, exactly where Roth’s root from on his own head, but Milo’s branch off in various directions, much like a stag. His nose flattens, like Roth’s, but instead of darkening to grey, his skin shimmers silvery white, glistening in the overhead light. He is beautiful, as he always has been, though the strange features of his human skin make far more sense in his demon form. I glance down at his pants, remembering what Roth said about tails and expecting to see one sneaking out of his blue jeans, but he clears his throat drawing me eyes back up to his face.

“I don’t have a big tail,” he offers. “Not like Roth.”

“You don’t look anything like him. Are you sure you’re brothers?”

Milo smiles gently, nodding his head. “We share a father, but we share no blood. When we were but little mindless wisps floating in the blood river beneath the everlasting moon, Lucifer came and plucked us out, breathed life into us and gave us form. Bezeroth is my brother, but we are not built the same.”

“Definitely not.” I sigh as Milo goes silent, pensive on the couch next to me. I let it linger as thoughts flit through my head like hummingbirds, the ache inside me settling deep into my bones. “Tell me why your brother thinks we’re destined to be together forever.”

“Because you are,” Milo offers, sounding somewhat disheartened by it. “You and Roth are fated and have been since the day you both drew your first breaths into your lungs. My father made it so.”

“So, I’m right. There really is no choice.” I’m not as disappointed as I should feel, but the thought that I’m destined to follow a carefully set up path irritates me. “What about my free will? Isn’t that a thing I’m supposed to have?”

“You have it. You don’t have to choose Roth.”

“The alternative is being alone forever.” And now, knowing Roth’s touch on my skin, the sounds of his pleasure and the warmth that emanates between us, I’m not sure I could ever survive a life without it. I sigh, sinking into the couch a little bit more.

“I will be by your side,” Milo promises, solemn in his vow. “I will not leave you until your heart stops beating at the end of your life, but I cannot give you what Roth can. I cannot make you whole. I am not capable of it.”

“Do you have a mate out there?”

Milo pauses, turning his head up and away from me. He stares into the distance, his blue eyes filling with something I can’t quite place. Longing, perhaps. Or maybe loss. He is silent for a long while before answering. “I thought I did. I believed I had found him, but I was wrong. There are no fated mates for me. For anyone, aside from you and Roth.”

That news rocks me to my core and I sit up, staring at Milo as he turns his face to mine. He offers a melancholy smile. “We are meant to be alone, Brady. Us demons. We’re meant to live forever with half a soul, always seeking things to fill the emptiness that lives inside us. Some indulge in sex, some in gambling, murder, torture... anything you can name, there’s a demon who’s tried it at least once. It is the price we pay for Lucifer’s fall, each and every one of us.”

“But not Roth,” I whisper, the gravity of everything crashing down on me.

“No,” Milo offers with a small smile. “Not Roth. He has you. His other half. He has always known about you. Always bragged about how handsome and smart you were. I remember him rushing to my rooms after returning from visiting you, talking all kinds of nonsense about popisculls and panned

cakes and seagulls. He never got the words right, but he was so obsessed with the idea of the beach, the pure hot sand that kisses the cold blue water.”

I swallow around the lump in my throat at the memories of how much Roth’s presence meant when I was just a little kid with no friends spring to my mind. “He said that I was going to take him to the beach when we got older.”

“Yeah,” Milo responds. “He always talked about that before.”

“And then he was gone one day. I looked for him, but he was gone, and I thought that I’d just outgrown my imaginary friend. It made sense then that he was just missing one night and never came back, but now.... Where did he go?”

Milo blanches a bit, leaning away from me as his eyes fill with that same sadness I recognize from before. “I can’t tell you that, I don’t think. That is a story for Roth to share, if he wants to share it, if you give him a chance to tell you things. What happened at the zoo today was brought on by the reason he went missing, and I will let him explain that to you as well, if you are willing to listen. I will say this, though. He has suffered greatly to be here.”

Suffered. A curl of unease threads through me, and I swallow hard, recalling a bloodied tail clutched between small hands. “His tail?”

“His tail was the least of it,” Milo responds. “Don’t ask more because I won’t tell you. It is his story, as I’ve said, though I’m still not sure what to believe about it. I may have been lied to.”

“That’s very cryptic.”

“It is. You’re not the only one with some confusion over what has happened, but he is your mate. That much I have always known to be true. Claiming you has been his sole purpose since the moment he learned of your existence.”

“That’s actually kind of sad,” I reply. To have no purpose but claiming another and having that be the sum of it. What happens after that is accomplished? I have always had goals to

look forward to, growth and building of myself in my career. When I walked my first runway show, that wasn't the end of it for me. My goals shifted; my purpose altered to move me forwards. Surely there has to be more to Roth than just claiming me. What comes next for him?

“It is beautiful,” Milo corrects, breaking into my train of thought. “To have a direction to move in and know what you are meant to do. The knowledge that with one action, you can change two lives for the better and make two beings whole. It is a gift.”

“He called it that.” And I called it a curse with my careless words.

“Trust me, I know.” Milo laughs softly, shaking his head a little bit. “I heard all about the gift Father had given him for many years. I used to despise him so much for having you when the rest of us had nothing.”

“He said you were trying to keep us apart.”

“I may have been lied to, remember. I thought that there may be another way to get you whole without Roth being involved, but all the avenues I sought out failed me and I kept coming up empty handed. Roth told me he is the only way and that much I believe is true.”

That brings another question to mind. “Why does he have me when nobody else has a mate? I know you've said that we were created for each other, but why?”

Milo shrugs slightly. “Lucifer has never said why. Roth and I always thought it was a bit of an experiment, mucking about with a mortal soul to see what happens. Lucifer may be the King of Hell, but at the end of the day, he is still just a demon with half a soul and he has always gone to extremes to try and make himself whole.”

“An experiment.” Great. That's awesome news. I always wanted to be a science experiment.

“But without his meddling, you wouldn't be alive,” Milo points out.

“So, I should be thankful that my mom sold half of my soul to the devil himself?”

Milo hesitates like he’s thinking over a response before speaking carefully. “Thankful for the chance at life and love you’ve been given, perhaps? You have every right to be mad at the truth of it, but I think a life is better than none.” He pauses, then smiles down at me where I’m slumped on his couch. “Then again, I could just be selfish. You’re my best friend.”

I smile in return, nodding the tiniest bit though my head feels full to bursting with information. This day feels like a fever dream that I can’t wake up from, and my mind just needs a bit of peace and rest, though I have about a thousand more questions I haven’t had a chance to even consider yet.

“What’s on the list for you tomorrow?” Milo asks, grabbing the remote for the TV and pulling his long legs up beneath him. He hasn’t sunk back into his human form, and somehow, he looks more comfortable than he usually does.

“Casting call,” I respond, though it seems like such a weird thing to have to do given all that’s happened. Tomorrow I will go to meet a casting director and perhaps try on some clothes, and today I learned that my imaginary best friend from childhood is my very real demon mate.

“Want to have a little kid sleep over?” Milo asks, clicking on the Netflix icon on his TV. “Monster movies, pizza, and popcorn?”

“Yes. Absolutely.” I need an anchor to keep me from drifting aimlessly in my mind all night, and a little kid sleep over—Milo’s favorite thing—sounds perfect. The first time he invited me over to his house, we ate candy until we almost threw up and watched every animated movie I could recall from my childhood. He never had a childhood worth remembering, he’d said at the time, and together we’d created little kid sleepovers to give him some of what he missed out on. At the time I’d thought he’d been neglected or abused, but now I know the truth. I can’t imagine demons having popcorn and sleepovers, even as children.

“You pick the movie,” Milo says, tossing the remote my way and popping to his feet. “I’ll make the popcorn.”

I nod and start scrolling through the list of movies as he wanders to his pure white kitchen, all the while an emptiness sits inside me like an open wound. I force a slow breath in and out of my lungs, feeling it rattle through me, echoing in the hollow that sits deep inside me where loneliness is kept. As the sound of popcorn popping meets my ears, I wipe away an errant tear that slips down my cheek, and Milo makes a pained noise under his breath.

“Hey,” he whispers, leaning over the back of the couch to look at me. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” I choke out, as another tear escapes my eye. I blink another few of them away as I look up into his face, his nose scrunched in concern and his horns rising high from his head making shadows on the ceiling above. “I’m all right. I have no idea why I’m doing this.”

Milo frowns slightly, reaching out to brush the tear off my cheek. “Is it really so bad?”

Is this emptiness really so bad? Is having Roth claim me so bad? I don’t know how to answer any of those questions, and I know Milo isn’t expecting one. Milo leaves me alone again in my thoughts as I click through movies, trying to find one that won’t poke at the ache inside me even harder. If this is the alternative to the warmth and comfort Roth has given me so far, I’m not certain it’s worth it at all.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The moon is high in the sky tonight, slivers of silver streaking through the relative darkness of my room.

I've been up for hours sitting naked in my true form at the desk in front of the window, watching it rise high in the sky, head deep in thought and heart aching at the lack of my mate. Having touched him, felt him against me, and heard his passion makes this a thousand times worse. If he denies me in the end, I know I'm going to be far worse off than if I never sought him out.

On the desk in front of me is the folded slip of paper Legion handed me, and a stack of cold pancakes on a plate covered in congealed maple syrup. Creed made them for us, as he said he would, but I only managed to choke two of them down before giving up. Though I need to eat, as all living things do, food can't fill the hole inside me. Neither can sleep. When I was little, I needed lots of rest to recuperate from the pains of growing, but now that I am an adult, I can make do with a few hours here and there. I tried earlier to have a nap, certain that a bit of sleep in my comfortable true form would help a little bit, but I'm restless. In my sorrow over watching Brady walk away, I forgot about the note Legion gave me until now, and that feels like a good enough distraction from everything else.

I pick it up from the desk, feeling the crinkle of the old paper against my fingers. It's fragile, though thick, and I hope that when I unfold it, it won't break into pieces. As I carefully start unfolding it, I catch the scent that clings to it, the foulness that reminds me of Lucifer seeping out of the pages. With

wide eyes, I keep working at undoing the creases until what is written becomes clear.

“What the hell?” I whisper as I catch my father’s handwriting. It is a page torn from a book of some sort, maybe from somewhere deep in the bowels of the castle where Lucifer keeps his library. And his seers. They live down alongside the thick tomes they write their prophecies into, intended for Lucifer’s eyes only. On the night I first struck him when he came to take my feathers, he went right down to speak with them and stayed there for hours.

The date on the top of the page matches that date exactly. One day before I was placed into the ground. My heart stutters in my chest as I start reading the handful of lines that are written.

*The sky will burn and bleed,
The moon engorged with flame.
Less power in the seed,
And more within the claim.
His heart shall fill with poison,
His hands are duty bound.
Sire shall fall to fate created,
Buried deep in hallowed ground.*

Legion’s words haunt me as I stare at the prophecy, clearly having been scrawled by my father as his seers muttered and mumbled it aloud. He fears me for what I am to become when I claim my mate. Less power in the seed and more within the claim. The sire falls to fate created. Am I meant to gain enough power to dethrone him? Take his place as ruler of Hell? Though it’s meant to be a vague portent, it’s clear

enough to me that the seers saw me unseating Lucifer somehow, after claiming Brady as my mate.

And that's why I was buried and left to linger beneath the ground under the light of the omen of a blood red moon.

"Christ on a bike," I murmur as I stare at the paper in front of me.

"I thought he didn't ride a bike," a soft voice whispers from behind me. I jolt in my chair and whirl around to find Brady standing in front of a portal that opened in the centre of my bedroom while I was preoccupied with this piece of paper. Miloriel steps through as well, wrinkling his nose at my ancient bedroom with its orange carpet and wooden walls, but my focus quickly becomes my mate.

He is shivering and pale, his eyes puffy and reddened. It pains me to see him looking so sad, standing there in my room wearing a pair of hideous plaid pajama pants I'm certain belong to Miloriel. His skin is sallow, and his face is crumbling as I stare for a beat too long. He inhales a shuddery breath that echoes through the silence of my room, and I can feel uncertainty and melancholy rippling through him, like all hope has seeped from him and he is nothing but a husk of loneliness. If touching him made things worse for me, it has clearly done the same to him and my continued distance is making him fall apart even more.

"My mate," I whisper, standing from my chair and moving to him. I don't even get halfway before he rushes to me, throwing his arms around me and burying his nose in my shoulder. I wrap him in my embrace as my half soul sings with joy and my heart warms. "Did something happen? What's wrong?"

"You suck, that's what." Brady sniffles as he leans into me hard, like he can't quite get close enough to my skin. "Apparently you forgot to mention how shitty it would be to be apart from you."

I snort a small laugh, leaning my cheek on the top of his head. "I'm sorry. I swear I didn't know. This part is as new to me as it is to you. I thought you wanted time to think?"

“I’ve spent the last hours pacing around Milo’s house, unable to sleep, unable to eat. He made me popcorn, but I didn’t want any of it and I love popcorn. I couldn’t even choke it down; all I feel is this need to be by you because I know I’m supposed to keep you safe. I know you think that’s bullshit. That I’m just a human and you’re a demon, but I feel it so deep inside me, I can’t even make myself rest. I’m hungry and tired and nothing makes any sense besides being here with you right now.”

“You’re okay. I’ve got you.” I will always have him, whatever he needs.

“You know what you could get instead? Some pants. You do have company over,” Miloriel snarks. When I glance at him, he’s purposefully staring at the wall, his nose still wrinkled and his pink painted toenails sinking deep into the orange carpet. Brady lets out a tiny huff of a laugh into my chest.

“Company I didn’t know I was having over,” I point out as I let Brady go and slip back into my human skin. I pretend not to notice how his cheeks have pinked up the slightest bit and how his eyes are suddenly glued to the floor like he’s just noticed that I am very naked. When I’m back into my itchy human skin, I grab a pair of sweatpants from the scuffed wooden dresser by the bed and quickly put them on. “Dressed.”

Brady’s eyes raise up as Miloriel’s turn to face me as well. He nods, then makes his way to the door. “I’m going to go explore this ancient shit shack. Do you have internet out here in the boonies?”

“We are on the edge of the city.” I sigh as Brady snorts another soft laugh. “Yes, we have internet. There’s a TV in the living room, don’t wake up Creed.”

“Who is Creed?” Miloriel’s eyes narrow and he crosses the room to stand in front of me, staring into my eyes like he’s still uncertain about my ability to keep Brady safe.

“A friend. A piece of Legion left behind to keep watch over me.”

Miloriel's eyes widen the tiniest amount at the mention of Legion, and he lets loose a low whistle. "Legion parted with a body? Shit. This is bigger than I realized."

He doesn't know the half of it, but I keep that to myself. I need to think a bit more on what I read on the piece of parchment before I go sharing it with anyone. I'm still not certain Miloriel believes me over the lie he was given about Kazmeus, and I have a mate to attend to. A mate that is shivering the tiniest bit where he stands in front of me. I reach behind me to grab a blanket for him from the bed, but Miloriel grabs my hand before I can give it to Brady.

"Fix him," he hisses, eyes flashing hellfire and damnation at me from beneath his prim and proper horns.

"I will try." That's the best I can offer right now. If Brady came seeking comfort because he felt the lack of me as I did of him, then I will do my best to soothe it away, keeping in mind that he hasn't consented to being claimed. Yet. As much as my teeth ache watching him shuffle on his feet as he looks around my room, I told Miloriel that I would prove to him that Brady would choose me by using his own free will. While the piece of me that wants my mate doesn't give a single shit about that, the larger part of me that delights in pissing Miloriel off wants to watch his face fall when he realizes how wrong he is.

"I have never met a body of Legion without Legion inside it before," Milo singsongs, taking a step away from me, though not without digging his nails deep into my skin as a warning first. "I think I'll go introduce myself."

"You will not," I protest as Brady snickers, shaking his head. I unfold the blanket and place it around him carefully so he can stop shivering, but when I turn to the door, Miloriel is gone, his footsteps clomping down the hallway, loud enough to wake the dead themselves. "If Creed maims him and leaves him for dead, I understand entirely."

"Would he?" Brady asks, glancing at the door.

"Maybe, but he'll heal. Nothing to worry about. It takes a lot to kill a demon for good."

“What is Legion, though?”

“A single demon made up of many bodies. They are like a beehive, except all the bees have the same thoughts and feelings at the same time?” Explaining Legion is really damn hard now that I think about it.

Brady nods, still looking at the door with some concern. “Do they have a queen?”

“A queen?”

“Yeah, like how a beehive has a queen and all of the other bees do the work to keep the queen going so that the hive is strong?”

“I am not certain,” I reply. “I have never heard Legion mention a hierarchy. They are all Legion, always.”

“And that’s who you were talking with? That good-looking guy at the zoo with the weird eyes?” I note the scowl as he speaks of how attractive he found that body of Legion, and I do my best to hide my smile at this errant streak of jealousy. Brady has no comparison in my eyes, but this tiny streak of possessiveness from him is welcome.

“That was a body of Legion. They were sent with one of my father’s lapdogs to find me and bring me home, but they are a friend.”

Brady doesn’t respond with anything more than a nod as he turns his sallow face to mine. “Why does this suck so damn much?”

He grips the blanket tight around himself, then steps closer to my body, leaning into my chest. I wrap my arms around him, pulling him even closer into me as he sighs in what feels like relief. I can feel his heart gentling inside mine, and in that, I am also sated and relaxed. “You’re okay.”

“Yeah, now I am. Milo threatened to throw me headfirst in the gutter the third time I woke him up before deciding to find you somehow and bring me here. He’s a bit of a bitch without sleep, apparently.” I snort another laugh. Miloriel has always been fond of sleep, much more than any other demon I’ve ever

met. Brady sighs into my chest, slumping in my arms. “I still have about a thousand questions.”

“That’s fair. I hope I have enough answers for you. I’m starting to think I don’t know everything about this bond as I used to believe I did.”

“Oh?”

I glance over my shoulder at the paper spread out on my desk. “Yeah, I think there are definitely things I don’t know about it. What happens after I’ve claimed and marked you is a grey area, and though I have some ideas, I am entirely uncertain what will happen.”

Brady hums beneath his breath thoughtfully for a moment before taking his head off my shoulder and leaning back to give me a relieved smile. “Not gonna lie, that actually feels a bit better. I thought I was the only one here who didn’t know any of these secrets.”

“Not at all, I promise.”

Brady lets me hold him there for a bit longer in the silence of my room, his eyes connected to mine. I am still taken by his beauty, and though I know the purpose of it, I let myself become captured in his gaze.

“You have always looked at me like that,” he murmurs, reaching a hand up and touching my cheekbone, fingers resting just below my eye.

“Like what?”

“Like I’m special. Unique. Something worth looking at.”

“Of course, you are,” I reply, baffled at the insinuation in his words. “You have looked at me the very same.”

His eyes go wide, and he steps away from my arms, gesturing up and down my naked form. “Because, dude, look at you. You have horns and a tail, not to mention your awesome nose. As a kid, all I wanted to do was drag you to school to show everyone that at least one person wanted to be my friend, and that just because they didn’t want to be near

me, that didn't mean I wasn't worth being close to. You are incredible."

My heart aches for little Brady even though I want to preen a little bit at his words. "I wish I could have always been there for you. I hated having to leave at the end of every night."

"And then you left for good," Brady comments. "I asked Milo where you had gone, but he wouldn't tell me. He said it's your story to tell."

I'm a bit surprised, yet pleased, that Miloriel kept his mouth shut. When we'd met in the diner, I had assumed he was dead set on the idea that I had committed crimes against Kazmeus, and that he wouldn't hold his tongue when it came to Brady. Then again, Brady wouldn't be here now if Miloriel hadn't opened the portal for him, so maybe my brother isn't exactly the enemy I believe him to be. "I'll tell you everything, I promise, but not tonight. I don't want to go back there tonight. We are safe here and that is what's most important."

I think, anyway. I know Legion knows where I am, but I've been told by Creed with extreme insistence that this house and the land it occupies is safe from other eyes that look for me from below. I'm not sure if its warded, those basic magic skills are things I never learned before I went into the ground, but Legion has many bodies with many talents, so I have to assume something has been done to keep us hidden.

"Okay," Brady responds, giving me a small nod like he understands, even though he couldn't possibly. I'm about to respond with a promise that I will eventually tell him what kept us apart for so long when his mouth cracks open in a yawn. He blinks slowly as his mouth closes, reaching up with the corner of the blanket wrapped around him to wipe at his sleep teary eyes. "Shit, I'm too tired for anything else today anyway. I work tomorrow afternoon. This is going to be such a mess."

"A photoshoot?" I ask, gently gathering him up and pulling his body towards mine because I can't help myself.

"A casting for one." He sighs, leaning into me like he can't help himself either. "A long day of sitting in a room waiting

for my fifteen minutes in front of the casting director and designer. It's going to suck. I probably won't even get a spot in the end."

"Why not? There is nobody better than you."

"Oh, but there are ones that are younger and ones that have more unique features and ones that are thinner... The list goes on. I'm just like any old male model, Roth. Nothing special."

Since childhood, this mate of mine has belittled himself and viewed himself as unworthy. Yes, his demon granted beauty gives him his career, but to still hear him speaking of himself like he's nothing more than a gnat beneath my shoe prickles inside me. "You are better than them." Brady stills entirely where he hands in my embrace, because he's heard me say this before, many times. "You are smarter, stronger, and better than all of them, Brady Schiff. You don't need them. They need you. Do you believe this?"

He inhales a slow, shaky breath that ends on a soft chuckle, rattling against my chest. "Like when we were kids? Sure."

He's lying, I know. I knew it when we were little that he didn't believe himself to be anything special either, but I won't comment on it tonight. Right now, he needs rest and perhaps a snack to fill his stomach until the morning, though the snack may not have a chance to happen. I can feel his breath slowing, and his heart is settling into a soft rhythm. Soon he will be fast asleep on his feet in my arms and that will not do. I gently shuffle us backwards, taking care to not stomp on his bare feet, until the back of his knees hit the bed. He leans back and gives me a confused yet exhausted smile before his mouth cracks open in another teary yawn.

"Time for rest," I murmur, gently lowering him down so he's sitting on the bed. I leave him there, slumping on the edge of the bed, as I quickly yank the blankets down and fluff up a pillow for him. He glances over his shoulder to watch as I smooth out the sheets he will lay on.

"Here?" he asks, like he somehow believes I'm going to let him wander off to his own apartment half-awake like this. I could ask for Miloriel or even Creed to call a portal for him,

but I'm being selfish and claiming his sleep tonight for my own bed.

“Yes.”

“And where are you gonna sleep?”

“Beside you,” I offer, but when his eyes narrow slightly, I add. “On top of the blankets, if you'd like.”

Slowly, Brady turns and crawls up the bed before slipping in between the blankets and sheets. He reaches for the blankets and covers himself up, head sinking into one of my soft, blue pillows. “Close to me, okay?”

“Of course,” I offer as his eyes drift shut. “Would you like a small snack before you sleep?”

“No,” he mumbles. “Just stay close to me.”

“I will, I promise.”

“So I can keep you safe.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

My body is on fire as I wake up, every piece of me prickling with need and want and desire held over from the dream I had throughout the night. If I had somehow thought that being by Roth would stop this from happening, I was sorely wrong. My sleeping brain was filled with fire, brimstone, and touch from a demon with horns and a feathered tail, but no release. Just the buildup of pressure that has my body aching and crying for it to be let loose.

Beside me, on top of the covers as promised, Roth rests, his eyes closed and his bat nose wrinkling slightly as he breathes. He's somehow shifted to his demon form while sleeping, and while I'm certain it's far more comfortable for him like this, I can't stop staring at his thick, long cock where it rests between his legs. The need inside me wants me to reach out, take it in my hand and taste it, but as that thought flits through my mind, his eyes pop open, and I jump in surprise. He laughs softly, and I scowl back at him, heart racing as the shock ebbs away.

"Asshole," I murmur as arousal spikes inside me at the sight of his beautiful eyes.

"You are awake," he murmurs. I nod in response as he moves his body slightly towards mine, his lips curling into a devious smile. "No, Brady. I wasn't asking. I was letting you know that you are awake so there is no confusion."

"What?"

"You are awake," he repeats as he moves closer to me, reaching over me to grab the covers that barricade my body

from his view. “Awake.”

I nod, not quite catching on until he pulls the covers away from my body, pushing them towards the end of the bed. I swallow hard as he glances downwards to where my pants are tented by my painfully hard cock, then looks up at my face with that same grin. His hand skates down my bare side, drawing goosebumps to my skin and sending a small shiver through me.

“I have smelled your arousal all night,” he whispers. “What have you been dreaming of, my mate?”

I inhale a deep breath as his fingers trail to the band of my pants, slipping just beneath it teasingly. “You. I always dream of you these days.”

“Because your body knows me. It knows what I am and what I can offer. It wants to be filled by me, consumed by me. Will you let me show you how I am known to you?”

I inhale another stuttered breath as I nod, body thrumming with the truth of his words and the desire to let him have me here, in the real world, while I know I am wide awake. Not telling myself I am sleeping to make it feel less real. Not believing this to be a dream so it makes more sense. Not this time. I know the measure of the creature looking at me, and despite a tiny curl of hesitation inside, I crave his hands on my body with a soul deep need.

Or half soul, I suppose.

Roth relaxes the tiniest bit, like my agreement was important to him, and places his hand on my hip, pushing me gently onto my back. Staring upwards, I meet his eyes as he shuffles so close, I can feel the heat of him against my skin. His hand trails down my stomach, then slips beneath the band of my pants again, fingers grazing the hairs that sprout from my lower abdomen. Without words, he grabs the elastic waist and raises an eyebrow in question. I swallow hard and nod my head once, body thrumming with need for him. I lift my pelvis at the same time he slips my pants down, my cock arching upwards outside its confines. It slaps against my belly in a

vulgar *thunk*, and Roth's eyes darken, his grin somehow looking hungry and feral at the same time.

"You are awake," he reminds me as he leans forward and presses his lips to my collarbone, his hand trailing down my body in one long stroke before he wraps his hand around my cock. I jitter on the mattress as my hips rise to meet his hand, reveling in his skin on mine where I want him the most. He gives me a few strokes, peppering a trail of kisses down my abdomen, lighting little sparks inside me where I thought I was already burning. His horns catch the light filtering in through his blinds as he moves lower on my body, lips pausing every so often to press into my skin, his hand moving on my length in slow, long strokes. I jolt the tiniest bit as his breath casts over the tip of me, followed by a swipe of his tongue, and I can sense he's laughing slightly by the way the bed jostles for a few moments.

"Asshole," I mutter, though I don't mean it. I smile as he grins up at me, clearly pleased with himself before turning his eyes back downwards to my cock.

Before I can even process what's happening, my length is engulfed in glorious, slick heat and my head spins. I melt into the bed as Roth's tongue slides around my cock where he holds me in his mouth like he's tasting every inch of me. The slow glide of his lips up my length, followed by a lap of his tongue at my slit has me panting, but his suction on me tightens and he starts bobbing his head slowly. My cock slides in and out of his slick heat, my body rippling with pleasure. I am struck with the need to watch him as much as I am feeling him. I prop myself up on my elbows and watch as my cock slips from his lips, his eyes glowing brilliant green in the dim bedroom.

"My mate," he purrs as he lets me go from between his lips, my soaked dick slapping obscenely on my lower stomach and leaving a smear of precum and saliva. "My beautiful, special mate."

"My... Roth," I respond, driven to offer words of my own, my voice husky and thick with arousal. He smiles at me, his eyes flashing as he lifts a finger to his mouth, baring his teeth.

Roth presses on one of his sharpened canines, and I watch in awe as a white liquid that almost seems to shimmer in the darkness pours down his finger, trickling like a rivulet of water. Slowly, he stops the flow of it, leaving his finger coated in the glistening wetness.

“What is that?” I ask, but all I get in response is a devilish grin. Roth nudges my legs open as he leans forward again and licks a stripe up my cock before reaching between my legs and brushing his finger over my puckered opening. He raises an eyebrow in question, and I respond by opening my legs even wider, body coiled with a need that’s bordering desperation at this point.

He gently trails his finger around the rim of my hole, whatever his finger is slicked with leaving a trail of tingling warmth in its wake. I moan softly at the increased pressure as he presses forwards into me the tiniest bit with the very tip of his finger. His other hand grasps my cock, and I am again quickly sucked back into his hot, wet mouth as his finger rests at the very edge of my entrance. A soft gasp leaves my mouth as the finger slides into me a bit more, my body rippling around the strange intrusion. Aside from nobody ever letting themselves get close enough to try this before, I too have never delved into my own body with anything. It’s foreign, though not unwelcome, and as my body opens more for him, Roth presses into me more with each slow, measured thrust while also swallowing my cock so deep into his mouth, I think I have to be inside his throat.

Nothing but pleasure lives inside me as the tingling sensation spreads through my entire body, making my head spin and my eyes slide shut. I lean back on the bed, arms as limp as noodles and simply let him do whatever he wants to me. Slowly, Roth starts moving faster, his mouth making all sorts of vulgar, sloppy noises as he tightens his lips around me and swallows me down with purpose. His finger presses into me faster, curling upwards to graze a spot inside that has never been touched, and I let loose a strangled cry of surprise as my body shivers. Roth grazes that spot again and again, not moving his finger out of my body at all now. Instead, he stays

inside, sending jitters and tremors through my body with every caress of that spot. I writhe on the bed, a mess of need.

