



Exercising
A DEMON

POSSESSIVE LOVE

H . L DAY

EXERCISING A DEMON

AN M/M PARANORMAL ROMANCE

POSSESSIVE LOVE

H.L DAY

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BY H.L DAY'S DARKER ALTER EGO H.L NIGHT

TWISTED WEB SERIES

Shai
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ABOUT THIS BOOK

Love comes in all shapes and sizes. And sometimes it has horns and a tail.

Jacob's in love. Again. Only, his future husband likes muscular men, and Jacob, well... isn't. A few sessions at the gym, and he'll have the leather-clad motorcycle courier eating out of his hand, though. And no, he won't switch his attentions to his hot new personal trainer. Honest, he won't.

Valvach's not your typical demon, preferring books over torture. Which goes down about as well as you'd expect in Hell. A move to the surface gives him the opportunity to start anew. To stay, he's going to need to make a friend, someone to help him blend in. And sweet, curly-haired Jacob is the perfect candidate. If he can't lick him, he can at least spend time with him.

When friendship blossoms into a passion that knows no bounds, Jacob and Val believe they've found the perfect match in each other. However, Hell isn't so accommodating, and they find themselves with a fight on their hands to prevent being torn apart and relegated to different planes of existence.

Exercising A Demon is a MM paranormal romantic comedy featuring a demon who's more of a lover than a fighter, a human who might finally have found the ~~man~~-demon of his dreams, steamy sexual liaisons involving a tail, and a sweet demon/human pairing who accept each other for who they are and embrace each other's quirks.

WARNING

Intended for an 18+ audience. This book contains material that may be offensive to some and is intended for a mature, adult audience. It contains graphic language, explicit sexual content, and adult situations.

PROLOGUE

Screams permeated the air as I waited for my father to grant me permission to enter his office. An especially loud scream had my fingers curling into my palms and my tail swishing backwards and forwards. I didn't blame the person screaming. They hadn't asked to end up in Hell, and if there was one person who could relate to that, it was me. Although, if it was who I thought it was emitting the blood-curdling sounds, the six women he'd killed over a period of a few months should have given him a slight inkling that no pearly gates were going to be waiting for him.

Still, I'd never met a newbie who wasn't surprised to find themselves outside the gates of Hell shortly after shuffling off the mortal coil. Even the religious people spent a few minutes in stunned silence when they realized where they were. That silence didn't last long once they got their personal torture timetable, though.

"Come in!"

I pushed the door open and swallowed a groan at my mother being in attendance. This conversation would be difficult enough with just my father. Satan knows I'd been working myself up to having it for weeks. My mother being present, though, that brought a whole other level of challenge to it. I'd been hoping to get my father onside before my mother got so much of a whiff of what was going on. That plan had just gone up in flames.

Mirrolok, the third, gave the papers on his desk a quick shuffle before looking up as I entered his office. Cursed Satan! His horns were shiny and had just the right amount of curve to

them. Mine always felt inferior in comparison. My brothers' horns were rather more spectacular, too. If it weren't for the fact that my mother worshipped the ground my father walked on, I might have suspected her of straying sixteen months before my birth—a demon's gestation period being a lot longer than that of a human. I knew that because I'd been reading up on some stuff.

My father waved a hand at the chair on the opposite side of his desk. "Sit, son."

I threw a quick glance at my mother to ascertain her mood. Bangror looked just as beautiful as she always did, my parents the perfect picture of demon health and vigor, their scarlet-red skin gleaming. "If you're busy, I can come back later?" *Please say you're busy. I've changed my mind. I can wait another decade before having this conversation.*

"Not at all," my father said with a smile. "Actually, it's good timing. We were just talking about you."

"You were?" I sat more heavily than I'd intended, the chair groaning under my considerable weight. I might not have inherited my father's perfect horns, but I had his muscular physique. The fact that they'd been talking about me didn't bode well, though. Not when I prided myself on keeping a low profile. My mother and father shared a look, and I tried not to grimace, pulling my tail onto my lap and arranging it neatly while I regained my composure. "What were you saying?"

My mother pulled a chair alongside my father's and sat. "A few things have come to our attention, Valvach."

My fingers dug into my thigh. "Such as?"

"Such as you not completing the jobs assigned to you. This is a family business, and we all need to pitch in. Brostraxol and Izrimoth complete all their tasks with gusto, while you..." She let out a little sigh.

At the mention of my brothers, my perfect demonic brothers, who never put a foot wrong, I raised my chin a little higher. "I do my jobs."

My father leaned forward in his chair, steepling his fingers in front of him. “How was the rack last weekend, Valvach? Did you make your quota of screams?”

I shifted in my chair, my mother immediately zeroing in on one of my nervous habits. “Don’t play with your tail, darling. You’ll make it sore.”

I pushed it away from me, the end hitting the floor with a *thwack*. I spent the next thirty seconds pretending it hadn’t hurt, even though my parents knew full well how sensitive a tail was, given they had one of their own. “I don’t like the rack,” I muttered.

“Speak up,” my father said.

I sat up straighter. “I said... I don’t like the rack.”

My mother frowned, either thrown by my honesty, or confused by how someone could dislike the rack. Possibly both. “What do you mean? What is there to not like about it?”

I held back a shudder with difficulty as I pictured the torture rack and what it did to the humans scheduled to experience it, which was everyone at least once a month. “It makes them all... stretchy.”

“I see,” my mother said, one of her horns twitching. “That’s what it’s supposed to do.”

“Yeah, I know that, but... yeah.” It was hard to put my distaste into words. I was a demon. I was supposed to get off on seeing people’s faces contorted into pain. I just didn’t. And there was only so long you could fake it convincingly.

My father pulled a piece of paper in front of him and leaned forward to squint at it. “You’ve been scheduled on the rack once a month for the last two years. Why are we only hearing about your dislike of it now?”

I gave a shrug worthy of a moody teenager before deciding that I might as well tell the truth, that as a lead-up to what I’d wanted to talk about, anyway, I wasn’t likely to get a better opportunity. “Brostraxol has been doing it.” Brostraxol was the oldest of my two brothers. “He likes the rack.”

“Everyone likes the rack,” my mother said. “Everyone except for you, that is. The rack is fun.” I retrieved my tail and picked at it again. At least until my mother’s gaze dropped to it and I quickly relinquished it once more. She let out a long and dramatic sigh. “Okay. You don’t like the rack. That’s not a problem.”

“No?” There was no holding back my note of surprise.

“No,” she said. “There are plenty of other jobs you can do apart from the rack.” She thought for a moment. “Skin flaying?”

I pulled a face. “It’s very messy. The bits of skin get everywhere. I end up spending the evening picking them out from between my toes.”

“Whipping?” my father suggested.

“Too bloody,” I said.

“Force-feeding?” That was my mother piping up again, the look on her face one of hope.

“I don’t like vomit.”

“Immersion in boiling water?”

“It smells terrible. And that’s the same for burning people alive before you suggest that.”

My father rubbed at his jaw, a muscle twitching in his cheek. “What exactly have you been doing around here, Valvach?”

I shrank in my chair under his steely glare. I guess the game really was up. “Not a lot. Brostraxol and Izrimoth do most of it for me. I usually just read.”

“Read,” my parents both chorused, disbelief present in their voices.

“Read what?” my father asked once he’d recovered from his shock. “Please tell me it’s hardcore porn?”

I dropped my gaze from his, my red skin gaining another level of color beneath his scrutiny. “Last time Zeggal was

summoned to the surface, he brought some books back with him.”

“What sort of books?” my mother asked in a low voice.

Shit! I shouldn’t have mentioned Zeggal’s name. As demons went, he was one of the good ones. While he enjoyed torture, there were a lot of other things he also enjoyed. The books he’d brought back from the surface had contained all manner of interesting things: elaborate paintings and sculptures; buildings with floors that showed no sign of a bloodstain; museums, and parks, and... The list was almost endless. “Books with photos in. And books with stories. They’re harmless.”

“They don’t sound harmless,” my father said. “Not if they’ve got you shirking your responsibilities.”

“I don’t shirk my responsibilities to read. I shirk them because I don’t like doing them.” I took a deep breath. “I don’t like torturing people.” There. I’d said it, and the world hadn’t ended. “I hate the screams. I hate the blood. And most of all, I hate them trying to convince me they don’t deserve to be here. Because, some of them probably don’t, like that guy who defrauded a multinational corporation. They could spare the money. I know that because he gave me a full financial breakdown the last time I buried him alive.”

My mother let out another sigh, this one even longer and more heartfelt than the previous one. It was her special sigh, the one that said she might love me, but that some of my behavior was distinctly trying. “You could be a greeter, I suppose.”

The word “greeter” was misleading. The greeter’s job was to deliver a short, sharp shock at the gates of Hell, to break the news to newcomers about where they were, and then debase them using any means possible, including calling them names and using physical violence. “I don’t think I’d be very good at that,” I said. Before either of my parents could comment, I broached my reason for coming here. “I don’t want to be an embarrassment to you, to either of you, so I was thinking I might be better elsewhere.”

“Elsewhere?” My father’s brow wrinkled. “Do you mean the east side of Hell?”

I sat forward in my chair, didn’t fiddle with my tail, and did my best to sound confident. “No, not the east side of Hell. I meant the surface.”

“The surface?” My father repeated the words slowly, as if he’d never heard them before, and then started to laugh. Between splutters of laughter, he turned to my mother and said it again. “The surface. Did you hear that? He thinks he could live on the surface.”

My mother, at least, didn’t laugh, her expression one of concern. “That’s not possible, Valvach.”

“Why not?” Indignation rose in me. I hadn’t expected them to like the idea, but I’d hoped they’d consider it for longer than two seconds. And instead, they were treating it like it was a joke. It wasn’t a joke. I was serious.

“Because... you have to be summoned,” my mother said. “And even then, you can’t stay. You don’t just go to the surface.”

“Why not?” I challenged. “Who decided that?”

“Well, Lucifer, I assume,” my mother said with a slight frown. “He sets the rules.”

I turned my focus to my father, my expression pleading. “You meet with Lucifer regularly. You could get him to agree to it.”

Before he could respond, my mother came around the desk to perch on the edge. She took hold of my hands and stared into my eyes. “You know I love you, Valvach, don’t you? You’re my youngest and you’ve always been more sensitive than your brothers.” I nodded. There was no point in denying it, especially coming on the back of me admitting that I didn’t like to torture people. “That’s why I’m going to be very blunt with you, because I love you, and I want the best for you. Even if we could get Lucifer to agree, as some sort of experiment, there’s a whole host of practicalities I don’t think you’ve given nearly enough consideration to.”

“Such as?”

“You’d have to maintain a human form for long periods of time,” my father said. He waved a hand up and down my body. “You couldn’t walk around on the surface like that, or the screams you hear here would be nothing in comparison.”

I lifted my arm, my mother letting go of one hand so I could, and stared at my cherry-red skin. I was a little paler than my father. Smaller horns. Paler. The comparison was never favorable apart from my build. “So... I’d learn to do that. I’m sure it would just take practice.”

“What would you eat?” my mother said. “You can’t just survive on human food, you know. We need to feed on the suffering of others. You say you don’t want to torture people here. Do you think it would be easier on the surface? You can’t just walk up to people and torture them. There are rules up there about that sort of thing. That’s how people end up here.”

Frustration became a raging beast in my chest. I’d known they’d try to talk me out of it, but I hadn’t expected their arguments to be so valid. It might be true that there were some aspects I hadn’t given a lot of thought to, but if you tried hard enough, you could always find problems with any situation. “I’ll find a way. And if I fail, what’s the worst that can happen?” I didn’t wait for an answer. “I’ll come home again. And then I promise I’ll try harder.”

“Why, the surface?” my father asked. “What are you expecting to find there?”

I’d asked myself that same question a hundred times, ever since the idea of going there had first taken root. No one was going to summon me, so if I wanted to experience it, I had to take matters into my own hands. “I don’t fit in here. It’s time to try something new.”

My mother squeezed my hand. “Darling, I hate to break it to you, but you won’t fit in there either. You won’t last a week.”

I swallowed down my hurt. “Maybe not, but I should at least get to try.” I raised pleading eyes to my father. “Will you

at least ask Lucifer, please?”

My mother and father exchanged another look, and when my father nodded, I couldn't hold back my grin. Mirrolok, the third, could be a very persuasive demon. I was going to the surface; I knew I was. And I was going to carve out a new life for myself and find the fulfillment I never could here.

CHAPTER ONE

JACOB

FOUR MONTHS LATER

When Melissa went to stand, I pressed a hand to the top of her head and pushed her back down behind the desk. “Don’t! He’ll see you.”

Her eyes flashed daggers as she turned my way. “*Who* will see me? And why are we down in reception, hiding in an empty office like we’ve been drafted into the army and we’re in the trenches?”

I rolled my eyes at her chronic over-exaggeration. Trenches! That was quite some imagination she had just because we were crouched behind a desk. “*You* followed me. I didn’t invite you.”

“I thought you were going to the cafeteria. I was going to make you buy me a sandwich. And instead, you brought me to the Battle of the Somme. When do people start lobbing grenades at us?”

I bit back the urge to say that I hoped it would be soon. “You didn’t have to stay once you realized I wasn’t going to the cafeteria.”

“Fine. I won’t.”

She went to stand again, and I tugged her back down. “You can’t leave now.”

Her sigh was laden with a hundred different emotions, all of them negative. “Start talking, Jacob. What are we doing here, exactly? This is not how I planned to spend my lunch break. If I starve to death because of you, I’m coming back to haunt you.”

“He’ll be here soon.”

“Who will?”

“Him?” I couldn’t keep the breathy note out of my voice. “Randall.”

Melissa blinked. “Randall who?”

“I don’t know his surname, do I? We haven’t met yet.”

Melissa closed her eyes in an expression I recognized. It was her count-to-ten face. She seemed to do it a lot around me. Either that or she did it a lot full stop. She really needed to work on her patience, take up meditation or something. I’d told her that to her face before, but it always seemed to fall on deaf ears. “Okay,” she said once she’d opened her eyes. “Let’s take a step back. Who is Randall, and why is he due here soon? I won’t ask why we need to hide behind a desk to await his arrival, because it’s you, and I should expect that sort of thing by now, after two years of being your friend.”

I shot her a hurt look. “You don’t have to sound like you should be awarded some sort of prize for it.”

“Sometimes I think I should,” she muttered.

“Pardon.”

She rolled her eyes. “Nothing.”

“Randall is the new motorcycle courier.” I checked my watch. “From what I can work out, he keeps to a regular schedule and always drops the parcels off around this time. I saw him when I went out for lunch the other day.”

“And?” Melissa prompted.

“He’s hot.”

A knowing look settled on her face as she rearranged her position and tried to rub some life back into the ankle trapped beneath her. “I see. And we’re hiding from him because?”

I sighed. “We’re not hiding from him. We’re collecting information on him.”

“Because?”

“So that when I speak to him, I can make sure he knows that I’m into the same things he is.”

Melissa frowned. “Motorcycles?”

“Not motorcycles, obviously. That’s why I need to find out what else he’s into.”

“How do you even know he’s gay?”

“Do you think my gaydar is that bad?”

“Yes.”

I shot her a frosty glare. “He’s gay.”

“Like you thought the technician from IT was gay until he showed you the picture of his wife and kids? Like you thought the guy who works behind the counter of the coffee shop was gay? Like you thought—?”

“You’ve made your point. *Sometimes* I get it wrong.”

“Sometimes!”

I ignored her as I peered over the edge of the desk, my gaze glued to reception where Randall would leave today’s parcels, assuming there were any, which was a slight stumbling block in my plan. Well, that and Melissa having invited herself along to cross-examine me like I was on trial for murder. “Randall’s gay, trust me.”

There was a moment of peace. At least five seconds by my count, before Melissa piped up again. “And we’re just going to watch him drop off the parcels, are we? What’s that going to tell you about him?”

“He chats to Fern.” Fern was the receptionist at Hargreaves & Co.

“Ah,” Melissa said. “I see.” More quietly, she added. “They’re probably married.”

“You’re not funny,” I ground out between gritted teeth. I would probably have said more if a vision of leather-clad butch-ness hadn’t chosen that moment to step into view. I grabbed Melissa’s arm. “There he is,” I hissed.

“I got that,” she said drily. “The parcels he’s carrying are a bit of a clue.”

Putting my finger over my lips, I turned her way, waiting until she’d given a reluctant nod before focusing back on the

reception desk. He really was hot. All bronzed skin like he spent a lot of time in exotic places, and sexy stubble that would feel great against my skin. I'd almost walked into a lamppost the first time I'd seen him. Luckily, he hadn't noticed that he was being watched.

"Fern's flirting," Melissa whispered. "Look, she's winding her hair around her finger. She wants him too."

"She can fight me for him."

Melissa's snort wasn't at all complimentary. It said I had about as much chance of winning that fight as I did of winning the lottery. Which, considering Fern was five-foot-two, was just plain rude. I might be shorter than the average man at five-foot-ten, but I still had a good eight inches on Fern. *Eight inches!* I bet Randall was packing at least eight inches if the bulge in those tight leather trousers was anything to go by. I'd be happy to measure his cock for him if he wanted clarification, and act as a fluffer, so we could make sure it was at maximum length.

"Just the three for you today," Randall said, his voice all kinds of deep and husky as he dropped the parcels on the counter in front of Fern. "You alright?"

Fern preened beneath the attention. "I'm good." She held out her hands for Randall to inspect. "I had my nails done."

To give him his due, he was polite enough to lean forward and inspect them. "Nice. All glittery and shit."

Fern wound another piece of hair round her finger, Melissa not having been wrong about that. "How's the boyfriend?"

I shot Melissa an I-told-you-so look.

Her only response was a slight curl of her lip.

Randall let out a grunt. "Wouldn't know. We split up last week."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Fern said, not sounding sorry at all. "You poor thing."

Randall shrugged. "S'alright. Plenty more fish in the sea."

There was. I was a fish. And I'd be quite happy to swim his way anytime he wanted. He could get his net out, and we could... Yeah, I was probably taking the fish analogy a little too far. Besides, Randall still hadn't finished, and I should be listening.

"No great loss. I like my men more..." Fern's slight lean forward said she was expecting to hear something juicy. "You know..." An eyebrow raise said she didn't know. I didn't know either. *Please say cute with glasses.*

"Muscular," Randall said. He lifted one arm to flex a leather-clad biceps. "Ivan wouldn't go to the gym, no matter how much I told him his deltoids needed work. What kind of man doesn't work on his deltoids?"

Fern's frown said she had no answer to that question. She probably thought that deltoids was an indigestion medicine. I might not know exactly where they were, but I knew enough to know it was a muscle. "A busy one?" she eventually offered.

Randall pulled a face. "Him being a lawyer shouldn't be an excuse. I kept telling him he could go to the gym during his lunch break, but he seemed to think eating was more important."

Sensing Melissa's gaze on me, I turned her way in time to catch the end of her disparaging once-over of my form. And there was no doubt it was disparaging, her facial expression giving her away. I narrowed my eyes at her until she looked away.

The conversation petered out after that, Randall taking his bulging thighs and his broad chest, and his beefy ass, and leaving. I climbed to my feet, wiping my chin in case there was drool as Melissa struggled to her feet.

She didn't comment on our little lunchtime adventure until we were sitting in the cafeteria. "Well, that's that then," she said around a mouthful of roast pork sandwich that I'd paid for.

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

“You’re not his type.”

I pushed my glasses more firmly on my nose. “He doesn’t *think* I’m his type.”

Melissa raised an eyebrow in question. “He hasn’t met me yet. He thinks he wants a muscular man. Once we meet, he’ll change his mind. Besides, I have muscles.”

Melissa choked on a mouthful of sandwich and I overcame the urge to let nature take its course to get up and hammer on her back. Once she’d stopped coughing, she fixed me with an amused stare. “These muscles of yours... Where are they? Did you leave them at home?”

I sniffed. “You’ll regret saying that when I don’t invite you to mine and Randall’s wedding.”

She sat back and crossed her arms over her chest. “I think I might hold off on buying a hat just yet.”



NOBODY HAD EVER SAID that being an auditor was the world’s most exciting job, but I liked it. It was safe and predictable, and I always knew where I was with financial records. They didn’t lie, and they didn’t pretend to be anything they weren’t. Well, unless there were discrepancies, but that was the interesting part of the job. Finding those little clues and following the threads to uncover a story made all the diligence worthwhile.

I was so focused on interrogating a row of figures for their secrets that I didn’t raise my head from my computer even when heavy footsteps sounded in the corridor outside. The door to the office was flung open, a male voice announcing. “Chick on reception wasn’t there. Can someone sign for this?”

Randall. My heart did a little dance as he stood there in all his leather-clad glory. This was it. Our first meeting. The point at which he’d realize he’d been wrong about what he wanted

in a man. He didn't need muscles. Or a gym bunny. He needed curly-haired, spectacled goodness. And that was me down to a T.

Melissa started to rise to her feet, and I shot her the glare to end all glares. She sank back down with a guilty expression on her face. I stuck my hand in the air and offered my most charming smile. "Over here."

Randall turned in my direction, his leather trousers making a swishing sound as he came my way. Oh, to be trapped between those thighs. I'd happily suffocate within their confines. Well, maybe not suffocate, but I could come dangerously close before Randall rescued me like the knight in shining armor he'd turn out to be. He didn't return my smile as he plonked the parcel down on top of my desk and pushed a clipboard under my nose. "Sign here."

I picked my pen up with a flourish and wrote my name, making sure it was legible. Turning the clipboard round to face him, I offered him another smile as I tapped on the signature. "Jacob Madden. That's me." Damn it! I should have written my number. Never mind, he'd no doubt ask for it.

He nodded, and then he turned and walked away. My mouth hung open as he walked out of the office and into the corridor without looking back. Well, that hadn't gone to plan. He was supposed to take one look at me and declare his undying love. Or at least ask me what I was doing after work.

A noise like a deflating balloon had me turning my head in Melissa's direction. She was trying not to laugh and doing a very poor job of it. "Definitely not buying a hat," she said once she'd gotten herself back under control.

I tapped my pen on the table while I considered what had just happened. It was fine. Nothing important ever came that easy. I needed to work for Randall. It was silly to think I wouldn't have needed to. Men like him didn't come around all that often.

"What's going on in your head?" Melissa asked.

I sat back in my chair. “I’m going to join a gym and get bigger muscles. He’ll fall in love with me, and we’ll live happily ever after.”

Melissa didn’t comment. She didn’t need to. Her expression said it all.

CHAPTER TWO

“You’re doing great,” I told Steve as he completed another eight squats with dumbbells tucked under his chin. Sweat dripped off him in rivulets, Steve puffing and panting like he was about to have an asthma attack. As he dropped the weights on the mat, I took a surreptitious deep breath in, drinking in his suffering and gorging myself on it. Who needed whips and chains when you had an obese middle-aged accountant determined to show his ex-wife that he wasn’t over the hill, and he could do a lot better than her? Which I didn’t doubt he would if he kept going the way he was. He’d already lost a stone, and the big round belly he used to sport was getting smaller every day.

“Another set,” I said cheerfully, Steve raising his head from where he was bent over with his hands braced on his thighs to eye me like I was Lucifer himself. I wasn’t, and he should be glad of that fact. Lucifer would have had hooks through his flesh, and instead of Steve holding the weights, they would have been dangling from his balls.

Despite his reluctance, he picked up the weights again and got into position. While he counted his squats, I contemplated the past four months of being on the surface and how my mother and father had almost been proved right about me not lasting. Even with their insistence that Lucifer set me up with all the documentation and a place to live, those first couple of weeks had proved difficult. With no source of suffering to feed on, I’d grown gradually weaker and weaker. Discovering the hospital had been my saving grace. There was plenty of suffering to be had there if you knew where to look. The maternity ward had proved a fertile hunting ground, the

women giving birth proving they could scream louder than anyone being tortured in Hell.

It had only been a temporary fix, though. Within a few days of visiting the maternity ward, eyebrows had risen amongst the staff, and once they realized I didn't have relatives on the ward, the security guards had taken rather too much interest in me. I'd looked into getting work there, but apparently it took years to be a doctor, and besides, being a surgeon looked too much like being back in Hell. If I wanted to carve pieces off people, I could just go home.

Back to starving once more, I'd stumbled on this place: *Bobby's Fitness*, the suffering of sweaty people working out oozing under the crack in the door. It differed from the hospital. The suffering here was muskier. More robust. It had become my second home, and it wasn't long before Bobby himself, a gruff man in his fifties with fiery red hair, had noticed my keenness to help people out. Nothing major, just counting reps for them and doing something called spotting, which I'd never gotten my head around. They didn't have spots. Well, most of them didn't, anyway. I wasn't putting spots on them. There were no spots to be seen anywhere. But, nevertheless, that was what it was called. He'd offered me a chance to train as a personal trainer, and I'd found myself not only earning money to put in the bank account Lucifer had set up, but with a perfect source of sustenance where nobody would think twice about my reasons for being here.

The more suffering I consumed, the easier it was to maintain my human form. There'd been a couple of slip-ups at the start, the staff toilets proving my salvation when I'd suddenly sprouted horns and a tail, but over time I'd gotten better at it. Don't get me wrong, it was nice to relax on an evening and let my tail hang out, but the human form was nice, too. The build was the same for both, Bobby telling me once that I was built like a brick shithouse. Not that I knew what one of them was, but I'd learned that it was usually easier to pretend I understood things than to question them.

As a human, I had white skin that turned a different color in the sun. Which was weird, and had taken some getting used

to. I had dark hair and brown eyes, and eyebrows, and eyelashes, and other weird things that I'd spent the first week unable to stop looking at or touching.

“Eight,” I said to Steve. He collapsed on the floor, looking for all the world like he might expire. I didn't want Steve to die. He suffered far more than my other clients. There might not be screaming, but it was still satiating. “I think...” Steve said from his prone position, face down on the mat. He really liked that mat. “That... might... be... all... I'm... capable... of... today. Sorry, Val.”

Steve was a very polite human. He always apologized profusely when his body gave out. I crouched down and stared at the top of his head, at the strange patch where his hair didn't want to grow anymore. It seemed to have gotten slightly bigger in the time we'd been working together, and I was in two minds whether to suggest a visit to the hospital to check he wasn't suffering from a disease. I rolled him over so he was facing me, his cheeks bright-red.

I gave him a pat on the head because I'd seen that done in lots of places on the surface and I strived to learn more human things with every day that passed. People did it to dogs, and I'd seen mothers do it to their children as well. Therefore, it seemed like something Steve might like, and I'd been waiting to try it out on someone for a while. “Please don't die, Steve.”

He choked out a laugh. “God, Val, you're so weird. People must tell you that?”

“Sometimes,” I admitted. I chewed on my thumbnail. “Is that bad?”

Steve struggled to sitting. It might have been a struggle, but it was better than his first few weeks in the gym, where his rocking backwards and forwards to get up had been rather reminiscent of the stranded turtles I'd seen on TV. He forced a smile. “It's not bad. It's not good. It's just a fact.”

I contemplated what he'd said while I took him through the stretches that always ended our session. It was becoming apparent that I needed to blend in more on the surface. I had clients, but I didn't have friends. What I needed was someone

who could teach me more about humans, about what was right and what wasn't. I didn't think Steve was that person, but someone had to be. I'd tried to make friends once, but it hadn't gone well, the group of people deciding that despite it being almost eleven o'clock at night, and them having drunk a considerable amount of alcohol that they needed exercise. Or at least that's what I'd assumed when they'd run away. I was a personal trainer. I was all for fitness, but that had seemed a little too dedicated to the cause, even for me.

Once the stretches were done, Steve closed his eyes again. "Would you like me to carry you to the shower?" I asked. I was much stronger than humans. Despite Steve being on the larger side, he'd weigh little more than a feather to me.

Steve sat up, clapping me on the back, and laughing like I'd been joking. "Kind offer, but I think I can drag myself there."

There were a lot of noises involved with him getting up, some of them rivalling the women on the maternity ward. Oh, my Satan, was he having a baby? "Breathe, Steve," I said. It's what I'd heard the midwives say, so it seemed appropriate. "Deep breaths like this." I proceeded to demonstrate, Steve pausing to stare at me like I'd lost my mind.

"Weird," he said as, stiff-legged, he took himself off to the changing rooms. Not having a baby then, apparently. That's right. Men didn't have babies here. Just like they didn't in Hell. Steve had just been making noises like he was. Sometimes life on the surface could be downright confusing, but it was still a thousand times better than being in Hell. Steve lifted a hand before disappearing through the door. "See you tomorrow, Val," he said. "Usual time."

The sound of a loud crash had me looking toward the area where the free weights used to be stacked in the gym. I say used to because most of them were now on the floor, someone having toppled the rack that normally housed them. "I'm so sorry," that person said to no one in particular. "I wasn't looking where I was going." He proceeded to put the weights back with little regard to worrying about matching pairs. He

was lucky Bobby wasn't around today. Nothing raised Bobby's ire like someone stacking the weights all wrong.

It wasn't until he'd straightened and was backing away from the weights, hands held out in front of him like he thought they might topple over again of their own accord, that I got a proper look at him. Brand new gym gear. I could tell that because he had his T-shirt on inside out and he'd forgotten to cut the label off. His hair was darker than mine in my human form, his a riot of curls, while mine was straight.

He wasn't that tall and had a lean frame. He reminded me of a cute forest animal who had wandered away from their mother for the first time. Only instead of finding himself facing a main road, he was at the gym. He positioned himself in the middle of the large room, pushing his glasses more firmly on his nose as he turned through a complete circle before striding purposefully over to a treadmill. Of all the runners I'd ever witnessed, either in Hell or on the surface, he had the most inelegant and uncoordinated running stride I'd ever witnessed. It was like he wasn't quite in control of his arms and legs.

With my next client not due for another hour, I watched him with something close to wonder. After about five minutes, he decided he could go faster. Only his body didn't seem to agree. He tripped, the momentum of the treadmill ensuring that there was only one outcome: he came flying off the back of it. He would have fallen in what would have been the most spectacular fall of grace *Bobby's* had ever witnessed, but I was already there to catch him, my arms wrapping around him to stop him from crashing to the floor.

He sagged for a moment before righting himself and turning around to face me. He cleared his throat and gestured at the treadmill behind him. "I think it's broken. There's something wrong with the speed control."

"I caught you," I said. He was even cuter up close, the big brown eyes behind the glasses only adding to the whole forest animal vibe. He was Bambi—I'd seen the film on the Disney channel—in human form. All legs and enormous eyes. Demons were renowned for wanting sex all the time, but I'd

never been that bothered, my sexual liaisons back in Hell more a case of me giving into it because it was quicker and easier than arguing. But something about this man made me want to lay him down on the floor and climb on top of him.

He stared up at me, blinking, our difference in height meaning the top of his head only reached my chin. “You did catch me. Thank you.” He cleared his throat again. “I’m Jacob.”

“Valvach.” I held out my hand, and he shook it. I’d gotten very good at these human greetings. “Most people just call me Val.”

His eyes went wide. Wider. Definitely Bambi. “Oh, are you Russian? Say something Russian.”

“Vodka,” I said. I racked my brain for something else I’d learned from the encyclopedia I studied on an evening and came up blank. It was difficult to remember what came from where. Was Russia baguettes? No, that was France.

Tiny lines appeared on Jacob’s forehead. “No thanks,” he said. “I’m doing a workout.” He threw one arm across his chest and hooked it behind the other to execute an arm stretch that really wasn’t necessary considering he’d done nothing except have an intimate encounter with a rack of weights and spent a couple of minutes on the treadmill. “I’m bulking up, you see. I’m going to get big and muscular.”

“Yeah?” I let my gaze trail slowly over him. It wasn’t impossible, but given the lean frame he had as a starting point, it would take a lot of work and dedication.

He nodded enthusiastically, returning the scrutiny, his gaze lingering for a long time on my biceps. “I’m after a pair of those. How long will it take? Couple of months?”

“Years, probably.”

Jacob looked like he was going to choke on his own tongue. “What?”

I took pity on him. He clearly didn’t have a clue what he was doing. And part of my job was to push people toward

lowering their expectations if they weren't realistic. "Do you have a diet plan set up?"

"A what?"

"A diet plan. Building bulk isn't just about exercise. It's about eating the right amount of protein, eating regularly, usually every three hours, and about making sure you don't eat the wrong foods." I gestured at the treadmill Jacob had come flying off. "And that sort of exercise is pointless for building muscle. You need resistance training, not cardio." Granted, I was still working on the diet plan aspect because it had proved complicated, but Jacob didn't need to know that.

Jacob turned to stare at the treadmill in a way that said he held it wholly responsible for being a piece of cardio equipment rather than something else, like it was masquerading under false pretenses. "I tried weights, but yeah..."

"I saw."

He squared his shoulders and despite a slight glow in his cheeks that I found fascinating and wanted to touch to see if it was as warm as it looked, pretended not to be bothered by me having witnessed both of his less than graceful moments in the gym. "Someone hadn't put them back right. I should probably sue them."

"Probably," I said. "Listen... I'm a personal trainer here. If you wanted, we could work on a plan for you. If you're serious about wanting to bulk up, that is?"

Jacob grimaced. "I looked at personal trainers, but you guys are expensive. It's not really something I can afford right now."

I stared at him, a ghost of an idea coming to me. He needed a personal trainer, and I needed a friend to walk me through the vagaries of human life. While Jacob might not be the smoothest human I'd ever encountered—he probably wouldn't even make it into the top one thousand if I was being honest—he was human, and he had to know more than me about a lot of things.

One condition of me coming here was that I had to show I could pass for a human within six months to stay. That only left me a couple of months before Lucifer sent someone to evaluate my suitability to stay. Failure would mean a return to Hell, and to torture, and that just wasn't an option. But with no idea what form the evaluation might take, or who might carry it out, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't getting twitchy about it. I needed to brush up on stuff and that required getting closer to a human so I could study them. I needed someone who I could ask questions of should I need to.

"I can help you for free," I said.

Jacob's eyes narrowed in a way I'd learned meant suspicion. Humans had a lot of emotions and they cycled through them at an alarming speed. I assumed it was why they needed to sleep so much. All the emotions they'd exhibited during the day exhausted them. Whereas demons only needed a couple of hours. "Why would you do that?" Jacob asked. "What do you get out of it?"

"I need someone for a study," I lied. Demons were far better at lying than humans were. We didn't have all those annoying tics and tells that gave us away. Some humans looked like they were having a stroke when they tried to lie. It was fascinating. "I need to complete one for CIMSPA."

"Sim, what now?"

"It stands for Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity. As part of the accreditation, I need to carry out a case study. You could be mine."

"And what would being a case study entail?"

"Measurements. Before and after photos. A copy of the exercise schedule and diet plan we come up with. Basically, just keeping records of everything we do to get you to your new and improved body and how successful we are at it."

Jacob blinked. "That sounds like a lot."

"It'll be easy."

"Yeah?" He sounded hopeful.

“Yeah. Piece of...” Damn it! What was the saying? Carrot? No, that wasn’t right.

“Cake?” Jacob offered.

I grinned at him. See, he was already helping me. Not that I thought one of Lucifer’s minions was going to test me on human idioms. Or at least I hoped not. Shit! What if they did? I’d definitely fail. There were so many, and so few, that made sense. What did a piece of cake have to do with something being easy? I’d tried baking a cake, and it had been anything but easy. It had looked more like a biscuit and I’d set the fire alarm off. And then there was one about there being an elephant in the room, when I couldn’t see any animal, never mind an elephant. They were thrown out in the gym constantly. Why couldn’t people just say what they meant? Yeah, I needed Jacob’s help. “So... what do you say?”

Jacob scratched at his chin, his reticence obvious. “You can make me more muscular?”

“Definitely. And with my help, you’ll be able to do it a lot more quickly than you would on your own.” Especially if his approach was anything like he’d shown today.

“Okay,” he said. “I’m in. I’ll be your case study.”

I wrote down my address, which earned me another narrow-eyed stare before Jacob finally took it, and we agreed for him to come round the following night to devise a diet and exercise plan. We could have done it at the gym, but as I wasn’t really using him as a case study and intended to make him my friend, then my home seemed a better place. I’d spend tonight on the internet reading up on how to make friends.

CHAPTER THREE

Melissa picked some icing off her slice of carrot cake with a finger, popping it in her mouth before fixing me with a stare. “So you actually went to the gym?”

“Of course I went. I told you I was going.”

“I know, but...” She trailed off, her focus switching to licking more icing off her finger.

“But what?”

“I don’t know. I’m just surprised you think the leather himbo is worth all this? I thought you’d set one foot in the gym and fixate on someone else instead.”

“You make it sound like I’m fickle.”

She raised an eyebrow that said “if the cap fits.”

“I’m not fickle.”

“Of course you’re not. You’re...”

“I’m...?”

“Changeable. Like the weather. Which is not necessarily a bad thing. It means you get over rejections quickly, and you’ve got to admit you’ve had a few of those.”

“A few,” I grudgingly admitted. Something clicked from what she’d said earlier. “And how can you call Randall a himbo? You’ve never even spoken to him.”

“Neither have you.” She laughed. “Not unless waving at him and saying your name counts.”

I couldn't really argue with that, seeing as it was true. "You just wait. He'll be begging me to go out with him."

Melissa gave up on pretending she wouldn't eat the rest of her carrot cake, taking a bite that a shark would have been proud of, the action not stopping her from talking. "So... what happened at the gym?"

I sat up straighter. "A personal trainer was so impressed with my style that he asked me to be his subject for a case study. So, I have a personal trainer now. We're meeting tonight so he can get my advice on some stuff."

Melissa started to choke. This time, I didn't get up. She needed to learn to chew her food more slowly. She gulped down some water and then stared at me speculatively. "What's this personal trainer like?"

Fucking hot! No, wait. I only had eyes for Randall. I wasn't fickle. I wasn't. No matter what Melissa might have to say on the subject. I shrugged. "You know, the usual for someone who lives in the gym. Big and muscular. I might take some nuts tonight and see if he can crush them between his thighs." I bet he'd be able to. He'd been all rugged masculinity and testosterone, even bigger than Randall was, both in height and in sheer bulk. But he wasn't Randall, I reminded myself. Randall was my future husband. Not Valvach, who may or not be Russian. We'd never really cleared that up. His name sounded Russian, but he didn't have a Russian accent. Maybe his parents were Russian.

Melissa popped the last morsel of carrot cake in her mouth, her gaze immediately straying toward the cafeteria counter, where she'd spend the next ten minutes debating whether to have another piece. "Just get it," I said. "We both know you will, so it'd be nice to miss out the part where you agonize over it?"

She crossed her arms over her chest and gave me a filthy look. "I don't know what you mean. One piece is more than enough for me."



SEVEN-THIRTY FOUND me standing outside the address Valvach had given me. He answered on the first knock, almost like he'd been waiting behind the door for my arrival, his handsome face creasing into a grin. He still had his gym gear on, his massive chest looking like it was fighting to escape from the black tank top he wore. I ripped my gaze away from it and stared at his thighs instead, the matching pair of black shorts doing nothing to hide them from view. Damn it! I'd forgotten the nuts.

Mind, I'd struggled to work out what type of nuts you were supposed to use, anyway. The Macadamia nut was apparently the hardest to crack, three hundred pounds of pressure per square inch required, which accounted for why you never saw them in their shells. That seemed too much of a challenge to throw someone's way, though, when you'd only just met them.

Val ushered me inside and whatever I'd been going to say, probably hello, seeing as I hadn't said it yet, died on my lips. There were too many things wrong with the picture in front of me to know where to start in pondering the whys and wherefores. I started with the furniture, most of it, apart from an enormous sofa and a TV, piled in the corner of the living room. "What happened to your furniture, Valvach?"

"Call me Val."

"Val," I agreed. "What happened to your furniture?"

The frown on Val's face said he didn't know what I was talking about. I pointed at the place where it looked like he was about to start a bonfire. "Why is it all over there?"

He followed my gaze. "I don't use it."

"Right." I waited for him to elaborate, but he didn't. Besides, I had more important things to think about as a pair of rabbits dashed my way and I had to step out of the way to

avoid them. The rabbits themselves might have been okay. I knew there were people who kept rabbits that let them roam free, but they weren't the only animals in the living room. There was a ginger tabby on the back of the sofa. A guinea pig by the skirting board. A tortoise slowly making its way across the carpet. And as the pièce de résistance, a pigeon perched on the arm of the sofa.

The pair of rabbits did another dash, forcing me to jump to the side and crash into the wall. Decorating the wall had clearly been a task for a two-year-old who had used paint instead of crayons, resulting in at least twelve different colors. "Why have you got a pigeon?"

Val gestured to the sofa, and I gladly accepted the opportunity to get out of the rabbits' way. At least until I went to sit and almost sat on a large white rat. Val plucked it out of the way with a laugh, holding the rat up in front of his face and delivering a kiss to its nose. "Look where you're going, Mr. Whiskers. Jacob doesn't want a rat up his ass."

I didn't. I was a huge fan of ass play, but even I drew the line at introducing furry mammals into it.

The pigeon flew across the room to perch on the pile of furniture, Val answering the question he hadn't yet gotten around to. "It flew in through the window one day."

"And you didn't put it back out?"

He shrugged. "There was room."

"Was there?" I ducked as the pigeon made a return flight to where it had started, flying low enough to take my head off if I hadn't taken evasive action. "People don't normally keep pigeons. Not in the house, anyway."

"Really?" Val seemed surprised. "Why not?"

"They're normally kept outside in a pigeon coop."

"What about cats?" Val asked.

"They're kept inside."

"Well, that doesn't seem fair."

“Birds fly. Cats don’t.”

“They could if they had wings,” Val insisted.

What were we even talking about? I felt like I’d stepped into the middle of a surreal dream. It had to be a Russian thing. Yeah, that was it. This was obviously how people lived in Russia, where things were a lot more rustic. Val had brought some customs with him when he’d moved. And the lack of an accent was just because he’d worked hard to lose it.

“I cooked for you,” Val said.

“Yeah?” There was no holding back the surprise in my voice. “You didn’t have to.”

“I wanted to,” he said. “I don’t get many visitors.” Not a surprise, given what I’d walked into. “Actually, you’re my first,” he admitted. He hurried through a door, coming back with a plate and handing it to me. I placed it on my lap and stared at it. The sofa gave as Val lowered himself next to me, his bulk making me feel like the sofa had just shrunk to the size of a small chair.

“I gave you all my favorite foods,” he said. He pointed at the plate. “Roast potatoes.” His finger moved across. “Curry. I didn’t make it too hot in case you’re worried about that. It’s made from chickpeas. I don’t eat animals.” No, he invited them all to live with him instead, like some modern incarnation of Dr. Dolittle. The finger moved again, the completely unnecessary labeling of the food continuing. “Avocado. Salt and vinegar crisps. Jelly Babies.”

I leaned forward to get a better look, something catching my attention. “What are the black bits?” I asked, almost afraid to hear the answer.

Val offered me a beaming smile. “Chocolate sprinkles.”

“Of course they are.” Not wanting to offend him when he looked so happy, I picked a salt and vinegar crisp that didn’t have too much curry on it off the plate, flicked a couple of chocolate sprinkles off, and popped it into my mouth. “Yum,” I said.

Val's grin grew wider. "Good, right? Have a Jelly Baby." Leaning onto one hip, he reached into the pocket of his shorts and pulled one out, holding it up between us. "Look! They're like actual babies made of jelly. They have little faces and everything. I picked out all the red and orange ones for you because they're the best ones. They're the only ones I usually eat." When I didn't immediately go to grab one, his face fell. "You don't like Jelly Babies?"

"No, I do," I said, trying to be tactful in the face of such enthusiasm. "I'm just not used to having them with curry. Or crisps. Or any of the things on this plate, really. It's an unusual combination."

"Thank you," Val said. "Possessing a vivid imagination is one of my great strengths."

"I can see that."

Movement in the corner snagged my attention, and I popped another salt and vinegar crisp—sans chocolate sprinkles—into my mouth as I watched one of the rabbits, who was male apparently, mounting the female one and really giving it to her. "You're going to have baby rabbits."

"Am I?" Val couldn't have sounded any more delighted by the prospect. "Great! The more the merrier."

He continued to watch me as I ate. It wasn't too bad if I tackled things one at a time. I'd had worse desserts than Jelly Babies, and I guessed having everything on the same plate saved on the washing up. The lack of a fork made eating the curry a bit of a challenge, but I managed. When the plate was empty, I handed it back to Val, and he got up to take it to the kitchen, the back view affording me the perfect opportunity to admire his ass in those tight shorts. And it was certainly worth admiring. Meaty, but rounded. Pert, and begging for a squeeze. Not from me, obviously, because my heart belonged to Randall, but from somebody who appreciated it as much as I did.

Val didn't immediately reappear, the need to pee having me shout through the open door. "Can I use your bathroom?"

“Sure. It’s just across the hall.”

I went that way, stepping over another tortoise in the hall and barely giving the mallard duck floating in the bath a moment’s thought because, of course, Val had a duck in his bath. That said, I did peer into the toilet bowl to check there were no goldfish or any other type of aquatic creatures hiding down there before I let loose with a stream of urine.

When I returned to the living room, Val was back. He grinned and held up a tape measure. “Take your clothes off. We’ll do measurements first.”

CHAPTER FOUR

The friend thing was going well. Jacob was showing an interest in my animals, and he'd eaten all the food I'd given him. I had the internet to thank for the helpful tip of cooking for friends, the article on how to be a good friend proving most informative. And he'd taken his clothes off when I'd asked him to. Well, apart from a pair of white briefs that contrasted nicely with his tanned skin. While he stood in the middle of the room, ducking every now and again as my new pigeon friend got bored with one side of the room and flew to the other, I appraised his muscle tone.

He might not have been that muscular, but he was lean, his body fat percentage low. As starting points went, it could have been worse. Although if he was serious about bulking up, it would take a lot of work. That was good, though. It would give us plenty of time to strengthen our friendship.

Jacob did everything I asked of him, turning, and lifting his arms when I needed him to, as I took a series of measurements: biceps and thigh diameter, waist, chest, and maybe a couple of others that weren't strictly necessary but meant I got to put the tape measure in some interesting places.

The only problem was I was struggling. Jacob was so perfectly put together, and had such lovely velvety skin to touch, that I was getting rather excited about the entire process. And when I got excited, my human form became difficult to maintain, my scalp tingling where my horns wanted to come through, and my lower back emitting all the warning signs of my tail wanting out.

“I have to...” I didn’t linger long enough to finish my sentence, the pigeon letting out a startled squawk as I nearly ran into it during my sprint to the bathroom. I reached it with seconds to spare, barely getting the door closed behind me before my horns and tail sprouted. Given I’d gone that far, there was no point in holding the rest back, my skin slowly turning red, and my teeth elongating into the natural fangs of a demon. It felt good to be myself again. I leaned against the sink, breathing hard, most of my blood in my stiff cock.

I wanted to arrange Jacob on his hands and knees, pull those tight white briefs of his down and bury myself deep in him. It was interesting to have that sort of reaction to a human. Actually, scratch that, it was interesting to have that sort of reaction to anyone. Why him? Was it because we were friends? I was still pondering whether this was what happened when you became friends with someone, when the door flew open to reveal a now clothed Jacob standing there.

His eyes went wide as he stared at me, his gaze not seeming to know where to settle and flicking between skin, horns, tail, fangs, before starting all over again like he was stuck in a never-ending loop he couldn’t get out of. “I was worried about you when you ran off. I was...” He trailed off. “What the fuck are you?” he finally choked out.

He wasn’t screaming. My dad had said people on the surface would scream if they saw me in my true form. Was it good that Jacob wasn’t? Or would the screaming start soon? Should I cover his mouth before he started? I could change back now that my libido had calmed down a bit, but it was probably too late for that when the damage had already been done. “You can’t tell anyone,” I said. “Especially not Lucifer.”

“Lucifer!” Jacob’s throat bobbed as he tried to swallow and seemed to have difficulty. “As in Satan?”

I nodded, and he continued to stare. “What are you?”

Right. I hadn’t answered that question yet. “A demon,” I muttered.

He leaned closer. “A what?”

I cleared my throat and tried to look less embarrassed about it. "I'm a demon."

Jacob pushed his glasses more firmly on his nose. It was a gesture he did frequently, and one I already appreciated. "Right." He moved his hand in a weak circle meant to encapsulate my body. "I guess that explains the tail, the skin, and the teeth."

"And the horns," I said indignantly. "They might not be the finest pair, but they are there." I tipped my head forward so he could get a better look. "See."

"They're very nice," he said somewhat weakly, and I had to say less than convincingly. I bet he'd love my dad's horns. He cleared his throat. "What happens now? Are you going to eat me? Is that why you lured me here? Oh my God! Are you going to defile me first?" Was it my imagination or was there a glint in his eye when he said that last part? "Are you going to throw me down on the carpet and force me to carry out depraved sex acts?"

"No."

"Oh!" Was that disappointment in his voice? It had certainly sounded like it. He raised his chin. "Well, good, because I don't have sex with demons and I only have eyes for Randall."

"You've met a demon before?" That would explain why he was taking this so well.

"Well, no, but..."

"So, how do you know you don't have sex with them?"

"I just know," he said, crossing his arms across his chest. "I'm a one-man man, and you're not Randall."

That name again. "Who's Randall?"

"Randall is my boyfriend." Jacob's brow creased. "Well... not quite, but he will be soon. That's why I need to get big and buff." His eyes narrowed suspiciously behind the lens of his glasses. "Are you really a personal trainer?"

I nodded.

“Huh.” His expression said he was struggling with the concept. “A demon personal trainer. Interesting.” He paused. “So, you can help me get Randall?”

I stared at him, surprised that he not only wasn't running away, but he seemed to want to stick around. He really wanted this Randall guy, whoever he was, a strange feeling starting up in my gut that must have been from eating a yellow Jelly Baby earlier in the day just in case they weren't as bad as I remembered. I needed to stick to the red and orange ones. “Yes.”

Jacob smiled. He had a beautiful smile. It was a smile that made me want to lick the corners of his mouth and taste it. I'd never tasted a smile, but I bet his would taste particularly sweet.

Jacob backed off a step, a look of caution appearing on his face. “Are you sure you don't want to eat me?”

“Why would I eat you?”

“Because you keep looking at me like you're thinking about it.”

Oh! I guess that kind of made sense. I wanted to lick him all over, but I didn't want to chew on bits of him. “Demons don't eat humans.”

“No? What do they do to them?”

“Torture them, mostly.” When his eyebrows shot up, I hastened to explain. “Not here. In Hell.”

“Hell!” Jacob's voice had gone squeaky. “Are you saying Hell's real? That it's not just something religious people made up to keep people on the straight and narrow?” He trailed off, answering his own question before I could. “I guess it must be if demons are real.”

“Look...” I jerked my head to the door. “Why don't we go back in the living room and talk? You can tell me about Randall, and why he's so important to you, and I'll tell you about Hell.”



I'D OFFERED to transform back into my human form, but Jacob wouldn't hear of it. The internet article had said that genuine friends accept people as they are, so I guess I really had made a friend, the knowledge sending a warm glow through me. Did friends get to lick each other? Once he stopped asking questions about Hell, maybe I could ask him.

"So... people really get tortured there?" Jacob asked. "Did *you* torture people?"

I grimaced. "Only when I couldn't get out of it, or one of my brothers wasn't available to take my place. That's why I came here, so I don't have to torture people anymore."

Jacob was silent for a moment. He seemed to do that when he needed to digest a piece of information. "You do kind of still torture people, though, don't you?"

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Exercise is a form of torture."

"It's not torture. It's very different to setting fire to someone or skinning them alive."

"But you said you feed on their pain."

I'd decided that there was no point in not being truthful with Jacob. Honesty had been number five in the internet article, sandwiched between giving gifts and providing a shoulder to cry on. Damn it! I knew I'd forgotten something. I hadn't given him a gift. The pigeon had settled on the arm of the sofa next to me. I grabbed it and offered it to Jacob with a smile. "For you. A gift."

He started to blink a lot. Was he overcome with emotion? "You're giving me your pigeon?"

I nodded enthusiastically. He blinked a bit more. "I can't take your pigeon."

“It’s not a big deal. I can get another.”

I moved it closer to him, but he made no move to take it. “How about I take it with me when I leave?”

“Sure.” I let it go, and it flew away to perch on the curtain rail. I was going to miss it, but apparently gifts meant more when they were important to the gift giver. Hopefully, Jacob appreciated that.

“You changed the subject,” Jacob said, his tone accusing.

Had I? Oh, right. He’d compared me feeding on my clients’ pain to torture. “It’s very different. They choose to be there. I even asked one of them to stop coming because I was worried about her. She laughed and still turned up the next day.” I leaned forward slightly, Jacob obligingly meeting me halfway to receive the confidence. “I think they might be secret masochists.”

Jacob’s lips twitched in a way that drew my attention back to them and made me think about licking him again. “You might be right.” He tipped his head to one side and stared at me silently, the scrutiny making me want to reach for my tail and start fiddling with it. At least my mother wasn’t here to tell me to stop. “So... you’re just going to stay here? Is that the plan? And they’ll be fine with that?”

I’d given Jacob a quick rundown on how much pleading I’d had to do to be allowed to come here. “I have to pass a test.”

“What sort of test?”

“A demon will come in two months’ time. I don’t know who it will be. They won’t say. He or she will spend time with me. They’ll be an expert on the surface. Probably someone who’s been summoned hundreds of times. Here,” I explained when Jacob looked confused. “That’s what we call it, the surface. They’ll want to see that I’ve fully assimilated, that there’s no difference between me and any other human.” I waved a dismissive hand. “I don’t see there being any problems unless they test me on idioms.”

Jacob blinked again. “You... don’t... see... there... being... any... problems?”

I had no idea why he’d suddenly started talking slowly. Perhaps he was ill. I knew where the hospital was because of my time spent at the maternity ward. I could take him there.

“You’re going to fail,” Jacob said, stalling me in my plan to call an ambulance.

“What? Why?”

He let out a long breath. “Where do I start?” His gaze darted around my living room. “The animals, for one.”

“Humans have pets,” I said, somewhat defensively. “I did research.”

“We don’t keep ducks in our bath.”

“No?” I pondered the piece of information for a few seconds. “Where do you keep them?”