I don't even have words left to let him know that I am getting close, but I am. I can feel my orgasm building, the tension in my belly growing and my balls drawing up as a series of soft panting moans leave my mouth. I don't want to be loud, because we aren't alone in this house, but I can't stop the noises from falling from my mouth. I let loose a louder groan as everything goes blank inside my brain, save for the thrill of coming into a hot, wet mouth. Roth swallows around me as my body lets loose, his throat bobbing around my cock, drawing more out of me than I thought possible. I whimper softly as he grazes my prostate again and again through my orgasm until I am entirely empty save for his finger.

I slump on the bed as the aftershocks ripple through me, my legs going lax and my body sinking into the soft mattress. Roth slowly pulls himself free from my body and lets my cock go from his warm mouth, but my hole still tingles and twitches even without him near.

“What the fuck was that?” I whisper, opening my eyes the tiniest amount to see him.

“My venom.”

“Venom?” I murmur, not even caring how terrifying that word actually is. He poisoned me? Used poison on my most intimate places? That doesn't compute, though I am sure I'll have a thousand questions about it later. When I'm no longer a pile of limp bones on the bed, perhaps.

“It is poison for others,” he explains, reminding me that he can hear my thoughts. “But not for you. For you, it is pleasure.”

“No shit,” I murmur, lips curling into a grin. “You can poison my ass anytime.”

Roth snickers, and I open my eyes to see him sitting between my legs at the end of the bed. Behind him, I can see his tail flicking, the feathers looking a bit fluffed up, like they're standing on end.

“I am horny,” he murmurs, clearly reading the thoughts in my head as he glances down at his tail before looking up at me. His bluntness catches me off guard, and I snort a tiny laugh. As if he’s taken my laugh as more than surprise, he frowns, then pulls back, gesturing to his pelvis, his rigid cock jutting out. “See?”

I snort another laugh as I nod. “Yes, I see. Just surprised me, that’s all. Your feathers fluff when you’re horny.”

“Apparently, they do.”

“Nobody has commented on that before?”

“There has been nobody else,” he admits, giving me a sheepish smile. “I am untouched, save for my own hand.”

Shit. I got so carried away with my own need that I completely dismissed that Roth has needs as well. Reaching behind me, I grab a pillow and shove it beneath my head as Roth cocks his head to the side in question.

“This is not about me,” he murmurs, shaking his head.

“Shut it,” I respond. This is the second time he’s given me an orgasm and taken nothing for himself. There won’t be a third. Even though I am noodly, I will return the favor this time. “Come here. Straddle me.”

Roth carefully moves until he is straddling my hips, but that’s not what I meant. My stupid sex drunk brain wasn’t clear enough, and I don’t have the words to explain, but his eyes widen as he apparently catches the thought in my mind.

Roth shuffles up the bed until he is straddling my chest, and I open my mouth, catching the head of his cock between my lips. They stretch a bit around his girth, and his eyes go wide, cheeks heating as he looks down at me. His hand moves to the rest of his length, and he starts stroking himself as I lap at his slit hungrily, body trying its best to wake up again for another round, though I am pretty sure I’m done.

Roth’s hand moves far faster than I would like for myself, but as a low growl rumbles from his chest, I make a note that that is what he likes. He squeezes himself harder than I would like as well, and I note that as I taste the burst of precum that

slips from the tip of his cock where he rests in my mouth. I shiver the tiniest bit at the hint of brimstone and heat that lingers on my tongue, swallowing the slightly bitter, slightly salty liquid down. If I was ever doubtful that he was a demon, tasting him would provide good evidence as to who and what he is. I wonder for a brief moment if he would fuck me hard and fast as well. If I were to let him claim me, that is. If that is part of it. I should probably ask more questions at some point... when his dick isn't resting on my tongue and his balls aren't slapping at my throat.

“Close,” he murmurs, and I start lapping my tongue on his slit even faster, trying to match the rhythm of his hand as he strokes himself. That seems to please him, as when he looks down at me, his eyes are darkening slowly, his lip curling into a grin that looks absolutely feral. He tilts his head back as his body lets go, and my mouth fills with heat and brimstone undercut by the slightly salty taste of him. I swallow greedily, lapping up every drop of it that I can until his moans die down and he lets go of his cock.

“My mate,” he purrs, his body slicked with sweat and cock still stretching my mouth open. “You look beautiful like this. Beneath me with my cock in your mouth.”

I let him look for a few moments longer as I snort a little laugh, my cheeks pinking up the slightest bit. Looking pretty with a cock in my mouth is a new one for me. I wonder if I could put that in my modeling portfolio?

Roth grins down at me and shakes his head as he pulls himself from between my lips. “That is a pretty that is just for me.”

“Oh yeah?” I ask from my melty noodly place on the bed.

“Yes.” Roth goes silent, and I can feel the bed moving as he shuffles off me. He lays back down beside me with a soft thud, and I turn my head to look at him. Roth leans in and presses his lips to mine in a gentle, chaste kiss. “Are you content?”

I nod, yawning. “What time is it?”

“Early yet,” Roth answers. “You have time for more sleep should you need it.”

“I have to get ready for my casting.” I don’t really want to go, but I need to work and that means moving out of this warm, comfortable bed. I also need my cellphone to check the details Felicity sent me, so I know where I’m going, but my phone is back at Milo’s place. I have nothing I need to get ready for my afternoon sitting in a hallway waiting for my turn to show off for the show directors. It’s so many things, and it all feels impossible to my brain at the moment.

“We can get everything you need. Milo and Creed can open a portal for you. Don’t worry.”

“You can’t open portals?”

Roth frowns, looking a lot like he’s thinking it over. “I might be able to? I haven’t tried in some time. I was kept in a place that leeched my abilities away. I am just now able to produce my venom, and I can feel my strength growing every day, so perhaps I could portal now.”

Roth hops off the bed with far more energy than I have inside me right now, his tail flicking wildly behind him that the feathers nearly slap my face. He crosses the room and closes his eyes, tilting his head upwards a little bit. The air around him seems to ripple slightly and his cheeks are turning red as he clenches his fists at his sides, his lips a thin line of concentration. Finally, he blows out a breath and stares into the space around us. I can sense his disappointment now in the room with us, and I gesture to him, urged by something inside me to make it better again for him.

“Can’t do it,” he grumbles, slouching towards me. He sits on the bed with his back facing me, and I scoot closer to him, reaching out to put my hand on his back. I am struck again by the idea that I have to keep this demon safe. That there is danger lurking and only I can keep it away from him. I’m not even sure where it’s coming from, but it rumbles up inside me like a whisper as the dim sunlight peeks through the blinds, lighting up what looks like scars carved into his back.

“What are these?” I ask, tracing the swirls and swoops of them with my fingertip.

“What?” Roth glances over his shoulder to see what I’m pointing at, but I know he can’t see it.

“There are scars all over your back, but it’s like a pattern?” It could be words, though I don’t know the language they’re scripted in. It’s nothing I’ve ever seen before, that’s for sure.

“Ah.” He sighs, sinking where he’s sitting. “Those are from my father.”

He has suffered greatly. I keep tracing the lines with my fingertip as those words from Miloriel flit through my brain. I hope Roth isn’t listening to my thoughts because I’m not sure my pity is what he wants, but he has it all the same. At least in this moment, my heart aches for the demon who was once my best friend and the scars he carries on his back.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I was below the ground,” I murmur as Brady’s fingers trace lines on my back. “Hidden beneath the courtyard of the very castle I grew up in.” Brady’s touch stills on my back, and I glance over my shoulder to see his confusion. “That’s where I was for all those years. My father had me buried beneath the dirt and rock.”

“Buried? Like in the actual dirt?” He looks horrified, and I can feel his heart kicking wildly in his chest, but the truth is what it is.

I turn on the bed to face him, nodding. “Yes. A hole was dug, and I was thrown into it. Legion did the task of filling the hole with me inside it, and I am thankful for that. If they hadn’t been there, I wouldn’t be here. I’d be beneath the ground still, alive and awake and aware of every second passing by.”

Brady scoffs, disgust I can taste rippling through him. “They buried you alive.”

“And taught me how to rest so I wouldn’t be aware of the passing of time,” I add. “I was supposed to suffer, Brady. I was supposed to linger stuck in the ground aching for the loss of you for all eternity, but instead Legion helped me sleep and returned for me when they were able to.”

“Why?”

I laugh softly. “What part are you asking why about?”

“All of it. You were a child, Roth. A demon, sure, but still just a child.”

“And a threat, though I didn’t understand it then. I believed he was angry with me because he came to collect my feathers, and I didn’t want to give them away again, even though they grew back. It hurt too much to have them ripped out. When he tried that last time, I struck him in the face hard enough to leave a mark.”

“Good,” Brady snaps, his anger bubbling to the surface. “I hated when you’d come with your tail bloodied and raw. My entire heart would do this weird angry stutter thing whenever I saw it. I hope it hurt him as much as having the feathers pulled out hurt you. I hope it hurt him even more than that.”

“I think it did,” I respond. “I also think it worried him. I didn’t know back then, but I am starting to grasp the seriousness of that one blow to the face and the mark it left. Lucifer fears me. Us. What I will become when I’ve claimed you. Beating me and whipping me would not have worked long to keep me from your side. Not even the runes he carved into my back to keep me from being able to portal to you would have worked for long, I don’t believe. What we are, what we have between us, is stronger than that.”

“Is that what the scars are? Runes?”

“Yes.” I nod. “Though I can no longer feel them brimming with magic, they will always be there in my skin. My young body was not able to go through the tedious task of repairing them before I was buried alive.”

“I hate your father,” Brady mumbles, his eyes burning with anger. “What’s his problem, anyway?”

“He is supposed to be untouchable, but I don’t think he is. I have reason to believe that I will contain the power to unseat him from his throne when I am whole, and that is why he had me buried in the ground. It’s also why he seeks to reclaim me, though I don’t know if he will bother to bury me if he can get his hands on me again. He may just have me killed outright.”

“I won’t let that happen.”

“I’m not sure you can stop him.”

Brady shuffles on the bed, moving towards me as he crawls onto my lap. His legs wrap around mine, and my tail reaches to wrap around his leg like it has a mind of its own, making him smile slightly as he gazes right into my eyes. His hands cup my cheeks, fingers smoothing along my cheekbones. I can see the same confusion written into his eyes that I hear inside his head, his thoughts muddled as ideas and notions flit through his mind like hummingbirds. Finally, I hear a strong, bold thought peering through that insists he can keep me safe.

“I’m not sure you can, Brady.” A reaver would tear his head off without even blinking. Even a lesser demon would rip him apart without effort.

“I can,” he insists out loud as his thoughts scream the same words. “I can keep you safe. Don’t ask how because I don’t know, I just know that I can. I’m supposed to. Somehow.”

“Maybe by allowing me to claim you as my mate, that will keep us both safe?”

Brady hums as he mulls that over before shaking his head. “I don’t think that’s what this is all about. It’s weird to try and explain, but I have this sense that it’s bigger than that.”

“Okay,” I respond. I’m not about to pick a fight with him. Not while he is seated on my lap and stoking my face with his hands, sending warmth and comfort scattering through my body. If being by him fills me up this much, I can’t even imagine what claiming him will be like. He leans in, pressing his nose to mine, and I can see nothing but the blur of his too close blue eyes. “Do you know why I trusted Legion when he told me how to sleep beneath the ground?”

“Why?” Brady whispers, his nose crinkling against mine as he speaks.

“You. It was the only way I knew I’d be able to see you again. You were my last thought before the dirt swallowed me and held me there.”

Brady leans back, inhaling a slow, steady breath. “I missed you, you know. I looked for you in every dark corner, hoping

that I was wrong about you being imaginary. I still do, Roth. I look for you, always.”

“I’m here now,” I whisper. “You have me. Always.”

My heart swells as Brady slowly leans forward, pressing his lips softly against mine. I meet him with my own, but instead of heating up, the kiss stays tender, gentle, and sweet. I have known the fire of him and the need that thrives within him, but this is a different Brady. A softer one, though still cautious of the bond between us. It’s a beautiful moment, that is broken into pieces by a pounding on the door. Brady breaks off the kiss with a slight chuckle, his pillowy soft lips curling into a smile as I scowl and glare at the sound.

“What?” I bellow to my brother, because it has to be him creating this racket this early in the day. Creed’s knock is usually a softer succession of gentle raps, not this banging cacophony.

“Rude,” Miloriel calls back with a hint of a snarl. “I’ve merely come to remind Brady that if he doesn’t get a move on soon, Felicity is going to eat him alive for being late to the casting.”

I have heard Brady’s thoughts long enough to know that this Felicity is his agent. She’s pretty ruthless, which is a trait I very much admire, but her threatening my mate would lead her to a very slow death. “She can try.”

“All right, calm down.” Brady laughs, patting my chest twice. “He’s just joking around. Felicity loves me. I do have to get moving though, or I will be late.”

Brady hops off my lap, and I frown at the loss of his warmth on my thighs, then he slips into his pajama pants, and I have to restrain myself from tearing them back off him. While I understand clothing is important, I much prefer Brady naked. On my lap. Where he should always be. I’m having one hell of a time keeping myself under control as he makes his way to the door and opens it. Miloriel greets him with a smile before looking over his shoulder to see me sitting on the bed, just throwing a sheet over my naked lower half. Though we are often naked in Hell, and I have grown fond of sitting

around in nothing but my demon skin, heat is rapidly rushing downwards, and I don't feel much like being teased by my brother today.

"Morning," he murmurs, giving me a look that is full of far more meaning than a simple greeting. He glances at Brady's smiling face, his own expression softening as he looks back at me. Not entirely, but just enough to let me know I don't have to make good on my promise to tear him limb from limb for getting in between me and what is mine today.

"Morning," I respond with a nod.

"You're coming today, right?" Brady asks, turning to face me as Miloriel trots away down the hallway that leads to the staircase. *Keep safe* trickles through his thoughts, and I can see worry etching itself onto his beautiful face.

"Yes. I'll be close by. There's no need to be concerned. You are better than all of them. You are smarter and stronger."

"My ego is going to balloon up if you keep saying things like that."

"Do you believe me, my mate?"

Brady hesitates a moment before he nods, his cheeks turning a little bit pink. "Yes."

"Good," I respond with a satisfied smile.

Brady lingers in the doorway for a moment before rushing into the room again. He throws his arms around my neck, catching me off guard entirely, before pressing his lips to mine softly.

"Thanks," he whispers as he lets go of me. Brady makes his way to the door of the bedroom, glancing over his shoulder before he is gone from sight, carrying my entire heart with him.



“YOU WERE SUPPOSED TO CLAIM HIM,” Creed comments, pouring sugar into his coffee cup.

I roll my eyes, scowling at the menu in front of me. “Oh, was I? I completely forgot.”

“No need to be snarky with me. I’m merely saying that if you had bitten him, this wouldn’t be necessary.”

I sigh, but I can’t say much against what he’s said. We’ve come to sit at a restaurant across the street from the building Brady is currently in for his casting call because the moment he and Miloriel left my house, the emptiness crashed down on me like a freight train. This isn’t the closeness I wanted, but it is good enough to make the weight of it not so staggering. At least from here, his heartbeat is strong inside mine, reminding me that though this pit of loneliness lingers inside, I am not alone.

“How long do we have to be here?” Creed asks, but there’s no whining in it. Instead, he plucks the menu off the table and opens it, perusing the list of dishes he could order.

“Until he is done,” I respond with a shrug. “I don’t know how long these things take.” The lineup of models outside the door when we arrived let me know that it could be a while before Brady is free.

“I’m ordering a lot of things then,” Creed decides, putting the menu down and licking his lips. “I am starved.”

“You ate a plate of bacon and toast not even an hour ago.”

“I have lived on gruel and scraps my entire existence. You cannot deny me this feast.”

“You’re right,” I concede with a gentle smile. Until I came to know Creed outside of Legion, I was very unaware that every single drone is fed nothing but a protein rich paste made of ground pit boar bones and water from the blood river that carries no real taste save for the strong tang of iron. The ability to choose his own food has been a delight for Creed these past weeks, and I can’t take that away from him knowing that eventually he will be folded back into the collective and living off tasteless food again. “Just don’t eat so much that you get

sick because of it. There will be more food before you go back, I promise.”

Creed nods, offering a small smile that’s tinged with sadness, and I find myself thinking again if he really does need to go back to Legion. It’s something that’s been on my mind since I first met him. Whenever we talk, the more questions I have about his existence as a free demon. Perhaps I could make a plea to Legion to allow him to remain present in his own body. The waitress comes over, and I watch her eyes bug out of her head as Creed orders a breakfast plate of eggs, sausage and potatoes, a basket of French fries and a fully loaded triple patty burger with extra bacon. She glances at me like she’s seeking confirmation that this is really what he wants to eat, and I give her a curt nod.

Creed laughs softly as she walks away to the kitchen. “She doubts me, but I can eat it all.”

“Whatever you can’t, we can pack up and take home as leftovers for a midnight snack or something. I’ve heard humans do that.”

“They are fascinating, aren’t they? The longer we’re up here, the more fond of them I find I become.”

“You don’t see them as tools? As puppets with strings to pull?” All humans are capable of being compelled to do wicked, evil deeds and most demons view them as such.

Creed shakes his head, picking up his coffee cup in his large hand. “I used to. In Legion. Now they just interest me. They’re like... little ants crawling around thinking that the things they do matter.”

“Some of them matter.” Brady matters.

“More of them do not.” The waitress comes over to the table, carrying a plate filled with potatoes, eggs, and sausages. She places it in front of Creed, and he grins, grabbing a fork after saying a hearty thank you. As she wanders away, he gestures towards her back with his fork. “That one matters.”

“Because she brought you food?” I laugh.

“Exactly.” Creed shovels a forkful of fried potatoes into his mouth then makes a low approving noise under his breath before digging back into the pile of food on his plate.

I leave him to his meal, eyeing the windows of the building across the street to see if I can pick out which shadow behind the curtains could be Brady. The sidewalk outside is busier than I expected it to be for this time of day, people carrying shopping bags and walking little yappy dogs. The waitress comes by and drops off a red plastic basket of French fries the size of my head, to which Creed makes a noise of interested followed by a rumbly thanks. I glance back over to see that he’s somehow finished off the entire breakfast plate and is starting in on the fries with gusto, then I’m drawn back to the window. A bird flies by, landing on the windowsill that Brady is behind, followed by another and another.

My heart thuds heavily as another bird shows up. “Creed.”

“Hmm?” he mumbles, mouth full of fries. He swallows as I stare at the birds that appear to not be moving. My eyes could be playing tricks on me though, I am on edge without Brady by my side. I need confirmation from someone else before I panic.

“Creed. Are those birds moving?”

He shuffles in his seat closer to the window and when I glance over, he’s squinting, face turned to the building. “I think so?”

I nod slowly, still eyeing the birds carefully. A woman in a red jacket crosses the street, heading for the building Brady is in as the birds sit on the windowsill. She makes it to the curb out front, then abruptly turns on her heel and crosses back over the street again, shaking her head like she’s hit a wall or something.

“Creed,” I murmur, watching the woman turn to the building, her face a picture of confusion. “Creed, something is wrong.”

“Hmm?” he mumbles, having gone back to stuffing food into his mouth. He is about to say more when the waitress

arrives with his loaded hamburger and places it on the table, taking with her the empty breakfast plate. When she's out of earshot, he leans over the table. "What's going on?"

"That woman just tried to walk to the building but couldn't. And the birds are not moving, I swear."

"Shit," Creed whispers, motioning frantically for the waitress to come back over as I slip from the booth and make my way outside.

Everything is silent, which is terrifying. The people that once wandered down the sidewalk are skirting around the building across the street like they can sense something isn't right about it.

"Do you think it's him?" Creed asks, wandering out of the diner to join me on the pavement. He's carrying two large containers in his hands that I assume are filled with the remainders of his meal, but that's not a worry of mine.

Right now, something is happening inside that building and my mate is in there. "I don't know. He could be."

"It could be Legion again."

"When did Legion get the ability to stop time?" I ask, because that is not a gift I have ever heard of outside of Lucifer's domain.

"I don't know. Follow me."

Creed takes off across the street and I go behind him at a near run, headed right for the door of the building. The air ripples as I run smack into an invisible barrier that seems to skirt around the building. I put my hand up to touch it, pressing on the air, testing it for any sort of give or flaw but find none.

"It is the same as at the zoo," Creed offers, like that's supposed to make this better. Legion was at the zoo and while he is an ally, Behemut was also there. "He is with Miloriel. He will be safe."

"How do you know?" I ask, panic rippling through me.

“I trust in Legion and how they will not lead harm to your door.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Milo?" I whisper, wandering past the frozen models in the hallway. I have no idea what is going on, but it's like the zoo all over again, and I am freaking out a little bit inside. The moment silence descended on the building, Milo grabbed my hand and shoved me under one of the plastic chairs in the front of the studio, hissing a direction at me to stay hidden. I probably should have listened, but I am once again filled with an urge I can't place and the words "keep safe" won't stop rattling through my head like a freight train. "Milo? Can you hear me?"

Pushing the door open that leads to the back room where the casting is taking place, I come face-to-face with a group of people behind a table. One of them is smiling, staring straight forward, and the other two seated at her side appear to be whispering something to each other. Standing frozen in mid-step towards the end of the room is a male model, his bouncy curls not even bouncing in the stillness. He's still utterly gorgeous, not that I should be standing here comparing myself to him in this exact moment.

I could wear those pants better though, which is also a thought that I shouldn't be having. I feel a bit like I'm on the border between keeping my shit together and losing it entirely, though, so maybe I need to just focus on clothes.

And hair. I would kill for his chestnut curls. Though I'm sure I'd wear those balloony linen pants he wears better, his hair is far better than mine.

What the hell is wrong with me?

I turn, tearing my gaze off the male model frozen in time and scan the room carefully, looking for signs of my best friend. “Milo?”

“You are quite lovely,” a voice murmurs, and I make some god-awful squeaking noise at the back of my throat. My heart trembles in my chest as the young man I remember from the zoo steps out from behind a mirror, offering me a smile that looks less friendly than it is intended, I’m sure. He wears a white linen shirt and a pair of tan pants that would look at home on any of the models in the hallway outside, yet his boyish features set him apart. I can’t tell if he is sixteen or thirty-six. Perhaps he’s neither.

“Legion?” I ask, though I’m fairly certain.

Legion dips their head once, then smiles at me again, their odd golden eyes shimmering in the brilliant white lighting from overhead. I have always hated those lights, they’re meant to enable the casting team to be able to pick out flaws in my skin when I’m in front of them, but seeing them shimmer in his eyes, I find they’re kind of pretty.

“As I said,” Legion says, their voice friendly and warm. “You are quite lovely to look at.”

“Thank you?”

Legion hums a note of approval, before stepping closer to me. “Do you find Bezeroth lovely to look at?” I nod, smiling the tiniest bit as I picture my handsome demon. The one who has crawled out from the ground to come back to me. Legion grins, showing a full set of sharpened teeth. “Then why has he not claimed you?”

“I don’t... What?”

“Claimed you,” Legion repeats, cocking their head to the side like they think I’ve lost all sense. “Bitten you? Made you his forever. We did not help him get back to you for his claim to be unfulfilled.”

“It’s been two days!”

“And an eternity exists within those two days, Brady. An eternity stretches between them like a cat, and Hell draws ever

so near.”

A chill runs down my spine and my heart kicks uncomfortably in my chest. “What do you mean?”

“Lucifer will come. He will bring Behemut. Astaroth. Abaddon. Belial. He will bring the raveners.” Legion holds out his hand and offers a smile. “Take my hand, I will show you.”

I take a step backwards, placing my hands into my pockets. “I think the fuck not. What you can do is undo this frozen time bullshit and let me get back to my mate.”

“Your mate!” Legion crows, clearly pleased at my slip. I’m not sure when I started thinking of Roth—who I’ve known as an adult for two days—as my mate, but I guess that’s where I am. “May I show you what is to come to your mate?”

“Dude,” I reply, taking another step back. “Fuck off.”

Legion lunges for me and before I can get away, he has my head trapped between his two tiny hands. He stands on tiptoe, pressing fingers into my temples and holding me tight as he leans in. All I can see are his golden, glowing eyes. As the room spins, I am nearly knocked off my feet.

“Steady, little human,” Legion purrs, letting go of my head.

I inhale a deep breath, head reeling and stomach feeling wobbly. I take a tentative step away from Legion, intending on yelling at him some more but a screech resonates through the air. “What is that?”

“You will see. Watch, Brady, and know what things exist in the world you have not yet seen.”

Another loud, horrible shriek pierces through the room, and I watch in horror as a terrifying creature crawls from between the cracks of the walls. It is long and gaunt, made up of pitch-black skin wrapped too tight over knobbly bones and tufts of fur sticking out here and there across its body. It moves much like a cat, four paws filled with claws digging into the floor as it lifts its head, drool slipping from its sharpened teeth. The four nostrils that sit above the teeth flare, but it has no eyes that I can see. No ears either, though I’m certain it can

hear. It opens its mouth and shrieks again, taking a step closer to me.

“Legion!”

“Hush now,” Legion whispers. “It is only an illusion.”

“What is it?” Besides something that will haunt my dreams for the next millennia, that is.

“It is a ravener. Lucifer’s favorite pet. Only he can control them, though that control is tenuous at best. Ravens do what they will and hardly listen to command.”

“It’s fucking terrifying.”

Legion hums under their breath like it hadn’t considered that information, before nodding an agreement. “They are not pleasant. Lucifer is hoping to reclaim his son without having to let them loose, but I fear he may have to make this choice.”

The ravener sniffs the air again, letting out another high-pitched shriek that rattles my ear drums. It pads closer to me, and I take a deep breath, hoping Legion is telling the truth about this being an illusion. It snorts at the air around my face, though no breath hits my skin.

“Do you know what a ravener eats?” Legion asks.

“Puppies and kittens?” I offer, my heart slamming in my chest as the creature tilts its head to the side, a blackened tongue licking at its shining white teeth and drool dribbling from its mouth.

“Anything it can.”

“No kidding,” I mumble as the ravener emanates a low noise from its thin, frail chest. It almost sounds like a purr, or it would if it wasn’t so damn terrifying. The absolutely feral idea that I should reach out and pat its head flits through my brain, and I shove that whole notion to the back of my mind. I’m not touching this freaky thing, illusion or not. Still, it purrs in front of me, clacking its teeth together as a high-pitched chirrup that my brain tries to tell me is cute leaves its mouth. It turns its head upwards to sniff at the air again, then turns abruptly and darts for the far corner of the room, leaving me

standing there breathing the biggest sigh of relief I've ever breathed.

"They will come for him, and they will tear him apart, piece by piece. You must let him claim you," Legion says as the room seems to ripple around us and the ravener disappears. "It is your fate."

"I never said no. You didn't have to do all that. I only asked for some time. My entire life has been a lie, Legion. Do I not deserve some fucking time to figure this all out before I jump into bed with a demon and give him my soul?"

"Ah." Legion grins, showing me those sharpened teeth again. "Half of your soul, Brady, because all you are is half. Half soul. Half person. Half loved. Half wanted." He pauses while those words rattle through my brain, digging deep into parts of me I don't speak of out loud. "Don't you want to be whole? Haven't you longed to be touched as you have craved since you were a little boy?"

"I can have that without him claiming me." I've already had more than just touch, but I'm not about to go spouting off the details to this demon.

"But only half," Legion whispers. "Only half of the feeling you will have when you and he are both whole. Do you not deserve to feel everything, Brady Schiff?"

I do. I really do, and I know it.

"You must let him claim you. Give yourself to him and take him into you. Become whole. Become strong. It is the only way forward."

"And if I don't?"

Legion's smile drops for a second and the ravener shrieks from the corner it disappeared into, sending a chill rippling down my spine. "And do not think Lucifer will stop his destruction with your mate. He will come for Miloriel, then the other one that travels with Roth."

I think for a moment about who the hell they're talking about before it comes to me. I haven't even been properly

introduced to the hulking demon that is staying with Roth, but I at least know his name. “Creed. His name is Creed.”

Legion’s eyes soften the tiniest bit. “Who named it?”

“I don’t know.” I shrug, listening as the ravener scratches at something in the corner, chirruping low beneath its breath. “Don’t all demons have names?”

“No. They don’t. A name is an important thing. To name another... it is a gift.”

Between Legion and Roth, I’m seriously staring to think these demons don’t have the greatest concept of what a gift really is. “Does it matter who named him?”

“No, I suppose not. Creed will be gone soon enough if Lucifer comes calling and, mark my words, he will. He will come for you all.” Legion steps right in front of me, grabbing my head in his hands again. The air ripples as I stare into his golden eyes, then he lets me go. “Bezeroth is your fate and destiny, little human. Take what is yours and give yourself to him. It is the only way forward and there is no need to hesitate any longer.”