“We rarely keep ducks at all,” Jacob said. “Certainly not indoors. If you live on a farm and have a duck pond, you might find them there. Where did you even get it from?”

“From the park. It was free.”

“Yeah, you’re not meant to take them.”

“Oh. I did get some stares on the way home. I thought people were jealous.”

“They weren’t jealous,” Jacob said with a slight head shake. “And as for the rest of the animals—”

“I got them from the pet shop, not from the park.”

Jacob sighed. “Yeah, but you’re not meant to get them all. You’re meant to choose one or two. You’re certainly not supposed to get a male and female rabbit and just let them have at it. Have you never heard the saying ‘breeding like rabbits?’”

More sayings. “No.”

“Do you know how long rabbits are pregnant for?”

In lieu of an answer, I shrugged.

“Thirty days,” Jacob said. “And they can have anywhere up to twelve babies. Five is more common, but twelve is possible. Imagine getting twelve rabbits every thirty days. And that’s just from the original two. Then they’ll start breeding with each other. So it could be twelve rabbits, all having twelve rabbits.”

I did a quick calculation in my head. “That’s a lot of rabbits.”

Our gazes both strayed to where the rabbits were at it again, the idea of baby rabbits suddenly not seeming as appealing as it had. Not if Jacob was right about how quickly their numbers might grow. There was already a lot of cleaning up after them to do.

“Furniture,” Jacob said, breaking into my thoughts. “We don’t pile it in the corner if we’re not using it.”

“No?”

He shook his head. “We either leave it alone or we sell it. We paint our walls one color, not several.”

“That’s boring. Who wants to stare at one color?”

“Humans,” Jacob said succinctly. “That’s who. And you, if you want to pass as one. And as for food...”

There was more. “What about food?”

“We have rules about what we eat.”

“Like what?”

“Like certain things we don’t put on a plate together.”

“Why?”

Jacob frowned. “I don’t know. We just do. Jelly Babies aren’t dinner. Neither are crisps. They’re snacks. And curry and avocado don’t go together.” He shook his head. “How do you not know this stuff if you put diet plans together for your clients? How did you pass your certification?”

“Bobby told me he’d pulled a few strings. I have no idea what pulling string had to do with it, but he gave me my certificate soon after, so they seemed to be related. He told me

the important thing was getting the proportions of carbohydrate, proteins, and fats and oils correct, and I do that. That's why I didn't give you that many Jelly Babies. Well, that and it hurts me to give them away."

Jacob let out a sigh. "And people have been following your diet plans?"

I frowned. "I think so."

"And no one questioned it?"

I grimaced. "A few people might have said that they adapted it slightly. We were getting the right results, so I didn't give it a lot of thought. Bobby seemed happy enough." I reached up to massage my temples, my head starting to pound. "How do you learn all this stuff?"

"I guess we learn it from our parents when we're growing up. And they're just the things I've spotted so far," Jacob said, "Within an hour of being here. I dread to think what other quirks you might have that would give you away."

"I'm going to fail," I said with fatalistic certainty. "I'm going to have to go back to Hell and torture people."

Jacob sat up straighter. "Maybe not."

"No?"

He pushed his glasses more firmly on his nose again, his brown eyes sparkling with enthusiasm. "No. I can help you."

"How?"

"How long did you say you have before the demon comes calling?"

"Two months."

"That's plenty of time."

"Plenty of time to do what?" I didn't know where his mind was going, but I was enjoying seeing him getting excited about something. It made everything about him glow. His eyes. His skin. And it made his curls bounce. This Randall guy was a lucky man.

“Plenty of time for me to teach you how to blend in. By the time I’ve finished with you, this demon guy will probably walk straight past you.”

“Yeah?”

Jacob nodded, his eyes still gleaming. “You make me big enough to bench press a bus so that Randall will fall at my feet, and I’ll teach you what’s normal human behavior and what isn’t. Oh, and do the case study as well.”

“There is no case study,” I admitted. “I figured if I made a friend, I could learn a few things that might help.”

Jacob smiled. “Friends,” he said and held out his hand.

I took it, his skin pleasantly warm against mine. “Friends,” I agreed.

Jacob’s gaze dropped to where I was still fiddling with my tail. “Can I touch it?”

“My tail?”

He nodded.

“I suppose so.”

I felt strangely shy as Jacob’s fingers crept hesitantly across the space that separated us. Tails didn’t really play a big part in the world of demons. They were just there. Therefore, I wasn’t expecting the surge of electricity that shot through me when Jacob gave it a gentle stroke, the sparking of sensitive nerve-endings culminating in a full body shudder. *Mother of Satan! What was that?*

Jacob snatched his hand away like it was on fire. “I’m guessing I probably shouldn’t do that.”

“Probably not.”

He checked his watch. “I better go. I’ve got work tomorrow.”

When he got up, I escorted him to the door, pausing on the way there when the flutter of wings reminded me. “Don’t forget your pigeon.”

Jacob leveled me with a look that reminded me of what he'd said about pets. If people didn't keep ducks in their house, then they probably didn't keep pigeons either. Which meant he'd only accepted the pigeon to be polite. "You don't want it?"

"No. Sorry. It was a nice thought, though."

"What sort of gifts am I meant to give friends?"

"Not pigeons."

"Right. And you don't want a duck?"

"No."

"This human thing is hard."

Jacob opened the door, and I had enough presence of mind to transform back into my human form before I stood in the doorway where anyone could see me. Jacob threw a quick glance down the corridor. "We'll work on it. Not using the phrase humans in communal spaces would be the first lesson."

I nodded. Right. There was no point in looking like a human if I made myself stand out from them. I had to think of myself as one of them. Jacob was going to be a mine of information. "Do I kiss you goodbye?"

The blinking was back. "Why would you ask that?"

"I see people do it all the time."

"Do you kiss your clients goodbye in the gym?"

"I did once."

Jacob's eyebrows shot up at my admission. "And?"

"She was different after. Kept touching me. Kept wanting to know where I hung out outside the gym. It was strange."

Jacob did that lip twitching thing again, and I finally worked out what was causing it. I narrowed my eyes at him. "Are you laughing at me?"

"No." Jacob ran a hand through his curls, and I had to stop myself from reaching out and finding out if they were as soft

as they looked. “Actually, I’m wondering what I’ve let myself in for by agreeing to help you.”

“Oh.” That wasn’t good. He’d been my friend for all of five minutes and he was already regretting it.

“You don’t have to. You can change your mind.” *Point seven on the list of good friendship traits—always be understanding of the other person. Take their feelings into consideration.* “It’s fine. Hell’s not that bad.”

“No?” Jacob frowned. “That’s not what the bible says.”

“Don’t use that word, please.”

“What word?”

“The B word.”

“Sorry.” Jacob grinned. “I’ve got a lot of things to learn about you, and you’ve got a lot of things to learn about me. Well... humans. Not just me.”

No, I wanted to know everything there was to know about Jacob. He fascinated me like no other human had since I’d traveled to the surface. I might even have been a little obsessed.

CHAPTER FIVE

I was struggling to concentrate on the rows of figures on my screen, Melissa shooting me the occasional suspicious look when I stared into space for too long. How was I supposed to concentrate, though, when yesterday had been such an eye-opener?

Demons were a thing. Who knew? Demons with horns and a tail and fangs. When Val had run for the bathroom without a word—and he really had run—I'd been concerned. When he'd still been in there ten minutes later, that concern had changed to genuine fear. What if he'd had a heart attack? What if the duck had attacked him? Although I probably would have heard a duck attack. It wasn't like anyone stayed stalwartly silent during such a thing. Not even the duck. There would have been quacking and flapping.

Heart attacks, though. Heart attacks could be silent. The more time that passed, the more convinced I'd become that Val must have gone into cardiac arrest. So much so I hadn't even considered knocking. I'd just burst into the bathroom, fully prepared to find Val sprawled on the floor, and already trying to recall how many breaths it was to chest compressions, and which Bee Gees song I was supposed to sing to get the right tempo. I'd gotten as far as deciding that it wasn't *How Deep is your Love*, when I'd realized that Val wasn't on the floor. In fact, he wasn't in there at all.

The only 'person' in the bathroom was a 'man' with ruby-red skin and a long tail that swished back and forth like he was an angry cat. Except... the similarity to Val was unmistakable. Same build. Same eyes. Same nose. And there was no way Val

could have left the bathroom without me seeing, which only led to one conclusion. It was Val. Val, but not Val.

Why hadn't I run? Maybe because he'd looked just as shocked as I was. Embarrassed as well. Although how I'd been able to tell when his skin was red, I didn't know. Body language, maybe. Anyway, I hadn't run, and Val, the demon, had turned out to be completely harmless. Clueless about how well he was fitting into the human world, but harmless. Could I really teach him to blend in within a couple of months so he didn't have to go back to Hell? The jury was still out on that one.

A shadow fell across my desk and, without me having noticed her leaving her cubicle, Melissa was standing there. From her expression, and the way she had her arms crossed over her ample chest, it didn't take a genius to work out that she wasn't happy about something. "You haven't spoken to me all day."

Was that true? Probably. My mind had been full of demons. Or at least, one demon. Operation Make-Val-Blend-In was going to be a tricky one. It needed careful thinking and planning. "Sorry." What else was I supposed to say?

"Why?"

I shrugged. "I've got things going on."

"Like what?"

"Randall, and..." I was reluctant to mention Val because it wasn't like I could tell her he was a demon. Although her reaction if I did might be interesting. It was doubtful she'd believe me. It was more likely she'd book me a stay in the nearest psychiatric institution.

"We should go to the pub after work," she said, tossing her long blonde hair back over her shoulder. "You're buying."

"Can't. I've got my first session at the gym." Which was true. I was going to put myself in my personal trainer's demon hands and let him feed on my suffering. Was that weird? I guessed it was when his other clients were unaware. But I knew, and I was still going to let him feed on me. I should

have asked him more questions about the process. Would I feel it? Was it sexual? Would it make me tingle all over? Too late now, though. I'd already agreed to it.

Melissa's nostrils flared. I really was on her shit list today. Thankfully, the appearance of our boss from his office forced her to return to her desk if she didn't want to risk being accused of slacking. When clocking off time came, I was the first out of the door before she could lie in wait for me.



"THEY LOOK VERY HEAVY," I said as I stared at the pair of dumbbells Val had deposited by my feet. "Can we maybe start with something lighter?"

He gave me that look. I'd only been here twenty minutes, and I'd already been on the receiving end of it more than once. It was a look that said he was less than impressed with me, and might rethink his stance on torture if I was the subject. So far, we'd done a bit of running and cycling, which, while I wouldn't exactly class as fun, had been bearable.

Val crossed his arms over his chest, those huge biceps of his bulging. He really was fucking huge. Were all demons that big? If so, what did I have to do to get myself sent to Hell? Although that plan had one big flaw to it: I didn't much fancy the torture part. Not unless it was sexual torture. I'd have to ask Val if that ever came into it.

"If you're not even going to try," Val said, "There's no point in doing this."

"I am trying." I dropped my gaze to the dumbbells, but made no move to pick them up. "Can you maybe model the exercise again?"

Val let out a sigh, but bent over and retrieved the dumbbells from the floor.

“Have you fed on me yet?” I asked in a whisper. I hadn’t felt anything, or noticed Val doing anything beyond what I would have expected from a personal trainer.

“Fed on what?” Val said, his voice low. “You need to suffer for me to feed on you. So far, you’ve expended less energy than the eighty-year-old woman I see every Friday.”

Wow! Rude. “That’s not true.”

I got the look again as he lowered the dumbbells before pulling them up to his chest in a move he made look about as difficult as breathing. He was halfway through modelling a set of eight with tips about body posture and breathing when I noticed the man who’d just drifted into view in the background. No fucking way. What were the chances? It had to be fate. There was no other explanation for me joining the gym where Randall also happened to be a member. But there he was, doing something complicated with one of the machines, and what looked like a stretchy piece of metal wire with a handle. Not dressed in leather. Which I guess was understandable in the gym. Leather would chafe and probably wouldn’t be the most giving material for all the bending and stretching required. No, Randall was wearing a pair of white shorts and nothing else, his muscular chest glistening with sweat.

He was working hard, his muscles straining, and a small grunt slipping from his lips every now and again. And what was I doing? I was standing *watching* my personal trainer. Shit! What if he looked over here? That wouldn’t be very impressive, would it? I quickly snatched the dumbbells out of Val’s hands. Ignoring the somewhat stunned expression on his face, I got to work. *Fuck!* They really were heavy. How was I supposed to do eight of the exercise he’d shown me? I managed it, though. Just.

I snuck a glance Randall’s way, but he hadn’t noticed me yet. Should I take my T-shirt off? No, it was probably best to wait until I’d developed some of those bulging muscles he liked so much. I did another eight, my arms protesting the action of doing something that wasn’t typing on a keyboard.

“That’s it, Jacob,” Val said approvingly. “Now you’re getting it. Another set.”

Another one! Was he insane? He moved slightly, blocking my view of Randall.

“Can you move?” I asked. “If I can’t see him, he can’t see me. And if he can’t see me, how’s he going to be impressed by what I’m doing?”

Val’s brow furrowed, but he stepped to the side. His frown grew as he followed my gaze to where Randall had moved to another machine and was currently lifting what appeared to be all the weights the machine had over his head. “Is that...?”

“Randall,” I squeezed out between grunts, sweat now pouring off me as I heaved the dumbbells to my chest once more. I didn’t manage eight that time, giving up when I got to six. Val hadn’t been counting, anyway. He seemed to be more interested in studying Randall. What if he liked what he saw? What if Randall liked him back? Val was the walking epitome of what Randall had said he liked.

Bent over and still trying to catch my breath, I nevertheless pinned Val with a stony glare. “You can’t have him. He’s mine.”

Val turned back to face me. “I don’t want him. He’s not my type. I was just trying to work out what *you* saw in him.”

“Have you seen him?” When my voice came out a little too high-pitched, I cleared my throat to make sure my next words came out in a more normal tone. “He’s got massive thighs.”

“I’ve got massive thighs,” Val said somewhat defensively if you asked me. “Mine are bigger than his.”

“Look at his ass. You could bounce things off it.”

Val’s expression changed to one of confusion. “Why would you want to bounce things off someone’s ass? What enjoyment would you get out of that?”

“I wouldn’t *actually* bounce things off it. It’s just a phrase. It means it’s tight enough that you could if you wanted to.”

Val turned to the side and tilted his hip to examine that part of his anatomy. “You could bounce things off mine.” He bent down and picked up my drink bottle. “Here! You can bounce that off it if you’d like.”

I took the bottle off him, but my focus remained on Randall. “Look at his calves. He normally wears motorcycle leathers, so I’ve never seen them before.”

“I’ve got great calves.”

“Look. He’s lifting ninety kilograms.”

“I could do double that. More, even.”

“Damn it! He’s leaving.” He was. Having finished his workout, Randall was heading for the changing rooms. “He didn’t notice me.”

There was no keeping the crestfallen note out of my voice. That was twice now that he’d looked straight through me. I was an optimistic guy, but it was hard to stay that way when I felt like I was invisible.

“He was busy,” Val said. “People exist in their own little bubble in the gym.”

While I appreciated the attempt to make me feel better, it still hurt that Randall could discount me so easily. “Do you think it’s the glasses? Maybe I should get contact lenses.”

Val’s brows met in the middle. “Why would a person not like someone just because they wear glasses?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. He might have had a terrible experience with an ex who wore glasses. He might have developed a phobia.” I squared my shoulders, the decision made. “I’ll get contacts. Muscles and contacts, and he’ll be putty in my hands.” I felt better already. “Right, personal trainer, train me. I need those muscles.”

Val gave me the look again. I had no idea what I’d done to earn it this time.

CHAPTER SIX

T raining Jacob was proving... Well, the only word to describe it was interesting. With Jacob, it was maximum effort or no effort at all. There was no middle ground. Maximum effort usually coincided with the appearance of the man he'd set his heart on. At least at those times, I got to feed from Jacob as he threw himself into a frenzy of activity designed to catch Randall's attention.

Jacob's suffering tasted like no suffering I'd tasted before. The women on the maternity ward had been sharp and spicy. My clients at the gym tended more toward tangy and full-bodied, but Jacob's... Jacob's was sweet. Like he was the human embodiment of a Jelly Baby. The good ones, though, the red and orange ones. Not the yellow and black ones. Green Jelly Babies belonged somewhere in the middle. I could take them or leave them.

Jacob's suffering wasn't just sweet, though. It made me tingle all over. Especially in a certain area, my cock straining at the front of my shorts, which wasn't a great look for the gym. I'd gotten creative with how to mask it, using everything from a drinks bottle, to dumbbells, to the machines themselves as a useful barrier. I didn't have to worry about Jacob noticing. He only had eyes for Randall. Stupid Randall, with his stupid grunting noises, and his stupid reluctance to wear a shirt while he was working out so that everyone could admire his muscles.

Randall had a variety of poses he cycled through designed to get attention. They worked as well, Jacob not the only member of the gym whose gaze strayed that way. A meeting

between the two of them hadn't happened yet. Either Randall still hadn't noticed Jacob, or he was deliberately giving that impression. Which suited me just fine. Jacob deserved someone better than that muscle-bound creep. Someone who would appreciate him the way he was.

I checked my reflection in the mirror, smoothing an errant lock of hair back behind my ear and checking my watch for the umpteenth time. Jacob was coming round today. With it being the weekend and him not having to work, he'd decided that today was the day to make a start on "humanizing my flat." His words. I'd have him all to myself with no Randall to distract him, and I was looking forward to it. I wiped my hands on my jeans, my palms sweaty, which was strange when I wasn't at the gym and hadn't been working out. Was I ill? Had I caught a human disease? I'd ask Jacob when he got here. I intended to ask him a lot of questions today.

A knock sounded at the door and I almost fell over the sofa in my rush to answer it. And when I opened it, there he was. Cute as a button and just as curly-haired as ever. I grinned at him and he grinned back, a weird sensation solidifying in my chest at being the sole focus of his attention.

His smile quickly faded as he stepped inside. "Oh! I thought you might have made a start on some stuff yourself, like getting rid of the rabbits, or painting the walls, or anything really."

"I wanted to wait for the expert. Wait for you. You're the expert. I was worried I'd do it wrong."

"I don't think you can get rid of rabbits wrong. It's just about making sure they're not here anymore." Jacob took a deep breath in and then rolled his sleeves up. "Okay. It's fine. It's a good job I came early. We've got a lot to do."

His gaze honed in on the pigeon. "Step one, he goes back outside. You grab him. I'll open the window."

I shook my head. "I can't do that. He's my pet."

Jacob arched a brow. "*Your* pet. I thought you gave him to me?"

“I did, but...”

The brow inched higher. “So... if he’s mine, I can do what I want with him, right? And I want to release him outside, where he’ll be much happier.”

And they said demons were manipulative. It seemed humans were pretty good at it as well. “Will he really be happier? Tell me the truth, please.”

Jacob’s expression softened. “Outside, he’s got more space to fly around, and lady pigeons, and people to shit on, and lots of other things that pigeons like doing.”

“Promise.”

“I promise. Cross my heart and hope to die.”

“Don’t die!” I couldn’t think of anything worse than making a friend and having him drop dead within a week. Especially not Jacob. And it wasn’t like he’d go to Hell if he dropped dead. Jacob was squeaky clean. He’d be going straight to Heaven. And if there was one place I didn’t have an invitation to, it was there.

“No, it’s just a... Never mind.” Jacob put his hands on his hips. “Pigeon,” he said sternly. “If you want my help, you have to do what I say.”

I let out a lengthy sigh. “Fine.” The pigeon took a few minutes to catch, and I had to admit to feeling sad as I opened the window and it flew it away. “You’re going to make me take the duck back to the park, aren’t you?”

“Certainly am.”

“Because it has duck friends there and needs to meet a lady duck?”

“If that makes you feel better, then yes. Although I was thinking more along the lines of you being able to use your bath again.”

“We manage,” I said. “He gets out when I need it.”

Jacob did that lip twitching thing again, and I had the urge to press my lips to his so I could feel it rather than just see it. I

was getting a lot of urges around Jacob, the place where my tail grew already starting to itch. Jacob waved a hand down the length of my body. “Feel free to slip into something more comfortable.”

Now, I had heard that saying. I’d seen it on the TV. A female character appearing in sexy underwear usually followed it. Did Jacob want me to wear sexy underwear for him? What about Randall? And what was classed as sexy underwear for men? I didn’t own a bra. Did he want me to wear one? “I’ll have to go shopping,” I said.

Jacob paused from where he’d made a start on the pile of furniture. “What? Why?”

“Because I don’t have one.”

“You don’t have one what?”

“A bra. You just asked me to wear one. I don’t mind, but I’ll have to buy one first.”

Jacob rubbed a hand over his brow in a way that said something was paining him. “Okay. Let’s backtrack a bit here. We seem to have a language issue. Another one. Why would you think I want you to wear a bra?”

I helped him lift the table, frowning slightly as Jacob placed it right in front of the sofa where it was going to get in the way. “It’s a coffee table,” he said. “You put your coffee on it when you’re sitting on the sofa. Now, answer the bra question, please.”

“You told me I could slip into something more comfortable.”

Jacob bit his lip. “I meant your demon form. There’s only the two of us here, and I’ve seen what you look like, and it doesn’t bother me. Nothing to do with a bra.”

“Oh.” I couldn’t help but feel insulted. “Would you want to see Randall in a bra?”

“No!” Jacob’s slightly sour expression said he was telling the truth. “I’m gay. I like men who look like men. Which... don’t get me wrong, there’s nothing wrong with men who like

to wear lingerie if that's what they're into, but personally, they're not the type of men I'm attracted to." He went quiet, his gaze lingering on my chest. "Do you... er... want to wear a bra?" He ran a hand through his hair. "I could... go shopping with you, if that's something you wanted to explore? I don't know where we'd go, though. Your chest is quite broad. I don't know if they make bras that big. I suppose they must for women who are on the larger size."

Did I want to wear a bra? I thought about it and concluded that it had never crossed my mind before I'd misunderstood what Jacob had meant, and there was a reason for that. Besides, if he didn't like men in a bra, why would I want to wear one? I shook my head, and he looked relieved.

While he turned his attention back to the furniture, I relaxed, my horns and tail returning to the physical plane, and my teeth elongating. It did feel better to let everything hang out. When Jacob turned back, he jumped. "Oh, hi," he said, like my demon form was a completely different person and we hadn't already greeted each other. Is that how Jacob saw it, that the demon me was different? It wasn't. It was still me. It was just me with a few extra bits and a different skin color.

It took most of the day to get my apartment to where Jacob deemed it as passing muster for somewhere a human might live. The furniture was back to being in the way. We'd taken the duck back to the park. We'd taken the rabbits and the guinea pig to the pet shop, Jacob saying I could keep the cat as that was, in his words, quite normal to be found loose in an apartment. We'd taken the two tortoises as well, Jacob making me choose between them and the rat.

On the way back, we'd stopped at a hardware store and bought paint and paintbrushes, Jacob overruling me when I'd reached for dark purple, and insisting that magnolia was better. He'd taught me how to put the paint on properly and while we'd made the living room look far worse than it used to, we'd talked, Jacob teaching me sayings and what they really meant. He had plans for us, he'd said, public places we needed to visit, like a restaurant and a museum, where he'd teach me how to fit in. I was already looking forward to it.

CHAPTER SEVEN

It had been a long day, but it had also been an enjoyable one. One thing you could never accuse Val of was being boring. From the bra conversation, to him insisting on kissing the duck goodbye before he released it back into the pond, he was never less than amusing. And hot. No, wait. He wasn't hot. Randall was hot. Val was just a friend who happened to be well put together, but didn't interest me in the slightest. I didn't want to touch his tail again to see if he'd have the same reaction as the first time. I didn't want to poke his thighs to see if there was any give in them at all. I didn't want to run my thumb under one of his fangs to find out how sharp it was. I didn't want to do any of those things because he wasn't Randall.

I'd insisted on cooking us dinner, because the thought of Val doing it scared me. Food was top of my list of things to teach him now that we'd tackled the home issue. I wasn't cooking anything fancy. Just pasta. But at least it wouldn't come with chocolate sprinkles or hundreds and thousands on the top if I did it.

Val's cat supervised me from the top of the cupboards as I chopped the ingredients for the pasta sauce, Val having been overjoyed at getting to keep it. I'd also let him keep the rat, but I'd insisted it needed to spend most of its time in a cage. To be honest, it surprised me that the cat and the rat had co-existed happily together for as long as they had without the cat trying to eat Mr. Whiskers.

“Val?”

“Yeah?” he said, his voice slightly muffled from the living room.

“What’s your cat’s name?”

“Mr. Stripes.”

I paused from chopping basil to smile. That figured, given it was an orange tabby. Val wasn’t exactly big on thinking too much when it came to giving his animals names. The rat had whiskers, so it was Mr. Whiskers. The cat had stripes, so it was Mr. Stripes. I turned slightly to address the cat. “You should be grateful, you know, that you’re not Mr. Whiskers Two.” The cat carried on washing its paw without comment.

With the pasta being done, I hunted around for a colander. I pulled open a cupboard door before quickly slamming it shut. “Hey, Val?”

He appeared in the doorway. “Yes, Jacob.”

I pointed at the cupboard. “Can you explain that?”

“It’s a cupboard. They’re for putting things in.”

“Yes, I can see it’s a cupboard. I’m the human, remember? I’m kind of an expert on human furniture and fittings, given I am one, and I’ve lived with cupboards since I was born. I was referring more to its contents, to what you’ve filled it with.”

“Things I don’t need.”

I pulled it open again, a landslide of yellow and black Jelly Babies cascading out to cover the kitchen floor like there’d been some sort of Jelly Baby war and they were the casualties. “Why is your cupboard full of Jelly Babies? It’s meant to have kitchen things in.”

The furrows on Val’s brow grew more distinct. “I don’t eat the yellow and black ones.” He pulled open a drawer to his right, that if anyone had asked me, I would have assumed held cutlery. “Look. The green ones are in here because I eat them sometimes, but not as much as I eat the orange and red ones. The yellow and black ones don’t taste good, so I put them in there.”

I stared at the almost full drawer of green Jelly Babies. I was beginning to suspect I might have bitten off more than I could chew in agreeing to domesticate a demon. “How many Jelly Babies do you eat that you have a whole cupboard full of the ones you don’t?”

“A few.” Val sounded defensive, like he thought I was having a go at him.

Maybe I was. Or maybe I was just jealous. “How come I have a diet plan... a correct one now that we’d researched it, that forbids me from eating even the smallest speck of sugar, and you gorge yourself on Jelly Babies regularly, and yet, still look like that?” I accompanied my question with a poke to Val’s abdomen.

Holy shit! There was no give to it at all, the muscles so tight I could definitely bounce something off them. I resisted the urge to pick up one of the yellow Jelly Babies and try it. Throwing Jelly Babies at demons probably wasn’t the best idea, even if Val had given me the impression he didn’t have a violent bone in his body. It was best not to push things so early in our relationship.

“Because... demons are naturally built like this.”

“Oh, are they?” I put my hands on my hips and treated him to my best glare. “That hardly seems fair, does it? I have to do all these exercises to build bulk, which incidentally”—I lifted an arm to flex a biceps, or at least what little there was of it—“doesn’t seem to be working.”

“You’ve only done three sessions.”

“Yeah, well...” I shrugged. “Surely, something should be happening by now.”

“You don’t start your diet plan until Monday.”

I pulled a face at the thought of it. The diet plan was pure misery in written form. Val claimed he didn’t torture people anymore. That piece of paper with its distinct lack of carbs, sugar, and anything interesting on it said differently. He’d be torturing me, and I hadn’t even started it yet. It would all be

worth it once I had Randall in my life, though. That's what I needed to keep reminding myself.

After picking up the fallen Jelly Babies and their comrades and returning them to the cupboard—we'd be having words later about what his long-term plan was for them once the cupboard was full—Val returned to the living room, and I set about serving up the pasta while Mr. Stripes supervised.



“TELL ME ABOUT HELL?” I asked once we'd eaten the pasta, Val not bothering to hide his distaste at the lack of chocolate sprinkles, and asking me more than once if I was sure I hadn't forgotten anything. “What do you eat there? Where do you live? Have you got a family? Tell me everything.”

Val was sitting cross-legged on one end of the sofa with me at the opposite end, mirroring his posture. Mr. Stripes had draped himself across Val's lap, purring loudly as he stroked him. It kind of made me want to be an orange tabby. *No! Randall could stroke me. Val couldn't because he wasn't the man I'd set my heart on. And he was a demon.*

“It's hot there,” Val said.

“That would make sense, what with all the hellfire.”

“What hellfire?”

It was possible I needed to drop my preconceptions about Hell and consider that all the films and TV programs that had featured it over the years could have gotten it a teensy bit wrong; you know, on account of them never having been there. “There's no hellfire?”

“We have a lot of barbecues, so there are a lot of fire pits. We eat a lot of meat in Hell. Mostly Quardocks.”

“Quar-whats?”

“Quardocks,” Val repeated it like the problem was my hearing.

“What the...” I stopped myself from saying Hell at the last moment before this conversation grew far too confusing. “What’s a Quardock?”

“It’s a big animal. They roam free in the north of Hell.”

“Hell has a north?” Stupid question. I guess all places had a north, south, east, and west unless they were the size of a postage stamp.

“It does. Quardocks are found in the north. Boongoms in the west. Sharpins in the south, and Harpools in the east.”

“Right.” I sensed there was no point in asking what any of them looked like, when any description he’d give was liable to bear little resemblance to the animals I knew. I frowned as something occurred to me. “I thought you said you don’t eat meat?”

Val tickled Mr. Stripes under the chin, his movements surprisingly gentle when you took the thickness of his fingers into consideration. I was a man who liked to take at least three when I was indulging in anal play, but taking three of Val’s would be a challenge that would require an awful lot of lube.

“Jacob?” I tore my gaze away from Val’s fingers to find him staring at me. Him and Mr. Stripes. “Did you hear me?” he asked.

“Yeah, I heard.” *Sort of.*

“Do you think that’s weird?”

“Do I think what’s weird?”

“That I’ve changed my whole diet. You see, Quardocks aren’t at all cute, but all the animals I’ve seen here are. I don’t want to eat any of them.” He bent over to kiss Mr. Stripes on the top of his furry head. “Don’t worry, Mr. Stripes, I won’t let anyone eat you.”

“We don’t really eat cats. Not in this country, anyway.” And to think there’d been a moment where I’d suspected Val might want to eat me. He couldn’t bring himself to eat an

animal, never mind a human. “And no, I don’t think it’s weird. I don’t see any reason you can’t be a vegetarian demon if you want to.”

Val seemed pleased about that, like he’d needed my seal of approval. “I haven’t told my family. They’d think I was being stupid. They don’t know what they’re missing, though. We don’t have Jelly Babies in Hell.”

“Yeah, that much I would have guessed. Have you got brothers and sisters?”

“Two brothers. They’re the perfect demons. Between them, they’ve won the Torturer of the Year award ten years running. I’ve never even made the top hundred.”

“I don’t suppose you would if you don’t enjoy doing it. It’s difficult to excel at something you hate. And there’s nothing wrong with not wanting to torture people.”

“There is when you’re a demon and you live in Hell. It’s the whole point of our existence.”

“You can’t be the only demon who doesn’t like torture?”

Val thought for a moment. “I’m the only one who’s ever admitted to it.” He sat up straighter and puffed his chest out. “I’m the only one who’s ever come here without being summoned, though. I’m something of a road pyromaniac.”

“Trailblazer,” I said absently while I contemplated the rest of what he’d said. “That actually happens? People summoning demons, I mean? I figured that was something that had been made up.”

“Oh no,” Val said. “Demons get summoned all the time, but it’s usually the well-known ones, or sometimes people summon them by the task they need doing, and the best demon for the job is the one who goes.” He dropped his gaze to Mr. Whiskers, the frenzied stroking that followed obviously a coping mechanism. “What would anyone summon me for? They would never want a demon who can’t even do his job properly.”

Val being sad made me sad. “Hey, cheer up. You didn’t need summoning, did you? You made it here on your own.”

Val raised his gaze to mine. “I did, didn’t I?” He smiled. “You’re a good friend, Jacob. I mean, you’re my only friend, so I don’t have a lot to compare it to, but I’m sure if I did, you’d still be better than them.”

“Thanks... I think.”

“What about you?” Val asked. “What about your family?”

“Only child, so I grew up on my own. My parents were in their late thirties when they had me, so they’re older than most people’s parents.” I shrugged. “That’s about it, really. I’m not that interesting.”

“My parents were in their third millennia. That’s quite young for demons.”

I blinked at him. “Sorry... What?”

“Third millennia,” Val said.

“How old are you, Val?”

“Only three hundred and twelve.”

“Wow! That’s—”

“Not that old, I know, but don’t worry, I’m quite mature for my age. I don’t want you to feel like you’re babysitting.”

There wasn’t a lot I could say to that.

Val leaned forward. “What do you do for a job?”

I gave him a quick rundown of the key aspects of being an auditor, how my work mainly comprised checking financial records and making sure that legislation and regulations were being followed, how it required a keen focus on detail. As ever when I talked about my job, I may have gotten a little carried away, so much so, that I didn’t notice the look of concern on Val’s face until he put his hand on my knee and told me he was sorry.

“For what?”

“I’m sorry you have to do that. I suppose torturing yourself is better than torturing others, but it’s still not fair. You deserve better, Jacob.” He accompanied his sentiment with a squeeze

of my knee that had my cock wondering what that hand might feel like a little higher up. I bet Val had a powerful grip.

“You think I torture myself?”

“Numbers,” Val said, as if that explained everything.

“I like numbers. I like them a lot. Much better than I do words. I’ve always liked numbers. And data. And facts.” I pushed my glasses more firmly on my nose. This was where Val would realize that of all the people he could have picked as a friend, he’d picked a geek. I still remembered my first ever boyfriend’s words when he’d broken up with me. He’d said that I’d be far more attractive if I spent more time thinking about what could be, rather than collating things that had already been. I’d never really worked out what he was talking about, but it hadn’t been a compliment. The fact that I’d never seen him again after that conversation had been proof of that. And he hadn’t been the only one who’d found it difficult to wrap his head around my love of statistics. It was true what they said; history had a habit of repeating itself.

“Oh,” Val said. “That’s alright then.” He sat back, Mr. Stripes jumping off his lap to revisit his food dish. “I like to read.”

“Yeah?”

He nodded. “My family doesn’t approve.”

“Why?”

“It’s not what demons are supposed to do.”

“What are they supposed to do? I’m assuming you can’t torture people twenty-four hours a day?”

“Fifty-two hours,” Val said. “Days in Hell are longer. I think it’s all part of the torture thing.” He scratched his chin. “Apart from torture, demons mostly eat and fuck.”

“Do they...?” How did I phrase this? I could just not ask, but I was more than a little curious. “How does that work?”

“The fucking?”

I nodded.

“Cocks in holes.”

Heat rushed to my cheeks. “I know that, but I mean, is a male demon meant to fuck a female demon, or...?” I left the end of the sentence hanging, not quite ready to ask if there was such a thing as gay demons.

“Most demons fuck anyone. Usually more than one person at a time, so it’s usually a mixture of both male and female. It’s rare to find just two demons together unless they’re a bonded couple, and even then, a few bonded couples will usually get together. My parents often invited the neighbors to join in.”

“Right... Hell orgies. Of course. And how about you? Were you into Hell orgies?”

Val’s furrowed brow said it was a tough question, and I got the impression that if his skin hadn’t already been bright red, he might have been blushing. What could be kinkier than an orgy? What was he about to tell me he was into? “Never mind. It’s none of my business. Pretend I never asked.”

“I didn’t really get involved in any of that stuff,” Val said. “I mostly read.”

“You didn’t fuck other demons?”

He lifted one massive shoulder in a slight shrug, gathering his tail onto his lap in what I already recognized as a nervous gesture. “Not if I could avoid it.”

Was he asexual? Could you have an asexual demon? It didn’t sound like the rest of them were. It sounded like they squeezed in as much sex as they could between bouts of torture. No wonder Val had barely blinked at the two rabbits going at it.

“I didn’t fit in,” he said by way of explanation. “I’m not like the other demons. That’s why I came here. And now I don’t fit in here either.”

It was my turn to pat him on the knee. “You will. We just need to work on it.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

The dreams about Jacob had started soon after meeting him. And the more I got to know him, the worse they got. It was difficult to understand why, when sex had been no more than a necessary evil to be endured in Hell, that my nights were filled with ever-increasing erotic tableaux where Jacob begged me to stick my thick demon cock deep in his ass and empty my balls in him. Dream Jacob was quite the dirty talker. Whereas the real Jacob was far sweeter.

He'd brought me books yesterday, turning up at my apartment door with a bulging bag, a gesture that had almost had me telling him I loved him. Almost. Somehow, I'd refrained from it. Probably because Jacob had trained me to think before I spoke, to examine carefully all the things I'd learned from him about humans and consider whether it was something I really should do or say before doing it. And I wasn't entirely sure that declaring your love for a friend was on the allowed list.

We still had a few weeks before a demon would appear on my doorstep to do whatever it was they intended to do as part of the assessment. The not knowing was the worst part. It was difficult to prepare for the unknown. And if no demon had ever done what I'd done before, why did such an assessment even exist? Or had they invented it just for me? It was a possibility. I made a mental note to ask my parents the next time I spoke to them.

Jacob had compiled a list of things he'd deemed as necessary experiences to blend in. So far, we'd gone to the cinema: popcorn had to be paid for and should be kept in the

container it came in, not stuffed into pockets to avoid having to hold it. The museum: don't touch wasn't just a polite request and the security guards did take it seriously. Bowling: you couldn't just pick any lane you wanted to. You had to stick to the one that had been allocated even when knocking over all the pins in that one was too easy. A nightclub. I remembered very little of that. Apparently, demons and alcohol weren't the best combination. And a restaurant. Jacob had rubbed his head a lot at the restaurant, prompting me to ask him if he'd had a hard day at work.

Today's challenge/adventure was the zoo, one I was particularly excited about. Jacob shot me amused glances as we queued for tickets, presumably because I was jiggling up and down with the anticipation of getting in there. He hadn't told me to stand still, though, so I assumed it was within the realms of normal human behavior. I did my best to think about something other than all the furry, scaly, and feathered delights that awaited me inside. "How are the numbers at work?"

Jacob's lips twitched. "The numbers are fine."

We inched forward a bit. This was taking an awfully long time. "Where I come from"—Jacob had taught me to say that rather than talking about Hell in public—"we don't queue."

"No?" Jacob tipped his head to one side as if he found the idea interesting. "What do you do if more than one... *person* wants the same thing at the same time?"

"Fight for it, usually. The winner gets it. The loser doesn't."

Jacob's eyebrows shot up. "I see." He had a checked shirt on today and looked adorable.

"Plus, there's not a lot to queue for. No cinemas. No restaurants. No parks. No museums. No zoos."

"Sounds like hell," Jacob said with a glint in his eye. "It's probably a missed opportunity, though."

"What do you mean?"

"Well..." He paused as we took another step forward, the kiosk where we were supposed to pay now in sight. "Torture

doesn't have to be bloody. Imagine a queue that never moves. Or a queue where you get to the front only to discover that there's another one waiting. Or one where you get to the front after hours of waiting and there's nothing there and you realize you've been queuing for absolutely no reason. There are loads of things you could do with a queue that would be torturous." He shrugged. "It's probably a silly idea. Unlike you, I'm hardly an expert on the subject."

"It's not a silly idea. I'm going to suggest it next time I talk to my parents. They tend to stick with the traditional methods, and..." I lowered my voice before speaking Satan's name. "Lucifer's always looking for ways to bring the place more into the twenty-first century."

Jacob beamed at me, pleased I hadn't shot his idea down in flames. He had a pretty smile. I still wanted to lick it, but I'd come to terms with the fact that it wouldn't happen. It didn't mean that I couldn't fantasize about it, though.

"Do you have any other ideas?" I asked.

Jacob's brow creased. "Waiting for a bus that never comes? I suppose that's too similar to the queue. Millions of people all talking about you on social media and accusing you of something you haven't done?" His expression brightened. "I know! I have a perfect one."

"Go on." We took another couple of steps forward, a family of four having just been admitted.

"Eating a chili that's too hot and not being allowed any water."

I thought about it. The idea was so simple it was genius. It wouldn't even require any equipment except for extremely hot chilis. "That definitely has merit." I nudged him with my elbow. Momentarily forgetting my own strength, I was forced to grab Jacob as he nearly fell over. "Sorry. Are you sure you're not secretly a you-know-what?" I left my fingers wrapped around Jacob's biceps where I'd grabbed him because it felt nice to touch him. If I was lucky, I'd get a few minutes before he noticed.

Jacob looked thoughtful. “I don’t think so. I look like my dad, and my mum’s a maths teacher, so I always assumed I got my love of numbers from her. I don’t think she ever had a secret affair with a demon. She’s more the baking muffins type.”

We moved forward again, the motion dislodging my fingers from Jacob’s arm. “I didn’t mean to insinuate that your mum had a secret affair with a demon. It was more of a joke.”

Jacob took a quick look around before moving so close to whisper in my ear that the touch of his lips in such a sensitive place had me immediately hard. *No tail, no horns. Not here where there’s so many people. Keep it together.*

“Do they do that?” he whispered. “Do demons fuck humans when they come here? Do they force them to submit to them? Do they impregnate them and make them do all manner of kinky stuff?”

This Jacob was a little too close to the dream Jacob, my cock not only hard but throbbing. “Some do. Sometimes demons get summoned specifically for that purpose.”

Jacob’s eyes went wide behind his glasses. “People summon demons to fuck them? Like a demon fetish?”

I nodded.

“So...” Jacob did another scan of the queue. “We could be surrounded by a bunch of half-demons without even knowing it?”

“Probably not surrounded, but there might be one or two.”

Jacob’s eyes narrowed in on a perfectly ordinary man in the crowd, nothing about his average height and slim build suggesting anything remotely demonic. “I bet it’s him.”

“Why?”

“He looks suspicious, like he knows something the rest of us don’t.”

He looked nothing of the kind to me. Besides, if there were any half-demons in London, it was unlikely they’d be at the zoo. I was the anomaly. I always had been from the moment

I'd been born. I was saved from offering any more opinions on the perfectly ordinary man just going about his business as we finally reached the kiosk, Jacob handing over enough money for two tickets. And then we were in.

Jacob took me to see the tigers first, catching my arm as I searched for a door. "What are you doing?"

"Looking for the way in."

A slight flush appeared on his cheeks as someone behind us laughed. Jacob cleared his throat. "We don't go in. We just look at them."

"Oh!" There really were a lot of different rules in different places. How anyone kept them all straight in their head, I didn't know. "I wanted to stroke one."

"You... wanted to stroke a tiger?" Jacob said it with the air of a man who didn't quite believe he was being forced to say the words.

"Yeah, of course. They're like a big Mr. Stripes. I wanted to bring him, remember, but you said I couldn't."

He blew out a breath. "It's a miracle you haven't gotten yourself killed. Tigers aren't like cats. Well, they are. Same family, anyway, but..." He shook his head. "A tiger could rip your hand off."

"Which one?"

Jacob frowned. "What do you mean?"

I turned my hands palm up and stared at them. I wiggled the fingers of my right one. "I use this one more, so I don't think I'd like it being ripped off."

"Well, there you go then," Jacob said. "Don't stroke tigers. Just look at them."

I did look, for about twenty minutes, until Jacob pulled me away with the threat that we wouldn't have time to see everything if we spent too long on one animal. That wouldn't do. Not when I really wanted to see the dragons. The ones I'd read about in books were fascinating, and I wanted to see how the zoo protected the public against their ability to breathe fire.

Jacob knew me too well not to notice the glint in my eye as we stood looking at the penguins. “No,” he said. “You can’t take one.”

“There’s a lot of them,” I pointed out. “They can spare one.”

“No penguins,” Jacob stated firmly. “We don’t keep ducks in our bath and we don’t keep penguins in them either. Or anywhere else, for that matter.”

“Humans should loosen up,” I said somewhat sulkily.

To my surprise, Jacob laughed. “Probably.” He took my hand and tugged me away. He’d been doing that a lot and I liked it. “Come on, I’ll buy you an ice cream. While we eat it, I can go through which animals are real and which ones can only be found in stories.”



JACOB STAYED FOR DINNER. He watched me cook, with his arms crossed over his chest and a watchful eye like it was some sort of test and he was my examiner. Which, I supposed to some extent, was exactly what was happening. I had the food thing down pat now, though. Keep it boring. Keep it bland. Keep your sweet and your savory separate. My arguments about the sweet and salty popcorn being mixed at the cinema hadn’t swayed Jacob in the slightest. Apparently, the cinema could break rules, but I couldn’t. Oh, and don’t improve a dish by adding Jelly Babies or chocolate sprinkles as a finishing touch.

I served up Spaghetti Bolognese, not touching it myself until Jacob had taken a bite. I waited nervously as he chewed and swallowed. “It’s good,” he said with a smile. “If you added anything you weren’t supposed to, I can’t taste it.”

“I didn’t,” I said indignantly. “I listen to you, you know. Me being able to stay here depends on it.”

“I know.” Jacob offered me an apologetic pat on the hand. “It’s only because I want you to do well that I’m such a hard taskmaster. Like you at the gym when you’re mean.”

I stared at him, the feeling in my chest not a comfortable one. I had a lot of feelings around Jacob, but most of them were pleasurable. This one wasn’t. This one felt like he’d taken a knife to my chest. “When am I mean?”

Jacob chewed slowly, swallowing before he answered. “When you make me do stuff.”

“What stuff?” I went to lift a whole strand of spaghetti to my mouth, correcting myself and winding it around my fork when Jacob gave me a look.

“Gym stuff.”

“That’s my job.”

“Yeah, I know, but you don’t have to enjoy it.” He screwed his nose up. “I guess that’s the feeding on suffering, though.” He tipped his head to the side. “What happens if you can’t feed?”

That was a straightforward question to answer. “I’d grow weaker and die.”

Jacob froze with his fork halfway to his mouth, looking alarmed. “Like really die? Or would you just go back to Hell?”

“I’d really die.”

“God!”

I winced, and Jacob immediately apologized. The doctrines of Hell were too engrained for it to be a word that could ever sit comfortably with me. Just like the name of that book that began with B and any other word connected to Christianity and the church. And I certainly wouldn’t be using it myself, no matter how well it might make me fit in. I was too scared that if I did, Lucifer would appear in front of me and drag me straight back to Hell. No assessment. No second chance.

“I’ll work harder in the gym,” Jacob said. “Give you more suffering.”

He seemed to have forgotten that he wasn't my only client. If he was, I probably would have died a long time ago. Jacob's efforts might be better than when we'd first started training together, but he wasn't exactly pushing himself to the limits of human endurance. I wasn't about to dissuade him from it, though. And he did enough that he was already noticeably more muscular after just a few weeks.

"What?" Jacob asked.

I jerked my gaze to his face, guilty of having been caught examining all those places where his T-shirt had filled out and now clung to him. I pointed a finger at him, attack being the best form of defense. "Don't think I haven't noticed that you're breaking your diet plan."

Jacob frowned at his Spaghetti Bolognese. "It's only a bit of pasta."

He pushed his plate away and I pushed it back. "But the odd treat day is okay. You already strayed with the ice cream earlier, anyway."

The smile he gifted me with made me want to rip up the diet plan and tell him he never needed to set foot in the gym ever again.

CHAPTER NINE

I'd started coming to the gym outside my scheduled training times. Given how obsessed Val was with making me lift weights, I'd told him it was to do extra cardio, but really it was just so I could watch him work out when he didn't have any clients. There was something breathtaking about the way his muscles bulged as he lifted a dumbbell to his chest and held it there before pushing it over his head. Val was strong. Like really, really strong. I'd never asked him, but I suspected he was holding back and that he could probably lift a weight twice the size of the ones he was attempting. Maybe even three times.

Also, it was fascinating to see the way he operated in the gym. All those rules that he struggled so much to follow elsewhere just didn't seem to be an issue here. Sure, there was the odd slip up when he misunderstood what someone had said, but nothing that couldn't be passed off as a slight eccentricity. He just fitted in this environment.

"Do I know you?" someone asked. That someone was blocking my view of Val as he went for another lift. I lifted my gaze to tell them to move, the words freezing in my throat.

Randall.

My dream man.

The man I was going to marry.

He was standing in front of me and talking to me. For weeks, he'd looked straight through me. I'd even stood next to him at the water fountain once, desperately racking my brain

for something witty to say, but by the time I'd thought of anything, he'd already walked away.

Now here he was. And he was the one instigating conversation, with his bare pectoral muscles beautifully adorned with perfectly sized nipples, and his beefy biceps, and his washboard abdominals, and his eyes on *my* face. "Me?"

"You," Randall said. "Thought I recognized you from somewhere."

"I come here a lot."

"Not from here. I recognize you from somewhere else. Did we hook up on Grindr?" He frowned. "Were you the guy who promised you could take ten inches and then didn't show up?"

I almost swallowed my tongue. "Me? No. I always show up. I'm good at keeping promises. If I say I'm going to do something, I do it. My mum brought me up well. You can ask her." I was rambling. And talking about my mother. Which wasn't usually the best way of getting a man to fall in love with you. I finally had Randall's attention, and I was squandering it. I needed to flirt. I needed to be seductive. I needed him to be looking at me without the creases on his brow. How did you flirt? Taking a tip from Fern on reception, I reached up and wound a lock of hair around my finger. Luckily, it was just long enough that I could. "Hargreaves & Co," I said. "I work there. I signed for one of your parcels a few weeks ago."

His frown grew more pronounced. "Huh! Guess it was there, then. Unless I'm confusing you with someone else. Got gum in your hair?"

"No, I..." I gave up on the hair thing. Perhaps flirting wasn't the right course of action. If Randall used Grindr, he probably preferred the more direct approach. Either that or I could download Grindr and find his profile and I could... No. He was right here in front of me, and I'd been waiting for this opportunity. Except he was already turning away. In a panic, I grabbed his wrist, his skin warm beneath my fingertips. "Wait!" I had a momentary image of him just carrying on

walking and me being dragged behind him like some sort of Wild West protagonist towed behind a horse.

Thankfully, that didn't happen, and he stopped, staring down at the fingers wrapped around his wrist like he didn't know what they were. I let go, straightening to my full five-foot-ten height compared to his at least six-foot-two. *Ask him out on a date, Jacob. What's the worst that could happen?* "I like to eat."

The frown was back. "Right."

"Lots of protein, of course, because I'm bulking up."

Randall's gaze drifted over me. He didn't say anything. I took that as a compliment. At least he hadn't laughed.

"Do *you* like to eat?" I asked.

"Doesn't everyone? It's kind of a human necessity."

"Maybe"—my heart was beating far too fast—"we could eat together?"

"Like a date?" Randall asked.

I resisted the urge to reach over and pat him on the back for drawing the right conclusion. "Like a date," I agreed. "I'm free tomorrow night. There's a steakhouse just down the road from here. We could go there?"

He gave me another once-over, this one much slower, his gaze lingering for longer on certain parts of me, my chest, my cock, my ass, my mouth. "Okay."

Okay. Jesus Christ! Randall had said yes. All those hours of sweating my ass off had clearly been worth it. Melissa was going to have kittens when I told her she'd been wrong and I was right. She'd never hidden her skepticism about my plan working. "Great," I said. "How about seven-thirty?"

"Make it later," Randall said. "Eight-thirty."

"Eight-thirty, it is," I agreed. "I'll see you there."

He sauntered off to the changing room, and I watched him until he disappeared out of sight and there was nothing to watch anymore. When I turned, Val was right there next to me.

I'd apparently missed the rest of his lifts. "I've got a date," I told him. "With Randall, and it's all thanks to you." I expected Val to look pleased for me. I definitely expected more than a frown. Was this national frowning day or something? First Randall. Now him. "Aren't you happy for me?"

"Yeah, of course," Val said, but there wasn't even a glimmer of a smile.

"You might want to tell your face," I said.

"You want me to talk to my face? What will that achieve? And how can I talk to my face when my apparatus for talking is part of my face? I suppose I could find a mirror and talk to my reflection. Will that work?"

"Never mind." I filed it under the rapidly growing list of sayings I needed to teach Val. Not tomorrow night, though. Tomorrow was about Randall feeling those first stirrings of love for me. Would he bring me flowers? What would he wear? What would he smell like? I couldn't wait to find out the answers to all those questions.



I WAS EARLY. Randall was late. I put it down to London traffic. I drank in the sight of him in his leathers as he approached the table where I'd spent thirty minutes nursing a bottle of beer. He, in turn, didn't seem to notice my brand-new shirt and trousers that I'd bought especially for the occasion, but that was fine. He probably thought I looked this good all the time. No flowers. No doubt he meant to get some and had run out of time. That damn traffic.

"Hi," I said as he took the seat opposite. I pushed a menu his way, and he gave it a strange look. "They do great steaks here. I mean, they would, right? They're a steakhouse. They wouldn't stay in business for very long if they were advertising themselves as a steakhouse and they didn't get that part right." There was something about Randall that made my

tongue run away with itself. I needed to chill the fuck out. Yes, he was sexy, but there were other sexy men who I could have a perfectly normal conversation with. Like Val, for instance. Val was sexy—whether he was in demon or human form—and I could talk to him just fine. Although perhaps ‘normal conversation’ wasn’t quite the right term for mine and Val’s interactions. Demon didn’t exactly come under the umbrella of normal.

“Oh, we’re actually eating, are we?” Randall said. “I thought we were just using this as a meeting place.” He gave a shrug. “Whatever.”

“A meeting place for what?”

Randall didn’t answer, snapping his fingers at a waitress until she ran over. Once she had, he ordered a beer. I guess we were going to chat and get to know each other before we ordered food. I didn’t order another beer. My tongue was already loose enough. I didn’t need a second beer sending it into overdrive when I’d always been a lightweight.

“You’re a bottom, right?” Randall asked, just as I’d taken a sip of beer. I choked on the mouthful, Randall doing nothing to help as I sought to purge the liquid from the places where it wasn’t supposed to go. “Erm... yeah,” I finally forced out. “Mostly.”

He nodded. “That works then. Do you like to suck cock?”