“It’s been two damn days,” I mumble, shaking my head.

“And a lifetime within each of them.” Legion smiles, though it doesn’t look overly friendly.

“Why do you care so much?”

Legion hesitates, cocking their head to the side again like a dog hearing a noise. “Perhaps there are those that believe a change of command is in order down below. Bezeroth has told you of his father, I am certain. It is not hard to understand why there are those of us who would see him cast aside. The potential in your mating cannot be squandered. It cannot be wasted. The whole soul will always defeat the half. Less power in the seed, and more within the claim.”

Those words ringing in the air around me, Legion places a finger in front of their lips and steps backwards into a portal that appears behind him. As the portal closes, he shouts out. “If you are not ready to let him be your mate, little human, you better be ready to watch him die. Lucifer is coming.”

The threat ripples through me, sending shivers down my spine as the portal slides closed. I stand, numb and motionless as the certainty of Legion's words echo in my brain, the words *keep safe* filling the spaces between each shaky breath I take. I wish I knew where this was coming from and what it meant. I'm clueless and growing a bit irritated with the urge to seek and protect that keeps popping into my mind. I am just a human, Roth has said it himself, it's ridiculous to think that I would be able to protect a demon.

But I know I can, even if I don't know how.

Life springs around me while I stand deep in thought, the model walking through the room stuttering in his steps as he bumps right into me.

"What the fuck?" he whispers under his breath, his caramel curls bouncing as he grabs onto me to keep from falling. "Dude, what are you doing?"

"Excuse me? How did you get in here?" one of the people at the tables behind me calls out. Instead of answering, I shove the model's hands from my arms and make a beeline for the door, leaving behind the group of people I had come here to impress. I reach the exit just as Milo yanks the door open from the outside, his eyes wide and face even paler than I've ever seen it.

"Brady," he gasps, clearly relieved to see me.

"Where the fuck did you go?" I hiss as he grabs my arm and drags me from the room. The door slams behind us, some of the people gathered on the chairs jumping at the sudden noise, but we don't slow down until we are a good enough distance from them so we won't be overheard. Once we've stopped moving and are tucked into a quiet corner, Milo throws his arms around me, giving me a tight squeeze.

"Fucking hell, I was so worried about you. I went to find Lucifer," Milo responds, letting me go. "I was certain I could feel him here somewhere, but the moment I left your side, I was trapped in the time freeze. Did you see him? Are you all right?"

He scans me from top to bottom, then starts circling me like he needs to check that every piece of me is all right. I can't stop the tiny laugh that escapes my mouth. "I'm okay, Milo. Nothing hurt me." Just scared the shit out of me, but I don't mention that. Instead, I add the information I do want to share. "It wasn't Lucifer, it was Legion. I need to find Roth."

Milo's eyes go wider than usual. "Legion can stop time now?"

"Apparently?" I comment as I push past him, heading for the glass door of the building, the push to ensure Roth is safe driving me entirely at this point.

"Curious. They shouldn't have that power," Milo murmurs, following behind me. "That's above their rank. Above what I and Bezeroth are capable of even. Unless things have changed below, that is. Maybe Creed would know?"

I shrug as I burst through the doors, pushing them open so hard and fast that the receptionist squawks a noise of displeasure behind me.

"Brady," Roth breathes, rushing over to me. I meet him halfway, throwing myself into his arms, pressing myself against him hard as he runs his hands over my back.

"You're okay," I murmur, pressing my nose against the hollow between his shoulder and neck. "You're safe."

"I know I am?" Roth asks, sounding confused and concerned. "Are you?"

"Yeah, I think so." I back up, looking him up and down, relief settling into me now that he's close and I know he's all right. Then, I frown thinking about the raveners. "You didn't tell me about the raveners, Roth."

He cringes, exchanging a glance with Milo who looks just as uncomfortable as he suddenly does. "What about raveners?"

"Legion came to show them to me. The same guy we saw at the zoo made time stop again and brought the illusion of one into the room with us."

Roth's eyes open wide and he scans me top to bottom again. "And you survived? Was it freshly fed? They eat tons of meat and bone, but when they are filled, they stop. Lucifer starves them for days before throwing demons that piss him off into their pit."

"It wasn't real," I offer, speaking clear as Roth has apparently missed the illusion piece of what I just said. "I wanted to pet it, though. It was really weird."

"Pet a ravener?" Miloriel squeaks. "No, no. You do not pet raveners, Brady. If you ever see one, you run in the opposite direction as fast as you can so they lose your scent."

Creed nods behind him, his face also paling at my suggestion that I would pet one. Well, not that I would, but that I was struck with the urge to. He offers a confused smile as my eyes linger on him; the gentle expression Legion had when I told them about Creed having a name leaving a question mark in my mind. I don't fully get what Legion is or how they work, but do all the individuals inside the hive want their own names? It feels to me like everyone should have a name of their very own. If I was in charge down there, I certainly would be giving out names like candy.

"To name a soul is to honor it. To take a sort of ownership over it, in the way Fathers are supposed to raise their children, if that makes sense. There are many within Legion that do not possess names as they are meant only to be pieces of the collective, working for the greater good," Roth whispers, clearly reading my mind. "Right now, I would like to know what was so important that Legion felt the need to come barging in again like this."

"He wondered why there was no claim yet," I reply softly, keeping the conversation between us.

"Ah."

I turn to look at Roth, focusing my attention on him here on the sidewalk in his human skin. The sunlight overhead casts shadows off the buildings, cupping his face and highlighting the curves of his nose. My best friend was brought back to me again, the only one who was ever there before and the only

one here now who can bear to touch me. No, that's not how to think of it. He's the one who wants desperately to have me in every way for the rest of forever. I can't lie, he is also wanted by me in return. Tanned skin stretches out from the green shirt he wears, and I oddly find myself wondering if he will be quite as sun kissed when the winter comes, and days grow shorter. Of course, he'll have to be around for me to see that, and if he's eaten by a ravener or taken back to Hell, I'll never know.

Legion's parting words echo in my head, and I watch Roth's eyes open wide, telling me that he has heard them. I am not ready at all to be a mate, it's still too much to think about. But having Roth die at the hands of his father and his pets simply because I need more time is also out of the question. I know he also hears that thought as it flits through my mind, his small understanding nod giving it away. There has never been a choice, I know. Looking at him now though, ready to give me more time than I'm sure we really have, I'm not certain there needed to be one in the first place.

**CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN**

Told you I wasn't feeling well, Felicity," Brady murmurs into his phone as he paces around the living room of my home. Miloriel and Creed scooted out the moment the phone call started, heading through a portal into Miloriel's brilliant white apartment, leaving me behind to sit with my angry mate.

My very angry mate. I have never seen Brady like this, and I'd be lying if it wasn't the tiniest bit of a turn on, even if his rage is fueling my own as I listen to his half of the conversation.

"I don't know what else you want from me. I've apologized and it won't happen again." He pauses, eyebrows furrowed, and mouth turned down into a frown. "I know! I know, okay. I know. I won't be invited back. I get it. It's fine. I'll send a fruit basket or some shit to apologize." He huffs an irritated breath out of his nose, finally stopping his constant moving around, though I can almost see the anger rippling off him in waves. On the other end of the phone, Felicity keeps chastising him, and I am very tempted to yank the phone from his hands and throw it against the wall.

She should not be speaking to my mate in that tone of voice.

"I'll send him a fruit basket too," he exclaims as he starts pacing again. "I didn't realize it was such a crime to have one mistake in my entire career. Felicity, be reasonable here. You know me. When have I ever gone out of my way to fuck with another model? It's not like I lit him on fire and danced around his flaming corpse or something."

I bite my tongue to keep from laughing out loud because he looks just about mad enough at the moment to start burning things. He makes a strangled sort of noise at the back of his throat as Felicity keeps talking on the other end of the call, and I have had enough.

“Give,” I demand, holding out my hand. I open and close it a few times for emphasis as Brady shakes his head at me, frowning even more now. I reach for the phone, and he slaps my hand away, scowling at me through his pursed lips.

“Who do you think you are?” he hisses into the phone. “Because my agent doesn’t treat me like I’m some wet behind the ears seventeen-year-old. My agent knows that I am nothing but professional in everything I do, and if my fucking agent were to keep going on like this, my agent would soon be finding a big fat empty spot on her roster.”

Felicity murmurs something back on the other end of the call as I flex my fingers again, demanding the phone be placed in my hand. Brady scowls and pushes my hand away again, making my own irritation kick up just a little bit more.

“Fuck you,” he snaps. He pauses, then his face slowly creeps its way into a satisfied smile. “I hate you too. Talk to you tomorrow.”

What the shit just happened? I drop my hand, staring at Brady as he ends the call and then turns to look right at me.

“I can handle my own agent,” he offers, sounding vaguely displeased with me. “I don’t need your help.”

“I did not like how she was speaking to you.”

Brady pauses, searching my eyes for a moment as he deflates a little bit where he stands. “I’m sorry. Felicity is... herself? She’s a raging bitch, but I love her because of it. She has been so protective of me since my mom died, but sometimes she forgets I’m not the same kid that wandered into her agency years ago, and I need to remind her I am not her child. I think she was scared today when she heard that I was behaving wildly inappropriately at the casting and sometimes her scared comes out like being a raging asshole.”

My esteem for this Felicity grows the tiniest bit, though I still don't like how she was talking to him. Still, he doesn't seem ruffled about it at all anymore so I should settle inside as well, perhaps. It's either that or I make Creed portal me to her house and spew venom into her coffee maker or something. Brady probably wouldn't like that though; he seems to be fond of this so-called raging asshole Felicity. I hope that she can smooth things over, so his career isn't damaged too much by Legion's carelessness.

If she can't, I know a couple demons who easily can and will. If I was a lesser, more petty demon, I would believe that his ability to persuade humans to give him what he wants is the reason Miloriel found it easy to become a model in the first place, but I am better than such childish thoughts. Or maybe I'm just good at pretending I am.

"Can it be fixed?" I ask. "Could Felicity get you a second chance at the job?"

"Nah," Brady comments with a bit of a sigh. "I disrupted another model's time. Can't really come back from that. It's probably for the best if I just take the loss and move on. There are many other designers and there will be other shows. Once fashion week gets closer, I'm sure I'll be super busy with castings and more chances to impress."

Brady crosses the room, slumping into the corner of the couch and drawing his legs up beside him. He leans back into the cushion and sighs again as the room starts to feel a little hit heavier. I'm sure it's not just the casting that's causing worries to flit through his head, but when I search his thoughts, all I get are snippets of disappointment. In himself. In Legion. In how the day went overall. He wanted this job, that much is clear. It meant something to him to be seen and wanted and now that that has been taken away, he's hurting even if he doesn't recognize it himself.

I must fix this.

"So, what is a casting like? What do you have to do?" I ask, sitting down on the flowery chair that I've claimed as my favorite. It is large enough to support me, and though it first

struck me as being a hideous eyesore like the rest of this house, I have grown a bit fond of the brown and blue flowers. If we ever get new furniture, I will be keeping this chair.

Brady turns to look at me, giving me a tiny half smile. “It’s nothing special really. I wait for hours for my turn to go into the room with the casting team. Sometimes the designer is there, sometimes they aren’t, but there’s always at least a couple people associated with the brand there to meet me. When I get into the room, they ask a bunch of questions to get to know me a little bit, then they usually make me walk up and down the room to see my walk. Sometimes, if I’m lucky and they’re really into my look and how I carry myself, they’ll get me to try on something that’ll be in the show and take a couple pictures for reference. That rarely happens though. Usually, it’s just talking and walking.”

“And this means you get the job?”

“I wish.” He laughs, shaking his head. “I usually get an e-mail from them inviting me for a fitting, and that’s how I know I’m getting something. Not that that’s a guarantee. I learned that my first show. I got a call back for a fitting, then was dumped because the clothes didn’t look right on me. My mom was so pissed. She threatened to go down there and wring their necks for crushing me like that, but it’s just business, you know?”

As the lingering sting of losing his mother flits through his brain, I curse myself inside my own head. I am meant to make him better, not add his dead mom to the list of things that have sucked about today.

“You have a nice walk,” I blurt, changing the subject entirely. His butt jiggles when he walks, I have noticed. I rather appreciate it and it feels like a good way to steer the conversation.

“You haven’t seen my runway walk,” he offers with a cheeky grin. “It took me a while to learn it. Felicity called me a baby elephant when she first met me with the way I stomped around the room, but now my runway walk is better. If there’s anything I can say about myself, it’s that my walk is good.”

“It is probably better than just good. Show me.”

“Show you.”

“Yes.” I stand and shove the coffee table out of the way, making him a runway so he can show me his walk. “Is this enough room?”

Brady pauses for a moment like he’s thinking before he nods and rises from the couch. “You really want to see?”

“I want to see everything about you. I want to know all there is to know of you.”

Brady’s cheeks flush a little bit red as he gives me a tiny smile, then darts to the other side of the living room. He shakes his hands out at his sides, then meets my eyes. “This is ridiculous. Are you ready?”

I nod eagerly and watch in awe as his entire face seems to change, his face becoming stern and a hint of what I would call sass entering his eyes. They sharpen as his jaw sets itself strong beneath his skin and his shoulders rise and fall as he inhales one deep breath and lets it out. Finally, he sets his mouth into a straight line and turns his eyes straight ahead. By the time he takes his first step on the carpet, then his second and I am absolutely sold on whatever he’s selling me.

Brady walks towards the opposite end of the living room taking what appear to be perfectly measured steps, arms moving but not too much. Not too over the top. It looks practiced, this walk of his, well trained and schooled into being the perfection that it is, but it is so much more than that. He looks comfortable. Confident. Far more confident in his own perfection than I’ve ever seen him before, and I am in awe of this change in him. When he reaches the end of the carpet where the hardwood begins, he strikes a small pose that also suits the confidence of the walk for a second before turning around and heading back the way he came.

“And then, I scoot off the stage and hope I didn’t look like a dumbass out there.” He laughs when he reaches his starting point, sinking back into himself again as his cheeks get a bit

red. He heads for the couch again, but I rise meeting him on his way there.

“Perfection,” I murmur, drawing up in front of him.

“Anyone could do it, if they knew their body enough.” He shrugs like it isn’t a big deal, but it is. Not the walk itself, but the confidence he has when he is doing it.

“I couldn’t.”

“You definitely could,” he responds with a laugh. “It’s easy. Look straight ahead, pretend you’re a zombie and take the right length of step.”

“No,” I murmur, grabbing him around the waist and pulling him into me. “I could never be as lovely.”

His arms wrap around me, and he tilts his head the slightest bit upwards, his lips begging me to kiss them. I close the distance between us. Brady melts into my arms, letting me tilt him backwards, arm cradling him, so he won’t fall as I deepen the connection. My body thrums with the need for him, my entire body coming alive as his hands grip my shoulders tight, though not so tight that I feel he doesn’t trust me entirely to not drop him.

“Roth,” he whispers as I end the kiss and bring him upright again. I hum a small noise of interest, giving him the go ahead to say whatever is on his mind, but my lips are too busy for words as I move from his mouth to his chin, then his neck. He shivers as I tilt his head to the side and press kisses to his skin, slicking my tongue over the corded muscles there. His breath hits my ear, little puffs of air tickling me as I listen to his heartbeat stutter in his chest.

“Roth,” he murmurs again, more insistent this time. I regretfully stop my exploration of his neck with my tongue, moving away to look into his eyes. What I find there is troubled, though undercut by arousal and heat. He wants me, I know. I can hear his thoughts crowing at him to let me keep going. To let me have him and take him and claim him. I am not surprised by his next question, given the turmoil inside his mind. “How am I just supposed to give myself to you?”

He takes a step back and tilts his head up ever so slightly to look at me. I offer a smile back, reaching up with my hands to capture his face between them. His cheeks are heated as I rub my thumbs over his cheekbones. “You are giving yourself to me, yes, but I am also giving myself to you. It’s not a take from you without giving in return.”

“How does claiming work?”

My own cheeks flush slightly as what I’ve been told flits through my head. I must be inside him, and I must bite him, releasing my venom into his veins to mark him as mine. Others would die from it but not my mate, though I don’t know how to explain that I will have to poison him to seal us together for eternity.

“You’ve gone awfully quiet,” he whispers, sounding a bit concerned.

“Intimacy is... key. I will bite you when I am inside you,” I start, choosing my words very carefully. “You’ll receive my venom into your body, but you won’t die. I know you won’t.”

“Die?”

“Won’t,” I repeat, soothing away the harsh lines of worry that have crept to his face. “You won’t die. I promise. My poison is pleasure to your body, you know.”

Brady slowly nods, and I can feel his heart rippling with unease, though want and need are also there. “Do I get to claim you back? Bite you? Am I supposed to?”

My body ripples with something feral as I consider Brady sinking his blunted teeth into my skin. I had never thought about that side of things, but I definitely like it. “You could.”

Brady hums under his breath like he’s thinking. “And what do I get in return if it isn’t death?”

“A whole soul to share with me for an eternity.”

“Immortality,” he breathes, his eyes growing somehow even more cartoonishly wide.

I nod. “You see, my mate? You were never meant to live, and now, you will have a life that spans infinitely into the

future and a mate who will be there by your side as the seasons change and years pass by. We won't get old; our bodies will stay eternally young and capable. Think of all the time we will have together to explore the world. I promised to show you everything you ever wanted to see when we were just kids. The cities, the small towns, the jungles with all the snakes you could ever want. I meant it, Brady. We will have an eternity together to fill with travel and food and sex." His cheeks flush the tiniest bit, and I can smell arousal burning deep inside him. "Does that part sound enticing to you?"

"I've never... um... had that. Nobody has ever gotten close enough to want those things with me."

I know this, but it feels important to hear from his own mouth. It's also equally important that he knows I have also never experienced carnal pleasures. "Me neither, my mate. We will learn together. You will be my first, my last, and my only."

"What happens if you hate me? Like years down the road, you decide that you can't stand the sight of me anymore."

My entire body rejects that idea, my stomach churning uncomfortably at the very thought of it. "I would never. I could never. Brady, you are everything I have wanted for so long. I could never turn you away or cast you aside, and nothing you could ever do would make me stop craving you. I love you, Brady. I always have loved you and in time, perhaps, you will grow to love me back." *Please*, I whisper inside my mind, the thought coming out of sheer nothingness. Please grow to love me back. I have never had love, not really, not entirely, and I find that now that the word is out there, I want it. If I could demand it of him, I would, the need is so great for it. I need this human to want me, crave me, and love me.

Brady goes silent, and I can hear thoughts scattering around his head like raindrops, snippets of the conversation he had with Legion blending with his own desires and needs, but finally he inhales a deep breath and looks back up at me. "Okay. Okay, let's do it. Claim me. Make us whole and make us unstoppable."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Roth grins like I've just given him the greatest present he could have ever asked for. Me? I'm shaking like a leaf, still uncertain what the hell I'm getting myself into here.

"No need to worry," Roth whispers, leaning in to wrap his arms around me again. "I will make this very pleasurable for you."

"Yeah?"

"Oh yes," he murmurs, his hand skating up my back, lighting little fires inside me. "I will give you nothing but pleasure, my mate. Nothing but myself in every way I can."

His hands move lower, cupping my butt in his hands and he gives the tiniest press upwards. Catching on quickly to what he's asking for, I hop up, wrapping my legs around his thick torso as best as I can. Leaning forward, he presses his lips to mine, and I wrap my arms around his neck, meeting him right back. His kiss is brimstone against my lips, the heat trickling through me like a wildfire as my body bursts to life.

Roth carries me to the edge of the staircase that leads to the upstairs bedrooms, his lips moving on mine, still which is a pretty impressive feat in and of itself. He breaks off the kiss though with a small, disappointed grumble. "I don't think I can carry you up there without dropping you on your head. Too steep. Too narrow."

"Old homes always have steep stairs," I offer as I unwrap myself from his body. He lets me go and I land on my feet, then turn to the stairs, heart racing, body thrumming with want. I make my own way up to the bedrooms, turning as I

enter Roth's to find him following close behind, his eyes heated and a small grin playing on his lips. "What?"

"That was not a model walk," he murmurs, stepping close and placing his hands on my hips. "But you have a very jiggy butt."

I can't help but laugh. "A jiggy butt?"

"A very nice, jiggy butt."

I laugh again as Roth smiles like he's pleased with himself, though as the laughter dies down, nervous butterflies scatter inside me. I meant it when I said I've never done anything like this before. I don't know what to expect, and I am a bit intimidated by the size of Roth's cock. I hope it doesn't hurt. I know he said pleasure is the name of the game, but it could hurt and that would really suck.

"No," he murmurs, reaching a hand up to touch my face. "I will do my best to please you. I promise."

"Me too," I whisper back. "For you, I mean."

"Don't think. Just let yourself feel me and you will know I could never hurt you. Not on purpose. I may be a demon, but you are a precious gift, and I would never harm you."

I nod as Roth reaches down and grabs the edge of my shirt, gently lifting it up my body. I lift my arms and he pulls it off me and drops it to the ground. Then, before I can comprehend what's happening, his lips are on my body. He sucks at my collarbone hard enough to leave a mark behind, his tongue laving over the skin in the wake of his lips. I shudder as he wraps one arm around me, drawing me closer to him, his lips and tongue moving over my neck and collarbones. My cock is plumping up inside my pants as he makes a meal of my skin, but I'm struck with a strange sense that comes out of nowhere. Something feels wrong. There's a small thread inside my mind that says this isn't right, though as with many of my thoughts these days, I don't know where it comes from. Roth pulls back, looking into my eyes with concern, and I know at once what it is.

“Not like this,” I murmur, looking into his tanned and perfect human skin. “I want your real form. Show me the demon you really are.”

Roth hesitates a moment, then nods, stepping away and making quick work of removing his clothing. He stretches as he drops his pants to the ground, his long, thick cock jutting from his pelvis obscenely. His whole body seems to ripple and pulse as his horns slowly extend from his head, his tail sprouts from his spine and his nose flattens. Finally, his skin turns from tanned copper to deep grey, and I am struck with a sense of rightness.

“Yes,” I murmur, reaching for him. For this demon that is my mate. Leaning forward, I press a kiss to his nose, my favorite part of him. Though the tail is amazing, and the horns are fearsome, this nose is the best part of Roth. *And his cock*, my brain offers, and I go a bit red as his lips quirk into a grin. “Stop reading my mind.”

“You like my cock,” he comments, standing tall and proud.

I burn with embarrassment as my hand trails down his body, his skin far warmer than I imagined it to be. His tail flicks behind him, the feathers glistening in the light streaming in through the slats of the window, before moving to curl around his thigh. He gives his own leg a squeeze, then it goes still, though stays wrapped around him.

“Why does it do that?”

“Self-soothing,” he admits on a whisper. “I am nervous and very excited.”

I can feel his excitement pressing against the front of my jeans as I lean in and kiss his beautiful lips. Trailing my hand down, I wrap my hand around his cock as best as I can, giving it a tiny stroke as he makes an approving rumble at the back of his throat. I stroke him a few times, feeling the weight and heat of him in my palm, then end the kiss to lean back and look at it. The shaft is the same grey as the rest of his body, but the glistening head of his cock is a deeper shade, pearling with the tiniest beads of precum already. I capture a bit of it on my finger, then raise it to my lips, sticking my tongue out to taste

the fire of him. He is as delicious as I remember him being, and without a second thought, I sink to my knees on the orange carpet. Roth makes a sound of surprise as I lean forward, pressing my nose into his skin and inhaling him into my lungs. He is brimstone with a hint of peppermint in my nose, and I take another deep breath of him, letting the smell settle down the butterflies inside me.

Finally, I move away and turn my attention to his hardened cock, grasping it in one hand and giving it a stroke. His skin is velvety smooth in my hand, and he lets loose a small noise of pleasure as I move on him. The noise turns into a more feral growl as I open my mouth and place the dusky tip of him into my mouth, my lips stretching wide around his girth. I can't get the whole length of him inside me, but I will take as much of him as I can without choking myself to death.

“Do not choke,” he demands, clearly listening in to my thoughts again.

I nod, sucking at the tip of him, tongue gliding over the slit as my hand strokes his shaft. He shivers above me as I lick at him, then move forwards to draw him deeper into my mouth. His cock is heavy on my tongue, gliding between my lips as I pull off him the tiniest bit, then move forwards to bring him into me more. I breathe carefully through my nose as I draw him as deep as I dare into my mouth, lips stretched wide around him.

“You look sinful,” he growls, staring down at me with darkened eyes. “On your knees with my cock in your mouth. Do you like being sinful, Brady Schiff?”

I murmur a small noise of agreement, my mind filled with how I must look and how perfect it feels. Moving my head back, I let him slide out of my mouth before pulling him right back in, taking care to breathe through my nose because my mouth is absolutely filled by him. Roth groans as I move on him, faster now that I can feel his body rippling with want and need that matches my own. My cock is painfully hard in my pants, and I whimper the softest noise as I reach down to press against it, giving myself the best stroke I can through the jeans I wear.

I want so badly and need just as much. My entire body fills with arousal as I lick and suck at Roth's cock, vulgar, wet noises escaping as I bob my head. Saliva slips down my chin, but I make no move to wipe it away. I am too enthralled by the feeling of him inside me and the taste of his precum that sits at the back of my throat. Above me, Roth has his head tipped back and his tail is tight around his thigh, the tip of it fluttering ever so gently against his skin. His eyes open and he turns his head downwards as I pull off him entirely, my hand replacing my mouth as I smooth saliva and precum down his heated shaft.

"Come here," he murmurs, gesturing upwards.

I scramble to my feet, releasing my grip on him as he leans forward and captures my lips in a kiss that heats up quickly. His lips devour mine as his hands move down my back, resting on the band of my jeans before slipping around to undo the button. Relief pools through me as he undoes my zipper, then shoves my pants downwards, grumbling a bit under his breath as he fruitlessly tries to get them off me entirely. I break the kiss with a small laugh and take a step away to finish removing my pants, kicking them to the floor without a single care about where they land. I slip out of my boxers as well, my cock springing upwards as I discard all my clothing to the ground. Finally, I stand before my demon, naked as the day I was born and thrumming with need for him. Roth licks his lips, looking me up and down for a few moments.

"You are beautiful," he murmurs, stepping into my body. His cock brushes against mine, and I recall the first time he touched me, the way they both looked nestled in his hand, my pink skin beside his own tanned. They are vastly different now in color and in size. I swallow hard again as some of the butterflies trickle through me at the thought of taking him inside me where nobody has ever been, but he gently nudges me backwards towards the bed, breaking all of those worries off. "It will be pleasure."

"It will be." I hope it will be. I have to trust that this will be.

I sit on the bed behind me, and Roth moves to stand in front of me, his cock swinging as he moves. I am about to reach for him again, to continue suckling pleasure out of him, but he leans down and grips my hips in his hands. My eyes widen as he gently nudges me into the position he obviously wants me in, and I quickly find myself on my hands and knees at the edge of the bed, ass up in the air in front of him.

“Perfect,” Roth offers, his breath skating over my skin. His hands move to rest on my buttocks, and slowly, I am opened and exposed to his view. My heart shakes a little bit as his breath crests over my pucker, body rippling with excitement and nerves at once. “Perfect, Brady. My perfect mate with a perfect hole for me to fuck.”

“Christ,” I whisper, his words sending a thrill through my body.

“He has no place here. Not when we are sinning deliciously.”

I’m about to make some flippant comment, but it leaves me at the touch of his lips against my hole. Instead, I shut my mouth and close my eyes, sinking into the bed. His lips are replaced by his tongue, and I shiver as he licks a slow line over my pucker then moves to do it again. He pauses for a moment, and I glance over my shoulder to find him pressing again on one of his sharpened teeth. My arousal spikes as I recall the warmth and tingle that his venom gave me before, and I stutter a noise as he wraps a hand around my cock where it hangs between my legs. His tongue moves back to licking at my hole as he holds my dick in his fist, not giving it a stroke at all, but simply capturing me there in place so I cannot move even if I wanted to. A warming tingle scatters up my spine as his venom coated tongue moves against my entrance. This is more pleasure than I have ever known, and my entire brain is screaming the word “yes” as loud as it can.

“Roth,” I murmur under my breath. “That feel so good.”

“Mmm,” he responds. “I know it does. I can hear how good it feels, my mate.”

His hand starts moving on my cock as he returns to lapping hungrily at my hole, the tingling sensation now moving through every sensitive part of me. I whimper as he delves into my body the tiniest amount with the tip of his tongue, licking at the rim like he's never tasted something quite so delicious. He does this again and again as I push back against him, needing more even though this is already more than I've ever had.

Roth lets go of my cock and his hand slips between my cheeks, replacing his tongue to touch and stroke the outside of my hole with his slick fingertips. The first press into me with one of his fingers have my knees almost buckling, and I tightly grip the sheets beneath me. Breathing hard into the mattress, I whimper as his finger leaves my body, then presses back in slowly. I can feel myself opening around this intrusion, and while there is a bit of a burn at being stretched, it fades quickly and is replaced by the pleasure tingle of his venom. Roth strokes his finger inside me a few times before replacing one with what feels like two. The stretch around his fingers isn't what I expected at all, it's feels far less unwelcome than I imagined. So far at least. This is just two fingers, and I know his cock is coming next. I'm surprised by how much I want it. How badly I need it and how it suddenly feels like it is all I have ever desired in my entire life.