I cast a quick glance at the occupied tables less than a meter away and, therefore, within hearing distance. Thankfully, none of them seemed to be paying attention to us. Randall was nervous, bless him. I just needed to steer him toward polite date etiquette. “How was work today?” I asked with a bright smile.

Randall’s stare went on a for a long time. I kept smiling, my cheeks starting to hurt. Finally, he shrugged. “Was alright, I guess.”

“It must be very complex, keeping all those parcels straight and where they need to go.”

“Not really. Address is on the front. I just need to read it.”

Right. Course it was. We lapsed into silence. What else made for good date conversation? Books? Randall didn't strike me as much of a reader. He spent too much time in the gym for that. Films? Maybe, but I didn't watch many so it would be difficult to find common ground. "You probably want to know some stuff about me? Ask away. I promise to answer as truthfully as I can."

"Not really."

Ouch!

"Oh, wait. I do." Randall leaned forward. I automatically leaned in as well to make sure I could hear him. "Can you deepthroat?"

I sat back. I might have been an optimist, but even I couldn't gloss over the fact that all Randall wanted to talk about sex, which wasn't how I'd seen this evening going. I was clearly missing something here. I concentrated on peeling the label on my beer away from the bottle as the waitress brought Randall's beer over and he snuck a glance down her top as she bent over. Bisexual. Which was fine. I had zero problems with bisexuality. I just preferred it not to rear its head when I was on a date with someone. Call me fussy. "What's going on here?" I asked once she'd gone and Randall's focus was back on me instead of a pair of breasts. "We agreed that this was a date."

Randall glugged half of his beer back in one long swallow. "It is a date."

"But you didn't think we'd be eating?" I didn't leave him any time to answer, the question having been rhetorical. "And you don't want to talk about yourself? Or me? What did you think was going to happen?"

"I figured we'd fuck."

Well, at least he was honest. It certainly explained why all his questions were about sex. He was a red-blooded male, so perhaps I shouldn't be surprised. Plenty of relationships started with sex and built from there. I picked another bit of the label off. The important thing was that after weeks of being

invisible, he obviously found me attractive and wanted to fuck me. “And after we fuck? What then?”

Randall’s brow creased as he took another long swallow of beer. “What do you mean?”

“Then... we’ll talk about stuff, right? Hopes, dreams, favorite desserts. I guess what I’m asking is when does the bit happen when we get to know each other?”

“Get to know each other?” Randall repeated the words like I’d said them in a language he didn’t understand. “Why would I want to get to know you?”

“That’s what people do when they start a relationship.” I hastened to elaborate lest he thought I was coming on a bit strong. “Even if that relationship is fairly casual, it’s still normal to express an interest in the other person.”

Randall scratched at his jaw, stubble rasping beneath his fingertips. “I don’t want a relationship with you. I just want a fuck. I was going to go on Grindr tonight, but you were there making eyes at me and I figured it would save a bit of time.”

I sat up straighter, the sting of humiliation making itself known. “I wasn’t making eyes at you! I asked you out on a date, where I figured we’d get to know each other and see where it went.”

“You’re not my type,” Randall said.

The matter-of-fact way he’d said it didn’t make it any less of a blow. “Why not?”

“Do you want a list?”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Yeah, I think maybe I do.”

Randall was nothing but obliging as he ticked them off on his fingers. “Too short. Too skinny. Too puny. Your hair’s too curly. Too talkative.” He waved a finger in front of my face. “And the whole glasses thing doesn’t work for me.” He guzzled the rest of his beer down. “So... do you want to fuck? Or am I wasting my time?”

I let my gaze drift slowly over him, noting a few things I hadn’t before. Randall was older than I’d initially thought, the

crow's feet at the corner of his eyes proof of that. His tan was clearly out of a bottle, the slight orange twinge to it unmistakable. It was funny how an ugly personality made you see the rest of the person for what they were. "No. I don't want a fuck. Not with you." I sat back in my chair and crossed my arms over my chest. "I can do better than a..." What was it Melissa always referred to him as? Ah, that was it. "A leather himbo."

"A what?" Randall's brows drew together. He really was a himbo. All muscle and no brain power. Val might not understand things, but that was down to him being from another dimension rather than a lack of intelligence.

"Never mind. I'd explain it, but it would take too long to use words of only one syllable."

"Is that an insult?"

I laughed. The fact that he had to ask proved my point. "I figured I owed you at least one."

Randall stood from the table. "Your loss."

"I really don't think it is."

He left without another word, the squeak of his leather trousers as he walked away now an irritation. It wasn't until he'd gone that I realized he'd left me to pay for his beer. That figured. Left on my own at the table with my 'date' having spent all of ten minutes in my company, reality set in. I'd wasted weeks fixating on a man who didn't deserve it, lusting after someone who I'd known nothing about beyond the physical. Had tried to change myself when I should be looking for a man who liked me just the way I was. What was wrong with me? Tears pricked my eyes and it was only the fact that I was in a public place that stopped me from crying.

CHAPTER TEN

So... Mr. Stripes,” I said as he turned around three times on my lap before finally lying down, purring as loudly as I’d ever heard him purr, “Jacob has gone on a date with Randall.” I winced at the bitterness dripping from my voice as I said the man’s name. I tried it again. “Randall.” No better. “Randall.” That was even worse. “Which is fine. I’m happy for him.”

Mr. Stripes turned to regard me with all-seeing, all-knowing cat eyes, and I wilted beneath the stare. “Okay. It isn’t fine and I’m not happy if you must know, but I need to pretend it’s fine, because Jacob is a friend and I want to keep him as a friend. It’s not like I didn’t know from the outset that Randall was the man he wanted. He only joined the gym to impress him. We’d never even have met if it wasn’t for him wanting to bulk up for Randall.” I wasn’t doing any better at being able to say his name without injecting venom into it. I tried another word out for size. One that Jacob had taught me the previous week. “Dickhead.” Yeah, that worked better.

“What do you think Jacob and Dickhead are doing right now?”

Mr. Stripes gave me another look, and I grimaced. “Really? You think Jacob will go home with him on a first date? What if Jacob’s got no time for me anymore?” It was selfish. I knew it was, but feelings were feelings and ever since I’d looked up this afternoon to find Randall talking to Jacob, I’d been having an awful lot of them. Far more than any demon should have about a human. And they weren’t just aimed at Jacob.

I had feelings about Randall as well. Only those feelings were the ones that a demon was supposed to have, where I would have been quite happy to abandon my previously held beliefs about torture if he were the recipient. I gave myself a moment of pleasure, imagining burning Randall alive. He'd go up fast. The gel he wore in his hair would make sure of that. Would he scream? Yeah, he would. They all did. Even the most stalwart of men. Would Randall go to Hell when he died? If so, going back there might not be such a bad thing after all. I could become Randall's personal torturer, on his case fifty-two hours a day, never letting him have a moment's peace, following him around and...

A knock at the door roused me from the pleasurable fantasy. "Who's that, Mr. Stripes?"

The cat fixed me with a how-the-fuck-should-I-know look. Which only left one method of finding out: answering it. I lifted Mr. Stripes off my lap, the cat not looking very impressed at losing the warm lap he'd spent so long kneading to get into tip-top shape. I'd stayed in my human form since getting home from the gym, so all I had to do was answer the door.

I pulled it open to find Jacob standing on my doorstep, the sight immediately making my heart sing. Had he brought Randall here? A quick scan of the empty corridor said he hadn't.

"Can I come in?" Jacob asked.

I nodded, standing back so he could come inside and then shutting the door behind him. Jacob immediately headed to the sofa, removing his shoes, and sitting on it cross-legged. "I was going to visit Melissa, but I couldn't face her telling me I told you so. I figure that can wait until work on Monday. Or maybe if I don't say anything, I can get away with it. Although she's like a sniffer dog. Only instead of sniffing out drugs or cadavers, she can sniff out drama. And if she can't, she usually makes her own. Anyway..." Jacob said in a falsely cheery voice, "I came here instead, so I'd appreciate it if you don't say I told you so. Although you can't really, because I don't

remember you saying anything about him. You're more of the strong, silent type."

"Him?" I resumed my seat on the sofa, mirroring Jacob's pose so we were facing each other.

"Randall," Jacob said without further explanation.

I studied him. He wasn't his usual cheerful self, his eyes duller and his shoulders sagging. If Mr. Stripes looked like that, I would have taken him straight to the vet. Did I need to take Jacob? Not to the vet, obviously, but to the hospital. "What happened? Did he not turn up?"

"He turned up," Jacob said. "Late, but he turned up. Him being twenty minutes late should have been my first clue. Especially when I didn't get so much as an apology."

"Didn't the date go well?"

"Date!" Jacob said the word like it had offended him. He hung his head to stare at his lap, and I had to resist the urge to stroke my fingers through his curls. You didn't stroke humans like a cat. Jacob had told me that himself. "I'm an idiot, Val."

"You're not."

When he lifted his gaze to mine, he was laughing. But it wasn't like any laugh I'd seen from him before. It was angry and dark. Almost demonic, ironically. "I don't know whether to be upset or angry."

"Both?" I suggested. "I don't think you have to choose."

Jacob nodded. "Maybe. And I don't know if I'm more annoyed at him or myself. Why am I like this?"

"Like what?"

"Like..." He shook his head like he was struggling to find the right words. "I fixate on things. I see something shiny and pretty and I decide I have to have it. And half the time, it's not even that shiny and pretty, but I'm so focused on getting it I'm blind to its faults. I did it with a car once. It was bright pink, and I decided that's what was missing from my life, like everything would be perfect if I just owned that car."

“Did you get it?”

He laughed, but it was that same dark laugh. “I did. I took out a loan. It broke down within six months because inside that pretty, pink exterior was a cobbled together mass of old parts that were all on their last legs.”

There were a lot of words I didn’t understand there. Such as how the parts of a car could have legs, never mind more than one pair, but as it didn’t seem like the right time to ask, I settled for a nod.

“The car ended up going to the scrapyard because it would have cost far too much to fix, and I was left paying off the loan for another eighteen months with no car to show for it.” Jacob ran his hand through his hair. “That. That’s what I do. And I do it with people as well. Not all the time. I mean, I’ve had boyfriends, so I can’t have dreadful taste *all* the time. But far more times than a man of my age should. I should have grown out of the I licked it, so it’s mine stage, shouldn’t I?”

Things were yours if you licked it? Why had no one told me this? I would have grabbed Jacob and licked him weeks ago if I’d known that. Was it too late? What happened if two people licked the same thing, though? Did you fight for it? I’d happily fight for Jacob, and most humans were smaller than me, so they’d have a job beating me.

“You don’t have a clue what I’m talking about, do you?” Jacob finally said.

“Not really,” I admitted. “Number seven on the list of things that make a good friend was the ability to listen, though, and I think I’m doing that well.”

Jacob laughed again. This time it was a normal laugh, genuine humor filtering through. “Oh Val, what am I going to do with you? You see, this is why I came here. I knew you’d make me feel better. Once I’d decided that visiting Melissa wasn’t a good idea, it was coming here, or going home and eating my bodyweight in ice cream. And yes, I know ice cream isn’t on my diet plan, but that doesn’t really matter anymore.” He sighed. “Okay. Let me try to explain this to you. Randall is a pink car.”

“Like a...” I sought for the cultural reference I needed. I’d watched a lot of TV in the first month that I’d had this apartment. “Like a transformer? Those robots that can change into a vehicle?” I reached out and patted Jacob on the knee. “I’m sorry Randall’s a robot. I couldn’t tell either if that’s any consolation.”

Jacob let out a loud snort. “Randall’s not a robot. That’s a metaphor. Like someone having a heart of stone, or the snow being a white blanket. The heart isn’t really made of stone and the snow isn’t really a blanket. I just meant that I did the same thing with Randall as I did with that car. I took one look at the flashy exterior and decided I had to have it, when what I should have done was lift the boot and have a look inside.”

“Randall has a boot? Wait. Right... Metaphor.”

“Exactly,” Jacob agreed. “At least I didn’t take a loan out this time. The only damage is to my pride.” Mr. Stripes chose that moment to jump on Jacob’s lap, putting his paws on his chest and rubbing his head against Jacob’s chin. Jacob smiled at him and tickled him under the chin. “We don’t need men, do we, Mr. Stripes?”

While I was glad that Randall had fallen out of favor with Jacob, it felt like I was missing a huge chunk of the story. “What happened to change your mind about him?”

Jacob sighed. “He didn’t like me. Not really. He thought I was offering him a no-strings fuck, and while he would have put a bag over my head and gone for that...” He caught the look on my face. “He wouldn’t really have put a bag over my head. It was just my way of getting across him not finding me at all attractive. But yeah, he wasn’t interested in anything more than a fuck.”

“How could he not find you attractive?”

Jacob smiled. “That’s the perfect thing to say. You’re getting better at this, but trust me, he gave me a long list of things that were wrong with me.”

“There’s nothing wrong with you.”

“I’m too short.”

“For what? Does he need things reaching for him? He can get them himself.”

“My hair’s too curly.”

“Your hair’s perfect. I like the curls.”

“He doesn’t like my glasses.”

“He doesn’t have to wear them. And if you didn’t wear glasses, you wouldn’t do that cute thing that you do.”

Jacob’s brow furrowed. “What cute thing?”

“That thing where they slip off and you push them back on. Except sometimes when you’re thinking hard, you think they’re slipping off when they’re not and you push them back on, anyway. Sometimes I can predict when you’re about to do it.”

Jacob lifted his hand as if he was going to do that exact thing, his hand freezing halfway to his face. “Now, I’m going to be self-conscious about doing it.”

I reached across, lining up my index finger with the bridge of his nose and prodding his glasses more firmly on. “That’s okay. I can do it for you.”

Jacob blinked a few times. “That’s... yeah...” He shook his head. “Anyway... going back to what I was saying about the car, Randall is the same. If you take away the muscles, what have you got left?”

I knew that one. There was a whole page on human anatomy in my encyclopedia, and I’d had to study it as well for my personal trainer certification. “Bones,” I announced proudly.

“I’ll tell you what you have left. A man who isn’t very bright, isn’t very nice given all the stuff he said to me, and who really isn’t all that.” Jacob sniffed, lifting his chin higher and studying the corner of the room in such detail that I turned to check the pigeon wasn’t back.

“Not bones then,” I said.

He frowned. “I was being less literal than that.”

“Right.”

His gaze came back my way, his sigh seeming to come all the way from his toes. “I’m twenty-six, Val. I should have things sorted by now.”

“What things?”

“Love... and life... and friends.”

“What’s wrong with your friends?”

“Well...” Jacob ran a self-conscious hand through his hair, tousling the unruly curls even more. “I don’t have that many for a start. And the ones I have, I’m not always convinced, are really my friends. Take Melissa, for example, she says she’s my friend, but she can be a bit...”

“A bit what?”

“I don’t know. I’m probably just being stupid.” He tried for a smile, but it only lasted a couple of seconds.

“You have me.”

“Yeah, I do!” Jacob’s gaze lingered on me and then flittered away, like he was uncomfortable about something. “And I’m doing it again.”

“Doing what?”

“Fixating on something I shouldn’t.”

I looked behind me, but there was nothing there. Did he mean me? *Oh please, let him mean me.*

By the time I turned back around, Jacob was on his feet and had already put his shoes back on. “I should go. Before I make a fool of myself for the second time in one night.”

But I didn’t want him to go. Now that Randall was out of the picture, there were no obstacles between us. Well, apart from me being a demon and him being human, and me possibly having to return to Hell soon, and Jacob having just confessed that he had a habit of wanting things that looked great on the surface but were a mess inside and me not wanting to be on that list. Apart from that, though, there was no reason we couldn’t be more than friends.

He headed to the door. “Thanks Val. You’ve been a great friend tonight.”

He got as far as having his hand on the door handle before I found words. “You make my palms sweat, my heart race, and my cock as hard as steel.”

For a moment, neither of us moved. Me, because I was watching Jacob, and him because he seemed to have forgotten how the door worked. “What?” he said without turning around. It had been a trying night for him and door handles could be tricky.

A strange feeling settled in my chest, something thick and cloying that threatened to turn all my internal organs into mush. “I didn’t say anything.”

Letting go of the door handle altogether, Jacob turned, his expression one I hadn’t seen before, which made it impossible to interpret. “No... you did. You said I make your palms sweat.”

I held my hands up in front of me, palms up, and studied them. “It’s hot in here. The central heating system still confuses me and Mr. Stripes was on my lap before you knocked. He’s like a furry furnace.”

Jacob came a couple of steps closer. “You said I make your heart race.”

“Probably just indigestion. Human food is spicier than I’m used to.”

A couple more steps brought Jacob back to where he’d started, right in front of me. “You said I make your cock as hard as steel.” He dropped his gaze to my crotch, my cock obligingly pushing at the front of my shorts to get closer to Jacob.

“I get my words confused. You know that. I probably didn’t mean steel.”

Jacob tipped his head to one side and studied me. “No? What did you mean?”

“Marshmallow?” I offered hopefully.

“I make your cock as hard as marshmallow?” There was an amused glint in Jacob’s eye now. “So... I make you soft. I repulse you. Is that what you’re trying to say?”

“No! Of course not. There’s nothing repulsive about you. You’re perfect.”

“So... do I make your hard, or don’t I?”

“I don’t know.”

A snort of laughter erupted from Jacob. “Val, just tell me the truth. Either way, it’s fine.”

“Is it?”

He nodded.

I studied my toes. They were very interesting, human toes. Not wildly different from demon toes, but different enough. “I...”

“The truth, Val.” Jacob sounded unusually bossy. I squeezed my eyes shut, so I didn’t have to look at him. “I’m not a car. At least, I don’t think I’m a car.”

“You’re not a car,” Jacob agreed. “You’re a sexy demon.”

I opened one eye. “Sexy?”

“I noticed, okay.” Jacob sounded unusually defensive. “Only, I’d already set my sights on Randall and Melissa had just told me I was fickle, so I figured I couldn’t switch my affections that quickly.”

“You have affections?”

“Do you even know what that word means?”

“Not really.”

Jacob planted his hand in the middle of my chest and pushed. If I hadn’t wanted to give in to it, there wouldn’t have been anything he could have done about it. Not when I was far stronger than he was. But it was Jacob, so I acted as if he had the strength of ten men and obediently fell back on the sofa, Mr. Stripes diving out of the way in the nick of time. I was glad I’d given in when Jacob immediately climbed on the sofa

and straddled me, his hands resting on my shoulders and his ass pressing against my cock. “Definitely steel,” Jacob said. “And affection for the record means I like you, too.”

“Even though I’m a demon?”

“Even though you’re a demon. Or...” Jacob looked thoughtful. “Maybe because you’re a demon.”

“What happens now?” I asked.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Tonight had been an absolute pile of shit. Until it wasn't. Until I had a man—a demon if you wanted to be pedantic—telling me I made him as hard as steel. He might have tried to take the words back, but there was no disputing it, not with that rod of steel pressing insistently against my backside. Was it awful to go on a date with one man and then climb on top of another within an hour? If it was, I'd settle for being awful. Because I'd already set the wheels in motion, and my insides were swimming with lust. And yes, it was sex again, but there was no comparing the two situations. Val and I already knew each other. We'd talked about anything and everything. I already knew he liked me for me. I just hadn't realized he wanted me because I was blind or stupid. Probably both.

“We do whatever feels good,” I said in answer to Val asking what happened next. “If you want to, that is?”

Val nodded, his hands coming to rest on my hips.

“What happened to you not being bothered about sex?” I narrowed my eyes at him. “Was that a lie?”

Val shook his head. “I wasn't that bothered about it in Hell. I guess I'm into humans, not demons.” He frowned. “No, that's not right. I'm into you. Just you.”

Sheer pleasure robbed me of the ability to speak for at least a minute. What man didn't want someone expressing that you were the only one they desired? How had I gone from Randall telling me all my shortcomings to that in such a brief space of time?

“Is that alright, Jacob?” There was a furrow of concern on Val’s brow.

“That,” I said, “Is more than alright.” I leaned forward slightly, his broad chest as solid as a wall beneath my hands. “Do demons kiss?”

“Not usually,” Val said. “They’re more about the fucking.”

I inched forward a bit more, close enough that Val could feel my breath feathering across his lips. “Okay. Different question. Do *you* kiss?”

“I haven’t before, which is not to say that it wouldn’t be something—”

He let out an “oomph” of surprise as I ran out of patience and tipped forward to press my lips to his. For someone who hadn’t been sure they wanted to kiss, Val got into it remarkably fast, giving as good as he got as I set about exploring his mouth with my tongue. At some point while we kissed, his hands moved from my hips to my ass, the two of us in complete agreement about grinding our lower bodies together, the friction on my cock nothing short of blissful.

It didn’t take long before kissing wasn’t enough and I abandoned Val’s lips to slide down his body until I knelt on the carpet between those magnificent thighs of his. I pushed them wider, Val obediently lifting his hips as I tugged the waistband of his shorts down, his underwear coming with it. There was nothing in the way of me admiring his cock now. And there was a lot of it to admire.

“I’ve dreamed about this,” Val said conversationally, only the slight breathiness of his voice giving him away. Well, that and how hard his cock was, Val aroused enough that his dick was flushed with blood.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” he said. “In my dreams, you have a filthy mouth.”

“Do I?” I smiled, my eyes still fixed on his cock, my ass throbbing just at the thought of taking it. “Is that something you like?”

“Maybe.”

A shudder ran through Val as I wrapped my hand around his cock, giving it an exploratory stroke. “What kind of things do I say?”

“All sorts of things about what you want to do to me, and what you want me to do to you.”

“Well... at the moment, the only thing I can think about is getting a taste of this.” I gave his cock a little shake to punctuate exactly what this was in case he was in any doubt.

“Please...” was all Val had to say.

I leaned forward, letting my tongue play over the sensitive glans. Val tasted of sweat and musk, but underlying that there was a sweetness like he feasted on pineapple. “Jelly Babies,” I said with a laugh. “You taste like Jelly Babies.” I gave it another lick before lifting my gaze to Val’s. “I licked it, so it’s mine.”

A fierce heat burned in Val’s eyes, giving the impression that despite being in his human form, the demon was fighting to come out. “It’s yours,” he said. “Yours to lick. Yours to make come. Yours to ride.”

Oh, fuck yeah. I wanted to do all those things, and I wanted to do them all a second time before the first had even happened. Which made little sense, but was the best way I could think of to describe the anticipatory desire that had overtaken my body.

“Suck me,” Val demanded. I could no more have denied him than I could have got up and walked out. He was a lot to wrap my lips around, the sweet taste only growing stronger the longer I sucked. A man could get addicted to the taste of Val’s pre-cum. I already was. My fingernails dug into Val’s thighs as I struggled to take him deeper, but he didn’t seem to care, his groans only growing louder. His fingers, meanwhile, were in my hair. Those curls that Randall had said he didn’t like, Val couldn’t seem to get enough of, the slight tug only making my cock throb more.

My plan hadn't been to make Val come, but then all my plans were going awry tonight, so the hot gush of liquid hitting the back of my throat shouldn't have surprised me. It didn't disappoint me either as I swallowed, licking up the drops of cum that had escaped from my lips, Val's massive body still twitching with tiny aftershocks of pleasure. "How was—?"

I didn't have time to finish my question as Val's hands hooked beneath my armpits and lifted me like I weighed nothing. My entire body was briefly off the ground before I found myself on my back on the thick rug I'd convinced Val to buy when we'd been sorting out his apartment. I had a few seconds to contemplate what a great purchase it had been while he stripped me out of my clothes with hurried movements that said getting me naked constituted numbers one, two, and three on his to do list. I cooperated wherever I could, his heated gaze saying he appreciated every inch of bare skin he uncovered.

"Hey," I said, a smile coming to my lips. "I guess you get to reap the benefits of the last few weeks of exercise. You know, enjoy the fruits of your labor."

Val ran a hand down the length of my chest, goosebumps breaking out wherever he touched. "I liked you before."

Only four words, but they meant the world to me. They also showed how stupid I'd been to attempt to remake myself for someone like Randall. But then if I hadn't, we'd never have met, so maybe stupidity wasn't all bad. "I might come off the diet plan," I said. "I miss cake. And chips. And Pizza. And..." Wait! Why was I indulging in food porn when there was actual porn going on? "Concentrate, Jacob," I said out loud.

Val lifted his head from where he'd been examining my toes. I had no idea why my toes were so interesting. "Will you stop going to the gym?" he asked.

I thought about it. Stop watching Val's muscles strain as he lifted heavy weights? Give up watching the flex of his glutes as he bent over to pick up a dumbbell? Stop listening to the decidedly sexual sounding grunt when he really exerted

himself? I'd rather die than give any of that up. Now I thought about it, my attentions had switched from Randall to Val a long time ago. I just hadn't been sensible enough to admit it. "No."

Val's smile said he was pleased. Not that I had much time to contemplate it when he'd lifted my ankle and popped my big toe in his mouth. "Oh," I said, "That's..." He sucked harder, and it surprised me to find I liked it. "I've never had my toes sucked before." Val didn't answer on account of his mouth being full of toe. He worked his way through all the toes on my left foot before releasing it, and starting in on my right foot. "You're very thorough," I said, my hand drifting to my cock to stroke it as he repeated his actions with the toes that hadn't already become intimately acquainted with his tongue. "Which is good. Nothing wrong with being thorough. I commend it."

Once he'd sucked all ten toes, Val stood, the sight of him stripping off all his clothes hot enough to make my mouth water. I'd seen most of him already. He sometimes took his shirt off when he was training, and the shorts he wore to the gym lived up to their name. And of course, I'd just sucked his cock, but seeing it altogether was something else. He was hewn out of marble, all sculpted flesh, and muscles on top of muscles. "Holy shit!" I winced at the word that had slipped out. "Sorry." I came up on my elbows to get a better look, Val's cock hard again. "But, Jesus!" *Fuck!* "Sorry. I just can't help myself."

Val grinned as he crouched down. Fingers curled around my hip and he flipped me as easily as if I'd been a burger on a barbecue. Huge hands palmed my ass cheeks, only the fact that my mouth was full of rug stopping me from uttering more religious epithets. How did he know ass play was my thing? Could demons read minds? It was probably way too late to ask after knowing him for weeks. "Please," I tried to say, but it came out as nothing more than a strangled noise.

He massaged my ass cheeks and then pulled them apart, baring me to his gaze. I lifted my head from the rug. "You better have lube."

“Lube?”

Holy Christ! This couldn't be happening. At least I'd only said that one in my head. I needed him in me. What I didn't need was to spend time explaining what lube was. “My jacket pocket,” I said quickly. “That, and condoms.” Yes, I'd taken some for a date with Randall. Sue me. It wasn't like I'd been averse to screwing around with him. I'd just expected a bit of romance first. Or at the very least, for him not to be a total bastard. And having them on me hadn't meant I had to use them. It just meant that I was a good boy who practiced safe sex.

Val was back within seconds, frowning down at the two sachets he held in his hand. I might have asked what they'd used in Hell, but that meant conversation and I was way past that point. “Sticky,” I said. “Helps big things go in small places more easily.” In case he still wasn't getting it, I waved a hand at his cock. “Big thing.” And then twisted my wrist to point at my upturned ass. “Small thing.”