"Because it is made for you," he murmurs, catching my thoughts. "Your body knows this."

His fingers move inside me, leaving me a trembling mass of need and want. Finally, he pulls out entirely leaving me empty and hollow. Distress creeps up inside me at the thought that it is over, even though I know there's more to come. I'm not sure when I turned into this whimpering pile of arousal, but somewhere between the licking at my hole and the finger deep inside me, things shifted, and all I want is to be filled by him.

"Please," I whisper, turning my head upwards to see him. "Please, Roth."

"Fuck you? Like you were made for?" he asks with a grin, clearly enjoying himself.

“Mate me,” I correct. “Like you were made for.”

A sharp breath leaves his chest like I’ve caught him off guard, followed by a low, feral growl. He likes that far more than the idea of just fucking me, and I’m thrilled that I can say things that have such an effect on him.

“Condom?” I ask, trying to recall if I’ve seen any of them kicking around here somewhere.

“No,” he responds, but as I’m about to protest that, he smiles. “I do not carry anything, and I have never done this before. I must fill you to claim you, with venom and seed.”

That makes sense, and I can feel my cheeks flushing as I recall that this is not a human about to take my virginity. He is a demon. My demon mate.

A thick, heavy weight rests at the rim of my entrance, and I breathe slowly into the mattress, forcing myself to stay calm and relaxed. Roth presses forwards slowly and insistently, my body resisting the idea of opening to him for a moment before he slips the very tip of his cock into me. I groan loudly as the feeling of being opened like this sends my body into overdrive. It aches the tiniest bit, there’s a bit of a burn at the stretch, but I want more. When I have more, I’m sure it will ease, and I turn my head back again to demand that he give me more. Without words, he does, sliding into me a little bit more before pulling out. Little moans leave my mouth as he presses in and out, delving deeper with each stroke until I find myself entirely filled by him. The pressure inside my body is intense, the urge to expel him and keep him inside are at war. Roth rests, stroking my lower back with his fingertips, not moving an inch otherwise. I think he’s giving me time to settle, but when I look up at his face, I see his mouth open, his eyes scrunched shut tightly as he pants into the air around him.

“Don’t move,” he murmurs. “You are very hot, and I am very close.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Brady's body is like a vice grip around me, and my cock throbs deep inside him, threatening to spill already and ruin this for both of us. Never before have I felt such bliss, such joy and pleasure rolled into one.

I breathe long, deep breaths, forcing my heart to settle, reminding myself that there are still tasks to complete to make him fully mine, though it feels as if he is already. I am filled with love for this mate of mine, my heart singing, and the emptiness inside me filling as I rest my cock inside him where it belongs. Where it has always belonged.

When I've settled, I reach up and grab more venom from my sharpened teeth, then slowly withdraw my cock from his body enough to add it to the slick coating I've already created. I push back inside, his body gripping onto me tightly, and a low moan leaves his lips. His head screams the word yes at me, and I grip his hips tightly, pulling out, then pressing into his warm, snug body. Slowly, I create a pace that suits me for the moment, slipping in and out of his body as I pull him backwards onto me the tiniest amount. Brady is moaning now with every thrust, my hips smacking against his asscheeks hard enough that they jiggle delightfully.

"You feel so good, my mate," I murmur, pulling him backwards onto me as I thrust forward.

Brady nods, his mouth open and his head sideways where it rests on the mattress. I frown though. I don't like him being mashed into the mattress as he is, so I pull out of him entirely to change his position and mine. He props himself up on his arms with great effort, turning to look at me behind him.

“Scoot forward.” I tap his butt gently and he shuffles forwards on the bed. I crawl up behind him, getting on my knees and slipping myself back into his warm, slick hole with a groan of relief. I start thrusting again, but instead of leaving him on his hands and knees, I reach forwards and wrap my arm around his chest, pulling him upwards. He arches his back as his shoulders hit mine, his head landing on my shoulder but his ass is juttied out so I can still press deep into him. I hold him upright on his knees as my hips work a rhythm in and out of his body, his pants landing in my ears now.

“Good?” I ask as sweat slips down his face.

“Mmhmm.” I am thrilled that he is enjoying this but know it could be better. My tail uncoils itself from around my thigh and reaches for him, wrapping around his body and curling instead around his cock. I have dreamed of this, of stroking him with my tail while fucking into his body. I give him a stroke with my tail, the feathers slicking as I move on and in him.

He is consumed by me, as I have always wanted.

“Fuck,” he blurts as my tail tightens its grip on his cock. “Fucking hell. That’s so good. I’m so close.”

As am I. My teeth are starting to ache and the urge to clamp them down onto his shoulder to let loose my venom into him is rising fast. His body grips mine tight as I thrust into him hard, holding him upright, tail slicking over his engorged cock. He cries out as his body ripples around mine, his orgasm drawing ever so near.

“Come,” I whisper, licking at my venom slicked teeth. “Come and I will claim you.”

Brady whimpers softly, then cries out again as I slam into him as best as I can, my cock delving so deep into his body now that my balls strike the backs of his thighs. I let go of his chest and he falls forwards onto the bed, holding himself up on his own hands as he cries out again, body trembling and rippling as his orgasm claims him. I throw myself over him, teeth aching as I give into the urges. I’m on my feet fucking

down into him as I grip the skin where shoulder meets neck in my teeth and bite down hard.

Brady screams, and I slip back to my knees, bringing him with me, pressing his back against my chest and settling him onto my lap, impaled on my cock as my tail strokes him through his orgasm. I can feel the venom leaving my body, slipping into his, and I do not dare let go even as he quivers and shakes.

“Burning,” he pants, almost like he’s pleading for me to stop, but something inside me says I’m not done. Says he’s not mine yet and that the claiming isn’t complete because I have not spilled my cum into him yet. I grip him tight in my teeth as he writhes on my cock, hips pressing downwards and forcing me into him deep. He whimpers again as more pearly white cum spurts from his cock, coating my feathers in more slickness, but I do not stop stroking him. I can’t. We aren’t done and there is more pleasure to be had for him.

“Roth. It burns,” he whimpers, pressing down on me hard. I grip his hips in my hands and thrust up into him as best as I can, my own cock pulsing deep in him as my orgasm draws near. Brady cries out again, his body rippling around mine as I draw more cum from his body, but only the tiniest amount.

He is empty now and ready to be filled. My balls draw up, and with a groan that echoes around us, I flood his body with my cum, listening to him whimper and moan as he is filled by every single thing that is mine to give. I let go of him with my teeth as I fuck up into him, drawing out my own orgasm as long as I can, my body thrumming with the release of myself into my mate.

“Mate,” I whisper, hips stuttering as my thrusts slowly stop.

Brady doesn’t move, but a low whimper leaves his mouth. In front of me, his bite is vicious and red, venom slicking every mark my sharpened teeth have left behind. His hole still quivers where he rests on my cock, my body pulsing in response as I breathe hard into the room. I lean forward and lap at the bite mark with my tongue, some feral urge inside me

taking control. I am pleased to feel the ripples in his skin created by my teeth and know that, though they will scar, they will always be slightly ridged.

“Brady?” I ask as his head flops to the side. He whimpers again, and I lift him off my cock, cum slipping out of his body and creating a pool on my lap. He is shivering like he’s freezing, though his body is slicked with sweat. I lay him on the bed and curl up around him, pulling him back into me. “Are you okay, my mate?”

“I’m warm,” he whispers back, voice hoarse even though quiet. “So warm. I have never been so warm.”

“Does it hurt?”

“No. It feels... full. Warm and full.”

I nod against his back, warmth unfurling from inside me as well. I search for the empty places that have always been inside but when I poke at them, I find them no longer half empty. My heart is full, as is the soul that sits at the core of me. Joy bursts inside me, unlike anything I have ever felt before, and I close my eyes, reveling in the feeling of no longer being half empty and wanting.

There is no more wanting or wishing for more. I have it all inside me. This man in front of me has given it to me. I am eternally tied to him, body and soul. His heart beats inside mine, strong and sure and it is a beautiful thing to feel.

“Brady,” I whisper. “We are whole.”

“That’s nice,” he murmurs back, clearly falling asleep. I laugh softly, pressing my lips to the mark on his shoulder and sending a shiver through his body. He reaches back to smack me away from him gently. “Sleep now.”

As soon as the words leave his lips, a soft snore rises in its place, and I slip from the bed. I am exhausted, but I am also filled with the need to clean us up. Slick cum coats the back of Brady’s thighs, and while I am absolutely thrilled to see myself upon him, I want him clean.

I head for the bathroom to grab a cloth and quickly give myself a wipe down before lifting my tail into my hands and

placing it into the sink. I run water over my feathers, stroking through them to remove traces of cum and sweat, before giving them a pat dry with a towel. I would love a shower, but that can be for later. Right now, I have a mate to tidy up.

When I return to the bedroom, Brady hasn't moved an inch, but his chest rises and falls with his little snores. I take the cloth and give his body a wipe down as best as I can without disturbing him. He will shower when he wakes, but now he needs sleep more, and so do I. When he's cleaned enough for my brain to stop yelling at me about it, I drop the cloth onto the pile of clothing on the floor and crawl onto the bed behind him. I wrap myself around his body and pull him into me, feeling the heat of him nestled deep inside my arms as I close my own eyes, settling into my own sleep.



“THIS FEELS STRANGE,” Brady murmurs, rubbing a fist into the centre of his chest. He’s been doing that off and on since he woke up from his nap, and I understand completely. It’s something we are both unused to, this feeling of being complete. I keep waiting for the emptiness I’ve felt since I was little to creep into me, but it’s just not there anymore. All I can feel is a sense of rightness, of being complete and when I look at Brady, all I can feel is a deep-seated love and appreciation for everything he is.

“Is it a bad feeling, though?” I ask as I cut up an apple for the plate of food I’m making. I woke up starving and Brady said he was as well, but neither of us really want a huge meal, so a snack plate of meats, cheeses, fruits, and crackers seems like the best bet for now.

“No,” he replies, still rubbing at his chest. “Just different. Strange.”

“Here,” I comment, pushing the plate filled with food towards him where he stands by the counter. “Eat something.”

Brady reaches for the plate, but instead of taking something off it, he smiles and grabs the whole thing. “Living room?”

“Or bedroom?” I ask with a grin. We haven’t bothered getting dressed yet, and if I have my way, we won’t even put clothing on again. My demon skin is far more comfortable, and I rather like Brady’s fresh and clean nudity. Even though he’s hardly truly clean. Neither of us have showered yet, but we will in time. There’s nothing but time now for both of us.

Brady’s lips curl into a small smile and he darts off to the staircase with the plate of snacks in his hands. His footsteps ring through the house, and I turn to grab two tumblers of orange juice from the counter then follow him. When I reach the bedroom again, he is settling onto the bed with his back resting against the wall and his legs extended down the mattress with the snacks balanced on his thighs. I place the juice cups on the nightstand and crawl up beside him, stretching out myself. I hand him one of the cups and he smiles, taking a long swig of orange juice before placing the cup on his bedside table.

“Do you remember sitting like this when we were little?” I ask, grabbing a cracker off the plate. I stack it with meat and cheese, then shove it into my mouth as my stomach growls.

“And you used to make me make seagull noises.” Brady nods with a smile. He starts eating as well, and I am captivated by the way his throat bobs as he swallows, though I shouldn’t let myself get too heated up again. I’m far too tired for that still, though I’m sure I could be roused to attention if he were willing.

“Those were the best. I still would love to meet a seagull someday.”

“They’re everywhere. I’m sure we could find one for you to meet pretty easily.”

“I want to meet one at the beach,” I reply, remembering all the stories he told me about his vacation when we were little. “I want to see where the water meets the sand and eat popisculls and panned cakes.”

“Popsicles and pancakes.”

He nudges me in the side with his elbow, and I grin, because though I know how to pronounce the words now, they will always be popisculls and panned cakes to me. We fall into a comfortable silence as we eat, snacking away at apples and meats and cheeses. I create a cracker sandwich and hold it up to Brady with a raised eyebrow, and he opens his mouth, letting me place it onto his pink tongue. As he chews, I am filled with... something. Something good and beautiful and perfect.

“You’re smiling a lot over there, demon.”

“Thank you for allowing me to claim you.”

“It burned,” he murmurs, rubbing his chest again. “It still feels... warm inside? Do you feel it?”

I rub my chest to mimic him, but I don’t feel this warmth he’s been talking about. Or rather, I feel warmth, but I get the sense that what he’s feeling is different somehow. “I don’t think I feel what you do.”

“Hmm. It’s not bad, just strange. It didn’t hurt, but it felt... hot? I’m not explaining this well at all.” He huffs a small breath of irritation, shaking his head as his fist rubs at his chest again. If he keeps doing that, he’s going to get a raw, red mark there.

“Here,” I say, handing him another cracker sandwich so he stops pushing at his skin. He takes it from me, popping it into his mouth and chewing, his hands leaving his chest alone for the moment.

“What do we do now?” he asks, after he’s swallowed.

“Anything we want.” The world is ours. He will understand soon enough the breadth of what lies in front of us. Money will not be an issue for us; I should be able to compel whatever I want from anyone I meet. We will have to be discreet over the years though, his lack of aging from this present moment will cause heads to turn, but he could work for a few years more if he wanted to.

“No, like aren’t we supposed to like... take Hell or something?”

I startle, turning to face him. “Where did you get that idea from?”

“Legion,” he offers, grabbing an apple. “They said something about how they need a change down below. I don’t know everything, they’re really confusing, but I think... Aren’t we supposed to, like, storm the gates of Hell and take your father’s throne?”

“I haven’t thought much of it.” I don’t know if I want it, the throne, the title, the responsibility of it all. I don’t even wish to ever see Lucifer again, not even to smite him under my heel. I have all I need right here in this bed beside me, nibbling away at an apple slice. “My purpose has always been you.”

“Yeah.” Brady sighs, sounding a bit sad about it. “But what about after? What about now? What do you want to do, Roth?”

“Be with you.”

“No, that’s not what I mean. I can be your mate, I’ve accepted that, but isn’t there anything you’ve wanted besides me?”

“Like what?”

“Like... I don’t know. Do you want to learn how to cook? To bake? To write books? Buy a store and sell stuff to people?”

“I don’t want a job.”

“Not a job.” He sighs, clearly growing frustrated with me, but I don’t know the answer he’s looking for. “A passion, maybe. Something to occupy your time when I’m not around. Something you do just for yourself because it makes you happy.”

“Like modeling makes you?”

A smile breaks over his mouth and his eyes light up. “Yes. Exactly like that. I love being in front of the cameras and I love walking the runway. I feel comfortable there, like I can be

anything I want to be, and nobody moves away from me or gets uncomfortable around me. What makes you feel that way?"

"Being by you?" That is the answer. It has always been the answer.

Brady's face falls and he sighs his irritation again. "No, Roth. I don't think you get what I mean. What gives you joy?"

"You."

"Oh, my fucking God. What else, besides me, gives you joy?"

"I am not sure. I don't know joy, outside of what I feel when I look at you."

"Oh, Roth." He sighs, picking up the near empty plate and putting it on the table alongside his juice. He crawls onto my lap, and I am thrilled to have him there, straddling me, his cock pressed against mine. He doesn't look happy, though, as he places his hands on my cheeks. "You have to have something besides me. I am not a purpose; I am a person. You have me forever, but you can't be without purpose, okay?"

"Okay." I don't get it, but I'll try. All I have ever known is the beautiful man on my lap, his hands gently holding my cheeks and his eyes staring hard into mine. Even though they are stern and filled with worry, they are all I have ever wanted.

He is all I have ever needed.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Hot water sluices down my back and Roth's hands move on my skin, rubbing soap on every part of my body. I ripple with pleasure under his hands, and though I am horribly sore, I could be convinced to let him into me again.

And again.

I could become easily addicted to having him inside me and that's what gives me pause. The words "keep safe" keep running through my head, even louder now than before his venom entered me, and though I have not told him the depth of it, there is a smoldering burn at my core that is almost stealing my breath away. His venom didn't hurt, though it did terrify me as it scorched through me like a wildfire, leaving this ache inside me in its wake. I fear if I open my mouth and don't mind my words, I will snap and snarl and hurt him with words as I've done before.

I'm prickling with something I can't place as he runs his hands through my hair, his knuckles getting snarled in knots left behind by him fucking me into the mattress earlier. I'm not sure what it is, but it feels strange, and I'm sure it's not what he feels. Roth is content in a way I haven't seen him before, his smile easier and his body more comfortable where he stands behind me. He feels whole and I know I am too, but his whole is a comfort where mine feels like a searing burn that lingers inside me.

Maybe it's because I'm human. Maybe that's why this feels so odd to me.

“Keep safe,” I murmur as I glance over my shoulder to see Roth’s handsome face, droplets of water dripping from the tips of his horns.

“Hmm? What was that?”

“Nothing,” I respond, offering a smile and hoping he isn’t peeking into my head. I’m sure the thoughts jumbling around in there would only worry him.

Roth’s hands skirt around my hips and come to rest above my cock. I can feel arousal stirring inside me again, and I’m a bit baffled at how even the easiest touch is making me behave like this. He pulls me backwards, then snakes a hand around my filling dick, giving it a soapy stroke.

“I don’t know if I have anything left.” I laugh as he strokes me again. I tilt my head backwards, resting on his shoulder as he strokes me gently in even, measured strokes, fire lighting along my spine. Orgasm comes easily to me, and I let loose a soft “oh” as I spill over his knuckles. He licks at my bite mark, and I shiver the tiniest bit, arousal once again beginning anew inside me. “Stop that.”

Roth laughs as I turn and give him a mock glare as things simmer down inside me. His nose wrinkles as water spray hits him right in the eye and it’s my turn to laugh. “Serves you right, demon.”

Roth reaches behind me and turns the shower off, leaving us both dripping wet in the bathtub. This room is dated like the rest of his house and that thought brings me to another. “Are you going to stay in this house now?”

“We can,” he says, stepping out of the tub and offering a hand to help me get out. “I like that the house goes up, but if you like houses that go out, we can change it.”

“I have an apartment. I really like it.”

“Ah. Maybe I could like it too?”

I step out of the shower using his hand as a support as the quickness of this claiming pops to my head. We haven’t even talked about where we will live, or who will pay the bills or how he plans on getting money, or anything. I can feel the

burn inside me growing and the words *keep safe* scream in my mind as I consider that this was far too fast and that I need some space.

“You are panicking again,” Roth murmurs. “Will you pass out?”

“I’ll be fine. It’s just... we didn’t plan anything. We didn’t talk about anything. It’s been two days. Three days. Not enough days to plan how to do this. I need you by me, but I also want to think, and I can’t. I have to keep you safe, Roth. I have to.”

“It will be all right, my mate. I will go wherever you are, I promise. You can keep me safe.” He doesn’t believe me, I know, but I can’t really expect him to when I don’t know how to explain it better. Roth lifts me into his arms and carries me across the hallway into our bedroom. His bedroom. The bedroom. My head is filling with thoughts and worries, and the burn inside me is increasing, creeping up my throat like a clawed hand. Roth places me on the bed and curls up behind me, his tail reaching to wrap around my waist along with his arms. “You are okay.”

“I am a mess,” I offer, the burn still creeping inside me. I reach up a hand and press it into my chest, right where I can feel it growing. Rubbing a circle there seems to settle it down, though not much.

“You are my mess.”

I snort a laugh, the tension easing inside me the littlest amount. I keep rubbing at my chest, the burn dying down to a tolerable level until I can breathe again. “Thank you.”

“Are you still tired?”

“I think so?” I’m not sure but laying down with him wrapped around me feels like more comfort than I’ve had since his venom ripped through my veins. Roth places his hand on my forehead, then touches the back of my neck like he’s checking my temperature before he presses his lips against the mark on my shoulder. I’m about to scold him for teasing what I’ve started thinking of as my horny spot, but he

moves away and instead presses his cool cheek to my heated skin.

“Get sleep,” he whispers. “I will be right here.”

I nod, closing my eyes and letting myself drift into sleep I’m not sure I need because it’s easier than being awake and dealing with whatever is happening inside of me.



I PRICKLE with awareness as I wake up, reaching behind me to find that Roth is not there. The burn has not left my chest and seems to have grown as I rested, but that is not my problem right now. I need to find Roth and voices coming from downstairs are drawing me out of my bed. I slip into a pair of sweatpants and make my way down to find Roth on the floor, Milo’s arm wrapped around him in a headlock. He is smiling as he meets my eyes, but the burn takes over and I snarl, curling my lip at him.

Rage pools inside me and I see red as I stare at Milo, who has his hands on my mate. A low growl escapes from somewhere inside me and his eyes go as wide as saucers.

“Brady, are you—”

“Get your hands off him,” I snap, cutting him off before he can even get a sentence out. I don’t like this. I don’t like him touching what is mine. He lets go of Roth who rises to his feet slowly, his eyes also wide as they meet mine. Milo is still too close to him for my own liking though, and I lunge forward, putting myself between them. “Do not hurt what is mine.”

“Brady,” Milo whispers, holding his hands up like he needs me to see he’s harmless. “We were just joking. I was only teasing him about claiming you.”

“I will end you and that is a promise. I will rip out your entrails and use them as a jumping rope. I will tear your head off and piss down your neck. Do not test me,” I snarl, rage

seeping through me unchecked and unaltered. Rationally, I know this isn't how I should be behaving, but I have lost all sense of myself in this all-consuming anger and hatred.

“Hey,” Roth murmurs behind me, putting his hand gently on my shoulder. I sink a little bit into the touch, though my anger still courses through me. “I’m okay. We were just joking.”

I turn to face him, seeing worry in his eyes. He exchanges a look with Milo, then meets my face again. “I don’t like it. I will kill him if he touches you again. I swear it.” I turn to Milo, who meets me with fear as he should. I am meant to be feared. I am meant to be obeyed. “I swear it by my blood.”

“Did he just blood oath me?” Miloriel squeaks, sounding incredibly distressed but that is none of my concern. I will end him if he dares touch my mate again.

“Okay, that’s enough. Settle down, everything is all right,” Roth whispers, reaching for me. I turn into him and let him take me into his arms, the rage slowly pulling itself out of my entire body and curling up into my core again to lay dormant in the burn. Roth strokes my hair softly, and I almost purr in his embrace, closing my eyes to smell his brimstone and peppermint scent.

“What the fuck did you do?” Milo hisses, and I growl at his tone.

“Stop it,” Roth snaps, though I know he’s not talking to me.

“My best friend just threatened to kill me and issued a blood oath, Bezeroth. What did you do to him?”

I growl again, unable to stop myself. I really don’t like how he’s talking to my mate, and I will not hesitate if he persists. Roth’s hands soothe me though, settling down the fire that threatens to again consume me. I let myself be lulled into his comfort, leaning hard against him as he holds me. I can hear that he is whispering with Milo, but as long as the tone of the conversation does not change to something vicious, I know I won’t snap.

Finally, footsteps heading towards the stairs echo through the quiet living room, and I am left alone with my mate. I tilt my head up and he meets my eyes, concern inside his own. “Are you all right?”

“I was mad,” I respond, not knowing what else I can say. Shame fills me as my words to Milo flit through my head, and I let loose a low noise of distress. “I was so mean. I’m never mean. Not on purpose. Not like that.”

“I know. I know you aren’t.”

“Why did I say those things?”

Roth doesn’t answer because I’m not sure even he knows. I sure as shit have no clue what just happened or where those words even came from. “What do you feel inside?”

“Nothing,” I offer, though it is a lie. I feel the burning in my core again and reach up to rub at my chest where it lingers.

“No,” Roth says, pulling away and looking from my face, down to my chest, then back up at me. “What do you feel, Brady? Don’t lie.”

“I told you before. It’s a burn. Like heartburn or something. It’ll go away, I’m sure. It just got bad when I woke up, maybe I need to drink some milk or something.”

“I don’t feel it.” Roth sounds a bit confused, and he raises a hand to touch his chest, eyebrows furrowing like he expects to feel something that he can’t conceive.

“Like I said, it’s probably just heartburn.” Roth looks worried, but there isn’t much I can do about that. I don’t have room for his worry when I’m so filled with shame at how I treated my best friend. “I have to talk to him.”

“Maybe give him a moment.”

“No,” I respond, pushing away from him. “I have to apologize. Roth, I have never treated him that way. I would never treat him that way. I don’t know where it came from, and he’s my best friend.”

“Okay. Okay, he’s upstairs with Creed.”

I nod, then lean in and give him a gentle kiss before heading for the staircase. I slowly make my way up and creep along the quiet hallway to the only closed door. Lifting my hand, I knock softly, my entire body crawling with unease.

“What?” Milo calls out, sounding incredibly upset.

“Can I come in?”

The door opens, and I am met with Milo’s anger and hurt. I have never been on the receiving end of it before and it rattles me down to the soles of my feet. Creed sits on the bed behind him, lifting his hand in a greeting that I briefly return before turning back to Milo’s face.

“I’m so sorry,” I blurt, shaking my head. “I don’t know what happened. Why I did that, I mean. I know you were just joking, or at least a piece of me knows that, but I just... There’s this feeling inside that says I gotta keep him safe, you know? I’m... I’m an asshole.”

“You issued a blood oath,” Milo spits out, crossing his arms across his chest. “I have never, ever had anyone swear to kill me on their very blood before.”

“I don’t even know what that means!”

“It’s a curse, Brady. It’s a curse to tie your own blood to someone’s death. A blood oath is vile hatred and pure malice, something you only dare say if you truly mean it.”

“I take it back, I swear. The words just came to me and I said them. I didn’t know it meant anything. Can I take it back?”

Milo hesitates, raising an eyebrow. “Touch your nose.”

My hand flies to my face and I smack my nose a bit harder than I intended to. His lips curl into a small smile for a brief moment, before going stern again. “Now stick out your tongue.”

I follow along with that order and then I also comply with requests to hop on one foot, quack like a duck and turn around in a circle clockwise, even though I know it’s bullshit. I figured out after the first command that a blood oath is more

of a swear than a true curse, I just don't want my only friend to be mad at me anymore.

“And now tell me you love me,” he says, raising an eyebrow.

“I do love you, Milo.”

“Good.” He sighs. “And now you can give me your Ticket bag and all will be good again.”

My black leather Ticket tote that was hand delivered to Felicity's office by a chauffeur in a fancy town car after I walked in one of their shows? That is my most prized possession and the best thank you gift I have ever received from a designer. “Uh, no. That's not happening.”

“Shit, I thought that would work. You were really mean, you know.”

“I am sorry, but you can't have my tote.”

“You never use it.”

“I use it all the damn time, what are you talking about?” It's where I pack all my snacks for casting calls and photoshoots. That thing goes everywhere with me and is the first thing I'm grabbing when I manage to make it back to my apartment at some point.

Milo sighs, his smile returning to his face. “Fine. I suppose that's okay. You did do a really good duck quack, I guess.”

“It was a good duck quack,” Creed calls out over him. “Definitely undoes the blood oath, I say.”

Milo nods, and I relax where I stand. He reaches out and pulls me into a quick hug, then lets me go again. “You really don't know what happened?”

“No,” I respond. “I was fine, then I saw you with Roth in a headlock, and I just went feral. I got so mad at you that even though I knew it was a joke, I couldn't stop myself from being so mean. If you hadn't let him go, I'm not sure I wouldn't have ripped your head off.”

“That’s a problem,” Creed offers, sounding a bit concerned.

“Yeah, it definitely is.”

“I’m sure it’s fine,” I respond, not wanting to have this conversation at all. “I was just caught off guard when I woke up and Roth wasn’t there. It’s been a strange couple of days.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Milo says, giving me a small nod that doesn’t really feel all that truthful to what he’s really thinking. “Just keep tabs on if it happens again, right?”

Yeah, he can be certain that I’m going to do that. If it does happen again though, I’m also going to do my best to keep whatever it is tamped down so I don’t lash out again at someone who doesn’t deserve it.

“Hey, you all right up there?” Roth calls up the stairs.

“Yeah,” I call back, smiling as my head flip-flops in my chest at the sound of his voice. “We’re good.”

“I ordered pizza for us. Do you all want to come watch a movie or something?”

I exchange a look with Milo who grins at me. “Little kid sleepover?”

I nod eagerly and lead the way down the stairs as Creed follows behind the two of us, asking Milo what a little kid sleepover is and proclaiming his need to experience one.

When we reach the main floor, I am drawn right to Roth and lean into his side, inhaling the scent of him into my lungs to settle everything inside me. I am still disappointed and prickly, like an angry little hedgehog filled with a tiny bit of rage, though this anger is directed right at myself this time.

“Everything all right?” he asks as he puts his arm around me and gives me a squeeze.

“Yeah,” I lie as the burn echoes inside my gut. “Everything is okay.”

**CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE**

Brady walks through the portal that connects my house to his apartment, holding up a leather tote bag with a grin on his face. I'm not sure what's so important about it, but he has a photoshoot today and informed me that he wouldn't go without it. Miloriel seems to get it, as he's currently staring at it with so much longing in his eyes that if Brady was anyone else, I'd advise them to run before the knocked them down and stole it.

Brady doesn't need any of my advice in that area, or at least he hasn't lately. These past few weeks have been a bit of a blur, but coated in the hint that something isn't quite right with my mate. Brady has grown short tempered, especially where I am concerned, and while I should be flattered that he has become very protective of me since I claimed him, it worries me. The hatred that burns in his eyes when someone bumps into me by accident in public or when someone flirts with me is unlike anything I've ever seen in him before. Last week, a woman at the fast-food burger place we popped into for a snack accidentally stepped on my foot when I went to get us ketchup, and though he didn't attack her, the level of malice in his eyes told me that he very well could and likely would have had I not soothed the rage away with gentle words. He's no longer talking of the burning inside him, but every so often I catch him rubbing at his chest with a frown on his face, so I know it still exists. I just wish I knew what it was or how to help because this is not the Brady I have known. It isn't the Brady that he knows either. After the fleeting moments of anger, I can tell he is left confused and saddened by how he is behaving.

“Is that it?” I ask as he walks over holding his bag like a prize.

“This is the legendary Ticket tote.” He smiles, holding it out to me. I take it and make a surprised noise at the weight of everything inside it.

“What do you have in here? Bricks? Rocks?”

Brady laughs, shaking his head. “Just the essentials. Phone charger, bottle of water, tissues, hand lotion, my tablet, and some snacks. Things I’ve learned I need when I’m at photoshoots.”

“Don’t they give you these things?”

“Sure. There’s usually snacks and water available, but I always bring my tote. I like having my own things, plus the tablet comes in handy when there’s lots of waiting involved. I have to be sure I don’t get lost in stories though.”

“You read a lot?” I have never seen him read a book, nor has he mentioned that being something he enjoys.

Brady’s face turns the tiniest bit pink along his cheekbones as he shakes his head. He reaches into the tote where it rests in my hand and pulls out a tablet in a blue case that almost matches the blue case on his cell phone. He flips it open and turns on the screen, then taps on an app before holding it up so I can see it.

The screen fills with brilliant colors and a series of boxes that I recognize well. “Comics! You still read comics?”

“Yeah,” he responds. “Mostly graphic novels. They have deeper stories, but I also collect comics. Just my favorites, the ones I grew up with.”

“You should see his collection,” Miloriel pipes up. “He’s got a whole shelf dedicated to his comics in his closet.”

“You do?”

Brady nods. “Yeah, I’ve kept all the ones we read when we were little and added to the stack over the years. I always thought it’d be cool to write my own book, but I’m horrible at drawing.”

“I can draw,” Creed offers as he walks down the stairs from his bedroom. He has taken to spending long hours in there on his own, listening to soft music and reading, or scrolling through the internet on his phone. He thrives in silence, he confessed a few days ago, and is getting his fill before returning to Legion. If he is returned, that is. I still have it in my head that I will seek clemency for him with Legion when the time comes.

“You draw?” Brady asks, turning to the large demon.

“Sure. I have learned that I can do many things on my own now that I no longer have the collective buzzing in my head. I’m also good at crossword puzzles.”

“Show us. If you want, that is.”

Creed smiles, giving a curt nod before taking off back upstairs. Brady turns to me with a grave look on his face.

“We cannot allow him to go back to Legion,” he murmurs. “I do not know him well, but to lose your individuality... that’s a terrible thing.”

“I agree, but it is up to Legion. They own his soul.”

“I thought you said that if you name a soul, you own it,” Brady says, his face screwing up into a frown. “And you named him, so you own him. You’re like his father.”

“I am not his father,” I blurt, as Miloriel laughs so loud I swear I hear the panes of glass in the windows rattling.

“Like his father, I said. You are the one who gave the poor thing a name.”

“I didn’t pluck him from the river, and I didn’t do a formal name day for him. I mostly just didn’t want to call him ‘you’ the whole time we were here.”

“Regardless, he will not be returned to Legion.” Brady sniffs, plucking his leather tote from my hand. “I will not allow it, and if Legion dares dispute that, they will fall at my feet.”

He turns and smiles as Creed comes down the stairs, carrying his own tablet in his hands. Brady goes over to him,

and they settle onto the couch as Creed starts scrolling through pages, showing my mate all he has learned since he came up from Hell.

“What the fuck is that all about? He won’t allow it? They will fall at his feet?” Miloriel hisses, sidling up to me as we both watch Brady and Creed chatting and scrolling.

“I am not sure.”

“That’s like... Father. That’s Lucifer. What the fuck is happening to my best friend, Bezeroth?”

I don’t know, and that Miloriel doesn’t either, is even more worrying. I have never heard of a human behaving like a demon before, but perhaps this is another unintended thing our half souls becoming whole has caused. “I’m not sure, Miloriel. Perhaps the mating has done things to him. Deep inside.”

“Do you feel anything different?”

“Yes,” I respond as Creed and Brady laugh at something on Creed’s tablet. “But not like him. I feel... warm where there was only cold. Full where there was only a fragment. I feel love and joy so deep it almost steals my breath away when I look at him, but I don’t feel whatever he does. I will not let anything harm him, but I don’t feel the all-consuming rage that he can feel.”

“He lies about it.”

“I know.”

Miloriel reaches out and places his hand on my arm. Brady’s head snaps upwards and he glances between us, eyes narrowing as he scrutinizes our faces, lips set in a thin line. I offer a smile to let him know that we are not fighting and that I am not in danger, and he nods, turning back to whatever Creed is showing him.

“I told you not to break him,” Miloriel hisses through a clenched teeth smile.

“I didn’t.”

“Yes, you fucking did.” Miloriel gives my arm a hard squeeze before letting me go and moving to join Brady and

Creed on the couch. I stand behind them in the kitchen, watching as he sits down beside Brady and leans into his side, Brady's arm moving to wrap around him as his other hand points something out on the screen. Miloriel nods as Creed taps at the screen, then Brady turns his head up to me again. He offers a smile that is warm and comfortable, a smile that tells me that regardless of everything else happening with him, he is still Brady Schiff.

Sometimes, anyway.

Sometimes he is someone else entirely.



"I AM VERY excited to try new food," Creed offers as we walk into the BBQ restaurant across from the studio Brady is in. This has become habit over these last few weeks. Brady goes to do his job, and Creed and I find a nearby restaurant to wait for him to be done. Another part of the habit is Creed's rapidly expanding love of every type of food there is. So far, we've had diner food, sushi and tempura, and my personal favorite, the most delicious chicken tikka masala at this very tiny Indian restaurant we found a few days ago. I am not usually a fan of lean meats, beef is the closest thing to the pit boar I gorged on as a child, but the spices of the chicken dish were perfect for my tastebuds. Creed ate his weight in naan, proclaiming it to be the best thing he'd ever put into his mouth and has been eagerly awaiting an opportunity to try something different again.

We settle down into the booth we are shown in the front of the restaurant, the waitress leaving us behind with menus and glasses of chilled water. I glance across the street to try and pick out which window Brady is behind while Creed gets started compiling his huge list of foods he wants to try while we're here. I usually let him make the choices for the table, I'm not fussy and have learned that there will always be something for me to try among the pile of dishes he'll order.

Across the table, Creed puts his menu down and pulls out his wallet, counting the bills inside. “We are running out.”

“Anyone in here?”

Creed glances around the restaurant, staring intently at every single patron. It takes him a while to sort through them all but finally, he grins. “That man over there in the green shirt cheats on his wife and could be the father of the child he calls his nephew. He is worried that this will be found out and that he will lose everything. Plus, he is alone and very rich.”

“Perfect.” The easiest people to compel are the ones that are already making shitty choices and using their free will to indulge in their sins. Creed slips from the table and makes his way over to a table at the back. He places his hand on the shoulder of the man in the green shirt, and I watch the air ripple between them as Creed leans down and murmurs something into his ear. The man goes rigid in his seat, then like a robot, he pulls out his wallet and hands it to Creed who opens it, plucking out a credit card and a stack of bills. He returns the wallet to the man’s hand, then leans in to whisper something else to him before turning and walking back over to our table.

“What’d you tell him?” I ask as Creed places the credit card and bills into his own wallet.

“That he needs to confess his sins. The usual.”

I nod, picking up my water and taking a sip.

“I also told him that he needs to support the child as if he is his own,” Creed adds, placing his hands on top of the closed menu. “I have been thinking a lot since we came here and have discovered that I don’t like when children are born under a secret.”

“Where is that coming from?” I ask, though I don’t have to guess. Secrets and lies surround me and have since I was plucked from the blood river.

“You,” he responds as I expect, but then he adds to it. “And Miloriel. And Brady and myself. There are too many secrets surrounding us all and that has become clear to me

over the months we've been up here. I'm starting to have moments where another life slips into my memories, and though I am not certain, I believe it is a life I once had before Legion."

I startle in my seat, eyes wide. "I thought you were always in Legion."

"I'm not sure anymore."

"Who were you then?"

Creed smiles, giving me a shrug. "I don't know the answer to anything, Bezeroth. Roth. I just know that there was something that came before."

Things are not as I had believed them to be, and this news from Creed is just another piece of an ever-expanding puzzle. The piece that is my sole focus, though, is currently across the street. As Creed pulls his cellphone from his pocket while we wait for the waitress to return and take our order, I turn my head to the window again. I can still feel Brady's heart inside mine, ticking away like a clock. Or perhaps, given his demeanour lately, he is more of a time bomb.

Miloriel wasn't booked for this shoot initially, but he compelled his way onto the call sheet anyway to keep an eye on my mate. His accusation that I have broken him stings, even more than the accusations he flung at me about his Kazmeus the first time we sat down together. I am trying my best to believe that Brady isn't damaged and that this is simply an adjustment period for him, as it is for me. We are both learning what it is to be whole, and that is the thought that runs through my head whenever I catch him rubbing at his chest, face crumpled in concern and worry because I can't let myself think anything else.

I won't let myself think anything else.

**CHAPTER
TWENTY-TWO**

I am better than everyone else.

I know this as I stand in front of the camera, handbag clutched in my fingers and gauzy white blouse hanging off my shoulders. The bright, color blocked flared pants I've been given fit me like a glove and are as soft as butter. I am in my glory as the camera snaps pictures, capturing my beauty for all to see.

This shoot will be on billboards, and though it isn't my first time on a billboard, I know it will be my best work. Confidence oozes through me. I haven't needed a single pointer from the photographer to get into the positions he wants me in. I am simply moving and listening as the camera clicks away.

I am unstoppable today.

I am perfect.

The exact perfect that Roth has always told me that I am. I just now finally believe it and that has made all the difference. The low simmering burn that lives inside me now is still present, but I have gotten used to it. I welcome it, actually, if it is what is letting me be this magnificent in front of the camera.

"Excellent," the photographer murmurs, like I don't already know that. He stops for a moment to peer through the images on his camera with the woman from the brand I'm posing for. Cheshire is a newer high-end brand, and I am lucky to have gotten this, but then again, I am the most beautiful thing so I can't imagine them passing me up.

If I keep impressing them, I stand a chance at getting cast for their show at fashion week, and I crave that. Their first ever runway show carries so much buzz in the industry that I can't imagine not walking in it. I want it and I deserve it. I already have the casting call booked in my calendar, a few weeks away, and I know I will get a spot.

"Perfect, Brady," the woman from Cheshire says with a very pleased smile. "That's excellent. Want to look?"

I nod and make my way over to look at the photographs taken of me. The photographer gets close to me, far closer than he would have gotten before I was whole, and my entire body lights up with joy at being close to people without them flinching away. Nothing is wrong with me anymore. I can be touched and hugged and spoken with by anyone now.

"Wow," Felicity whispers, leaning over my shoulder to take a look at the pictures.

They are stunning. The overhead lights capturing my cheekbones and my plump lips perfectly. The pants fit me like a glove and the shirt somehow looks ethereal where it billows around me. Gender neutrality is the aim of Cheshire's entire brand, and in these photos, they have succeeded. I don't look boy, nor do I look girl. I am everything and anything in these photos.

The photographer finishes showing us the images, and then I take a step back as he holds his hand out for a handshake. A real handshake. I clasp hands with him, joy bursting inside me at such a simple thing. Felicity watches with a bit of awe in her expression as I thank him for making me look as beautiful on film as I am in real life.

"You're different," Felicity comments as we walk away.

"Bad different?" I ask, hand rising to rub at my chest through the white fabric.

"Confident different. You never shook hands with anyone before. Not that easily, anyway."

"I feel a bit different." I am a demon's mate now, though I can't tell her that. Still, I feel the need to explain why I have

changed so drastically. “I met someone.”

“A boyfriend?” Felicity asks with a smile.

“Yeah, I have a boyfriend now.” He is a demon with a big thick cock that fills me up inside. He is handsome and perfect, and I would kill for him. I keep those thoughts to myself, but they exist all the same. If Roth was near, his face would be heating by now with everything I am thinking about him running through my mind.

“And he’s good to you?” Felicity asks, as I make my way to the curtained off changing area. “He treats you well?”

“He’s perfect. You’ll meet him sometime, I’m sure.”

“What does he do? Who is he?”

“His name is Roth and he is... unemployed currently. He doesn’t really need a job or anything.”

“Ah,” Felicity says with a knowing smile though she knows nothing. “A rich boy.”

“Yeah. Old money. You know how it is.”

She nods and gives me a smile before leaving me along to change out of these gorgeous clothes. I make quick work of it, slipping into my sweatpants and a comfy T-shirt, then throwing on my black zip up hoodie. It’s getting chilly out now, the summer is leaving us behind, and as much as I dislike winter, the change is exciting. With fall comes fashion weeks across the globe, and I will soon be flying all over the place to meet with designers.

I hope Roth is ready because he’s coming with me. He doesn’t have much of a choice and he doesn’t have anything else going on, which prickles at me the tiniest bit. Since I told him that I cannot be his sole purpose, I haven’t checked back in to see if anything has caught his attention. If he’s found passion outside of me and who I am to him. Part of me says that I should be his only concern, that I am important and that his attention should always be focused on me and my needs, but that feels incredibly selfish. Besides, there is another piece that still insists that me being his sole purpose is really quite sad.

“Keep safe,” I murmur to myself, as the idea that he could be away from me at some point ripples through me. The thought is constant in my head still, deepening as the days go by. I feel like we’re on the edge of a knife and no matter what way we tip off it, danger will come for my mate.

When it does, I will let the burn loose and give it what it demands of me. I will allow it to consume me so that I can keep him out of harm’s way because I know that this rage is the only tool I have to do that. I am not strong like a demon is, but this fire that lives deep in my belly is powerful. It is safety for Roth, though he doesn’t know the depth of it.

“Ready to go?” Felicity asks as I step out of the changing room.

“Yeah, you hanging out?”

She nods. Milo still has his turn in front of the camera, and I know she has another model on her roster in this shoot, that’s why she’s here. She didn’t come for me or for Milo this time, but instead a newer, younger model doing her second ever photoshoot. I met her on the way in and we exchanged quick greetings. She’s stunning and I know she will shoot well under the lighting set up.

Not as good as me, though.

I am better than everyone else.



ROTH TASTES of barbecue sauce and spice as I kiss his lips, leaving me with a small smile. He smiles back as I move away and slip into the booth beside him. Across the way, Creed is stuffing ribs into his mouth at a pace that I couldn’t keep up with if I tried.

“Good shoot?” Roth asks, shoving a plate of brisket and potato salad over my way.

I grab a fork and take a bite, giving him a nod as the smoky sweet barbecue sauce hits my own tongue. I see now why Creed is so into this food; it's delicious. I take another bite of the meat and sigh happily as Roth laughs.

“Good food?”

“Delicious,” Creed responds, devouring another rib from his piled high plate. “I should learn how to do this.” I smile, reaching over to pluck a rib off his stack. He scowls at me briefly but stops as I raise an eyebrow back at him. “They're really good.”

“I can tell,” I offer, taking a bit of the meat. It's juicy and smoky, the same sauce on them as on the brisket.

“I should learn how to make good food.” Creed sighs, leaning back in his chair and patting his stomach. “I could eat like this all the time... I mean, at the moment, anyway. I'll be returning to Legion eventually, so I have to get my fill now I suppose.”

“You aren't going back.” I drop the bone of the rib on my plate to punctuate my sentence.

Creed exchanges glances with Roth briefly before meeting my eyes. “I have to return. I am meant to.”

“No,” I decide, picking up my fork and grabbing some potato salad. “You are not meant to because I say you're not meant to.”

“But—”

The fire sparks inside me the tiniest bit, and I swallow my potato salad, then stare hard at Creed who dares speak against what I have said. “You will not be going back. I will not let you, and if Legion dares go against me, I will break their bones with my own bare hands.”

Creed and Roth exchange another glance before Creed slowly nods, turning his attention back to me. This pleases me, and I smile at him in return. “Besides, who will make me bacon and pancakes if you go back? Roth is not a good cook.”

“Hey,” Roth protests, giving me a nudge in the side. “I try.”

“You burn, my mate, but I appreciate the effort.”

“I make good sandwiches.”

I don't have the heart to point out that sandwiches are basically stacking pre-made things onto bread. Instead, I lean into him and press a kiss to his cheek. “You do.”

Roth smiles, giving me another nudge in the side. “Finish up. Creed's almost full.”

“I am not,” the bigger demon huffs across the table. “I am just taking a breather.”

He goes back to eating his ribs, though far slower than he was putting them away when I arrived. I start eating my own smaller plate, savoring the flavors and spices in the meat and the salad as Roth nibbles at his own plate.

Just as I'm finishing my food, the bell on the restaurant's door dings, catching my attention. I look up to see Legion walking through the door, a small smile on their lips. It's the same body from the casting, the same one from the zoo, but this time they have not frozen time. Perhaps they've learned manners, but I scowl anyway as they slip into the seat beside Creed.

“Hello, old friends,” they say, their strange eyes glimmering in the sunlight streaming through the window.

“What do you want?” I demand, a growl creeping in as the flame inside me smolders angrily.

Legion smiles that same shit-eating insufferable smile they always seem to have on their face, and I scowl even harder. Roth places his hand on my knee and gives me a squeeze like he's reminding me where we are, and that Legion is an ally.

“What news do you bring today, Legion?” he asks, with far more tact and pleasantry than the demon deserves.

Beside the golden haired, golden eyed body, Creed is silent, staring at his plate with his head turned downwards entirely. I hate it. I hate that he can't even look at the being

that will try and consume him again. Roth grips my knee even tighter, keeping me from flying into the rage that's slowly building inside me.

“Stop,” he whispers, putting his lips by my ear. “We are fine.”

Legion cocks their head to the side like they've seen something interesting, and I prickle with the words *keep safe* screaming in my head. They look at me, then Roth, offering my mate a smile that I want to reach over and slap off.

“Claimed, I see. And protective.”

Roth glances at me, then turns to Legion with a smile and a nod. “I protect him, and he protects me. We are fated to do so for all eternity, as you know.”

“I can feel the difference,” Legion offers, tenting their fingers and placing their elbows on the table. “How does it feel? Do you feel the power?”

“It feels whole. I am not empty anymore and neither is Brady.” I note that he hasn't answered the second question posed, but Legion doesn't seem to be bothered.

“Good,” they say with a smile. “Lucifer is readying himself to come and reclaim you, Bezeroth. You will need the strength this claiming has given you.”

I tense in my seat, relaxing only when Roth brushes his hand over my thigh again. Come for my fucking mate? I think not. Lucifer can try, but I will not let him take what is mine and bury it. He will not feed what lives in half of me to his raveners. I won't give him the chance.

“Be careful,” Legion whispers, looking right at me like they can sense the churning anger inside me. “I would not want for you to get harmed.”

“I will be fine.”

They raise an eyebrow briefly, before nodding and looking back to Roth. “Do you feel stronger?”

Roth looks at me, his eyes betraying his truth to me. He doesn't feel it. Whatever he's supposed to have gained by

claiming me hasn't come to him. Still, he nods as he turns to Legion. "I am whole."

Not a lie, yet not the truth of it.

"Good." Legion grins, clearly not catching the unspoken words. "That is good. I will leave you but be prepared. He will come."

"I know he will."

Legion makes a move to rise from the booth and leave, but instead his body jolts the tiniest amount, and his eyes dim the tiniest bit. He turns to face Creed, reaching out to cup his chin in his fingers. Legion turns Creed's face upwards and they connect eyes.

"There you are," Legion whispers, sounding a bit in awe and very much not like himself as they stare at each other. Creed looks confused, but Legion's eyes are filled with certainty. Whatever is happening between them ends as Legion shakes his head, dropping his hand from Creed's face and pulling it back to his side. "Forgive me, Body. Soon we will have you back where you belong."

Creed nods somberly as Legion moves from the table and gives a strange sort of bow. They leave the restaurant quickly, disappearing into the sunlight outside.

"What was that?" Roth asks, leaning across the table to look at Creed.

"Legion's weird." The bigger demon shrugs, reaching out to snag a rib off his plate. He lifts it to his mouth and gnaws on the meat, but I can tell he's a bit thrown off by how Legion just behaved.

"I will not let them have you," I promise, looking at Creed before turning my attention to my mate. "I will not let anyone take you from me. You are mine, Roth. You have always been mine."

**CHAPTER
TWENTY-THREE**

Brady sighs happily as he sinks onto my cock, gripping my horns in his hands. He slowly lifts himself off, then slips back downwards, squeezing my length inside him.

“You feel so good,” he moans, raising himself up again.

“My beautiful mate,” I murmur back. Brady tightens his grip on my horns as he writhes on my cock, moving in a languid rhythm.

“I can feel every inch of you. You are where you belong.”

I moan my agreement as he slips off me, then lowers himself back down. My hands rest on his hips, my tail curled around his cock where it slaps against my stomach. He is warm and welcoming inside, his body creating a space I never want to leave.

Brady lets go of my horns and leans forward, his head landing on my chest. I move my hands to wrap around him, holding him tight. Thrusting upwards slowly, I set the same rhythm, enjoying the pure feeling of him wrapped around me. My lips find the mark on his shoulder, and I lick at it with my tongue as best as I can, causing shivers to run through Brady’s body that I can feel deep inside him.

“I love you, my perfect mate,” I whisper before going back to lap at his skin, feeling the ridges of his scar against my tongue.

Brady doesn’t say it back, but I know he is getting there. I can feel everything growing between us day by day, and I have

faith that someday soon he will tell me of his love for me. I have his need and want, and love will come.

“Faster. Harder,” he murmurs as I slip in and out of him, his face pressed to my sweaty skin.

I tighten my grip on him even more as I thrust upwards, feeling him ripple around me until I bottom out inside him. I pull back out, then slam back in, drawing a small whimper from between his lips. He lifts his head and starts to work his hips against my own movements, once again gripping my horns in his hands. I tremble as his hands hold me tight, his body moving on mine to match my rhythm.

Soft noises escape his mouth as my tail wraps tightly around his cock, stroking him with my feathers while he rides my cock. Everything inside me is lighting up like a firework, spurred on by the beautiful sounds he is making for me. Sounds that he will only ever make for me. As I thrust into him hard, these noises are my reward.

“Fuck,” he groans as he bounces on my lap, hips working a furious rhythm.

I can feel him trembling and squeezing my cock, sending matching sensations scattering through my own body. I am growing close to release, and I can sense he is as well. His hands tighten on my horns as he slams down onto me hard, drawing me orgasm out of me, hot and fast. I moan as I spill into him, coating him inside with myself as he continues to ride me, chasing his own release.

Finally, his body stutters, his hips writhing and his cock jerking in my tail as cum spills over my belly. He moans low and satisfied while his body releases everything he has to give, the tip of my tail dragging through the puddle he’s left behind.

He inhales a deep breath, then lets go of my horns, flopping forward onto my chest again. I wrap my arms around him, and he sinks into my embrace, cock still twitching in my tail the tiniest bit. I unravel it from around him and he sighs happily, pressing his cheek to my shoulder.

“Don’t ever leave me, okay?” he murmurs, yawning.

“I don’t plan on it.”

I lift him gently off me, my softening cock slipping free from his body. I think we both need a shower, but he cuddles up to me again, closing his eyes. “Like five minutes. Then we’ll shower, okay?”

“Did you hear that thought?” I ask.

“I think so? Either that or I just know we need a shower because this will get really gross if we don’t.” Brady shrugs slightly as he talks, and I settle back against the wall behind the bed. He quickly falls into a light nap, and I sit awake, listening to him breathe as I wonder for the millionth time what the hell is going on with my mate.

“Roth?” he asks, startling me a bit.

“Yes?”

“Let’s go to the beach tomorrow before the fall comes in true and the leaves change. We won’t be able to swim because we’ll freeze, but we can have ice cream on the boardwalk and watch the ocean. It’s a bit of a drive to get there, though.”

“Miloriel or Creed could open a portal for us,” I offer.

“Oh yeah,” he responds, picking his head off my chest. “They could. They could come as well. Creed would love the seafood restaurant on the boardwalk and Milo loves collecting sea glass.”

“Sea glass?”

“Little bits of glass that have washed up from the ocean. It’s not sharp, because the water takes the edges away, but they’re quite pretty.”

“What do people do with them? Just collect them to look at?”

“Some people make jewelry. Some do art with them. Milo puts the pieces he collects into jars that sit in the window of his bathroom. He likes the way the light moves through them, he says.”

My brother has always been a strange sort of demon. If he hadn't already been a couple of years old and growing into his stag like horns and tiny tail when I was plucked from the river, I wouldn't think him a demon at all, save for the hellfire that runs through his veins. Kazmeus and I used to tease him sometimes, about his furry little deer fawn tail. We used to call him all number of things, but FluffButt was our favorite even if it is hardly a cutting name to call someone. Miloriel used to hate it, though, and that was all that mattered to me as his younger brother. Father never seemed to get on Miloriel about his little deer tail like he did about my feathers. He never shaved or burned the fuzz off it or anything, he simply let Miloriel be who he is.

"I want to eat popisculls," I say with a grin. "Not ice cream."

"Popsicles," Brady corrects with a matching grin and a tiny roll of his eyes. "We'll get lime ones."

"It sounds perfect. Will there be seagulls there?"

Brady laughs, nodding. "Probably. They show up anywhere they can find food."

"Tell me how they sound again."

"Roth."

"I can't remember," I insist, though I clearly remember the screeching noises Brady imitated for me when we were little. They were loud and violent, and I loved them so much back then. Seagulls remind me of ravens, in a way, though they are far smaller and covered in white feathers. They can fly too, which ravens can't do. Thankfully.

Brady screws up his face and takes a deep breath. He glances at me for a quick moment, a bit of a grin on his lips, before letting loose a squawking cry that pierces the silence of the bedroom. It's deeper than when we were children, but I can hear the seagull in it. Laughing, I nod. "Perfect. Still perfect."

"They are horrible birds," Brady says, laughing the slightest bit. "I don't know why you like them so much."

"They are loud."

“And they eat garbage.”

“That isn’t the negative you think it is,” I reply. “Garbage eating birds that shriek so loud that the air rattles around them? What’s not to love?”

“They poop on people sometimes,” Brady offers, but again, that is not a negative in my eyes. I grin even wider and he rolls his eyes, though his smile doesn’t falter. Instead he nudges me gently with his fingertips as he yawns. “Tomorrow you’ll see.”

“I am excited for it. To be with you at the beach sounds like a perfect day.”

Brady nods his agreement, his smile stretching all the way to his eyes. It sounds like a relaxing day with my mate, sitting on the boardwalk and eating popisculls, watching the water where it meets the sand.



DESPITE HAVING the beach to look forward to and knowing I will need a few hours of rest, the night doesn’t bring me any sleep. Brady and I showered earlier, then ate a dinner of salmon and asparagus that Creed made from a recipe he found online, but now that we’re both tucked into bed, I am restless. Beside me, he snores softly, body sprawled out on the mattress and elbows digging into my ribcage. His face is serene though, no nightmares or dreams about me ruining his sleep tonight.

I carefully pull myself up from the bed, wandering towards the desk in the corner. The prophecy Legion brought me still sits on the surface, tucked beneath a cup filled with pens and pencils. I glance back at Brady’s sleeping form, then settle onto the chair, pulling the piece of parchment out. I unfold it and smooth out the creases, reading the words I know by heart again.

*The sky will burn and bleed,
The moon engorged with flame.
Less power in the seed,
And more within the claim.*

Clearly that's meant to be about Brady and I being mates. The night I was put into the ground, the sky did look like it was burning and bleeding with the reddened glow pulsing inside the everlasting moon and I have claimed him as mine. I can make all of that part of the prophecy make some sort of sense inside my head, but the next part is what continues to baffle me when I really think about it.