“Pretty thing,” Val said as he knelt at my side, the packet of lube somehow already open and smeared across his fingers. At the first exploratory touch of his fingers against my hole, I buried my face back in the rug and gave myself up to whatever he wanted to do to me. Which was a lot, apparently, Val exhibiting the same thoroughness as he had with my toes, only with a lot more nerve-endings being involved.

He started by circling his thumb around the sensitive skin, the gentle caress going on for so long that I thought I might crawl out of my skin before he was done. Either that or come all over the rug. “In,” I said.

“In,” Val repeated, the tip of one finger penetrating me with such exquisite care I didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Remembering what he'd said about his dreams, I didn't hold back on what I wanted to say, figuring I'd like saying it and he'd like hearing it. “Want you to fuck with me with those big fingers of yours. As many as you can get up there. As deep as you can get them. Fuck me with them until I forget my name.”

Val said nothing, but I could feel his coiled tension. It was easy to take the first finger, Val locating my prostate with surprising speed for someone who had claimed to prefer reading over sex. Two fingers took a bit more work, the stretch a sweet pain that had me panting as he used them to fuck me with metronomic efficiency. “Three,” I demanded. “Stretch me, so I can take your cock.”

Lips landed on my shoulder, kissing their way up my neck until they reached my ear, Val still maintaining that delicious friction with his fingers buried deep inside me. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Hurt me,” I said, barely aware of what I was saying, my cock so hard that there was a distinct possibility of me drilling through the floor to the flat below. “I don’t mind when it hurts soooo good.” I pushed back against him, punctuating my words by doing some of the work. An ex of mine had once commented that he didn’t recognize me in the bedroom, that I transformed from Clark Kent into Superman. Well, I would endeavor to be Superman for Val and take those fingers of his.

It took some maneuvering, but eventually Val worked a third finger into me. “God, yes,” I said. And then, “Sorry.” I cried out as his fingers slid over my prostate again. The next few minutes were about nothing except moaning and muttering gibberish as Val worked me over, giving me everything I could have asked for and more. Randall would never have spent so much time on me. I bet he was the sort who bent you over the sofa, hammered away at you for a few minutes and left you with the challenge of whether you could make yourself come before he did.

“Cock,” I finally said. “Now.”

If Val had any issue with being bossed around by me, he didn’t say so, his fingers slipping free from my ass to leave a residual ache behind that begged to be filled. A heavy weight settled on my back, the foil square in my peripheral vision bringing me back down to Earth with a bump. “Wait!” Val froze, with the blunt head of his cock pressing against my hole. “Do demons have diseases? Like sexually transmitted

ones? Can you pass them onto humans? That's why we usually use condoms."

There was a slight pause, neither of us moving. "No," Val finally said. "Demons can't catch diseases or pass them on."

I reached behind me, grabbing onto Val's hip and urging him forward. "Then what are you waiting for? Fuck me. Fuck me into the middle of next week."

"The middle of...?" I could hear the confusion in Val's voice. I needed to remember to speak in simple terms, especially when there were far more important things to worry about than language lessons, like me getting fucked for the first time in months. Okay, it was over a year, which might account for my level of desperation, but really, who was counting? "Never mind. I swear if you don't fuck me in the next three seconds, I'm going to—"

"You're going to what?"

"I'll probably cry."

"Don't cry," Val said. "I wouldn't like that at all."

I might have responded if he hadn't eased himself into me, presumably to stop me from crying.

"Holy Mary, mother of Christ!" I said, as the thick head of his cock breached me. He was bigger than three fingers, which I'd sort of known but chosen not to dwell on.

"Jacob," Val said, "if you could refrain from naming blasphemous deities, I'd very much appreciate it."

"Yeah, sure," I said. "They just keep slipping out. Unlike your cock, because that bad boy is going nowhere."

It wasn't, my eyes watering behind my glasses as Val gradually introduced the full length of it into my ass. "You know when I said I licked it, so it's mine?"

Val made a sound of agreement. "What about it?"

"Nothing. I just wanted to check you remembered, because it definitely and indisputably is."

"Okay."

And then I stopped talking, stopped even thinking about anything except the extreme pleasure being wrought on my body as Val fucked me with a dedication that deserved to be lauded by some sort of prize, should such a thing exist. Maybe it did in Hell. If they could give prizes for torture, they could give prizes for fucking. The deep thrusts had my ass tipping up to take more and my fingers clenching in the rug. Val's fingers dug into my hips to hold me still. Not that I was going anywhere. I was perfectly happy impaled on a demon's monster cock.

Val let out a sound, my befuddled mind latching onto it. "Did you just growl?"

"Sorry."

"No. Don't apologize. I liked it. It was animalistic. It was ___"

Val finished the sentence for me. "Demonic."

"Well..." My glasses flew off with the force I was being fucked, but I was beyond caring. Seeing was overrated, anyway. "You should never try to be something you're not. Look at me and the gym, and where that got me." Except, it had got to me this point, hadn't it? The point at which all my Christmases had come at once and I was being fucked senseless by a man who oozed testosterone. Which kind of rendered my point null and void. But it was unrealistic to expect me to make sense when all the blood had abandoned my brain for my cock.

Val pulled me up onto my knees, his chest plastered against my back. Yeah, I had no problems with this position. Mind, he could have probably hung me from the lampshade and I wouldn't have complained. He growled again, and I shuddered. It was a deep, guttural growl that said he wasn't to be messed with. It seemed I wasn't the only one who took on a new persona in the bedroom. Gentle Val became a growling stud with a cock like a piston, and I was here for it, here for him to use me like a rag doll should the urge take him.

His hand slipped to my cock as he continued to spear me with thrusts that drove me ever closer to the peak. I almost

feared the orgasm this sexual interlude was going to end in, because I didn't doubt that it was going to be intense in the best possible way.

He growled again, his hips snapping faster and the speed of his hand increasing on my cock. I turned my head, Val instinctively knowing what I wanted, what I needed, his lips coming down on mine in a possessive kiss that had me never wanting to be anywhere but here, and for this never to end. The stroke of his hand was too good, though, my balls already drawing up tight. I came with a gasp into Val's mouth, the orgasm just as intense as I'd expected it to be. Only his arms stopped me from pitching forward as I shot into the firm grasp of his hand, Val continuing to stroke me through it.

When Val came, we both tumbled forward onto the rug, Val's weight lying heavy on me as his frame was wracked with the spasms and aftershocks of a second orgasm. Completely satiated, I closed my eyes.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I carefully rolled Jacob onto his back, my friend/lover having gone unusually quiet. He didn't seem to have any injuries, save for a few bruises where I'd gripped him too tightly. He'd seemed to like that, though. Or at least that was the assumption I'd made when he'd offered no complaints and pushed back against me every time I'd slackened my grip, like he was afraid I'd let go.

Jacob's curls were damp with sweat as I stroked my fingers through them, but no less attractive for it. I might even have liked them more. "Jacob?" He made a sleepy little sound that was nothing short of adorable, but didn't open his eyes. I gave him a little shake and repeated his name. His eyelids fluttered before finally opening, and he smiled up at me. That smile. It reminded me of that first night when he'd discovered I was a demon, and how much I'd yearned to taste it.

I dipped my head, unable to resist the temptation, Jacob's lips curling more as I tasted one corner of his mouth before moving to the other side. "What are you doing?"

"Tasting your smile."

"You can't taste a smile."

"You can, and I did. And it's just as sweet as I knew it would be."

He lifted a hand to my face, his fingers tracing my jaw before moving to my cheek. "I'm sorry I chased after a pretty idea and was blind to what was right in front of me. You're better than Randall in every single way."

I rolled onto my back, dragging Jacob with me so that he sprawled across my chest, his breath feathering my nipple. “I did try to tell you that.”

Jacob lifted his head, his expression curious. “When?”

I kept stroking his curls, loving the feel of them beneath my fingertips. “When we were in the gym and you kept talking about Randall’s thighs, and Randall’s chest, and how much weight Randall can lift. I pointed out that I was bigger and better in all those areas.”

“Sorry,” Jacob said. “Like I said, I get fixated on something and then that’s all I can think about, whether it’s worth thinking about or not. Until I realize what a disaster it is, and move on to the next thing.” His gaze drifted down my chest and he let out a low whistle as he got to my cock. “You came twice. How can you still be hard?” His expression held a mixture of amazement and wonder. “Is it a demon thing?”

I lifted my head to study Jacob’s cock. Unlike mine, it had shrunk down to a fraction of the size it had been previously. I ran my fingers over it, Jacob laughing like it tickled. “It’s cute,” I said. “Like a little pink grub.”

That elicited a snort from Jacob. “Yeah, well, keep doing that and the little pink grub will grow back into a...”

I helped him out. “A mighty pole.”

“I think there’s only one of us packing a mighty pole, and it’s not me.” Jacob studied it for a few moments. “But seriously, does it ever go down?”

I lifted my head to join him in studying my cock. “I don’t know. I didn’t really have sex in Hell, remember? And when I did, it wasn’t usually me doing the fucking.”

“Have I ever told you,” Jacob said, with a wicked glint in his eye, “what a big proponent I am of a good old-fashioned scientific experiment? I vote we test how many orgasms it takes.” I didn’t get a chance to offer a response, Jacob already sliding down my body. Not that I would have put up much of a protest. While he wrapped his fingers around my cock to take it in his mouth again, I marveled at how easy it had been to

keep my human form during sex. It seemed that when it came to Jacob, I'd do anything to make him happy. Which was... Well, it was scary and exciting in equal measure. I'd wanted to come to the surface to experience the museums and the parks, and all the wildlife. I'd never factored in meeting a human who would make all those things seem dull and drab in comparison unless he was there to share them with me.



JACOB HAD SURPRISED me post-Randall by keeping up his gym sessions. We did fewer weights now that he'd given up on bulking up, and the diet plan had fallen by the wayside, but he'd admitted to cardio making him feel better. And his efforts had come a long way since that first disastrous attempt. Take today, for instance. He'd been on the treadmill for at least fifteen minutes without stopping and at a far greater speed than the one that had had him careening off the machine and into my arms.

If it wasn't for having a client, a perky secretary in her early forties with a steadfast determination to keep her butt looking like she was still in her early twenties, I would have been over by Jacob, offering encouragement or simply basking in the warmth of his smile. Instead, I had to make do with the occasional glance in his direction.

“Is that your boyfriend?” Bridget asked.

I jerked my gaze back to her to find her studying me with a slight smile on her face. “What? Who?”

The smile grew wider. “The guy you can't take your eyes off? Either you're an item or you'd like to be.”

Was he my boyfriend? We hadn't exactly put a label on what we were doing, which was mostly fucking as much as we could any time of the day or night. I knew humans had lots of labels that demons rarely bothered with: friend, boyfriend, girlfriend, husband, wife. Demons either were together or

weren't. Sure, my parents were bonded, but there was nothing official in terms of the language of it, or through any kind of ceremonial event. Therefore, I shouldn't need to be bonded to Jacob in any way other than by us spending time together and sharing our bodies.

"I don't know," I answered honestly.

"You don't know?" Bridget sounded outraged. She snapped her fingers. "Sugar, if he's giving you the runaround, you need to kick his ass to the curb. Don't be taking no shit from no one, no matter how cute he might be." She gave Jacob a long, lingering look. "And he is cute, with that hair and those glasses, but you need to look after number one, you hear?"

I heard her. I didn't understand all of what she was saying, but I got the general gist. "He's not like that. Jacob's sweet. Sweeter than Jelly Babies. We just haven't discussed what we are to each other."

Bridget put her hands on her waist. "You want anyone else?" I shook my head. "Does he?" I shook my head again. I wasn't worried about Jacob's self-confessed habit of moving on to the next thing. We were different. I knew we were. Because from what Jacob had told me, most of his fixations had been very much one-sided, like Randall, whereas I was very much on the same page as he was. "Does he stay over at your place?" I nodded. "You spend most of your time together?" Another nod. "Then, sugar, he's your boyfriend." She tutted loudly. "Honestly, modern men. And I thought it was just the straight men that didn't have a clue." She laughed. "Turns out it's all of them."

We went back to doing what we were supposed to be doing, Bridget giving me a nice top-up of suffering as I led her through a series of exercises. We'd taken a quick break, and I was putting the weights back on the rack when she paused from drinking water to come and stand next to me. "Looks like your maybe boyfriend is getting some shit in case that's something that interests you?"

I followed her gaze to the water fountain. Jacob was there, and next to him was... Randall, my face immediately settling

into a scowl. Randall had one hand braced against the wall, and I didn't have to be human to recognize the pose as one that reeked of intimidation. That, and the sneer on his face, said that whatever he was saying to Jacob wasn't all that nice. And he'd already said more than enough nasty things to him.

"I have to—"

Bridget waved my excuse away. "I'm tired today, anyway. Let's end our session early and I can do my own stretches. You deal with Mr. I don't take steroids, honest."

With the gym being about as busy as it ever got, it took longer than I'd have liked before I got close enough to hear what was being said. Once I had, it did nothing to appease the feeling of my blood boiling at Randall even daring to speak to Jacob after all the stuff he'd already said to him during their not-date.

"Go away," Jacob said. "I have nothing to say to you."

"Don't be like that," Randall said. "The other night was just a bit of fun."

Jacob's mouth dropped open. "Fun! For who, exactly? And when was the fun part? Because, let me see... I wasn't having fun when you were twenty minutes late and didn't see fit to apologize. I wasn't having fun when you were ogling the waitress's boobs like I didn't even exist. And I certainly wasn't having fun when you told me all the things you didn't like about me. Which, incidentally, makes me wonder why you're over here speaking to me." He pointed at his head. "My hair's still curly." He pushed his glasses back on his nose in that gesture I loved so much. "I still wear glasses. And"—he crossed his arms over his chest and stared at the bigger man belligerently—"I haven't grown a single inch."

"I tell you what," Randall said, as if he hadn't been listening to a single word Jacob had said. "I'm prepared to let bygones be bygones and let you suck my cock."

Jacob narrowed his eyes at Randall. "I wouldn't suck your cock if it was a hundred degrees outside and covered in ice cream."

Randall took a step toward Jacob. “You little—”

He didn't get to finish his thought as I stepped between them. In Hell, I'd been a meek and mild demon. I was always the one who stayed out of trouble, who was prepared to cede control if it meant leading a relatively quiet existence. But just like with sex, Jacob seemed to bring out the animal in me, and I could no more stand by and watch him be insulted than I could chop off my tail. The growl that came out of me as I faced Randall down had Jacob smiling, and Randall looking unsure of himself.

I grabbed a handful of his T-shirt and drove him back against the wall. “You don't speak to him, do you hear? You had your chance with him and you blew it. He's not too short. He's the perfect height. I like his glasses and I love his curly hair. Jacob's a wonderful man. Far too good for the likes of you.” I prayed that Bobby's attention was elsewhere, and that no one alerted him to one of his personal trainers backing a customer against the wall. Bobby had always been a fair boss, but I'd never really tested how far that stretched.

Randall opened his mouth without anything coming out of it, his brow knitting in confusion.

Jacob nudged my arm. “Tell him what you'll do to him if he ignores you and bothers me again.”

“Listen,” Randall said. He grabbed my wrist and tried to remove it from his T-shirt, but he may as well have been trying to push a wall over with his bare hands. I could see when he realized how much stronger I was than him, his fingers falling away and a bead of sweat appearing on his brow.

I leaned closer to him the way I'd seen other demons do when they weren't happy about something. “If you come anywhere near Jacob again, I'll...” What would I do? So far, I'd been operating on pure instinct, but it wasn't like I had a lot of experience in making threats.

Jacob leaned up on his tiptoes and whispered into my ear. “Tell him you'll rip his dick off and eat it.”

“Really?” I whispered back. “That seems a bit extreme. I get to cook it first, right?”

“Threats have to be extreme,” Jacob said. “They don’t work if they’re not. And it’s not like you’re really going to do it. He just needs to believe you will.”

“I know, but...”

“Okay... wait.” Jacob thought hard. “Not that then. You’ll punch him so hard he’ll still be feeling it six months from now. You’ll rip his tongue out so he can never say bad things to anyone again. You’ll break both his knee caps so he’ll be left crawling on the floor. You’ll stick a broken bottle up his ass and twist it.” Which one of us was a demon? The lines were starting to blur. Pleasure dawned on Jacob’s face as another idea came to him. “You’ll—”

“Okay. Okay. I get it,” Randall interjected.

I’d almost forgotten he was there. I turned back to him to find the single drop of sweat on his brow had multiplied. His face twisted. “You can call your murder twink off. I’m getting the message loud and clear. I won’t say so much as one word to either of you again. Trust me, I don’t want to. Not when you’ve both clearly got a screw loose. I’m not stupid. I know when it’s best to give someone a wide berth.”

Jacob muttered something that involved the words, “course, you’re not,” and “himbo,” the rest unclear.

I gave Randall a little shake because it seemed like the right thing to do. “So yeah, make sure you do, or I’ll hold you down while he”—I jerked my head in Jacob’s direction—“does whatever he wants to you. *Comprende?*” I’d seen that last word used in a film about gangsters, and it seemed fitting to the scenario. Maybe I should get a gun. Although there was nowhere to keep one in my gym gear, and asking the person to wait while I went and got it out of the staff changing room seemed a little counterproductive to what I wanted to achieve.

“Yeah, I understand,” Randall said. I let go of him, but he didn’t move, the whole moment turning awkward as we stared at each other. “You should go,” I said.

Randall cleared his throat. “I can’t...” He waved a hand in the general direction of my chest. “You know...”

Right. He couldn’t get past. Not without pushing me out of the way, which he’d obviously decided wasn’t a good idea. Wise decision. Once I’d stepped out of the way, Randall wasted no time in taking off.

“Walk faster,” Jacob barked at his departing back, Randall obligingly speeding up as he headed straight for the changing rooms, his workout apparently over before it had even begun. I might have commented on it, but I had other things to think about, like Jacob flinging himself into my arms to press kisses to my face. “You were wonderful,” he said, his voice breathy.

“I didn’t really do anything.”

“You did,” he protested, his eyes shining. “You came steaming over here to rescue me, and you defended me, and you growled at him, and you grabbed him, and you didn’t let go. You were magnificent.” Having covered the rest of my face, he pressed a kiss to my lips. “No one’s ever stuck up for me like that before.”

“It’s what I’m supposed to do, right? For my...” I cleared my throat, wanting the word to be clear. “...boyfriend. Assuming that’s what we are. Boyfriends?”

The hesitation while Jacob digested the word seemed to stretch for a demon lifetime, which was a very long time indeed, far longer than a human one. But then Jacob’s smile grew wider. “Definitely.” He prodded me in the chest. “And don’t even think about trying to escape me, because I’m a murder twink, apparently.”

I still wasn’t sure what a murder twink was, but a gruff voice cutting through the air forestalled the chance to ask. “Val, a word please, in my office.”

Bobby. Shit! And he didn’t sound happy. I spent the next thirty minutes in his office, repeatedly answering yes to the question, did I understand why we don’t threaten clients in Bobby’s Fitness? And no to would I do it again? Only when Bobby finally believed me did I get to leave. I’d learned my

lesson. If anyone else threatened Jacob, I'd wait and follow them outside. There was an alley at the side of the gym.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Are you sure this is a good idea?" Val asked as we neared the restaurant where the party was taking place.

"Why wouldn't it be?" I knew he was nervous because the hand I held of his was sweaty. And this time Val's sweaty palms were nothing to do with him wanting me, because he had me, labels, and everything.

"Because these are your work colleagues, and I don't want to do anything to embarrass you in front of them."

"You won't," I said. "We've worked really hard these past couple of weeks on any scenario that could come up, and how you can make sure you don't give yourself away." We had. In between bouts of toe-tingling sex, we'd visited so many places in London that I was exhausted. Although that was probably more to do with the sex than the tourism if I was being completely honest. "This is the perfect opportunity to put it to the test before next month."

Val's face fell, and I regretted reminding him that the date of his evaluation grew ever closer. I gave his hand a squeeze. "It's going to be fine. We've still got time to iron out any problems."

"I know, but..."

"But what?" I pulled Val into a shop doorway, wanting to get this conversation out of the way before we reached the party.

"What if what we've done isn't enough? What if they still send me back?"

Something burrowed into my chest at the thought of losing Val, something sharp with serrated edges. I'd finally found a man who liked me for me, who didn't want to change me, who didn't want me to be less of something, or more of something, who was happy simply to accept Jacob Madden, flaws, quirks, and all. There was no way I was giving that up. Not for all the demons in Hell. Lucifer himself could turn up, and I wouldn't let him take Val away from me.

I shrugged, displaying a disdain for Hell's rules that I was a long way from feeling. "Then I'll have to murder someone and get sent to Hell, won't I?"

A look of alarm dawned on Val's face. He grasped me by the shoulders and turned me to face him, holding my gaze. "Don't do that! Promise me you won't. Hell's not the right place for you. It would kill me to see you there. Promise me that if things don't work out the way they should, you won't even think about getting yourself sent to Hell."

Even though his eyes were brown, they somehow managed to blaze to make him the most demon I'd ever seen him, my cock reacting to it despite the seriousness of the conversation. "I promise," I said weakly. "I was joking." *Mostly.* "Anyway..." I forced a smile. "That's not going to happen. You're going to ace the evaluation, you'll get to stay here, and everything will be fine."

"It will," Val said. He might have said it, but the words didn't ease the furrows on his brow in the slightest.

I hastened to change the subject. "What do you need to remember about this party?"

Val's frown deepened, but he politely reeled off all the things we'd discussed whilst getting ready earlier, Val looking as hot as... well, hell, in his black jeans and white shirt. "Don't talk about Hell. Don't ask people what words mean. You'll tell me later when we get home." I took a slight pause from listening to him to bask in the fuzzy glow of Val referring to his apartment as "home" for both of us. We'd spent time at mine as well, but his was bigger, and he had Mr. Whiskers and Mr. Stripes to take care of, whereas I didn't have any pets, so

it made sense to spend more time there. If I had my way, it wouldn't be long before I gave up my apartment altogether and moved in with him, but waiting until after Hell had given him the go-ahead to stay seemed like the sensible thing to do, even if it was frustrating.

Val was still talking. "Don't drink from vases. Ask for a drink if I'm thirsty. If someone looks at me strangely, I should stop talking about the current topic and switch to talking about sports or politics. Alternatively, I can compliment them on their appearance to distract them."

I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him. "You've got it, babe. You'll do fantastic and don't worry too much about my work colleagues. I don't like most of them, anyway." It was true; I didn't. There was a reason I'd befriended Melissa despite her being less than complimentary seventy-five percent of the time. The twenty-five percent when she was in a good mood was still better than never.

"None of them?" Val questioned, clearly confused. "If you don't like them, why are we even going?"

"Because..." I tugged him out of the doorway and toward the open door of the restaurant that Hargreaves & Co had hired for their annual clap-themselves-on-the-back party designed to celebrate how much profit they'd made in the past year. "Where else am I going to get to show you off? They all think I'm a complete nightmare who couldn't land a man even if they were all floating at sea and I had a net that stretched for three miles."

I was only half joking. I'd never been sure whether it was homophobia or what I'd already confessed to Val—my penchant for chasing after men who were wholly unsuitable, but they'd never hidden their negative views about me. To be honest, it didn't bother me all that much, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't keen to show off my very tall, very muscular, and very sexy new boyfriend to prove that I wasn't a complete disaster with relationships. Was that fair, though? Val meant more to me than a trinket to parade around, like he was something I'd bought in the sales. With that in mind, I came to

a stop a few feet away from the door, the party already in full swing if the music spilling out of it was any indication.

“What?” Val asked. “Is this the wrong place?”

“I should have asked if you minded being shown off. Before we got here, I mean. If you’re not happy with that, we can leave.”

Val pushed my glasses back up my nose for me, his finger lingering for a moment on the tip of my nose. “Whatever makes you happy, makes me happy, too.”

I grinned at him. “Right back at you. Unless it involves living with an entire zoo.”



VAL HAD EXCUSED himself to go to the bathroom when Melissa found me. She’d gone all out on her outfit, the metallic green dress making her look like the green triangle from a box of Quality Streets. She dragged me into a corner, her eyes wide. Although that might have had more to do with how heavy-handed she’d been in applying eyeliner and mascara. “Randall’s here,” she hissed.

“Is he?” I frowned. “Why?”

She joined in with the frowning. “I guess because he delivers parcels to the building and someone saw fit to invite him. Probably Fern.” She pushed a glass of what looked like whiskey into my hand. “Drink this. It’ll give you enough Dutch courage to throw yourself at him. You won’t get a better chance.” Melissa’s distraction for the past few weeks with a new boyfriend had never been more obvious. She spent her lunchtimes cooing to him over the phone, which to be honest, seeing as I’d been keeping a Val-sized secret, had suited me just fine. It left her somewhat out of the loop, though.

I pushed the whiskey back into her hand. “I don’t want to throw myself at Randall, thank you very much, so I won’t be

requiring that.”

She blinked. “Since when?”

“Since I met someone else.”

Her face had settled into a familiar expression of long-suffering before I’d even finished the sentence. “Who are you chasing now? I bet it’s someone just as unsuitable, isn’t it?”

“Actually—”

Melissa carried on, her dress rustling as she grew more animated. “Because the only reason I thought it would be a good idea to throw yourself at Randall is so we could be done with the whole thing.”

“It is done. It’s...”

“You see, the problem is,” Melissa continued, “that you fixate on all these big and burly men. You need to find someone a bit more realistic, like...” Her face lit up. “How about that waiter at the Italian restaurant we went to at the end of last year?”

It took me a moment to recall who she was talking about. “You mean the extremely camp one who’s only about nineteen and still lives with his parents?”

“Yeah.” Melissa nodded enthusiastically. “He’s gay.”

“So that’s your standard for me, is it? They just need to be gay?”

Melissa frowned. “I’m just trying to help. If you want, I can talk to him, ask if he’d be interested in going out on a date with you. The worst he can say is no.”

No, the worst he could say was yes. “If you’d let me get a word in edgeways, I’d be able to tell you that you don’t need to fix me up with anyone, that...” An arm snaked around my shoulders before I could finish what I was saying, Val pulling me into the heat of his body. I turned to smile up at him, and he returned it. For a moment, I was lost in his eyes, nothing existing except this marvelous man, who, despite what Melissa had said, was interested in me. I didn’t even need words to

know that. Not when it was in his eyes every time he looked at me.

A rustle of dress had me remembering Melissa's existence. I turned back to find her mouth hanging open as she stared at Val. I waved a hand in her direction. "Val, this is Melissa. She was just offering to set me up with the waiter at the Italian restaurant."

I'd expected Val to laugh. What I hadn't expected him to do was to gather me to his chest so tightly that it was difficult to breathe, the arms around my back like a vise. "No," he said clearly and firmly. "He's mine. I'm not sharing Jacob, no matter how nice the food in the restaurant is. Not even if he puts Jelly Babies in everything."

I would have given anything to see Melissa's face, but this was nice as well. Possibly a little on the tight side, but who needed oxygen when your demon boyfriend was staking a claim?

Melissa made a noise not unlike a chicken being strangled.

"Val," I said.

He hadn't finished, though. "Who's this waiter guy?" he demanded. "Why is he trying to come between me and Jacob? I licked Jacob, so he's mine. We agreed. Just like he licked my..."

I struggled free before my innocent statement had the potential to turn into either World War 3 or Val sharing things I didn't think my work colleagues would be keen on hearing. While I loved Val's possessiveness, I wasn't sure Mr. Hargreaves, either the younger or the elder, would agree. "Melissa, this is Val," I said. "My boyfriend."

"Oh! Who...? When...?" She seemed to struggle with which question she wanted to ask first. Lifting the glass of whiskey to her lips, she drained it in a couple of swallows.

"I was trying to tell you, but you weren't listening. Val was my personal trainer and now he's my boyfriend. So as for those big, burly men you said I can't get..." I threaded my fingers with Val's and offered him another smile. "Seems you

don't know everything, Mel." She hated being called Mel, so it was a deliberate dig in return for her thinking she knew everything about my love-life.

She crossed her arms over her chest and studied the toe of her shoe—green to match the dress. "Well... I'm happy for you, obviously."

"You might want to tell your face," Val said. I laughed. Melissa didn't laugh. Instead, she stared at him in a way that said she was still trying to work out whether he was real. "I'm not a car," he said.

"What Val is trying to say," I said. "Is that we're the real deal and we're very happy together, and he no more wants me dating a waiter than I want to date one."

"What happened to Randall?" Melissa's expression said she was still struggling to catch up.

"He was mean to Jacob. I threatened to cut his dick off and eat it," Val said conversationally. "That, and a few other things."

"Not cut off a few other things," I explained. "Just... you know, more general threats."

"That would explain," Melissa said, "why he just came in here, saw you two, and ran off like someone had set fire to him." She paused, her lips twitching. "Poor Randall. I bet that's a novel experience for him, falling foul of someone bigger than he is."

The rest of the party passed without incident. I got to show Val off, some of my work colleagues choking on their drink when I introduced him to them as my boyfriend. Val was generally well behaved, give or take a few things that I needed to explain. Randall was successful in avoiding us for the entire evening. Which, Val had told him not to come anywhere near me, so perhaps he was just applying himself to that with zeal and doing an excellent job of it.

As the evening wore on, though, there was only one thing I was looking forward to: going home, stripping Val's clothes

off, and reacquainting myself with the monster who lived in his trousers.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

We'd barely gotten through the door before Jacob was on me, or I was on him, or we were on each other. It didn't really matter which way round it was. Just that we were finally alone, and I didn't have to be on my best behavior any longer. I didn't have to remember what to do, or what to say. I could just touch and feel, and put my tongue in all of Jacob's interesting places. And he had an awful lot of them I never tired of exploring.

I lifted him, Jacob obligingly wrapping his legs around my waist as I drove him back against the wall. "Could you fuck me like this?" he asked between heated kisses.

"Yeah, I could."

"You're amazing," he said. "Amazingly amazing. The most amazing demon who ever lived."

I shut him up by kissing him again. Jacob liked to talk, but occasionally his mouth was better employed doing other things. Like, kissing and sucking and licking. I kissed my way down his neck because it was there and because it always tasted good.

"Val?"

"Hmmm?" I'd reached his collarbone. I undid a couple of buttons on his shirt so I could get to more of it.

"Why are you always human when we do this?"

I froze with my tongue plastered to his sharp clavicle. It took longer than it should have done to realize that I needed to retract it if I wanted to speak. "What do you mean?"

Jacob wriggled, a silent plea for me to put him down. I did, following him as he wandered into the living room. He leaned against the back of the sofa and crossed his arms over his chest. “Every time we’ve had sex, you’ve been in your human form. Why?”

“Because... I assumed you’d prefer it.”

“Huh.” Nothing else followed the sound of consideration that Jacob made for a few seconds. Finally, he nodded. “It’s my fault. We should have talked about it.” He waved a hand. “Change.”

“And then what?”

“Then we’ll carry on doing what we were doing. You’re a demon. We don’t need to pretend you’re not one.”

“That seems...” I didn’t know what it seemed. Too good to be true, maybe. “The more I do it, the easier it is to stay human. It’s not a problem.”

Jacob came toward me, planting his hands on my chest, the look on his face one I recognized: pure stubbornness. “Change.”

I changed. It was always easier to go from demon to human than it was to do it the other way around, which I supposed was to be expected when it was my natural state of being. My hair disappeared to be replaced by horns. My teeth elongated into fangs. My tail lengthened and extended, unfurling like it was desperate to show off. My skin darkened to a cherry-red color.

“Undress,” Jacob said, his bossy side coming out like it always did when we had sex. He might be happy to always be the one getting fucked, but there was no question about who was really in charge. I took my shirt off first, Jacob following my movements with an impatient gleam in his eye. Shoes and socks came next. And then finally, trousers and underwear, until I was a naked demon standing in front of him. My cock was fully hard because it was Jacob looking at me, and I was a walking erection at the best of times when it came to him.

“Oh, my... the word we don't say,” he said. “How is it bigger?”

I dropped my gaze to my cock, Jacob transfixed by it. “Is it?”

He nodded. “I am intimately acquainted with every inch of your cock and trust me, it's bigger. How come the rest of you doesn't grow, and that does?”

I shrugged. There was no answer to give when I hadn't been aware of it until he mentioned it. “I can change back.”

“Don't you dare!” Jacob said. “You're going to get yourself in that bedroom and you're going to do what you're told.”

Was I? I would, because even though I was no longer human, Jacob was still looking at me with heat in his eyes. And that was something I'd never dreamed of. I led the way to the bedroom, Jacob leaving a trail of clothes in his wake as he followed, both of us naked by the time I arranged myself on my back on the bed.

“I'm going to explore you,” Jacob said as he straddled me. “Is that okay? Can you just lay there while I do that?”

I was only half listening to him, my hands straying to those perky pink nipples of his, the urge to rub and squeeze taking over. He batted my hands away. “Do I have to tie you up?”

My cock twitched at the thought, Jacob's keen gaze zeroing in on it. “Oh really. Who's a kinky demon? You like the thought of lying there unable to move while I rub all up against you and do all manner of dirty things to you?”

I did. Not that Jacob had waited for an answer. He was already off the bed and rooting through my wardrobe. “No ties,” he said aloud. “Which makes sense, given you're a personal trainer and not a businessman. I guess gym casual doesn't require a shirt and tie. Ah, I know.” He hurried out of the bedroom, returning a minute later with two of the calisthenics bands I'd brought home to teach Jacob some toning exercises a few nights previously. He held them up with a victorious expression on his face. “These will do.”

He spent the next few minutes securing me to the headboard of the bed, the tip of his tongue poking out slightly as he concentrated on the knots. Mr. Stripes did the same thing when he was particularly focused on something. Once he'd finished, Jacob straddled me again to admire his handiwork. We both knew that if I wanted to get free, I could, but this was Jacob's game and I was willing to play along. Anything to make him happy.

"I don't know where to start," he said. He dropped forward onto my chest, his gaze focused on my lips. "I've never kissed anyone with fangs before." He laughed. "Well... obviously I haven't, given I've never met a demon and nothing else has fangs unless I'm going to start a sexual relationship with a snake, which is not on my wish list anytime soon, or at all." I didn't have time to respond, Jacob already lowering his head to fuse our lips together in an exploratory kiss. I let him take the lead, let him explore what difference it made to kissing.

When he lifted his head, there was a huge smile on his face. "Your tongue is longer."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah? And I can definitely think of a way to put that to good use," he said, his grin growing wider.

So could I. It was never a hardship to worship Jacob's hole. Forget Lucifer. Jacob's hole was a far preferable altar to kneel before. And I had. Many times.

"But..." Jacob said, breaking into my thoughts of rimming him until he was a panting mess. "Not yet."

My horns were the next focal point on his list, my old insecurities coming flooding back as he pressed a kiss to the tip of each one. "They're not that big, I'm afraid. Nowhere near as impressive as my father's or my brother's. Or my mother's, if I'm completely honest. I don't know why."

"Shhh..." Jacob pressed another kiss to the right one. "They're perfect. What happens if I suck them?"

Interesting question. "I have no idea. No one's ever wanted to."

“Let’s find out,” Jacob said, his words delivered in a seductive tone.

“Oh,” I said as his lips closed over the tip of my right horn, his tongue spiraling around it before taking it deeper. While it was nothing compared to the throbbing ecstasy of Jacob’s mouth on my cock, there was no denying the flutter of pleasure it evoked, Jacob’s tongue finding nerve-endings I hadn’t even known existed. I guessed horns could be an erogenous zone. Only once he’d treated my right horn to some prolonged attention, did he move on to the left one, spending just as much time on that one as he had the first.

The smile on his face was decidedly smug as he backed his way down my chest until he was straddling my thighs again. “Someone enjoys getting their horns sucked.”

Someone did. Jacob had just proved that beyond all doubt. “Only by you.” Which was the truth. I couldn’t imagine letting anyone else near my horns.

Jacob’s gaze strayed to where my tail lay against the duvet, the end twitching slightly. “Do you remember when I touched your tail before?”

“Yeah.” My voice had gone husky. Remember it? It had been front and center of my dreams for weeks after, while Jacob had been busy fluttering his eyelashes at Randall.

“What did it feel like?” Jacob asked, his face lighting up with curiosity. “Because from the way you reacted, anyone would think I’d stroked your cock.”

“That’s exactly what it felt like, like my tail was wired to my balls.”

“Interesting,” Jacob said, his fingers hovering above it, but not touching. Not yet, anyway. The anticipation sent a wave of lust through my body so intense that had I not been lying down, I probably would have keeled over.

“Maybe I shouldn’t touch,” Jacob said with a wicked glint in his eye. “Who knows what might happen?”

“Don’t tease,” I ground out.

Hands skimmed over my pectoral muscles, fingers tweaking my nipples before moving down to trace my abdominal muscles, Jacob never having bothered to hide his fascination with them. “Ask me nicely.”

“Please,” I said, straining at the bindings keeping me anchored to the headboard. Hard, but not hard enough to break them. “I can beg if you want?”

Jacob pretended to consider it. “Maybe later.” He bent his head forward, a curl dropping onto his forehead, the bindings bothering me for the first time when I couldn’t stroke it back.

When he finally touched my tail, that same bolt of electricity hit me, even though Jacob had only given it the slightest of touches with the tip of his finger. “Oh, father of demons!” I said, unable to hold back the epithet. How could I have lived so long and not known that it would feel like this? But then demons didn’t waste time on stroking. They fucked, and they came and then they did it again.

Jacob smirked, his eyes on my face as he circled it with his fingers and stroked it like he might my cock. “It’s so soft,” he said. “Almost like velvet.” There was wonder in his voice. He was still speaking, but I couldn’t take in what he was saying, all my senses attuned to what he was doing to my tail as he pulled it onto his lap and explored every inch.

When he lifted it to his mouth and the tip of his tongue touched it, I almost came right there and then, only immense self-control on my part stopping it from happening. Thankfully, Jacob seemed to realize how close I’d been to coming, his gaze fastening on the pre-cum oozing from my cock. “Oh, look at you,” he said, with that same note of wonder in his voice. “You’ve produced about as much pre-cum as I do cum.”

I lifted my head to look. He wasn’t wrong, Jacob’s stimulation of my tail making me gush like a geyser.

“Want me to ride you?” Jacob said. “Want me to rub the sensitive head of your cock with my hole? Want me to squeeze you tight as I take you deep in my ass?”

I'd created a monster when I'd confessed to Jacob talking dirty in my dreams, because he'd had no problems living up to it.

"Yes," I said. "Yes, yes, and yes."

"In a minute," he said. "But first..."

I didn't have to ask what Jacob meant, the change in position and the hands planted by my shoulders giving me all the information I needed about what he wanted even before his cock pressed against my lips.

I gladly opened for him, Jacob's salt and musk taste making my salivary glands tingle as he slid deeper. Bound as I was, Jacob did most of the work, fucking my mouth with wanton enthusiasm and almost making me choke a time or two when his cock lodged itself in my throat. I missed being able to touch him when he did this, my hands feeling empty without the curve of Jacob's perfectly shaped ass resting in my palms.

Jacob pulled out before he came, indulging in a quick taste of my pre-cum before adding lube. "I think," he said as he eyed my stiff cock, his fingers wrapped around the base, "that this is going to be quite the challenge."

"You don't have to," I said. "We can—"

But Jacob was already in position, his teeth digging into his lower lip as, despite all the lube and the pre-cum, he struggled to take me. While I'd never noticed my cock being bigger in my natural form, I could tell as the head of my cock finally breached Jacob's ass that he was tighter. And I knew he hadn't shrunk. It took a lot longer before he finally reached the point where my balls were resting against his ass, the pained expression on Jacob's face replaced with one of ecstasy.

He was beautiful like that. Not that he wasn't beautiful all the time. But he was stunning with his slim thighs spread, his cheeks flushed, a sheen of sweat making his skin glisten, and a hard cock pointing up toward the ceiling. He was even more beautiful when he lifted himself off me before slamming himself back down, the delicious friction on my cock driving

me toward an orgasm in less than a minute, my back arching and a growl escaping my throat as I emptied myself into Jacob's ass.

When I came back to myself, it was to find him smiling at me, his hips still rocking. "Good?" he asked.

"Yeah," I choked out, my body still tingling. Like it was ever anything else with Jacob.

"Ready for another?"

"Do you even need to ask?"

He laughed as his hips picked up the rhythm once more. He'd taken his glasses off at some point, his head thrown back in abandon as he controlled the angle of our union, and therefore the amount of stimulation on his prostate. "You're stretching me so good," he gasped out, his hand moving to his cock to stroke it. "I just wish I hadn't tied your hands so you could do this for me."

Oh, that was an easy one. I snaked my tail over his thigh until it curled around his cock, Jacob gasping as he looked down to find it wrapped around him. "Can you...?"

I didn't let him finish, using action instead of words to show him I most certainly could. He didn't seem able to tear his eyes away from where I was curled round him, stroking him, the grip just as nimble as my fingers would have been.

There was one slight problem with using my tail, though. Unlike my fingers, I felt it too, the sensation of my tail sliding over his cock, combined with the squeeze of Jacob's ass, throwing me over the parapet of a second orgasm before Jacob had even had his first. Thankfully, his followed seconds later.

We lay in a sticky mess, Jacob having fallen forwards to sprawl on top of me, our breathing equally ragged. "Why didn't you tell me it could do that?" he asked, with that same awe in his voice. "All these weeks and I've been missing out." He mustered enough energy to push at my shoulder, but it was half-hearted. He leaned up on one elbow to press a kiss to my lips. "Prehensile. Fuck me! No way is Hell getting you back. I'm keeping you and that's that."

I broke the calisthenic bands to wrap my arms around him, Jacob snuggling closer. “I’m not going anywhere.”

He turned his face up to mine. “Promise.”

“I promise.”



I SMILED as Jacob laughed at the comedy show on the TV. He was lying on his front on the carpet, his chin resting on his hands and his bare feet bent up behind him. I’d tried watching it, but it seemed like a lot of falling over and swearing. Mr. Stripes seemed to think so too, his tail twitching to show his displeasure. But if Jacob was happy, I was happy, too. He hadn’t been home for a week, quite a few of his clothes having found their way into my wardrobe, including some of the suits he wore for work. My place was closer to where he worked, anyway, so it made perfect sense for him to stay here during the week. And at the weekend, neither of us wanted to be separated if we could help it.

Had he moved in? I gave the idea some thought as Jacob laughed again. I was tempted to ask, but what if it made him self-conscious and he felt he had to go home? I didn’t want that. I wanted things to stay exactly as they were. However, it made certain things trickier. Speaking of which... I checked the clock and winced. I was late. “Jacob?”

He answered without taking his eyes off the TV. “Yeah.”

“I need to call my parents. Is that okay?”

He rolled onto his side, his brow furrowed. “It’s your place, V. You don’t need to ask permission.” V was a new name that Jacob had come up with for me. He was the only one that called me it, so it made it special. He waved a hand before rolling back onto his front. “Call them.”

It wasn’t until I had everything set up in front of me and the end credits were rolling on whatever it was Jacob had been

watching that he sat up, his chin lifting as he gave an exaggerated sniff. “What’s that smell?”

“Probably the blood,” I said. “Even though I keep it in the fridge, it gets a little ripe.”

Jacob spun round so fast that Mr. Stripes startled and ducked behind the sofa. Jacob stuck a finger in his ear and wagged it around. “Say that again, because for a minute there, I thought you said blood. But obviously you couldn’t have done, because that would be crazy.”

I stared at Jacob. It wasn’t often these days that we had communication breakdowns. Jacob had learned to speak more directly and I, in turn, had picked up far more idioms and their meanings, so that we met somewhere in the middle. “I told you I was calling my parents.”

“Yeah, but I assumed you meant on a phone.”

“We don’t have phones in Hell.”

“Right.” Jacob shuffled closer, his nose wrinkling as he took in the bowl of blood on the coffee table. “Did you kill someone?”

I might have thought it was a joke if it wasn’t for the slight edge in his voice. Leaning forward on my elbows, I held Jacob’s gaze. “The woman upstairs asked if we could be quieter when we had sex.”

There was a moment of stunned silence before Jacob started laughing. “I don’t think you could kill someone if you tried. Your method of murder would probably be to overfeed them with yellow and black Jelly Babies until they burst. They’d probably end up sick, but still very much alive.”

“Probably,” I agreed.

“Did she really say something about us?”

I nodded. “I told her I’d have to gag you to get you to be quiet and asked her if she had any recommendations for where I could buy one. I think she had an appointment or something. She had to leave rather suddenly after that and I haven’t seen her since.” It had all been rather strange to be honest, but I’d

given up on trying to work out what a lot of human behavior was about, and I just accepted their weird quirks.

Jacob turned his attention back to the blood. “So where...?”

“The butchers,” I said. “They didn’t even charge me for it.”

“Didn’t they ask why you wanted it?”

Unwilling to go into the rather confusing conversation that had occurred at the butchers before they’d been willing to give it to me, I simply shrugged. Thankfully, Jacob let it go, his attention riveted on me and what I was doing as I said the incantation to connect to Hell and steam started rising from the bowl. When the face of my parents appeared in the murky depths, I smiled. I might have been eager to get out of Hell, but I missed them. I even missed my brothers.

“Valvach, is that you?” my mother asked. “I can barely see you. I thought you said you’d get hold of some decent blood so we’d be able to see you properly. You know that animal blood doesn’t work as well for scrying.”

I had told them that, but it had been more to stop them nagging than any actual intention to do so. They seemed to think that human blood was easy to come by on the surface, but as I had zero intentions of killing anyone despite my joke to Jacob, and the only other alternative was to launch a daring raid on the hospital blood bank, this would have to do, unclear picture or no unclear picture.

My mother leaned forward to peer at me more closely. “Are you getting enough sleep, darling?”

Probably not. Sleep was a waste when time was better spent doing delicious things with Jacob instead. “Yes,” I lied.

The narrowing of her eyes said she didn’t quite believe me.

“Listen...” I said before she could call me on it. “I wondered if you’d found out anything yet?”

“About what?” my father asked, getting involved in the conversation for the first time.

I sighed. “You said you’d look into my assessment, find out who it is that will come to test me. Have you discovered anything?”

“Ah,” my father said and then fell silent, which was never a good sign.

“We were hoping you might have changed your mind,” my mother offered. “Come home, darling. We miss you. All of us do, your brothers included.”

I raised my gaze to Jacob’s, Jacob offering me a smile of reassurance. Go home and leave him behind? I hadn’t wanted to return to Hell before I’d met him. Now he was in my life, there was no question of leaving. When I’d wanted to come to the surface, I’d been searching for peace and quiet, a world that didn’t revolve around torture. I’d found that, but I’d also found so much more. I’d found a soulmate. I’d found someone who accepted every inch of me in whatever physical form, be it human or demon. In short, I’d found someone I couldn’t leave, someone I wouldn’t leave.

“No,” I said.

My mother blinked, taken aback by my definitive answer when I usually pandered to them. She regained her composure quickly, though. “Do you mean not yet?”

“I mean, no,” I said. “I love you both, but I don’t want to come back. Now, do you have anything to tell me or not?”

My father sighed. “I tried to find out who it would be, but no one seems to know anything, and it’s not like there’s any precedent for this kind of thing. My reading of the situation is that no one’s saying anything because they simply don’t know. You’re just going to have to take it as it comes, I’m afraid.”

It was what I’d feared, but I’d hoped that there might have been some forward planning in Hell that my father might have picked up on.

“Thanks for trying,” I said.

We chatted about multiple things over the next ten minutes, my father updating me on the latest torture techniques that were being trialed, my mother detailing how

Brostraxol had come out on top in the Torturer of the Year contest, just edging out my other brother. Yeah, no surprises there that the two of them were still tussling for who got to be number one in Hell. I was just glad I was out of it. No doubt I would have dropped to my lowest ranking ever this year, given that I'd been doing everything I could not to torture anyone.

Although Jacob's attention had never shifted from me, he'd stayed silent throughout the entire conversation, not speaking until I shook the bowl to bring the conversation to an end, my mother and father both still waving.

"So we wait and see who turns up," Jacob said. "And then we show them what a marvelous and very ordinary human being you've become."

"Piece of cake," I said. At least, I hoped it would be.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Are you sure I should be here?" I asked, and not for the first time.

"Yes," Val hissed. "I'm not doing this without you. I need you to tell me if I do or say anything wrong. In code, though. Don't forget you need to pretend that to you I'm just a human."

I was hardly likely to forget. Not when I'd been awake half the night worrying about it. What if I was the one who slipped up and ruined it for Val? It was a lot of pressure to carry on my not-so broad shoulders. "I know."

When I had slept, I'd been plagued by dreams where we'd been in a public place and I'd shouted at Val to get his tail out and to show me his horns, my subconscious apparently determined to rack up the anxiety to the next level when I'd thought it was already as high as it could go.

"It will be fine," I said. "A few hours and it will be all over."

"It *will* be fine," Val repeated. He paused from pacing to check his watch. "They're late. What do you think that means?" His expression brightened. "Do you think it means they've changed their mind about coming? That they've decided I don't need any sort of assessment, after all, and I can stay?"

Much as I didn't want to crush his dreams, sometimes it was better to stick to reality rather than going off on a flight of fantasy, and this felt like one of those times. "I think it means they're probably late and they'll be here any time."

“Yeah,” Val agreed, his face falling. “I just want to get it over and done with.”

“I know.” That made two of us. “How long does it take to get here from Hell?”

In lieu of an answer, Val snapped his fingers.

“Right. Instantaneous,” I said. “Course, it is. Maybe this is part of the test, seeing if you’ll crack under the pressure.”

“Maybe.” Val went over to the window to stare out of it, the number of times he’d done that already nearing double digits.

“If it’s instantaneous,” I asked, “as in poof, one minute they’re in Hell, and the next they’re here, then why do you keep looking out of the window? Surely, they’ll just appear outside your apartment?”

“It’s what humans do?” Val said with utmost seriousness. “All the time. Therefore, I thought it would be useful to get into character.” He turned around. “Do I look okay?”

I gave him the courtesy of examining his white shirt and black trousers as if searching for invisible creases or stains, even though this was the fifth time he’d asked. Given that we didn’t know where we’d be going, we’d decided on smart/casual: shirt and trousers, but no tie or jacket. “You look great.”

Val let out a breath. “I just wish they’d get here.” A knock sounded on the door and we both spun round to stare at it. “Fuck,” Val said, his ability to swear having grown exponentially over the last few weeks. “Bollocks, damn, sod,” he ended with.

“You wished it,” I pointed out.

“Yeah, but...”

“Do you want me to get it?”

“No.”

“Well then, you need to get it.”

“I know.”

I gave him a little push, Val stumbling toward the door. We took a collective deep breath before he pushed it open.

“Lucifer,” Val said. “This is a surprise.”

I bolted for the kitchen. *Lucifer!* Lucifer, as in Satan himself, as in the devil. I’d volunteered to spend the day with the devil. There was no way. How was I supposed to act normally while the devil quite literally walked among us? What if he started doing devil things? Like... I didn’t really know what the devil did, but obviously they weren’t good things. Was I supposed to pretend I hadn’t noticed if he slit the throat of a passing traffic warden? Although traffic wardens weren’t that popular so it could be worse. What if he went after someone else, though? Like a priest or a nun?

Conversation was being had in the next room, but I was too busy concentrating on not hyperventilating to listen to what was being said.

“Jacob?” Val called out. “Come in here and meet my friend Colin.”

Oh, so he wasn’t Lucifer now. Well, I guess the name was a bit of a giveaway. What right-minded person would call their son Lucifer? Colin, though. How was I supposed to look the devil in the eye and call him Colin? I eyed the oven. Maybe I could stick my head in it and gas myself. Except it was electric, so that wouldn’t work.

“Jacob?”

“One minute,” I called back. “I’m just getting a drink of water.” I turned the tap on to make my white lie more convincing while I attempted to compose myself. “Mmm... I do like water. Nothing’s more refreshing, right? No added sugar. Or anything, really. Nothing but what nature intended for us to drink. Did you know that ninety-seven percent of the Earth’s water is salty or otherwise undrinkable? Good job we’ve got taps, right?”

No response. But then I hadn’t really expected one. I had to do this. For Val’s sake. The man standing in Val’s living room wasn’t Lucifer. He was Colin. If I convinced myself of

that, it would be fine. Just Colin. I turned the tap off and kept up a running commentary of ‘just Colin’ in my head while I walked breezily back into the living room. Could you walk breezily? If not, I was giving it a damned good try, my hips sashaying so much I may as well have been auditioning for a trip down the catwalk.

“Colin!” I announced, possibly a little louder than the small living room required. “Val didn’t say who’d be coming today. Just that it would be a good friend of his.” Fuck me, he was pretty. It seemed Lucifer’s human form was a very fresh-faced platinum blond with ice-blue eyes. Forget me being a model, he could be one. How could the devil be blond? Not the devil, I reminded myself. Colin. Just Colin. Pretty Colin. Colin could have whatever color hair he wanted, because he was Colin. Colin could be tall as well, apparently. Taller than Val. Which meant he was at least a foot taller than me.

He held out his hand and although it came somewhere below skewering my own eyes out on the list of things I didn’t want to do, I took it. Oh, good God, the devil was touching me. What if my skin blistered? What if pus started oozing from beneath my fingernails? What if I developed leprosy where he was touching me? Thankfully, none of those things happened. It was just a perfectly ordinary handshake. With the devil. Did he own my soul now?

Val cleared his throat, his exaggerated smile behind Lucifer’s back an obvious message that I probably looked like I’d sat on a cactus and needed to appear more relaxed. “Lovely to meet you, Colin,” I said, smiling, and then smiling some more, to make up for my earlier awkwardness. “I’ve been telling Val that I’m keen to meet some of his friends. He keeps them hidden.”

“Does he?” Lucifer said, his voice deep and gravelly. “Maybe he’s a man of many secrets?”

He wasn’t catching me out that easily. “Val? I don’t think so. He’s one of the most straightforward people I’ve ever met. I don’t think he could keep a secret if he tried.”

“No?” Lucifer tipped his head to one side and studied me, sweat breaking out on my brow. Or at least it felt like it was.