*His heart shall fill with poison,
His hands are duty bound.
Sire shall fall to fate created,
Buried deep in hallowed ground.*

As I read through the words again and again, I find myself questioning what it all means. If I am supposed to have power beyond measure, something has gone horribly wrong. When I search inside myself, I don't feel any semblance of the overwhelming amount of power required to take down this supposed "sire" if said sire is Lucifer. What I do have is my own abilities back, save for my ability to portal, but that is all. I have strength, but it's no more than what I have always had. Instead of becoming some kind of all powerful, all knowing monstrous creature, I've become myself again as the magic held beneath the ground where I was kept has leached out of me. I'm just Bezeroth. Powerful in my own right as Lucifer's Second Son, though not powerful enough to topple my Father from his lofty perch high above everyone else down in Hell.

I shake my head, wrinkling my nose as I read the prophecy again, seeking meaning I can't seem to find. Legion seems convinced this is about me, but it's clearly not. For all I know, the seers were lying when they told Lucifer this information as a way of appeasing him under the fear of being fed to raveners if they didn't give him something he'd asked for, but that somehow sours on my tongue and sits in the back of my head like a lead weight as also being untrue.

"It makes no sense," I murmur, searching again for the power the prophecy says I should have inside me, but cannot find. Yet, if I look at the words from a different angle entirely I can find some truth in it and that is staggering. As it hits me, I am stunned, brain whirring frantically as the puzzle starts to snap together in my mind. It could be true. It could be a very real prophecy, if I look outside of myself. I turn in my chair to see Brady, my sleeping mate who has changed immeasurably since my venom and teeth entered him. His face is serene in his rest, though I catch the pulsing of his jaw beneath his skin and the curling of the very edges of his lips into a small frown like he's not having dreams about happy things at all. Brady is the one that is rapidly becoming different and that recognition stuns me where I sit, making me lean back in my chair and stare hard at him, shaking my head in disbelief. "It can't be."

The whoosh of a portal opening makes me whirl around in my chair before I can fully let the realizations unfurl inside my head or finish my thoughts. I drop the parchment to the desk. I rise to my feet. The portal ripples and glows, but through it, I can see the castle I grew up in. I inhale a sharp breath as I stare at the darkened wood and blackened store I used to run over, tripping over my tail as it was starting to grow in. My tail flicks angrily now, my hands tensing at my sides because I absolutely anticipate a fight now. I glance at Brady, certain that he has to be awake now, and find that he hasn't moved an inch, but what's more, he isn't moving at all. He is frozen in time, his chest not rising and falling, his eyes closed and hand gripping the pillow loosely.

"Come home," a voice whispers out of the portal. "Come home, forgotten one. Give yourself to me, and I will spare him."

I can't make out the tone of it, nor does the cadence seem familiar to my ear. "Lucifer?" I receive no response save for my heart beating like a drum in my chest. "Father? Come and face me like a demon, you coward."

Nothing happens, but overhead within the portal, the silver everlasting moon glistens, blood spilling over it and casting a red glow on the earth below the castle. An omen that makes me shiver, recalling the last time I saw the moon behave this way.

"Come and I will spare him," the voice whispers again.

I glance over at my sleeping mate. My beautiful other half and my fate. I move to his side, brushing a lock of hair off his cheek.

Suddenly the house quakes and rattles with an otherworldly force that echoes from outside. I am knocked to my ass on the carpet at the force of it and scramble to my feet, rushing to the window. Behemut stands outside, his glowing hand raised to the sky, and Astaroth, another demon that fell with my father, at his side. Behemut shoves his hand forward, hellfire springing from his fingers and slamming into the ward that Legion erected around the house. The house rattles and quakes again, but the demons outside do not gain purchase. Behemut growls angrily, then pulls back, shaking his hand.

"They cannot get in," I call into the portal. "You fail, Father. They cannot get inside."

"Come home, and I will spare him, forgotten one."

I peer out the window again, watching as Behemut tries again to break through the shield with his hellfire to no avail. He is much stupider than I thought, really. It's almost comical watching him try again and again to get through the shimmering shield and fail every time. Finally, Astaroth steps forward and shoves him aside, raising his own hand to the shield. He glares right into the window as his lips start moving and fear creeps down my spine.

"Come," the voice whispers. "Come and I will spare your mate. I will spare them all."

I watch in horror as the invisible shield cracks like a pane of glass where Astaroth's hand rests. He gives me a triumphant grin, reaching forward and grabbing the edges of the crack. A hard yank shatters more of the shield, and Behemut gives a joyous call of his own, hell snarling at the back of it. My heart leaps to my throat as he raises his hand again, the glow of it illuminating his horrid pig shaped faced. He makes a sudden move forwards as a sharp toothed ravener creeps out of the darkness behind them both. I cannot take them both, let alone a ravener. Not on my own, and with everyone else in the house frozen in time, we will all be torn to shreds. Dread pools in me and I fall away from the window, scrambling to the portal.

“Stop,” I scream into the courtyard I was once buried in. “Stop this. Please. If I come, do you promise them safety? Real safety? Not a demon's game of it?”

“I so swear.”

I wasn't born yesterday, and I don't trust anything Father has to say. “Swear it by... the moon. Swear it by your blood. Give me assurance.”

“I swear by my blood and the moon and my very grave. They will be spared. Come home, forgotten one. Come home to me.”

The ravener shrieks outside, the sound of its cry rattling the windows and sending fear racing through me like wildfire. I get to my feet and move to grab the parchment off the floor where it landed. I quickly fold it up and move to the bed, pressing it into Brady's frozen hand. I hope he understands, I hope he gets what I mean by this and if he doesn't, I hope Creed and Miloriel help him figure it out.

Leaning forward, I stroke his cheek with a finger before pressing my lips to his forehead. I rise, my heart beating hard and fast, his only a shadow now inside mine where he lays frozen.

“Bezeroth,” the voice snaps from the portal. “Come. Now.”

“Find me,” I whisper to my mate as I step towards the portal. “Keep me safe, Brady, as you know you can.”

Throat thickening with grief unlike I have ever known, I turn and face the portal, watching as the blood red everlasting moon shimmers overhead. With a deep breath, I step into it, leaving my mate behind to enter Hell.

“Roth?” Brady calls as I step onto the crunchy grass of the courtyard. I turn to see him scrambling out of the bed in the bedroom that is ours. He drops the prophecy I tucked into his hand to the ground beside the bed and dives for the portal as it’s closing, his arms reaching for me.

“Stop! Brady, go back!” I shout, as the portal slowly closes around his extended arms. I don’t know what will happen if he gets caught halfway between the connection, if he will be severed into pieces or lost between two anchor points. Instead of listening to my warning, Brady wrenches his arms apart, tearing the portal open. The sound of time and space cracking into pieces echoes across the courtyard as my mate steps through the open gateway he created with his own two hands, his bare feet sinking deep into the ground that once held me hostage.

“How the hell did you do that?” I ask, rushing to his side as the yelp and squeal of a ravener rattles through the air. The ground rumbles with footsteps that rush towards us, but he pays them no mind. Instead, he turns to me, his eyes glimmering with tendrils of brilliant green poison.

“Keep safe,” he whispers as he reaches for me, his eyes glowing in the dull red moonlight trickling down from above.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The ground quakes as I lean in and press my lips to Roth's. He kisses me back, then breaks away, turning his head to the horizon like he's scanning the distance. The thundering footsteps grow closer, and I can feel Roth tensing beside me.

Before I can even comprehend what's happening, a flaming ball of fire and rock crashes into the ground next to us, scattering sparks through the darkness. Roth grabs my hand and tugs it hard, but I don't let him drag me away. I can't. Someone has tried to hurt me and mine, and I will not stand for that insolence.

"Brady," he cries out as a hideously ugly demon appears at the other end of the courtyard, his left hand glowing bright red and his face contorted like a wild boar's.

"What is this one's name?" I murmur, glaring at the pig faced cretin.

"That's Behemut. We have to go. He will kill us."

"He will try."

Behemut grins a wicked grin and starts raising his glowing hand as he moves towards us. His head snaps to me and his eyes go wide for a moment before that same sickening smile creeps back over his mouth, sharpened teeth glimmering in the moonlight. In the blink of an eye, he pushes his hand forward, sending a ball of hellfire and brimstone careening my way, clearly taking me for easy prey and intending to burn me alive in front of my mate.

Believing me to be capable of such a death at the hands of this lesser creature.

“Brady!” Roth cries out, yanking my hand again, harder than before to get me to move out of the way. I stay put, digging my heels in against his tugging as I shake off his hold. He doesn’t have to worry. I know I have this handled, though I don’t know exactly how I know that. I am acting purely on instinct now and trusting that what has burned inside me since the moment I was made, my demon’s eternal mate will keep us safe. Behemut is a dead demon walking, though he doesn’t know that yet. The fury sparks inside me and I let it loose along my veins, feeling the trickle of it along my fingers and toes. Raising my hand as the fireball rockets directly towards me, I let my rage loose, knocking Roth away from my side and catching the projectile midair before it can even get close enough for us to feel its heat. I hold it, suspended it in the space between myself and the horrific pig demon that dares come to harm us.

With a growl, I send it right back where it came from, watching as it shatters over Behemut’s chest, sending sparks flying into the air and illuminating the darkness.

“What the fuck?” he shrieks, patting at his chest to try and stop the burn from spreading.

“I will end you,” I murmur as Behemut burns, hellfire licking through his pockmarked flesh. “This is twice now, you have sought to harm me and mine. There will not be a third, Behemut.”

The demon doesn’t move an inch, save for trying his best to put out the flames that are digging into his skin. I step closer as he yowls, patting at himself furiously, his cries of fear sounding like joy to my ears and my body sings with the rightness of his pain and anguish.

A low growl emanates from my right, and I smile, crouching down and beckoning for the other living being lingering nearby to come closer to me. This one I will not harm. It is merely acting according to its nature, but that nature can be bent to my will. The ravener slinks through the

darkness, tilting its head upwards and sniffing at the air that is rapidly filling with the scent of burning demon flesh. Instead of getting distracted by the feast cooking itself in front of it, the ravener moves past it, coming to stand in front of me.

“Brady,” Roth cautions, his voice trembling. “Run.”

“I don’t need to. He will not harm me,” I murmur, reaching out and placing my fingertips on the ravener’s skin covered head. It jerks for a moment, like its unsure of my touch, but moves forward the tiniest bit, pressing its head against my hand. A low, rumbling purr emanates from its thin chest as it bumps its knobby head against my palm. “You’re just a big, scary kitty, aren’t you?”

The ravener purrs as Behemut continues to screech, the hellfire he should not have tried to kill me with now clinging to his flesh and bones. I lean forward and place my lips beside where I believe the ravener’s ears would be, if it had any. “Feast.”

With a delighted chirrup, the ravener sniffs the air catching the scent of burning meat, then bounds over to Behemut and leaps onto his sizzling flesh. The sound of bone crunching echoes through the night as the ravener tears Behemut into pieces, devouring the cooked meal I have created for it.

“How did you do that?” Roth asks, his voice shaky as the ravener finishes the last of Behemut.

“I told you I could pet it.”

“Not control it,” he whispers, sounding terrified and in awe of me, as he should be. “I didn’t think they could be controlled. Not even Lucifer can do it with that much ease.”

“I am better than Lucifer,” I snap, turning to face him. “I am better than everyone. They will all fall beneath my feet for what they have done to me. For seeking to harm and claim what belongs to me and only me. I will flay their skin from their bones and sing along with their screams.”

“You sound like him,” Roth whispers. “Miloriel was right. You do sound like the Morningstar. Like Lucifer.”

“Fuck the Morningstar,” I snarl, heated with my rage and fury at being compared to such a weak being. “I am better than him. I am better than everyone.”

Roth steps forward and grabs me in the tightest hug, pressing his body against mine as he murmurs soft noises into my ears and strokes his hand through my hair. I tremble in his grasp, muscles tensing and veins popping with unbridled hatred for everything and anything save for the demon holding me so sweetly. His tail wraps around my leg, giving my thigh a tight squeeze in the same way he told me he once soothed himself.

“Calm,” he murmurs, stroking my back as his tail feathers flutter on my leg. “Nobody got hurt. I am safe and so are you.”

I swallow hard, inhaling the scent of him into my lungs. He is soothing and peaceful, this demon of mine, despite being born here in a place filled with the scent of burning as he was. “I’m okay. I’ll be okay. Thank you.”

“We have to run,” Roth murmurs, his voice soothing me almost as much as his touch does. He releases me from his comforting hold and glances around the open courtyard. “More will be coming.”

“Okay,” I reply, shaking a little bit as what I just did becomes very real. I killed a demon. I set him on fire and fed him to a ravener. That same ravener that is now seated a short distance away, sniffing at the air and licking its bloodied paws. “He’s coming with us.”

“Brady. He is terrifying.”

“I like him.”

“You have got to be kidding me. You’ve been in Hell for less than an hour and you’ve already burned a demon alive and picked up a brand-new pet.”

“A new pet that will help keep us safe,” I point out, as the ravener sniffs at the air, its four nostrils twitching and its tongue lolling out of the side of its mouth. It looks absolutely ridiculous, but a high-pitched yelp echoes through the courtyard and it suddenly goes alert, tail swinging. It emits its

own answering call, then darts forward, pressing its head to my thigh for a split second before taking off across the courtyard in the opposite direction.

Roth breathes a sigh of relief. “That solves that, then. Come with me, we are exposed and very naked here.”

I nod as he grabs my hand and takes off at a run for the forest that lies at the outskirts of the courtyard. We crash through trees and rocks, the forest absorbing all the noise we make as the heavy underbrush snaps beneath our feet. Roth leads me through the wilderness at the edge of the castle, gripping tight to my hand and giving me no choice but to run with him, tripping through the thickened roots of gnarled trees as vines and branches whip at my legs.

Finally, we come to a big enough space that we can stop and take a breath, nestled deep in the middle of the thick forest, and Roth stops moving. He turns, yanking me into his arms deep within the thick forest of darkened tree trunks. Not even the night sky or the blood moon touches us here in this quiet stillness. I let myself go to him, sinking into his embrace and wrapping my arms around him tightly. Roth shakes and quivers with adrenaline, or perhaps lingering fear at the scene back in the courtyard, though I don't feel it inside me at all. Instead, I am filled with glorious purpose and righteous anger at the idea that someone would dare sneak to my home in the middle of the night and try to take what belongs to me.

“How did you do that? Break out of the time stop like that?”

I had felt the time slowing and my body freezing up as I slept, but the urge to protect my mate overrode all of that, and I had fought hard against it. The moment he slipped through the portal, I finally escaped the trap. “The need to keep you safe is much stronger than anything else inside me, Roth.”

“And to think, I thought I'd be the one keeping you safe.”

“We keep each other safe.”

He releases me from his embrace with a smile, and I can tell that he likes the idea that he can still keep me safe. I know

it's not a lie. I may have strange things happening inside me, but he is still a demon in the end.

“Where do we go from here?” I ask, scanning the trees as a chill whips through me. The courtyard was warm, but I am not wearing any clothing and the forest is much cooler. I shiver as another cool breeze ripple through the trees.

“To find warmth before anything else,” Roth says. “The Dead Forest is much colder than the rest of Hell.”

“No shit.” I shiver again as another breeze whips through. “What is the point of this? I thought Hell was supposed to be hot, not cold.”

“The Dead Forest is meant for those with a tolerance of heat. If we keep going the other way through, we'll come to the frozen lake that holds many wicked souls within its icy waters.”

“Who named shit around this place?” I mumble as we start moving forward again. “The Dead Forest. The Castle. The Pit. I feel like I'm stuck in some kind of comic book.”

“My father?” Roth offers, leading the way through the maze of trees. “Or maybe that's what they've come to be known as over the millennia.”

“What's the lake called?”

“The Frozen Lake.”

I snort a laugh through my chattering teeth. “So inventive.”

“We're headed for the caves,” Roth offers from ahead of me.

“What are they called? The Caves?”

“Nope.” He turns around, giving me a grin as he steps backwards. “The Glistening Caves.”

I snort another laugh, but as Roth turns around again, a thick, clawed arm snakes out from a portal that has opened within one of the trees. It wraps around his neck tight, and fury explodes from me. Rushing forwards, I reach for him, but I

only manage to graze his fingertips before the portal slams shut, leaving only a blackened tree trunk behind.

“No,” I whisper, kicking at the tree with my bare foot. Rage bursts from within and I unleash it all onto the poor tree trunk, slamming my hands into the bark and kicking at it hard enough to rattle the branches overhead. He was right there. I didn’t save him. I didn’t keep him safe, and I am beyond fucking furious at having him snatched right out from under my nose.

They will all pay for this.

I will show no mercy.

I just have to find the pit and then I will take back what is mine. I would say that Lucifer will rue the day he crossed me, but he won’t be around to remember it. He will become nothing but a smear of blood on the ground when I am finished with him.

A twig snaps behind me, startling me out of my temper tantrum, and I whirl around to find an immense cloaked figure standing there. It has to be at least six and a half feet tall and it’s almost as thick as the tree trunks that surround me.

“What the fuck do you want?” I snarl, lifting my aching, bleeding hands as I prepare to take out the rest of my rage on the face of whoever this is. Without my Roth, I am nothing but a ball of burning malice, and I don’t give a shit who has stumbled upon me.

The figure shakes its head and holds up its hands, the cloak sliding off its arms to reveal skin covered in tiny black and red snake scales. I swallow hard at the anger, tilting my head to the side as I try to figure out what the hell this demon is.

“Friend or enemy?” I ask.

It says nothing but raises a finger to the hood of its cloak like it’s telling me to be quiet. I snap my lips shut, still ready for a fight if this thing means to hurt me. It nods, then turns around and starts walking away into the forest. When it gets a handful of steps away, it turns and looks at me, then continues

moving away. I get the hint and follow as best as I can, stumbling over rocks and branches that litter the ground.

Finally, we reach a staggeringly tall grey and black rock face with a thick crack in it. Beyond the crack, I can see something glowing, like the flickering of a campfire. The cloaked figure slips through the crack, and I inhale a nervous breath, hoping that I'll be all right if I enter, but not finding much choice in the matter. I don't know where I am and I don't know where Roth is. I am in no shape to be stumbling around Hell, naked and freezing.

I slip through the crack and find that I was correct about the flickering. A campfire sits in the middle of the floor, and beyond that, a simple mattress that looks like it's been made of leaves and branches. Strewn haphazardly on the floor is the darkened cloak the figure was wearing, and as I look through the flickering flames, I see it.

Not it. Him, I think. He's curled up on the mattress with his back to me, his body covered in thousands of snake scales that glisten in the flickering flames of the campfire. His horns curl backwards from the front of his face that I can't see, but one of them has been snapped off, the edge jagged and rough looking. His thick tail also appears broken and bent where it flops on the floor behind him.

"Hey?" I say, watching the creature shiver at my words. "Who are you?"

It doesn't move, except for trembling in its bed. Confused, I step forwards, watching as it curls in on itself even more, shaking so hard that the pebbles around it clatter around on the rock floor. It's strange to see it cower from me when it was the one that came to bring me here.

"I'm not going to hurt you," I offer, tamping down my irritation. "Why did you bring me here?"

It doesn't respond again, so I busy myself with warming my freezing body by the fire, making sure to keep an eye on it. I hold my hands over the flames, letting the warmth seep into my battered knuckles that are slowly healing themselves.

“Oh wow,” I whisper as I hold my hands up to my face, watching my cuts close and my bruises leech away. I had no idea I could do that. That’s going to come in really handy at some point, I bet.

Now that I’m warm, it’s time to survey my surroundings and see if I can find a way to Roth. The snake demon that brought me here is still ignoring me, so I can’t quite ask it anything, but I can take a look around and see what I can find. If I can find anything, that is. Aside from the fire, the cloak, and the mattress of leaves on the floor, there’s not much to this little cave home.

“Can I ask how to get to the pit from here?”

The demon on the bed curls into itself, shivering again, but it shakes its head this time and I take that as a good sign.

“Okay,” I say, trying to stay calm. “Do you have clothing I could use? Pants maybe? A shirt?”

He grunts under his breath, but I get nothing else.

“Listen, I just want to find my mate, okay? Thank you for bringing me here, I guess? But I’m going to go.”

“M—” he says but is cut off by a gagging noise that rattles through the tiny cave. He rolls over, facing me and rising to sit on the edge of the bed as his snake-like yellow eyes bulge from his head and he grabs at his throat with a clawed hand.

“Are you choking?” Holy shit, how do I even cope with a choking demon? I can’t use the Heimlich maneuver, that much is clear. I could hardly get my arms around the guy as thick as he is.

He hacks and coughs a bit more, then shakes his head, finally looking up at me. His eyes are filled with such sadness, it almost takes my breath away. His face is riddled with scars.

“What happened to you?”

The demon shakes his head, pointing at his throat, and I stare at it, not sure what he’s trying to tell me. He grabs his throat, then looks at me, eyes begging me to understand.

“You can’t talk.” Great. That’s awesome. The only being in this realm that doesn’t want to murder me on sight, and he can’t even fucking talk. Rage curls inside me, but as it starts to thread along my veins, the demon whimpers, rocketing towards the back of his mattress and covering his face with his hands. He trembles, a fearful whine emanating from deep within him as he pulls his knees up and cowers like a frightened rabbit.

“Hey,” I whisper, all the anger seeping out of me at his terror. The feral part of me likes that he is scared and cowering, tells me that everyone should behave the same when they meet me, but I am trying to ignore that piece and focus on the pieces of me that are disappointed that I am causing such fear for another creature. “You’re all right. I won’t hurt you. I just... I need to find my mate. Being away from him makes me really angry.”

The demon peeks over his hands and looks at me, still trembling the tiniest bit. I smile the friendliest, gentlest smile I can muster, still prickling with rage, though trying to tamp it down as best as I can.

“I,” he whispers, lowering his hands as his entire face screws up in concentration, “tok.”

“You can talk?”

“I. Kaz mee yoos.”

**CHAPTER
TWENTY-FIVE**

Kaz mee yoos?”

The snake demon nods, pointing to himself. “Kaz mee yoos. I.”

“Brady?” I offer, pointing to myself. “Um... I?”

“Br—” the demon starts, only to be cut off by a gag and cough. His eyes bulge from his head and his scales clack together as his lungs heave and his throat wheezes. Finally, it stops, and he slumps back on his bed, shaking his head sadly.

“You can’t say my name,” I say to another sad head shake. “Can you say other things?”

He opens his mouth, then closes it, shaking his head again. Okay. So, I’m working with I, Kaz mee yoos and tok. This is going to go great.

“Do you know where my mate is? Bezeroth? Roth?”

Kaz mee yoos’ face lights up and he smiles, nodding. He scrambles off the mattress and lifts it, plucking something from beneath. He holds it up to me, but as soon as I reach for it, he yanks it back against his chest, eyeing me carefully.

“I won’t take it,” I say, holding my hands up. “I promise. You can hold it.”

He hesitates for a moment more, his snake eyes boring into me from above. Shit, he’s tall. Finally, he nods and holds whatever is clutched in his hand out to me. I don’t make a move to take it from him again, but I am stunned by what I see. Cradled in the palm of his huge hand is a shard of what looks like a mirror, though what I don’t see is my reflection.

Instead, I see a very familiar being curled into a ball, fast asleep on the couch in my living room.

“Milo,” I whisper, reaching to touch the image.

Kaz mee yoos yanks the mirror shard back, cradling it to his chest again and blocking my vision.

“That’s Milo,” I say, pointing at his hand. “Miloriel. Is that real? Is that happening right now? Holy shit. Could I talk to him through that?”

Kaz mee yoos frowns, taking a step away from me, his scales starting to clack again as he shivers in fear. I hold my hand up and take a deep breath.

“Okay. Okay. I’m sorry. I just got excited. He’s my best friend, and he could help me find my mate. His brother. Bezeroth.”

The snake demon doesn’t move an inch, but he watches me carefully as I take a step back, trying to tamp down the urge to snatch that mirror shard from his hands. I could do it too. He may be big, but he is weak. He is nothing but a trembling wreck of a creature, and I could squish him like a bug if I wanted to.

Kaz mee yoos cowers again, his scales clacking even louder as he shakes. He takes a fearful step backwards, and I feel nothing but shame ripple through me. I did it again. I made him scared of me. Why the fuck do I keep doing that without even meaning to?

“I’m sorry.”

He inhales a handful of sharp, quick breaths before opening his palm and holding out the mirror to me. “Tok.”

“I can talk?”

He nods, then shoves the shard into my hand before scurrying away from me. He grabs the cloak on his way to the bed and curls up into a ball, tossing the fabric over himself. It snags on his broken horn, and he struggles for a bit to cover himself before sighing sadly. I step over to the mattress on the floor, bending down to gently cover his horn for him before

backing away to give him space and lifting the shard to my face.

“Milo?” I hiss into the shard, seeing that he’s still fast asleep inside. I’m not sure how this is supposed to work, but I hope the scared demon on the mattress isn’t lying to me. “Milo? Hey. Wake up!”

Milo doesn’t move, and I sigh. I hate how he sleeps like the dead. It’s always been very inconvenient but never more so than now when I’m trapped in Hell without my mate. Or pants. I would love a pair of fucking pants right now.

“Milo!” I bellow into the shard, hoping that Kaz mee yoos wasn’t lying about being able to talk.

Milo doesn’t move save for scrunching his nose and rolling over, but movement flickers in the distance within the shard.

“Creed!” I yell because there can only be one other demon in my house. I hope anyway. I’m proven right as Creed wanders into the living room, turning around in circles with his fists flexed like he’s ready for a fight. Relief pools in me at the sight of him. “Creed, it’s Brady. Can you see me?”

Creed turns around in another slow circle, and I get the impression that I am appearing as a disembodied voice. That’s pretty freaky, I don’t blame him for being on edge. He reaches over and grabs Milo’s shoulder, giving him a shake. I watch as Milo wakes up, scowling and snarling at Creed who gestures around the room. Their mouths are moving but I can’t make out any words.

“Creed. Milo. I’m in Hell. Long story. Roth is... gone. Something took him, but I’m with this snake demon guy in some cave? He calls himself Kaz mee yoos?” I hope what I’m saying makes sense. Milo’s eyes pop open wide at the mention of Kaz mee yoos, he gestures frantically to Creed who nods at whatever he’s been told. “Can you get to me? Somehow? Portal?”

Milo and Creed talk for a moment, then Milo turns and nods to the far corner of the room. All I can see is the back of

his head though, which is kind of funny—or would be—if I couldn't feel the hatred simmering inside me again. "Bring pants, if you can get here."

Milo nods again to the corner of the wall facing away from me and Creed takes off to the right, heading for the staircase I know is there. Finally, he returns carrying a plastic bag and a shimmering light appears in the centre of the cave I'm standing in to match the one that has appeared on the mirror shard I hold in my hand. Creed steps through first, followed by Milo.

"What the hell is going on?" Creed demands, his voice rattling off the cave walls. "How did you end up in Hell? Where's Roth?"

"Calm down," I snarl, gesturing at Kaz mee yoos, who is shivering again beneath his cloak. "Don't scare him. I'll tell you everything, but I've already scared the absolute shit out of the poor thing more times than I can count without meaning to."

I slip into the clothing they've brought me, making sure I stay close enough to the campfire that I don't get cold again. A simple T-shirt and a pair of jeans, plus some socks and sneakers. It'll do nicely for the moment, but I'll still freeze if we have to head out into the forest again, so I hope they know a different way out of this place. Once I'm dressed and feeling a bit warmer, I fill them in on what happened and how Roth was taken from me, anger and shame rippling through me as I have to divulge that he was snatched right out from under my nose.

"And then, I found this guy and his magic mirror thing." I reach down and hold up the shard Kaz mee yoos gave me, and Milo takes it from me.

"A seer glass," he breathes, peering into it. "How in the hell did Kazmeus get his hands on this? These are very rare, but I think this one is broken."

Kazmeus. Not Kaz mee yoos. I make a mental note as Milo keeps staring into the seer glass, his face wrinkled in confusion. "Why?"

“All I see is myself inside. I should be able to see who I’m thinking about, but this one only shows me my reflection.” A soft sigh rises from the cloak covered demon, lingering in the air and blanketing us with its sadness. Milo seems to be rattled the most by the noise. He places the seer glass on the floor of the cave, then steps over and crouches beside Kazmeus. Slowly, he places his hand on the lumpy cloak. “Kazmeus? Kazy? Do you remember me? It’s Miloriel. It’s your Meemo.”

I didn’t think it was possible, but Kazmeus somehow curls himself even tighter into the ball he’s become. Milo sighs, gently stroking the lump he’s become with his hand, turning his teary eyes to me. “He was my best friend once. We used to play together when we were little, we were inseparable. I thought he was...” He trails off that sentence with a sad head shake, pausing to wipe his tears away before continuing. “Then he was attacked by someone here in this cave that has always been his home, and just kind of shut down. Totally shut down. He wouldn’t eat or sleep. He even forgot how to talk.”

“Who attacked him?” I demand with far more force than is my right. I can feel the anger threatening to curl through me again at the idea that this beautiful snake creature would be attacked without provocation.

Milo swallows hard, exchanging a glance with Creed before turning back to me. “I was told Bezeroth did it. He was only a child. They both were, but I was told that Bezeroth went feral and attacked him for no reason.”

“He would never,” I deny, my voice hissing out of my lungs. “My Roth would never do something as shameful as this. Seeking out to attack a defenseless creature in his own home? Never. How dare you say such things about my mate?”

“I said that’s what I was told,” Milo protests. “Yes, I was foolish and believed it, believing that his burial punishment for the crime was just and right, but it is all the information I had.”

“He wasn’t buried because he did this to Kazmeus. He was buried because Lucifer fears him. He will take the throne away from Lucifer and crush him into the ground beneath his foot as

he rises to power. Roth is the beginning of a new era for Hell, and I will be by his side, laughing and dancing on the corpses of all those who dared challenge me.”

“You sound like him again. Like my father.”

“Fuck your goddamn daddy. I am so tired of hearing about him. He is the reason my mate was buried, and when I am finished plucking the skin from his bones, strip by strip, I will bury him alive beneath the ground to rot.” I am seething. A ball of anger. A creature of spite and malice. I clench my hands at my sides, feeling my healed knuckles cracking, but I can’t stop it. I can’t settle it down again. I need Roth. I need my mate, my other half, to help quell this burning hatred seething out of every pore within my body. “Help me. What’s happening to me?”

“It’s you,” Creed murmurs, shaking his head in disbelief. “It’s not Roth. It’s you. You have the power.”

“What?” I ask, the burn crawling up my throat like a snake.

“You are the prophecy. It’s not Roth who is given the power of your mating. It’s you, Brady. You are the one who will take the throne of Hell and overturn Lucifer’s rule. He is calmed by the addition of you, but you have become something else entirely by taking what he is inside you. You are brimming with something vicious, Brady.”

Stunned, I reel backwards the tiniest bit. “You have got to be shitting me. Me? I’m a human.”

“A human filled with half a demon soul.”

The truth of it resonates deep within, stirring the burn inside me, and in my mind’s eye, I can see throngs of demons kneeling at my feet, ready to obey my every word. My will, will become theirs and they will exist only to please me. My face cracks into a grin though the human piece of my soul weeps at the thought that I could become something horrific. Something so terrible and vile. I feel unbalanced inside, two halves at war with each other, and I fear slipping off onto the wrong side.

“I don’t want to be Lucifer,” I bite out, head swirling with thoughts, possibilities, and sheer dread. “I won’t.”

Kazmeus throws off his cloak and rises from his bed, towering over everyone else in the cave. He gently moves Milo out of his way and starts pacing around the room, his shoulders rolling uncomfortably. I can read his fear in the way he trembles, his hands and knees knocking, though still he paces, a glorious, terrified scale covered demon. He moves towards me, and I can’t help but clench my fists at my sides. He could easily tear my head off with both of his huge hands if he really wanted to.

“What are you—” The question is cut off as he lifts his hand and places it gently on my mouth, looking intently into my eyes, showing me his wariness and discomfort. He moves his hand downwards and grabs my hand in his fingertips, his touch like a feather on my skin. Carefully, he pulls me to the mattress and motions towards it. I look at him, seeking answers to questions he doesn’t have words for. He gestures again at the bed, eyes filled to the brim with fear and hope, and I understand. He can’t help himself from fearing me, and I can’t help myself from being fearful to him. Not right now anyway. It’s like in the forest when he found me and made me follow him. It wasn’t by choice, but because I caught him off guard. Instead of running and risking the chance I would give chase, he felt he had no choice but to help me and bring me here. He gave me the shard for the same reason. Kazmeus doesn’t like me, but he will show me his weakness for I am far stronger than him, and he believes his utter destruction is only an outburst away. He will give me things he owns to appease me, and the mattress and shard are all he has to his name.

What kind of monster would take all that a being such as him has?

“Oh, Kazmeus,” I breathe, rage quelling and heart breaking the tiniest bit for this utterly broken demon in front of me. “No. That’s your bed. I am so sorry. You lay back down, it’s all right. I’m not mad at you.”

He looks at me with uncertainty, loosening his fingertips from my arm, and I nod, gesturing to the leaf mattress again.

Kazmeus grabs his cloak, wrapping it around himself and laying back down to become a silent, trembling figure again. A terrified whimper rises from his mouth, and he starts rocking himself back and forth on his bed, whatever sudden burst of confidence he had in approaching me leeching out of him as quickly as my rage is settling down inside me. Milo goes to him immediately, settling down beside him and rubbing his shoulder, cooing soft words into his ears.

“We need to leave,” I murmur, shame and guilt spiraling through me at my behaviour once again. “I won’t stay here and continue to make him scared of me. I have to find Roth. Someone has him, and I have to keep him safe. I don’t know if my purpose is to overthrow Lucifer, but I do know that I am meant to protect my mate, and in that, I have failed.”

“Do you know where he’s been taken?”

“The pit?”

Creed shivers and glances at Milo who doesn’t move from soothing Kazmeus to even look up. Tears stream down his pale face, and I swear I can almost feel the ache of his sadness inside my own body.

“How did you know his name?” Milo asks, resting his cheek on Kazmeus’ shoulder and turning his head to face me.

“He can talk,” I offer. “Not many words, but there are some he can say. He’s tried a couple others, but it’s almost like they can’t make their way out of his throat.”

“I’m staying with him,” he whispers, reaching up a hand to wipe his face, though more tears spill down his cheeks. “Please, don’t ask me to leave his side again.”

I never asked that of him in the first place, but I nod because for some reason it feels like the permission to linger behind is mine to give. Milo closes his eyes, leaning against the hulking snake demon hiding beneath his cloak, his lips curling into a sad smile. I gather the shard off the floor and head over to Kazmeus, placing it between him and the wall, watching as his hand snakes out to grab it.

“To the pit?” I ask, standing back up and looking at Creed.

“What about the raveners?” he asks.

“They’re just big kittens,” I comment with a grin.
“Nothing to worry about. You’ll see.”

“Nothing to worry about?”

“Not this again. Roth said they were dangerous too, after I had one eat Behemut, but they’re not.” I reach down to ensure my shoes are tied as Creed squawks an incredulous noise.
“What?”

“Behemut is dead?”

“Kitty chow, my friend. I told you, raveners like me and I like them. You’ll see.”

**CHAPTER
TWENTY-SIX**

My head aches as I pull myself off the cold, hard ground beneath me. As I sit, the world shifts sideways and my stomach rolls with nausea. I don't know where exactly I am, the last thing I remember was being pulled through a portal before everything went black and the world disappeared.

Beneath me, the cool rock sends chills through my bare skin, though the air is scented with brimstone and fire. I can feel warmth glowing beyond where I sit, dazed and confused on the hard floor. My head pounds like a drum, and I lift my hand up to touch my skin, wincing as my fingers connect with a knotted bump on the back of my head.

"Coward," I whisper, pulling my hand away to stare at the blood that seeps from my head. It won't last long, already my skin is starting to heal and knit itself back together, but that I was attacked from behind is pure cowardice.

Cowardice that does not speak of Lucifer at all. My father would never sneak up behind someone and bash them across the head. He is far too engorged with ego and power for that kind of shame. Perhaps one of his lapdogs is the culprit here instead of Lucifer himself. If he is as scared of me as I've been made to believe, he must have delivered a warning on what he believes me to be capable of.

Ahead of me, a set of iron bars sit dug into the rock, and I shuffle forward, peering through them as I start to figure out where I am. It's a narrow hallway lined with cells much like the one I am in, and I remember it well from trips down here with Miloriel and my father when I was just a child. These

cells lie below the castle, connected on one end to the place I called home for many years, and on the other end, to the pit where my father keeps his favored pets. A chill ripples through me as I stare at the open mouth at the far end of the dungeon that leads downwards to the ravener nest, but a shuffling noise draws my attention to the opposite end of the hallway.

“You,” I murmur, staring as my captor shuffles down the stairs, cradling a small glowing orb in their hands. He turns his eyes to mine and grins, the golden tones shimmering out of a handsome face I know well at this point.

“Me? What did I do?” Legion asks with a wicked grin from within the same body they sent to the zoo, the casting call, and the diner.

I am stunned as they carry the orb to a small table that rests beside my cell, placing it onto a rock pedestal. I thought they were my friend. My ally. “Why?”

“Why not?” they say with a shrug of their shoulders. “Why not take what is created and make it something more? Something mine? You think that whole soul is yours to have when I have waited so long for this to come to me? Foolish little demon, you don’t know the half of it.”

Legion caresses the orb on the pedestal, smiling as it ripples with glimmers of golden light at their touch. I’m not sure what it is, but it looks as old as the walls around us.

“A soul cairn,” Legion offers with a knowing smile. “I know you’ve never seen one, but once I am finished, you will never exist outside of one again. I need what you have, you see. The power and the strength inside your whole soul will be mine.”

I snort a loud laugh, shaking my head at the mistake he’s made. My power? No, I have no more than what my demon birth gave me. I am tempered by the human half soul given by my mate. The true power lies in the human with a brand-new half of a demon soul burning inside his chest. Legion turns and scowls at me. “You find this funny? Am I humorous to you?”

“Very,” I offer. “I mean, the whole evil villain act you’ve got going on right now is hilarious, you have to admit. Did you spring from a comic book or a movie or something?” I pause, shaking my head as they glare at me. “No. Don’t answer that, never mind. Answer this instead. How does it feel to make mistakes, Legion?”

“I don’t make mistakes.” They sniff, turning their golden eyes on me.

“Yes, you do. You have, by taking me away from my mate. He will come for you. You’ll see.”

Legion snorts a laugh, shaking their head. “The human will come for me? Oh, dear. Whatever will I do? I have bodies, Roth, and every one of them obey my commands.”

“I, me, and my, huh? When did you become singular?” Beehives have queens, Brady once said, one bee that leads the rest. I should have listened more to him then, but never did I think that Legion would be the one behind everything that had happened.

“The moment your fuck of a father slaughtered half of us with his stupid fucking pets, that’s when. We all bleed the same blood and feel the same pain. I am tired of burning at his hands for the greater good. Ending your bloodline is the greatest good I can think of, and when I am through, I will rule all that you see.”

“And what about those pets, huh?”

“I will command them,” Legion responds. “I will command everything down here when I have your soul in my grasp. Nobody can stop me, not even your father. You read the prophecy yourself, and besides, Daddy Dearest isn’t feeling well lately.”

Legion gestures to the cell across from mine, and I squint, peering through the bars to see Lucifer’s pale figure slumped on the floor. He is thin and frail, his chest hardly moving with breath. I have never seen him like this, so weak and fragile. Startled, I glance up at Legion, who nods at me, clearly pleased with themselves.

“How?”

“He underestimated me,” Legion offers, their lips drawing down into a grimace. “And overestimated himself. Absolute power and control does start to wear on a demon after a while, you can’t blame those beneath him for listening to my whispers that he could be dealt with permanently. It didn’t take much to place him under my foot, and when he was there, it took even little to squash him like a bug.”

“He still breathes.”

“For now.” Legion moves back to the soul cairn, giving it another stroke and drawing more silvery shimmers out of its depths.

“It won’t work, you know.”

“You are a foolish child,” Legion retorts as the raveners in the pit below cackle and shriek. “You always have been. Did you really believe that I was helping you out of the goodness of my heart? I have no good heart. I’m a demon.”

“I never said you weren’t a demon,” I reply with a smile. “Only that you weren’t very smart.” He clearly must not be intelligent if he thinks for one minute that a rudimentary cell like this one would hold Brady with all the power leeching through him. My mate, the one who has enough contained within him now to unseat Lucifer himself, would never be held such as I am.

“I am smart enough to figure this out. Your whole soul is needed to kill this vile creature, and I will have it in my hands soon. Then all of Hell will tremble before me. I am done bowing before your tainted bloodline. It is time for Legion to rule all.”

“Okay. Sure.” What a pompous asshole. And he thinks Lucifer is the problem? As my mate would say: Christ on a bike.

Legion turns to me, their, or rather his, eyes burning. “You’ll see.”

“Yep. I guess I will.” If he cracks me open and searches for a soul filled with power and brutality, he will find me to be

sorely lacking in both. In his certainty that I am the one he needs, he's completely ignored that a mating is between two beings. Legion's refusal to see Brady as the real threat will be his undoing, and I know my mate will come for me.

Legion turns to the soul cairn, then wrinkles his nose before moving to my father's cell. He leans down and grabs Lucifer's head, tilting his face upwards and pressing his lips to Lucifer's. Legion inhales breath from Lucifer's lungs, the crackle and pop of bones snapping echoing through the dungeon, and when he pulls away, a tendril of blue lingers between their mouths. He is leeching power from Lucifer somehow. I had not thought such a thing was possible, but then again what I was able to learn about Hell and demons is very limited owing to the years I spent buried. The raveners shriek and chirrup to each other in the pit suddenly, sending tendrils of fear rushing through me. They continue making noise, claws scrabbling on rock and dreadful screeching echoing through the space.

"Maybe I'll just burn them all alive." Legion scowls, turning his face to the open mouth of the pit where they nest. "I won't need raveners when I have your soul."

I swallow through a fear thickened throat as the raveners continue to create a racket below, the cacophony of noise ringing in my ears. Focusing back on Legion, I tell myself to stay calm. To rest and wait for my mate to come and end this play at power.

To keep me safe, as he has always known he can.

My best bet for the moment is to keep Legion talking. I also know that he thinks himself far more clever than I could possibly be. "I wonder what the rest of the drones think of you right now."

"They think what I tell them to think," Legion responds, releasing Lucifer's head and turning to his soul cairn. He places his hand upon it, closing his eyes, and I can tell he's deep in concentration.

"Do you? What if there's another one like you in there?"

Legion opens his eyes and scowls, huffing an irritated breath at me. "I am all of them."

"How does that work?"

"It... I just am."

"Hmm," I respond, thinking for more questions I can delay him with. "Why this body then? Why not someone bigger? Stronger? Scarier? This body is basically a kid. It's not intimidating at all, especially in a human skin. Does it not come with a demon skin?"

"He does. He certainly does. This one was twenty when he joined us," Legion responds with a wicked grin. "A gift from your father. Failed experiment number one."

That news ripples through me, and I move to grasp at the bars of the cage. "What do you mean?"

"Come now, Bezeroth. Surely you recognize your brother?" He casts a hand down his body and grins.

"I have never seen that body before you showed up at the zoo wearing it."

"Noreth, he was called once. He went by Nor. He was Lucifer's first attempt at creating a mate for a demon to fill a soul to the brim."

I stare at the golden curls atop Legion's, no, Noreth's head, his golden eyes glimmering from the shadows of his face. "And what happened? How come you have him?"

"It failed," Legion responds with a shrug. "You cannot mate demon to demon. They will tear each other apart. Lucifer learned that lesson the hard way."

"Who was his mate then? Did Father kill him? Did Nor?"

Legion cackles, moving to the bars of my cage and leaning down. He looks in at me, his entire body rippling with delight and joy. "I believe you named him Creed."

I am stunned as Legion laughs, his fetid breath reaching my nose and rolling my stomach. Nor, my brother, the skin that Legion is wearing, and Creed, the friend I named, are

mates. I cast a glance at my father where he lays crumpled on the floor of his cage, anger pooling inside me. How dare he fuck with all of us like that and then rip us away from each other?

“How does Creed not know of your plans?” If he was in Legion with the collective’s thoughts trickling through his brain, he has to know more, right? Has he been lying to me all this time as well?

“They know what I allow them to know,” Legion snaps, sounding put out by my line of questioning. “Never before has Legion contained one such as me. It was nothing to keep Creed under control and ignorant to everything that did not concern him.”

“Why leave him with me then?”

Legion grins, his sharp teeth gleaming. “An experiment of my own, perhaps. Removed from Legion, how much does a body recall of its life before being enfolded into the collective? Would he remember his mate? His life?”

I get the feeling I’m being baited to ask more about Creed so that Legion can continue telling me how great and special he is. Instead of playing into his hand, I just scowl and frown at him from behind the bars of my cell. He seems a bit disappointed and sighs loudly to show me his displeasure as I turn my head away from him. I watch him out of the corner of my eye as he crouches, staring at me.

“You can’t mate angel to demon either,” Legion offers, out of the blue as he rises to his feet and moves to his cairn again.

I snap my attention back to him, narrowing my eyes. “Well, what the fuck does that mean?”

“Your father keeps so many secrets. Three sons. Three experiments. Two failures. You do the math, smart one.”

“Miloriel,” I breathe, gripping the bars in my hands again as Legion grins his wicked grin at me. “Miloriel has a mate. He is an angel?”

“A fucked up one, but yes. He is divine born.”

“That’s why he’s shaped different. His stag horns and fluffy tail. How come he has those if he is an angel?” Angels are pure beings of light with big feathery wings, as far as I recall from the stories Lucifer told when I was a little demon.

“Demons are all fallen angels, you idiot. Those that hail from his classification have antlers and cute little fluffy bunny tails like the one you call brother. Sprinkle a little bit of hellfire into it though, and you have an angel that should be capable of keeping up with a demon mate.”

I bristle at his tone, scowling out at him. “And who is that mate, then?”

“That disgusting chaos demon,” Legion snarls, wrinkling his nose. “I told your father that such a pretty creature needed a pretty mate, and he went ahead and chose the ugliest, most vile one he could find.”

“They knew it,” I respond, thinking of how close Kazmeus and Miloriel were as children. “They were best friends. They had to have known. They shouldn’t have failed.”

“They had to fail. Don’t you see? Neither one of them would have had the power created by you and Brady. So, I did what was necessary. Thank you, by the way, for taking the blame for what happened to poor, poor Kazmeus. To think you were waiting inside his cave to attack him as you did. It’s shameful, Bezeroth. Purely shameful. Your brother couldn’t understand why you’d done such a thing to his very best friend, but I made sure he and your father believed the story I told them. And then experiment number three was conceived, and upon your birth, I knew it would be what I needed to end Lucifer for good. A demon and a human, of all things. A simple human with simple needs.”

“I’d say I’m pretty fucking far from simple, pal,” a voice rings out from the pit below and my heart goes wild with love and comfort.

**CHAPTER
TWENTY-SEVEN**

Legion.
Of course, it's fucking Legion.

I should have guessed he was behind all of this when he showed up at the diner and tried to deliver thinly veiled threats my way. My head had screamed at me to keep my mate safe, but I hadn't listened to it at the time. Hadn't heeded the warnings that were being given to me by my own half of soul. That I was misled prickles at the burning core of me, and I scowl at Legion as I step into the dungeon from the open pit below where the raveners were sleeping in their nests until I arrived to collect them. "So. It's you."

"Come to save your mate?" Legion snarks. "You cannot have him."

I raise an eyebrow as I continue walking down into the cool, rocky dungeon. The long hallway I step into is narrow, yet not too narrow to keep me from moving quickly. I am followed by Creed and my new, fiercely loyal pets are just below in the nest, awaiting my command. I was appalled to find them as I did. Food bowls empty, chests caved in with hunger and water dirtied with bugs and debris. I promised them a feast of flesh, believing there to be a whole group of demons up here, not just one pathetic creature.

"Where are your friends?" I ask, coming to stand at the top of the staircase. "Or do you not have any of those?"

"They await me upstairs," Legion answers, like an absolute idiot. "Once I have finished my task, I will go to them and they will crown me upon Lucifer's throne."

“Ah. So, it’s the throne you want. It’s just a chair, you know. Fancy, most likely, but still just a chair. Do you not have a chair of your own?”

A snorting laugh reaches my ears, and I glance to the cells that line the walls. Roth’s face peeks out between the bars of one of them and he grins at me, teeth glistening. I resist the urge to run to him, knowing that the one who separated us has to pay for his actions first. Instead, I smile, my entire body warming as I look at Roth’s handsome face. “Hello, my mate. I have missed you. Don’t worry. I won’t be long.”

Roth laughs, shaking his head at me, and I grin back. Legion exhales an impatient sigh, which is really quite rude if you ask me. “What?”

“You’re pretty bold for the moment, human. You and that body behind you cannot stop me.”

“His name is Creed.”

“I don’t care what his name is. He’ll be dead soon enough and so will you.”

“Us? Dead?” I shake my head, smiling. “We have come to deliver your own death, demon.”

“I think not.” Legion takes a step backwards, letting loose a high-pitched whistle that rings in my ears. High pitched shrieking and yelping echo through the space, and Creed inhales a sharp breath. His hand lands on my arm, squeezing tight, and I brush him off. I know what lies below and I am not scared.

“You cannot control them, you know.”

“I don’t have to control them. They are starved,” Legion says. “They will eat whatever lies within their path. Consider this a warning, human. You do not want to be at the other end of a ravener’s jaws. I promised your mate that I would spare you, but I will not hesitate to call them upwards to feast on your flesh.”

“Do it. Call them up.”

Legion falters for a moment, then sets his jaw tight beneath his skin again. I smile in response. “You can’t. Because you fear them. You have treated them horribly, haven’t you? Kept them from eating. From drinking. Poor little beasties. They are angry, Legion, and so very hungry. I wonder how long it would take for them to eat you and all of your friends you say wait for you upstairs? Should we find out or will you give me my fucking mate back?”

“I can’t do that, so sorry. You see, I need him. I told you before when I came to you that Hell needs his soul. Your soul. The whole soul created by your mating. If you knew what was good for you, you’d turn around and leave right now.”

“No deal.” Does he seriously think I’m negotiating here? The burn rises inside me at not being obeyed, and I let it flow along my veins, feeling the scorch of it threading through my entire body. He does not know what I am. What I am capable of, but he will.

“Human,” Legion says with a sigh. “I am trying to be kind here. Turn and leave. You cannot stop what is to come.”

“I will end you, Legion,” I promise, tone ominous. The raveners below in the pit cackle and shriek as my voice echoes through the room. “You will be forgotten by time and place. Your bloodline will end, and there will be no new souls joining the collective because the collective will not exist. I will rip your head off and feed it piece by piece to my raveners for what you have done.”

Legion looks a little bit scared now, but still he steps forward, threatening me. “Who do you think you are, human?”

“I am the world ender. I am what is promised and what is sought. I have become your nightmares, Legion. I have become everything Lucifer feared, I am the purpose and the fate and you will be the first to taste my wrath.” Legion takes a step back now, eyes widening in fear and dread as he realizes what mistake he’s made by taking my mate. My soul churns and throbs inside me as I stare at the demon that dared to take what belongs to me. “He is mine, Legion. He is only mine and you have angered me greatly by taking him.”

“You fucked up, buddy,” Roth murmurs from somewhere to my right. My skin starts to burn, but instead of pain, all I feel is warmth and love radiating through me. Love of my mate, warmth of the connection we share and the burn inside as it becomes manifest, filling my veins. It is not fire that lives inside me, but poison. The same poison that lives deep within my mate’s body crests through mine, loosened from the soul we share. A gift of our mating given to me by him. It is my pleasure and will be Legion’s doom.

Legion sputters, scrambling backwards away from me as I reach for him. “We are many. You cannot end us all.”

“I only have to end one for the rest to fall. Without a queen, a beehive is nothing.”

He scrambles away from me, but I leap forwards, wrapping myself around him like a snake. Legion shrieks as I take us both to the ground, holding him tight with his back on my front, legs and arms wrapped around him. He screams in pain, body writhing in my grasp as I sink my teeth into his flesh, tearing at his shoulders and seeping hot poison into him. In this moment, he is my prey, and I am the snake that will devour him whole.

“Stop,” Roth calls out, sounding scared for some reason. “Brady, you can’t kill him.”

I double down on my bite, as Legion’s shrieking becomes the chorus to song of death I am writing. Roth meets my eyes, but I cannot let go. Legion has earned this.

“Please, my love. Don’t kill the body. It is my brother. Spare him.”

Startled, I pull my teeth out of Legion’s shoulder, licking his blood off my lips. I pant as I stare down at the damage I’ve done to his flesh, but I don’t let go of him. He struggles, and I can hear the sizzling of his skin, deep inside the wound I’ve created in his shoulder. It is satisfying and right and perfect, I open my mouth again, urged to do more damage by the burning poison inside me. Leaning forward, I press my teeth into his sink again, fascinated by the sound he makes as I

pierce his skin. It's like a shriek mixed with a sort of panting noise at the back of his throat. Fascinating.

“Brady,” Roth snaps, drawing my attention up to him. “The orb. It's a soul cairn.”

I withdraw my teeth, a bit embarrassed that I went back for seconds. Looking up, I see the orb on the table then turn back down to the gaping hole in Legion's shoulder. I hold out my hand, not moving my eyes away from the torn flesh in front of me. I'm not entirely sure what a soul cairn is, but I know what I must do. Creed places the smooth, glass orb in my hand, and I lean down, tearing Legion's shoulder open even more as he screams in pain.

“Please,” he begs. “Please don't kill me.”

“Kill you? No. I'm not going to kill you, but you will wish I had.” Without even thinking, I shove the sphere into the hole I've dug in his shoulder, releasing my grasp on him. Legion's cries echo off the rock as he writhes on the ground, smoke seeping out of his pores. He rises to his feet, digging at his skin with his hands as his flesh burns around the soul cairn, but he can't get purchase on it to tear it out and make it stop. Finally, his screaming stops and his eyes gloss over, soul draining out of him inch by inch into the cairn. I watch with glee as his body drops to the ground, his head smashing off the rock at my feet with a hideous thunk.

Heart slamming in my chest, I step towards him, still licking his delicious blood off my lips. Leaning down, I pry the soul cairn from his body and lift it up, watching as it glows brilliant red in the dim light of the dungeon. I give it a tiny shake and an even tinier scream echoes from within it.

Like turning on the lights in a dark room, I slump where I stand, the orb slipping from my fingers as I turn to my mate. I rush to him and reach through the bars, unable to stand the weight of not touching his skin any longer. He leans into my hand, and I smile, feeling the tiniest bit of relief from the simmering burn inside me.

“My mate,” I murmur, brushing my fingers over his smooth cheeks. “Oh, my mate. I am here.”

“I knew you’d find me,” he says, a brilliant smile lighting up his face. He turns his head to my palm and presses a kiss into my hand. “And what a display. You understand everything, I assume?”

“I am the prophecy,” I whisper, feeling a bit sheepish now.

“You are. Not me. Not like everyone thought.”

I smile for a moment, then turn to look at the bars that hold him captive. “Back up. Let me get you out of here, then we can talk.”

Roth scoots to the back of the small cell, eyes peering out at me as I grip the wrought iron in my hands. I’m not sure I can do this on my own, but the other part of me is simmering with power so it’s at least worth a try. Maybe this strength can do some good for once. My cheeks heat as I pull, teeth clenched and arms quaking, but eventually the bars creak and groan as they rip away from the stone wall. I throw the grate to the side, then turn to my mate as he rushes towards me.

“I kept you safe,” I say, leaping into his arms and wrapping my legs around his waist.

“You always knew you could.”

“I mean, you were kidnapped right from under my nose, but we can forget all of that, right? Let bygones be bygones and all that?”

“Of course, we can.” He laughs.

I lean in and press my lips to his, unable to wait any longer to feel him on me. It wasn’t long that I was without him, but any time is far too long to be without my mate, apparently. He kisses me back greedily, like a man starved for the hunger of my taste until he consumes me whole.

“Um,” Creed says from behind us. “Who is this body?”

I let go of Roth and jump down off him, turning to find Creed cradling the body Legion was inside of in his arms. He looks absolutely bewildered as he stares between the demon and us. Roth steps forward, brushing a lock of golden blond

hair off the body's face, and I am relieved to see his chest moving with breath.

"His name is Noreth. Nor," he offers with a gentle smile. "And he is my brother. My first brother. I have many things to tell you."

Creed glances back down at Nor, then up at my mate. "I know him."

"You do. You were made for him," a creaky, gravelly voice I have not heard before murmurs. I stare, stunned as a thin, frail demon with horrific horns curling around his ears reaches out from the cell across the way.

"Lucifer," Creed breathes, holding on even tighter to Nor's body as he takes a step backwards.

"Yes," Lucifer replies, the words groaning out of him. He stops and coughs, pressing a hand to his flailing chest. "I am still him."

"Hello, Father."

Lucifer raises his head to look at Roth with watery eyes that have all but sunken into his skull. "I suppose you are pleased to find me here, my son, in such a state."

"Not going to lie, I kind of love it," Roth responds, though I can hear heartbreak in his words. "How did this happen?"

Lucifer shrugs, coughing so hard his whole body rattles. "I made many mistakes."

"No shit," I comment, stepping in front of my mate. I gently push him behind me and stare down at the weak pathetic creature behind the bars. "So, you are the one I'm supposed to defeat?"

"Ah," Lucifer says with a grin that almost makes his gaunt face appear handsome. "The prophecy. There you are all grown up."

"What?" Roth whispers, and I reach back to grab his hand, smoothing my fingers over his own carefully.

“You think I don’t know my own son? My own demise? You are a fool, Bezeroth.”

“Bold words for a dude stuck in a cell,” I comment, earning a grin from Lucifer.

Lucifer inhales a shaky breath. “I always knew it was you, Brady Schiff, who would come to end me. I dealt with it in the only way that made sense at the time, and now that the hour of my demise is upon me, I cannot find space for regrets. I accept my death, please make it quick.”

I step back, staring at the sad, pathetic demon in the cage. “Where did your power go, old demon? Where is all your strength?”

“Legion.” He sighs, shaking his head. “I did not know until it was too late that he sought to destroy me because I did not think it possible outside of your mating. I never believed he would stoop so low as to incapacitate me and hold me here, feeding off my power to steal your whole soul. He always was deep into the elder magics. You know that, Bezeroth.”

“I do.”

“Sleeping beneath the ground. I didn’t see that one coming, that’s for sure.”

Silence ripples between us all, and I loosen my hand from Roth’s, peering into the cell at my foe. I have nothing but pity running through me as I look at him, though. There is no anger, no hatred burning in the background. Lucifer is not the challenger I believed him to be, and though part of me is disappointed, the human piece of me is just simply tired.

“Will you kill me quick?” he requests, tilting his head up to look at me.

“I will not,” I reply with a sigh. “I won’t kill you at all, Lucifer. Your reign is incomplete, for you are also incomplete. This is no challenge for me. You are no great power to topple.”

“I am Lucifer.” The hint of something vicious sparks inside his eyes, but it quickly fades to nothing.

“What do I gain by killing you? A title? I’ve got one. I’ve got many. Model. Friend. Son. Mate. What else is there? A throne? I have chairs at home that are probably far more comfortable than whatever you sit on. You have nothing I need, Lucifer Morningstar, and nothing I really want. You’re welcome to keep it all if it makes you feel better about your shitty existence. Mark my words, though, and listen closely. If you dare come near my mate or anyone I love ever again, I will end you. It will not be the quick death you have asked for, Lucifer. I will make it hurt. Your agony will rattle in the air above Hell for millennia if you dare try to take anything that I love from me ever again.”

“Deal?” Lucifer whispers, sticking his hand out of the cell. Roth grabs me like he means to stop me, but I turn and offer a smile before turning back to his father.

“I may be human, Lucifer, but I am not weak. This isn’t a deal. It’s a promise of what will come if you step over the line again.”

Lucifer slumps lower in the cell, tilting his head upwards to the rock above. “Will you let me out?”

Roth shakes his head, crossing his arms across his chest and frowning down at his father. “I think you can get yourself out when you have healed more. You should have enough left for a portal or two, but while you wait, think on your mistakes and don’t give my mate a reason to come seeking you again.”

Lucifer grimaces, but nods. Already I can see color returning to his cheeks, though he still chokes on his own breath.

“Are we done here?” Roth asks as we move away to stand by Creed, who is still cradling Nor’s body like he is holding very precious porcelain.

“Not yet,” I reply, glancing upwards towards the castle above. “I believe I promised my pets a feast, and I seem to recall Legion saying that he was awaited by others above. And you need pants.” He is very naked. Shockingly so, his cock swinging between his legs and his tail flicking in the air wildly. Everyone down here has been absolutely naked aside

from Milo and Creed who at least had the decency to wear pants and shirts.

“Pants?” He scowls. “We are in Hell. Pants are optional and I’m opting to not wear them.”

I consider snapping something back, but instead I sigh, nodding. I’m too tired to fight, or even joke around about clothing, and there is still so much left to do.

“I’ll take Nor and head to find Miloriel and Kazmeus,” Creed says, still appearing stunned by everything that has happened. He looks up at Roth, then back down at Nor. “We’ll wait for you in the caves, but when we get back home, you and I need to talk.”

“We will,” Roth promises. “Take care of my brothers, okay?”

Creed nods, then opens a portal. He steps through carrying Nor, and I catch a glimpse of Milo sitting beside Kazmeus just as the portal closes.

“How is Kaz?” Roth whispers, sounding a bit nervous.

“Broken,” I respond, unwilling to lie. “But he’ll be all right. Milo seems to have a bunch of feelings for him.”

“They’re mates. Or they were meant to be before Legion meddled in their lives. Creed and Nor were the first, Milo and Kazmeus were the second.”

“And we are the third,” I finish.

“We are the final.”

**CHAPTER
TWENTY-EIGHT**

What are you going to do with them all?”

Around me, the throne room ripples with screams of terror and blood slicks the floors. The raveners are having the meal that Brady promised them, and though it churns my stomach to listen to the bones of demons I knew when I was younger crack and crunch, I am pleased to hear it. Brady stands, holding my hand and cradling the soul cairn in his other, as he watches over his pets, shrewd eyes scrutinizing every single demon’s face as they fall to tooth and claw. Every so often, his face darkens, and he gives the orb a vicious shake, Legion’s angry shriek rising out of it to join the cacophony around us.

“I will keep them,” he responds, staring at the raveners with glee in his eyes. “They will be very useful.”

“We can’t have raveners loose inside the house,” I point out. “There isn’t nearly enough room for all of them anywhere, and besides that, what will they eat?”

“I will figure it out. There aren’t as many as I thought there would be, and there has to be a place for them somewhere.”

He’s not wrong, not entirely anyway. Though I seem to remember there being many more, there were only three full grown raveners nesting in the pit, plus one baby who has yet to grow into his teeth. He’s out there stumbling around his elders on clumsy paws, lapping up blood off the floor with his blackened tongue and grabbing at whatever bits of meat left behind for him. It would be adorable... if it wasn’t a bloodthirsty monster eating demon flesh.

“I wonder if they have a human form,” Brady muses as one of the raveners runs over, butting its head against his leg. He gives it a little scratch and then it darts away again, chasing down an unfortunate lesser demon. There aren’t many of those left out there either. Legion’s group was smaller than he’d made it out to be, though large enough to have these beasts’ bellies full to bursting.

“You can’t be serious,” I respond, as Brady continues chattering to himself about whether or not the raveners would have an earthly equivalent they could be costumed as. “How about we let them loose into the wild? There are hundreds of pit boars for them to snack on out there in the forests and caves, and you know they’ll be left alone entirely.”

“I can’t leave them behind.”

Somehow, I don’t think he’s going to be given a choice in the matter. As the last scream rings through the air and everything goes silent around us, one of the sated raveners rushes towards us. It butts its head against Brady’s knee, but as he reaches down to scratch its head as he’s been doing off and on since we arrived up here, it darts away towards the thick wooden door that leads out to the open atrium. Beyond that lies the courtyard and the full moon, and Brady swallows, looking intently at me, confusion in his eyes as the raverer paws at the door.

“I think they mean to leave,” I whisper, watching as the rest of the—now full—raveners run over, bump him with their heads and make their way to the closed door. “I don’t think we need to plan for them at all.”

“Oh,” he replies, sounding a bit shaky about it. Visibly deflating where he stands, he nods as the raveners continue to scratch and bump at the door, glancing back at him every so often like they’re waiting for him to come. Even the baby is in the mix, tiny paws batting at the door because, it too, can feel the moonlight beyond the door.

Brady swallows hard, then makes his way to the door. He opens it and the raveners explode out of the room heading for the atrium. Their loud cries of joy and freedom echo through

the space, tapering off as they slip through the gaps between the pillars that hold the atrium together and disappear into the night beyond.

“Free is better, I suppose,” Brady murmurs, turning to me though I can see he is saddened. “I didn’t know where we were going to put them, anyway.”

“Me neither.” I am silently thanking the moon above for calling them to her glow, not that I will ever admit the same to my mate.

“It’s done then.” Brady turns and surveys the desolate throne room. My father’s chair sits on its side, spattered with the same blood that lingers on the floor beneath it, and pieces of demon dot the granite. He presses his hand against his chest and frowns. “It doesn’t feel done. It feels... more. Like there’s more to do. More to tear apart.”

“Maybe it will always feel like that?”

“I hope not,” he says with a shudder. “I hope I can get back to myself now that this is dealt with.”

“Maybe you need to go decapitate my father,” I offer. He is just downstairs. Removing his head would be no big deal for my mate.

“Nah.” Brady lets go of my hand and grasps the soul cairn in both of his hands, raising it to his face. It glows red, brightening as he gives it a violent shake. “Maybe doing this will help.”

Legion’s half soul screams from inside it, the red glimmer swirling like a whirlpool, but Brady sighs, shaking his head. “That’s going to get really old, really fast. What do I even do with this thing?”

“Bury it. Bury him where he buried me on the first night he lied through his teeth.” It’s fitting for him to linger alive and awake for eternity beneath the ground. Without a mouth and throat to swallow the dirt riddled with ancient magic, he will feel every minute as it ticks by, completely unable to grab hold to any of them.

“Would anyone dig him up? Does he have any allies left?”

“There’s a bit of one here,” I say, pointing at a smear of red on the floor, then turning in a circle to point out more. “And then a piece right there. And there. Also there.”

Brady laughs, the sound echoing through the space around us. The laugh tapers off into a tired sigh. “How am I ever going to go back to my life after this? What am I even supposed to say? Hello, my name is Brady Schiff, and I am a model. I have a mate and half of a demon soul inside me. It burns sometimes, but I’m sure it’ll be fine. I guess. Oh, by the way, I once tore a hole in a dude with my own teeth and poisoned him with my venom, which is another thing I have now and absolutely a skill I will need on the runway. Hire me?”

He rubs at his chest again, then gives Legion another vicious shake. This time the orb doesn’t scream, and he frowns, holding it up and gripping it tight, rocking it back and forth until Legion lets loose a cry. I reach over and take the orb from him, cradling it in my hand as he scowls at me.

“I was busy,” he snaps, reaching for it again.

“Tormenting Legion is fun and all, but you can’t carry him around with you everywhere you go. Let’s go bury him where he belongs.”

Brady huffs a noise at me under his breath, his fist rubbing hard at his heart again. I reach out and take his hand into mine, leading him out to the courtyard. The moon glows red overhead, which isn’t what I thought I would see after everything had been dealt with, but then again, Lucifer still lives and the prophecy is unfulfilled. I place Legion on the ground, then look around for a shovel, but when I turn back around, I find the orb slowly sinking into the ground.

“How deep?” Brady whispers, his face a portrait of concentration as he looks at the soul cairn. “How deep did he bury you?”

I have no idea, I was only a child, but I go with the first thing that comes to me. “As deep as the grave, times two.”

Brady nods, staring intently at the orb as it disappears from view, the earth closing around it and swallowing it whole. Finally, he steps back and exhales a breath, blinking his eyes fast. He stares at the now flat ground, then turns to me with a small smile. “Done.”

“Thank you.”

We stand in the glow of the everlasting moon, Brady rubbing at his chest as he frowns at the spot Legion lies beneath, his fist working so hard, I’m starting to worry he’s about to crack through his ribs. I reach out and stop him, grabbing his hands in mine and slipping them around my waist. If the burning won’t settle on its own, I will settle it myself. My tail wraps around them so he can’t yank them back, and I pull him close, leaning down to nuzzle the spot on his shoulder where my mark lives.

“Roth,” he whispers, body shivering the tiniest bit. “That’s dangerous.”

“Is it?” I ask, licking gently at the small, dimpled scar left behind by my teeth. It isn’t big and can’t really be seen, but I know it’s there. It will always be there. I run my tongue over the mark again, feeling my mate tremble in my arms. “Or is it what you need?”

He makes a small noise of assent, and I slick my tongue over my mark, delighting in the way his body is now melting into my embrace. He breathes hard into my ear as I press my body against his. I can tell he’s hard for me, as much as I am for him. Brady is the only aphrodisiac I will ever need, his lips, his skin, the soul we share. Nothing else can compare to my mate.

“Roth,” he whispers, shaking his hands against my tail. I loosen my grip on him, and he grabs at my sides, holding me tight as I lick and suck at the skin above his shirt. “Not here.”

“Not here?” I ask, leaning in to place my lips by his ear. “Not on Legion’s forever tomb in the moments after your defeat of him?”

Brady lets a soft “oh” fall from between his lips, and I know my mate suddenly loves this idea. I reach for the hem of his shirt and take it between my fingers, lifting it to expose his body to the reddened glow from above. He lifts his arm as his chest glimmers in the moonlight, the centre of his chest reddened from his rubbing at it. Dropping his shirt to the ground, I lean forward, placing my lips on the spot above his heart, laving my tongue over his skin in hopes that it will soothe whatever is inside him, burning him up.

His pants are the next to go, though I had no part in that. Brady grins as he shoves them downwards, followed by a pair of boxers.

“I thought pants were important,” I murmur with a grin.

“And I thought pants are optional in Hell,” he retorts with his own smile as he kicks his clothing away. His cock curves upwards, and I reach down to take him in hand as he reaches out for me. A laugh falls out of his mouth as I close my hand around him, milliseconds after he wraps his fist around my cock. I reach up to collect some venom from my teeth, but Brady stops me with his free hand.

“Let me,” he says, lifting his hand to his own mouth. I watch in awe as he pushes on one of his blunted canines, venom seeping out of it and running down his fingers. My venom is his pleasure, and I am certain his will be mine, but another thought flits through my head. If my venom is for claiming and I have claimed Brady as my own, filling him with everything I contain, then what is the purpose of his venom? Why is he so tormented by something that should bring nothing but joy and pleasure to him?

“You have to bite me,” I blurt, staring at his finger.

“I have to bite you,” he deadpans.

I nod, glancing at the red moon overhead, then back at him. “And fill me.”

“I have to claim you back,” he murmurs, glancing up at the moon as well. “Is that why I’m like this? Why this burns inside?”

“I don’t know, but it’s worth a try, right?” I could be absolutely wrong, but at the very least I will carry his mark on me for the rest of my never-ending life and that is good enough for me. The red moon might be tied to Lucifer’s unended life and not to our mating at all, but I know it plays a role here or the seers wouldn’t have mentioned it in the prophecy.

Brady’s eyes darken as he grins, leaning forward and grabbing my cock in his venom slicked hand again. He strokes me slowly, then rapidly quickens his pace, leaving me breathless and wanting more. My own hand holds him tight, but I can’t even think to move and stroke. I am captured at once by him, his eyes flickering dangerously in the moonlight.

“How would you like it?” he whispers, stroking me fast and hard, the way I like it. I ripple with pleasure at the near violent touch of him. Glancing down, I see the head of my cock jutting forcefully through his palm, and I moan loud as he squeezes tighter.

“Like that,” I gasp back as my toes curl into the ground and my tail shivers wildly behind me. My feathers are poofed out again, and as I flick my tail forwards, Brady grabs it in his free hand, stroking down it as he strokes my cock. Sensation ripples down my spine, heat pooling in my core as I waver on my feet. “Holy shit.”

“There is nothing holy about this,” Brady comments with a grin. “Someone told me that once.”

I stifle a laugh that turns into a soft moan as my body writhes in his hands. I let go of him completely, giving myself over to the pleasure he is wringing out of me. My beautiful mate, the one I have loved for as long as my lungs have drawn breath.

“You are awake,” Brady whispers, releasing me with both of his hands.

“I would never dream of something so perfect,” I respond as he grips my hips and turns me around. I tumble to my hands and knees willingly, tail lifting to expose the place of me that he has never seen like it has a mind of its own. A slicked

finger traces the edges of my puckered opening, but I don't need preparation. I just need him.

"You're sure?" he asks, as I demand of him what I desire.

"Yes," I reply, hands quaking where they rest on the hard ground. "I am yours, my mate. Take me."

Brady hesitates a moment, but soon I feel the heat of him pressing against my hole. I bid my body to let him in so that he can slide deep inside where he needs to be. Without thinking, I wrap my tail around his waist and pull him closer to me, his tip entering my body the slightest amount. It is pressure, but it is welcome as is his startled laugh.

"Give a guy a minute, would you?"

"Please," I whisper as I pull him the tiniest amount closer. He laughs again, then I feel it. Brady slides into my body, dragging slow heat up my entire spine. A low moan leaves me as he opens me wide, just for him. His cock is not the size of mine, but it is perfect for me. He is perfect for me.

Brady whimpers slightly and when I look behind me, his eyes are closed and his lower lip is caught between his teeth. Red moonlight ripples across his chest as he pulls himself out, then presses back into my body painfully slowly. He slips back out again and instead of giving him the chance to torture me more, I pull him into me hard and fast with my tail. He slams into me, and I cry out, body singing with the need of it.

"Like that," I gasp, turning my head back down.

"Oh, I got you." Brady pulls himself from my body fast, then slides himself in deep again almost as quick. My body clenches around him and his hands come to rest on my hips, gripping me tight. He thrusts into me hard and fast, his hips slamming against mine, my tail lingering around his waist so that he cannot stop making my body sing with pleasure. Not that he would, judging by the noises escaping his mouth behind me. I have never heard something as filthy as the noises falling from my mate's mouth.

He reaches his hand up, slapping wildly at my sides and I lift up, letting him snake his arm around my abdomen. His lips

are right by my shoulder, and though he cannot get as deep in this position, it hardly matters. I am right on the edge of release, my body quivering and tail tensing around my mate as best as it can.

“I’m there.” I gasp as my entire body is taken over the edge. Feral noises leave my mouth as I reach down and stroke myself hard, my cock pulsing in my grip as the handful of strokes I give it have me spilling all over the ground beneath us.

Then, Brady strikes. His blunted teeth dig into my shoulder from behind, and I howl pleasure to the moon above. My body is a firework, and he has set me off. I can feel his venom slipping into me drip by drip, searing along my limbs and spine. A burn echoes in the core of my chest as he holds onto me tightly with his teeth, and I understand. I feel now what he has felt, the discomfort that isn’t pain, but something else entirely.

Brady lets go of my skin as I spill again, body burning and soul singing inside me. He pants softly into my ear for a couple breaths, hips working his cock in and out of me fast and hard. Finally, he groans low, and I am at last filled with everything he contains.

“Fuck,” he pants, hips stuttering as he shoots deep inside my body. “Roth. Fuck.”

I breathe hard as his venom and seed fill me with warmth, lighting fires along my nerve endings that snuff out slowly. There’s a sense of rightness in this moment, a feeling of balance and of completion I had not felt the depth of after I had laid claim to his body. It is almost enough to force me to tears where I rest on the ground, knees digging into the dirt, Brady’s cock still nestled deep inside my warmth.

“I love you,” he whispers, pressing his cheek against my back. “I have always loved you.”

A tear slips down my face as I smile to the sky above, my love for him returned to me as I knew it would be. I have never been loved before, and I never will need for it again, because Brady is everything to me. “You have always had my

heart, Brady Schiff. Since the moment I appeared in the corner of your room, I have been yours and you have been mine.”

“We are the final,” he murmurs, and I nod as he presses his lips against his mark in my skin.

After a moment of sharing breath and heartbeat, I uncurl my tail from around him, releasing him from my tightened grasp. Brady pulls himself from me slowly, then falls onto his side on the cold, hard ground with a soft grunt. I flop over onto my back beside him, staring up at the moon as his cum drips from my hole and his bite mark pulses in my shoulder.

“How do you feel?” he asks, shuffling over to me and grabbing my hand, his head turned up to the sky like mine.

“Good,” I say with a yawn. “I’m good. Are you?”

Brady pauses for a moment, and I turn my head to him as he lifts his hand, pressing against his chest. Finally, he nods. “I think so. Did it work?”

“You tell me, my mate. You are the one that felt the burn.”

Brady’s face turns to concentration before a grin breaks over his lips, lighting up his face with delight I haven’t seen outside of bloodshed and malice for quite some time, and I know it is gone. The burning of my soul inside him has been balanced, and I breathe a sigh of relief as he throws himself on top of me, wrapping his arms around me as best as he can and shoving his head into my shoulder. I hold him tight against my chest, grinning to the moon above as it ripples and shimmers, brightening then dulling where it hangs in the sky. As Brady lifts his head and looks down into my eyes, the red overhead seeps out, leaving behind the shimmering silver everlasting moon.

“You are better than all of them, you know,” I whisper, as he reaches up and strokes my horn, his eyes radiating love into mine. “You always have been. Do you believe me?”

“I am better than them because I have you, Bezeroth.”

Beneath the glow of the silver everlasting moon, on top of the tomb of our enemy, my mate, my love, my purpose, and

my best friend leans down and presses his lips against mine,
and I am lost to the warmth of the soul we will always share.

EPILOGUE

BRADY, 6 MONTHS LATER

Water laps at the edge of the beach and my mate sinks his toes deep into the sand, turning to look at me with a grin that resembles the joy of a child experiencing something amazing for the first time ever. I sit on my towel, fashion magazines spread out hiding the comic books I really want to be reading, cradling my phone to my ear. On the other end, Felicity drones on and on about my schedule this week, but I'm finding it hard to pay attention with Roth wearing a bathing suit. The sun glistens off the water, sweat drips down his chiseled bare chest, and I'm not sure how I'm supposed to ignore that.

"Tomorrow is a big one," Felicity says. "Expect to be there all day. He's finicky like that, and I didn't think you'd get a second chance at this."

"Snack bag. Gotcha."

"Make sure you stay hydrated, Brady. I don't want you getting sick again."

I roll my eyes. "That was one time." And I was seething with an unbalanced demon soul inside me, but she doesn't need to know that.

"I know, but still. Stay hydrated. Stay fed. There won't be a third chance at this, a second is already unexpected." Don't I know it. After shooting some images for a different brand and making it through a couple of runway shows at New York Fashion Week, I was baffled when Markos reached out and requested me. I distinctly recall interrupting a model mid-

casting last time I was there, but I have it on good authority that they have forgotten the entire transgression.

That good authority being named Milo, who confessed after I got the call that he'd compelled the memory out of the minds of everyone that was there to witness what I'd done.

He should have compelled Felicity too while he was at it. She's been absolutely ridiculous to deal with these past few days. On the other end of the call, she starts going on about my schedule again, but I tune her out, watching as Roth tilts his face up to the hot sun. Much to his dismay, when we left Hell, it was nearly winter and far too chilly for the beach. He did spend some time staring longingly out at the water from the distance though, bundled in his winter jacket and boots while complaining very loudly to me about his useless, frozen human skin. The cold winter didn't stop him from eating his weight in popsicles, though. For a while I was convinced that every time I took him into my mouth, he was going to taste like nothing but sugary limes.

He steps closer to the water, then turns around to face me, raising an eyebrow. I frown back, shaking my head. Felicity called as we were setting up, and though he was beyond elated to be in the sand, Roth promised he wouldn't go into the water without me. He thinks it's because I don't trust him to not get carried away by the tide, but I know it's because if I miss the moment that he steps foot between where the water meets the sand, I will regret it.

"Felicity, I've gotta go," I blurt, cutting her off entirely as Roth hovers his foot above the water, grinning deviously at me. "Text me."

I shut down the call and drop my phone, racing towards my mate. He grins at me, planting his foot back into the sand.

"I don't get what the big deal is," he murmurs as he reaches for my hand.

"Zip it," I offer, giving him a friendly nudge with my elbow. "You ready to experience the water?"

Roth nods, his entire body practically rippling with anticipation. I wait while he lifts his foot and places it into the cool, crisp water, his eyes lighting up bright. "It's colder than I expected, but then again, I am wearing my human skin."

"I remember hearing all about your cold human skin, don't worry." I laugh, stepping into the water myself.

Roth takes a few more careful steps into the water, then lets go of my hand and takes off in a run. He splashes as he falls in the waves, feet flying out from under him. I rush towards him, alarmed at how quickly he went down, but when I get to his side, he bursts upwards, spraying me with chilly droplets.

"This is incredible," he breathes, looking between the piping hot sun and the cold water. "This place is amazing."

I laugh as he splashes back down into the waist deep water, kicking his feet beneath the slow waves. The look on his face is everything I had imagined it would be, and more. My heart warms as I watch him roll around in the water, flapping his feet like he's some kind of strange mermaid. He's not the most graceful demon, but he is all mine.

"Do you think Miloriel would like some sea glass?" he asks, rising from the water and heading over to me.

I sigh, giving him a shrug. What Milo wants these days is beyond me. When he's not working, he spends his time curled up with Kazmeus in the basement of the house we all share, watching TV and reading him books. He kept his apartment because he loves it still, though his mate is far more comfortable in the dark silence than the brilliant white that is Milo's space. Kazmeus has not spoken a word since he left his cave, not even any of the three he once told me, though sometimes when I go visit him, he stares at me so intently that I swear I can almost hear his voice. It's in there somewhere, I'm sure. Maybe someday he will find it again.

If not, there's always Creed to fill the empty silences. He has become quite the chef since Nor returned to him, and there isn't a day that goes by without some kind of noise emanating from the kitchen whether it be his voice murmuring

ingredients as he cooks, or a video he's trying to learn from. He and Nor haven't become closer since they left Hell behind, but there's a sense that something exists between them. Creed chooses to fill whatever that is with food, baking cookies and making meals for his mate, though Nor hardly eats. Nor hardly speaks either, he and Kazmeus are rather the same that way. Our house that goes up is filled with our little found family of misfit demons, and though some days it's hard to always have someone around, I have grown to love them all dearly.

But not as much as I love and cherish what is mine. The demon currently flopping around in the water like a drowned rat is my entire heart and soul.

"I love you," I say, stepping close to Roth.

"I love you as well." He reaches for me, and I go to him, pulling him to me in the water. I rest my head on his shoulder, smiling into the sunshine as I wrap my arms around him and he returns the gesture. My heart has never been this full, nor has every single piece of me felt this complete.

"Are you working this week?" I ask, my smile widening even more.

Roth sighs softly, shaking his head against my skin. "I have lived in Hell. I have met demons. I have watched raveners rip beings apart and gulp down their blood. I have slept beneath the ground in a grave designed by my own father and created by my foe, but I cannot for the fucking life of me figure out what should happen next in the damn story."

I snort a laugh, shaking my head. He's been struggling hard this week with capturing the next step to take with the characters he and Creed created. At my request, Roth found his purpose, what drives him beyond simply me, and that purpose is telling stories. Creed, when he's not cooking, draws the images to accompany his storylines for the comic book they've created together. They've been posting bits and pieces online, and so far, it seems like it will go well. If Roth can finish the story, that is.

"Take a breather," I offer as Roth sinks into my embrace a little bit. "We're at the beach, maybe that will spark some

ideas.”

“Maybe he falls in love forever.”

“He’s a superhero,” I point out. Snakeroth, to be exact, though I’ve pointed out that’s probably not the best name for a hero. It’s hard to pronounce inside my head and Roth has agreed, though he is disappointed that the character won’t be named after himself. Creed suggested Captain Hiss which is why he is not in charge of the story at all.

“Superheroes fall in love,” Roth points out, loosening his grip on me. I pull back so I can see his smile, his eyes sparkling in the overhead sun. He reaches up and tucks a lock of my hair behind my ear. “I did.”

“You were never a superhero though. You were the bad ass imaginary friend that lived in the corner who had cool horns and an awesome tail. That’s way cooler than any old boring superhero.”

Roth smiles, then pulls me close, slicking his tongue over my mating mark. I shiver, then push him away. “Dangerous. We are in public.”

His smile turns devious as he leans forward and whispers the one thing I’ve learned can make arousal course through my veins like wildfire. “You are awake, Brady.”

He stands upright as I shiver, licking my lips as all the times he’s whispered that to me run through my brain like a movie, though none more potent than that first time he took me and made me his. As I lean in to return the favor, intending to brush my own lips over the mark I left in his skin, he goes rigid, staring off into the distance.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, scanning his body with concern.

A horrific high-pitched squawk rattles through the sky and Roth looks at me, grinning as bright as the everlasting moon. He turns his attention back towards the shore, his body vibrating with delight again as the white birds toddle along the sand, squawking and shrieking.

“It’s a seagull!”

POSSESSIVE LOVE

Check out the rest of the [Possessive Love](#) series!



[A Slice For My Demon](#) by K.L. Hiers & Mozzarus Scout

[Cuddly Demon](#) by Aster Rae

[My Demon Husband](#) by Jax Stuart

[Exercising A Demon](#) by H.L Day

[Drop Dead Demon](#) by B. Ripley

[The Demon's Dealbreaker](#) by Delaney Rain

[My Demon Rebound](#) by Ashlynn Mills

[Curiosity Caught the Demon](#) by Travis Beaudoin

[My Saintly Demon](#) by RM Neill

[Terrible Lovely Demon](#) by Odessa Hywell

[Son of the Arch Demon](#) by Amanda Meuwissen

[Recalling My Demon](#) by Colette Davison

[The Demon Undertaker](#) by Alex J. Adams

[Gift for a Demon](#) by Emily Alter

BOOKS BY B. RIPLEY

THE BOYS OF HORSESHOE LAKE

[Halfway Down](#)

RED DOOR DADDIES

[One More Song](#)

[One More Try](#)

STANDALONES

[The Cabin](#)

[Haunting With A Ghost](#)

[To Wish Impossible Things](#)

[A Little Christmas: Morrie](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

B is a self described weirdo from the wild prairies of Alberta, Canada who lives on a diet of coffee, hockey and horror movies. Along with her collection of increasingly strange art and slightly off-putting oddities, B lives with her husband and collection of pets in a house that looks like Halloween threw up everywhere. Her love language is music, and she collects coffee mugs and garden gnomes, but only really ugly ones.

Passionate about mental health and suicide prevention, B spends her days managing programs for a national non-profit and her nights writing heartbreak stories about broken people trying their best to survive while finding love and acceptance along the way.

You can find, friend and follow B here:

www.bripleywrites.com