“We should go,” I said. “Before it gets too late. Don’t you think?” I grabbed my jacket, taking the opportunity to surreptitiously study the hand Lucifer had touched while I had my back to him. It looked like it always did. No pustules. No peeling patches of leprosy. Not that I knew what leprosy looked like, but I assumed it wasn’t pretty. No mysterious red patches. Just normal skin, like I saw every day when I looked at my hands.



LUCIFER TOOK us to an Italian restaurant, Val and I exchanging a look behind Lucifer’s back. A restaurant was good news. Given Val’s habit of mixing absolutely anything he fancied together, we’d done more work on food than on anything else, and had long since ironed out any problems that might arise in public.

There should be no way Val could slip up in this kind of scenario. He just needed to concentrate. Correction. *We* just needed to concentrate. I needed to make sure I didn’t call him Lucifer and accidentally ask whether he was concerned Hell might become a place of sunshine and rainbows in his absence, and Val needed to remember that a main course and dessert required separate plates.

“So... Colin,” I said while we waited for the food to arrive. “How did you and Val meet? He’s told me absolutely nothing about you.” I sat back and tried not to look smug. Ha! Maybe if we kept Lucifer busy making up his own fictional background, he wouldn’t look too deeply into how Val was faring on the surface. And as a bonus, I could pretend I wasn’t about to have a civilized meal with the devil.

“We met three years ago,” Lucifer said smoothly. “We frequented the same bar, and we bonded over our mutual love of personal fitness. I sell exercise equipment,” he elaborated.

The lies slipped off his tongue far too easily, but then he was the devil. He leaned forward on his elbows, interlocking his fingers together and resting his chin on the top, his ice-blue eyes boring into me in a way that made me want to slide down in my seat until I disappeared beneath the table. “How did you two meet?”

Well, that one was easy. We could just use the truth. “At the gym,” I said. “He’s a personal trainer at the one I go to.”

“Jacob needed help to devise an exercise regime that would work for him,” Val added. “We got on well and became friends.”

“We did,” I said. “You know how it is. Val’s just one of the lads. He’s been a great source of information and wisdom for me.”

“Is that so?” Lucifer said, his gaze flicking between the two of us.

“He has,” I said, bringing my wineglass to my lips and giving myself a mental high-five when my hand didn’t so much as tremble when I took a drink. That didn’t mean it wasn’t a relief when the food came, though, the distraction of having the waiter at the table giving me an opportunity to regroup. Although, I was rather concerned when the waiter started flirting with Lucifer. He didn’t get paid enough to have the devil quite literally sitting on his shoulder.

Over the next hour, I lost track of the number of questions Lucifer slid into conversation that were obviously designed to catch Val out. He answered them all with aplomb, pausing when he needed to think about them and phrasing his answers carefully. I helped wherever I could, Val and I proving to be quite the team. Yeah, take that devil boy. You might be king of the demons, but you’re no match for us.

Being on your guard proved exhausting, though, and when my full bladder required attention, I seized on the opportunity to excuse myself and head for the bathroom, Colin offering me a polite smile as I left the table. Bypassing the urinal, I went into a cubicle. If meeting the devil wasn’t an excuse for having a sit down wee, I didn’t know what was. I’d finished doing

what I needed to do and was having a moment of perfect—and much deserved—solitude when a knock sounded on the door.

“Hello?” I enquired cautiously. Social calls weren’t exactly the norm in the men’s room, but I didn’t want to be rude. I would have said come in, but I’d locked the door.

“It’s me.”

I pulled the door open and Val joined me in the cubicle, which there really wasn’t room for. I didn’t give him a chance to speak first, all the thoughts I’d kept to myself over the last couple of hours coming tumbling out in a torrent of words. “That’s fucking Satan out there. I’ve just spent the last hour making polite conversation with the devil. The devil! The devil is in London, and people are talking to him like he’s just anybody. The waiter slipped him his number. What if he takes him up on it and does something awful to him? Nobody deserves to get tortured just for delivering a bit of lasagna and garlic bread. Not even if the service is awful, which it hasn’t been. I mean, I’ve had better, but I’ve had worse, as well. I couldn’t name one waiter that I think deserves to be tortured. Not even the one that dropped my meal on the way to the table. Well, maybe him. I was quite hungry, and I had to wait another thirty minutes for my meal and everyone else had already finished eating by the time I eventually got mine. Maybe I can get his number for your friend, Satan. Although, I don’t think he was gay. I don’t know if that matters.”

“Jacob, breathe,” Val said, his expression half amusement and half concern.

Okay. So perhaps I was slipping into panic mode. Which would be stupid when we’d come this far. I took a deep breath in and then let it out again. “It’s going well, isn’t it?”

“That’s what I came to ask you?” Val said. “Have I done anything wrong?”

“Not a thing,” I said honestly. “You’ve been great.”

“Yeah?” Val slipped his arms around my waist, his grin huge as he pressed his lower body against mine, that mighty

demon cock of his stirring. “Do I get a reward when I get home?”

“You get anything you want,” I said.

“Can I tie you up?”

“Sure.”

“Can I...?” Val thought hard about it. “Can I cover you in Jelly Babies and eat them off your naked body?”

“Definitely.” I pulled his head down to mine, unable to resist kissing him. We needed to get back to Lucifer, but a quick kiss wouldn’t hurt. “We can... maybe do that thing as well.”

Val frowned. “What thing?”

“The tail thing.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Oh, the tail thing. Yeah, we can definitely do that.”

We went back to kissing. Someone cleared their throat, but I ignored it, more interested in sliding my tongue against Val’s. It felt weird these days to kiss him when he didn’t have fangs. Something was wrong, though, Val not as responsive as he usually was. I let go of him, Val turning his head to the right, and my gaze following his.

The door was open, which shouldn’t be possible because I knew I’d locked it again after Val had joined me in here, but given that the devil himself was standing outside watching us, I assumed demon hocus pocus was to blame. “Oh. Hi,” I said. “We were just on our way back, Colin.” I gestured to where Val’s body was plastered to mine. “We might be a little more than friends.” I held my finger and thumb up, allowing only a tiny space between the two. “Just a teensy-weensy bit more.”

“I can see that,” Lucifer said, the inflection in his voice saying that he wasn’t all that happy about it. “We need to talk, Valvach.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Lucifer waved a hand, the action placing us in a bubble where we could still see the people in the restaurant car park, but they could no longer see us. He didn't waste any time in getting to the point. "You're in a sexual relationship with a human."

It was a statement, not a question. Even if it had been a question, there would have been little point in denying it. Not when Lucifer had stood and watched us. "It seemed like a good way to blend in," I lied. "Humans have sexual relationships with other humans. Like, all the time. I've seen them. Some of them even do it in the gym. Not sex. But you know the rest of it, kissing and hugging and holding hands."

"It's prohibited," Lucifer said, his pale blue eyes growing icier.

I frowned. "No, that can't be true. What about Girnorik? A woman summoned him last year. She tied him to a bed and used him as a sex toy. For an entire year. *She* was a human. He was never quite the same after he came back."

"Summoning is different," Lucifer said. "I assume you are familiar with the rules of summoning?"

I winced. If you knew you wouldn't be summoned, you tended not to keep up to date with the rules, or even read them in the first place, really. I might enjoy reading, but the summoning rules were full of old-fashioned words like *thy* and *forthwith*. Dry and boring was an understatement. I preferred reading material with adventures and escapades, and dragons

and princesses. I fastened my gaze on a white Peugeot pulling into the car park. “A slight reminder might be in order.”

Lucifer crossed his arms over his chest. “When you’re summoned, you become a servant of the person who has called upon you. By invoking the incantation, you are bonded to them until such a time as what they have asked of you is fulfilled, whether that be the murder of a close family member or providing complete sexual satisfaction for a prescribed amount of time.”

I nodded, hoping it gave the impression I knew what he was getting at.

“What I’m saying,” Lucifer continued, “is that demons have no choice when it’s a summoning contract. However, you haven’t been summoned. Therefore, you cannot lie with a human. There is no contract. You are not a servant. You are an autonomous demon able to make your own decisions.”

“Oops,” I said. “I didn’t know.”

“And it’s not just that,” Lucifer said, his tone becoming more strident. “If that was the only rule you’d broken, I *might* have been able to look past it, but the other one you’ve broken is unforgivable.”

“Which one would that be?” My palms were sweating again and not in a good way.

“That human, the one you’ve been breaking rules with, the one who doesn’t seem to know when to stop talking.”

“Jacob?” I asked, unwilling to let on I knew who he was talking about from the character assassination he’d just done on him. So Jacob liked to talk. It was hardly a crime.

“Have you been conducting a sexual relationship with any other humans?”

“No.” At least I could answer that question honestly. “What about Jacob?”

“He knows what you are.”

“No, he—”

“Don’t lie!” Lucifer’s voice was as sharp as a whip. So sharp that it caused a physical reaction, my heart pounding and a sensation of nausea starting up in my gut. “I heard you. You were talking about your tail. Humans don’t have tails. Ergo, he knows you’re a demon. Unless, of course, he thinks you’re a monkey or some other Earthly creature?”

“No,” I mumbled at the ground, unable to witness the disapproval on Lucifer’s face for a second longer. It was hard to believe that after all the hard work we’d put in, Jacob and I could have fucked up so badly. Although, it was my fault really, wasn’t it? I was the one who’d followed him to the bathroom when I should have known better and sat tight. I’d been too eager to hear him tell me it was going well. Now I’d screwed everything up. “He knows what I am, and he doesn’t care.” That fact still amazed me weeks later. Jacob really didn’t care. He looked at me the same way, whether I was human or demon. I didn’t know how I’d gotten so lucky, but I had.

Lucifer shook his head. “Do you know how high that is on the list of what’s forbidden?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “And I know your parents gave you a list of rules. It was one of my prerequisites for letting you come here.”

Had they? I vaguely remembered my mother shoving a piece of paper into my hand and telling me to study it, but in the excitement of coming here, and the burning need to find some suffering to feed on, I’d never really gotten around to looking at it.

“It’s not a big deal, though, is it?” I asked, hopefully.

“Not a big deal!” I cringed at Lucifer’s derogatory tone. “What do you think would happen if news got out that Hell is real?” Again, he didn’t wait for an answer. I was thankful because I wasn’t sure I could have provided one. “I’ll tell you what would happen. Sins would halve. Murders and other crimes would decrease. No crime would mean fewer souls coming to Hell. Fewer people means less suffering. Hell would face famine to a degree it never has before. There are reasons for the rules, and you have shown a flagrant disregard for them.”

“I...”

Lucifer held up a finger, and I fell silent. “Ignorance is no excuse, Valvach. I can’t even begin to tell you how disappointed your parents will be in your actions.” *Ouch!* “They lobbied hard for your right to come here. They assured me that no harm would come from it.”

“Jacob hasn’t told anyone,” I said. “And he won’t.” At least I hoped he hadn’t. Perhaps it was something we should have discussed rather than me assuming it, though. “If anything, he’s been helping me to keep it a secret. He’s been teaching me how to blend in better. He’s good for me. He’s—”

“Enough,” Lucifer said. “You were given an opportunity, and you squandered it. I was willing to give you the benefit of the doubt and let you stay, but I can’t now.”

Cold fingers wrapped around my heart, turning my blood to ice, and making my palms clammy. “What? Wait! You don’t mean that. I’ve got a life here. A job. An apartment. A boyfriend. A cat. Mr. Stripes needs feeding three times a day, or he gets grumpy. I’ve got clients at the gym. Rebecca Fairchild needs to lose a stone in the next month to fit into her wedding dress, and Jamie Hamilton has a health issue that requires frequent exercise to keep it in check. I don’t really understand what it is, but that’s not the point. They both need me. I can’t just leave them.” *Or Jacob.*

I was sensible enough to know that bringing Jacob into the conversation wasn’t wise, though. “I have people and animals who depend on me. And you’re Lucifer, king of Hell, king of all demons. You can do whatever you want.” Pleading had crept into my voice, but I didn’t care. If he wanted me to beg, I’d do it. “You made the rules, so you can change them. I’m no good in Hell. You know that. You must have heard how terrible I was at torturing people?”

“Your father always described you as a perfectly adequate torturer. Not on par with your two brothers, of course, but then so few demons are.”

“My father lies.” When Lucifer lifted one perfectly groomed blond eyebrow, I hastened to explain. “Lies isn’t the

right word to use. He's my father. He wants me to appear better than I am. Partly because he doesn't want it to reflect on him, I suppose, and partly because he loves me. But I am, terrible, that is. I'm not a good demon to have in Hell. That's why I left and came here."

"That may be so," Lucifer said. "But I'm afraid I already made my mind up. You can't expect me to turn a blind eye while you break rules that go back millennia and get away with it." He reached across, intending to place a hand on my shoulder and transport me back to Hell immediately. I jerked away from him, my action so abrupt that I lost my balance and went stumbling out of the bubble Lucifer had created and back into the physical realm, a woman pausing from unlocking her car to stare at me curiously. "Are you alright, darling?"

"Bee," I said, swiping at the air like there was something she couldn't see. "I was worried it was going to sting me."

"Ah," she said. "It's not the bees you need to worry about. It's the wasps. They're evil. Like little demons. They'll sting you just for the joy of stinging you. Bees only do it if they feel threatened."

"Thanks," I said. "I'll remember that." I waited until she'd climbed into her car and closed the door before reluctantly turning back to face Lucifer. Unlike humans, I could still see him on the other side of the bubble. Which was a shame, given the tight expression on his face and the stance that oozed annoyance. You didn't annoy the king of demons, or if you did, you worked hard to change that within a matter of seconds. It was for that reason that when he lifted a hand to beckon me forward, I immediately stepped back into the bubble. I kept a space between us, though, just far enough that he couldn't reach me. "I'll come," I said quickly. "Of course I will if that's what you've decided and I can't change your mind?" He shook his head, my heart sinking into my stomach. "All I ask is that I get the opportunity to say goodbye to Jacob, to tell him why I'm leaving, to make sure he understands I've got no choice. Please. You can grant me that, surely?"

The wait for Lucifer to respond to my plea lasted a lifetime, and not just a human lifetime, but a demon one. You

didn't bargain with the king of demons. You did what he said without question, or you risked him ending you with one click of his fingers.

"*If*," he said, "I let you have a conversation with the human, there are some conditions."

"Anything." I meant it as well. I guess you did bargain with the king of demons if you were stupid enough.

"I'll let you say goodbye to your little plaything, *if* you return to Hell with me straight after, and you become the best demon you can be. No talk of returning here. No shirking your tasks. You apply yourself to torture like you never have before. I expect you to be in at least the top fifty in next year's Torturer of the Year competition."

Every word he'd said had made my heart hurt that bit more, but it would probably break in two if I left here without explaining to Jacob what had happened and saying goodbye. That made it a sacrifice I was willing to make. I would be miserable anyway when I returned to Hell. What was more misery on top of that? And maybe I could find a way around it. Implement some of those ideas that Jacob had dreamed up. Torture that was less bloody and more monotonous. "Yes," I said, "I promise. You won't recognize me. I'll be a completely different demon."

Lucifer snapped his fingers and suddenly Jacob was right there in front of me, with both of his hands held out in front of him. He blinked. "Where did the hand-drier go? I was drying my hands and then... poof."

"Jacob," I said in the softest voice I could muster. He lifted his gaze to mine, and I took hold of his hands.

He tried to tug them out of my grasp. "Wet," he said. "I only just put them under the hand-drier, which, as I said, disappeared."

"I don't care if your hands are wet."

His gaze searched my face. "What's wrong?"

Everything. I forced a smile. I doubted it was very convincing, but it was the best I could do. I glanced Lucifer's

way. Given Jacob's gaze hadn't strayed that way, I assumed Lucifer had made himself invisible to Jacob. Good. I wanted Jacob to think we were alone, that this moment was just for the two of us. "I have to go back," I said.

There was a long period where Jacob just stared at me, like he didn't understand the words or, more likely, didn't want to understand them. "Back?"

"To Hell," I clarified. "I can't stay."

Jacob was already shaking his head before I'd finished. "No. You can't do that. I need you here."

"I have to," I said. "Trust me, if there was any way I could stay, I would, but Lucifer has made his decision."

Jacob's jaw jutted out stubbornly as he turned in a circle. "Where is he? Let me at him. I'll give him a piece of my mind. I'll..."

Lucifer laughed silently, but didn't make himself visible. I turned Jacob back to face me, grasping hold of his hands once more, whatever threats he'd been going to make about the king of Hell—and knowing him they would have been quite creative—dying in his throat. "It won't make any difference. I broke rules."

"What rules?" Jacob's voice had gone quiet, like the reality of the situation was finally sinking in.

"Having a relationship with a human and telling you what I really am."

"You didn't tell me," Jacob argued. "I walked in on you in the bathroom in all your demon splendor. And it is splendid," he added, the last bit making me smile, because it was so Jacob.

"Semantics," I said. "I should have locked the door." And I should have read the rules in the first place. I didn't want to get into that, though, not when I didn't know how long Lucifer would let me have with Jacob, and I still had things I needed to say.

"You hate Hell," Jacob said. "You said—"

Conscious of Lucifer's presence, I interjected quickly. "I exaggerated. Hell's not so bad most of the time."

Jacob's lower lip quivered, those large brown eyes of his filling with tears behind the lenses of his glasses. "I don't want you to go."

"And I don't want to go, but I must. Lucifer wanted me to go straightaway, but I insisted on at least having time to say goodbye. There was something I needed to tell you, something I would never have forgiven myself for if I didn't say it before I go."

Jacob blinked rapidly to rid himself of the tears threatening to fall. All it did was dislodge one, so that it slipped down his cheek. Nothing was sadder than tracking its path. "What did you need to say?"

I wiped the tear away with my thumb, bringing it to my mouth to taste the saltiness. It tasted of sadness. Sadness and finality. I rubbed at my chest, my ribcage feeling like it might crack open. If it did, I could pluck my heart from my chest and give it to Jacob. It would be a better present than the pigeon. My gaze slid sideways to Lucifer, hoping he might have turned away. He hadn't. Well, fuck him. Having him here watching wouldn't stop me from saying it. "I love you," I said. "You fell into my arms in the gym and from that moment on, everything changed for me. For the better," I hastened to add. "Even though things haven't worked out the way we wanted them to, I wouldn't swap the time we had together. Not even for all the Jelly Babies in the world."

Another tear fell as a smile quivered on Jacob's lips. "Wow! Given your love of Jelly Babies, that's huge." His fingers tightened around mine. "I just wish I hadn't wasted time chasing after Randall. He didn't deserve even a minute of my attention."

"He didn't," I agreed. "I reckon I'll be seeing him in Hell someday."

"Yeah?" The smile stayed on Jacob's lips longer this time. "You might get to cut his cock off and eat it after all."

“Even Hell doesn’t go that far.”

From the corner of my eye, Lucifer pulled a notebook from his pocket and scribbled something down.

“Oh,” Jacob said. “And I love you too. Of course, I do. I wanted to say it sooner, but...” He grimaced. “I have a habit of saying it to men when I don’t really mean it. I was trying to show it rather than say it. You know the whole actions speak louder than words thing, but I didn’t really come up with anything except baking a cake and spelling it out with Jelly Babies on top.”

“That would have been epic,” I said.

“Yeah... Except, I’m not very good at baking cakes. I suppose I could have bought one,” Jacob said, “And then all I would have had to do is decorate it. Anyway”—his shoulders slumped—“it’s too late now.”

“Yeah, it is.”

We stared at each other, both leaning in at the same time to meet halfway in a kiss, our bodies pressed together. The taste of salt again. His tears or mine? Because I was pretty sure I was crying too. How could I not? How was it fair that I’d found something so precious and I couldn’t keep it? There was a human saying about it being better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. Whoever had come up with that saying was full of crap and had obviously never felt the pain of having something ripped away from them. Maybe they were in Hell and I could torture them.

The kiss went on for a long time. Maybe we could kiss for an eternity and the separation would never have to happen. We could stay fused together—a beautiful statue representing how love could transcend dimensions.

“Valvach.”

I ignored Lucifer. He wasn’t here. It was just me and Jacob.

“Valvach, we need to go. This is your thirty-second warning.”

Thirty seconds! That was nowhere near enough time. I wrenched my lips from Jacob's. "Wait!"

"Me?" Jacob asked, confusion written across his face.

"No, not you, Lucifer." I pulled my key out of my pocket and pressed it into Jacob's hand. "I know it's a lot to ask, but can you take care of Mr. Whiskers and Mr. Stripes for me? Explain to them why I can't come home?" Jacob nodded, his fingers closing around the key, tears falling rapidly now. "Find someone who loves you the same way I do. Someone who's not a car."

A sob broke free from Jacob's throat, the sound almost enough to bring me to my knees. "I don't want anyone else," he said.

"I know, but..." I leaned forward, closed my eyes, and pressed a kiss to his lips, this one more chaste than the previous one we'd shared. "I love you."

"I love you too, Jacob said." He lifted a hand to my cheek and I smiled at the gentle touch.

Fingers closed around my shoulder. I kept my eyes shut as all sense of Jacob disappeared. No lips to kiss. No fingertips on my cheek. Nothing.

"Valvach."

I opened my eyes to find Lucifer staring at me. He was back in his demon form. As was I. "Go home," he said, "and remember we had a deal. I let you say goodbye. Now you need to keep your side of the bargain. Be the demon you were always meant to be. One that will be a credit to your parents."

I managed a nod, but I didn't dare speak in case I broke down in a very un-demonly way.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

JACOB

ONE MONTH LATER

Call him,” Melissa said, her mouth full of Jelly Baby. A red one at that.

I snatched the packet out of her hand. “They’re not for eating.”

“No?” Her brow furrowed. “What are they for, then?”

“They’re my emotional support Jelly Babies.”

“You were always weird,” Melissa said. “But you’ve been even weirder the past few weeks. Who just sits and looks at Jelly Babies?”

“Me,” I said, that same wave of emotion threatening to overwhelm me. The pain of separation was supposed to lessen as more time passed. I didn’t know when that was supposed to start, but I was ready for it. Preferably before I went batshit crazy.

As if sensing the impending maelstrom, Mr. Stripes leaped from the floor to land on my lap. He put his paws on my chest and rubbed his head against mine, a rumbling purr starting up. He missed Val as much as I did. When I’d picked him up from Val’s apartment—there’d been lots of tears involved in that trip—it had been with the intention of finding him a home somewhere else, but how could I when just like the Jelly Babies, he reminded me of Val? Besides, he’d been a comfort to me, just like he was being now. Far more than the woman staring at me across the table who I hadn’t invited here today, but who had turned up at my door, nevertheless. I’d hoped that if I didn’t say much, she’d get bored and leave, but so far that tactic hadn’t worked.

“You’re not allowed to have cats here,” Melissa said. “You’re in violation of your lease.”

I narrowed my eyes at her, my fingers buried deep in Mr. Stripe’s fur as he continued to make love to my face. “Fuck the

lease and fuck the landlord. I'm keeping him."

Melissa blinked rapidly. "Christ! Chill out. I was just saying."

"Don't use that word?"

"Which one?"

It had been an automatic reaction after weeks of trying to eradicate all the Gods, Christs, Jesus's and any mention of holy from my vocabulary. I could say them as much as I wanted to now Val wasn't around. And wasn't that a depressing thought? But then everything was depressing in a Val-less world. "Never mind."

Melissa reached over the table to snag my phone. "What are you doing?" I asked.

"Finding his number. If you won't call him, I will." I regretted having told her my passcode in a moment of weakness as she typed it in. Her lips pursed as she perused my address book and I waited for the realization to hit. "Did you delete it?"

"No."

"Oh. Did you call him by some cute pet name? Like..." She thought for a moment. "Muscles?" She scrolled for a few seconds. "No Muscles listed in your phone, so it's not that." She pulled a face. "What else could you have called him?"

I sighed. "He's not in there under a pet name. I never had his number." No, that wasn't quite right. "Val didn't have a phone." We'd talked about getting one, most of his work colleagues finding it odd that he didn't, but Lucifer had happened before we'd gotten around to getting one. Lucifer, the bastard. I didn't feel bad about hating him. He was the devil. I was supposed to hate him.

Melissa screwed her face up. "What do you mean he didn't have a phone? Was he a Mormon or something?"

"What?"

"They don't use electronic things, do they?"

I shrugged. “Val just didn’t have one, okay?”

“So go around and see him.”

“I can’t.”

“Did he move?”

I sighed again, this one much more pronounced. I knew Melissa was only asking the questions that anyone would ask, but I just wanted to be left alone to stew in my misery. “Yeah, he moved. Sort of.” Relocating back to Hell under the order of the devil was moving when you thought about it.

“Well... you must have some way of getting in touch with him?”

“I don’t.”

“Family... or friends... or... I don’t know... something. All you need to do is get in touch with him and apologize for whatever it was you did.”

I kissed Mr. Stripes on top of his head, his purr growing louder. “I didn’t do anything.”

“Okay. So... get in touch with him and give him a chance to apologize for whatever he did.”

“He didn’t do anything either.”

“So, why did you split up?”

“It’s complicated.”

She rolled her eyes. “Look... I’ll admit that when you introduced him to me, I thought he was just another in a long line of men that you throw yourself at, that are wholly unsuitable and will never come to anything.”

“Thanks,” I said drily.

“But then I saw how happy you were. And then, suddenly, you weren’t happy anymore. You were downright miserable. And it’s getting to where it’s affecting your work. If you don’t pull your socks up soon, Mr. Hargreaves is going to notice.”

“Which one?”

“Both. And if they fire you, who am I going to get to buy me cake?” She gestured at Mr. Stripes, who’d curled up in a ball on my lap, his face tucked into his tail. “And how are you going to afford cat food for the cat you shouldn’t have?”

I shrugged. I knew I hadn’t been giving work my full focus, but how was I supposed to care about it when I couldn’t stop thinking about Val? “I wish I could tell you the truth,” I said, “but I can’t.”

Scenting blood in the water, Melissa sat up straighter, her eyes going wide. “The truth! So... there is a story. I knew it. Is it a juicy one?”

I laughed. At least it was supposed to be a laugh. In truth, the noise had taken a wrong turn at the department of humor and ended up somewhere in distress. I wished I could tell her, but it risked bringing the wrath of Lucifer crashing down on me, and it was usually considered wise not to piss off the devil. What if he came, though? It would give me a chance to talk to him, to beg to see Val again. What if I could get Lucifer right here in front of me? It had to be worth a try. And it was better than sitting here feeling sorry for myself.

“I’m going to tell you,” I said.

“Okay.” Melissa drew the word out, her expression saying she was suffering from a severe case of whiplash.

I took a deep breath. “Val went back to Hell.”

“Grimsby?”

“No, not Grimsby. There’s nothing wrong with Grimsby.” Melissa’s slight eyebrow arch said she begged to differ. She’d probably had an ex that came from there or something. Ignoring the shade she was throwing Grimsby’s way, I carried on before I changed my mind and thought better of it. “Val was a demon. He came from Hell without being summoned because he hated torturing people. I don’t know what other demons are like... it’s possible they get a bad rap from the media, but he wasn’t like that. He was sweet and he wouldn’t hurt a fly. Quite literally, he wouldn’t. There was one in his apartment one day, and he insisted on catching it and releasing

it outside. Gave it a name and everything. I mean, it was Mr. Wings because, of course, it was, but it was a name. He probably would have tried to keep it as a pet if I wasn't there."

I smiled at the memory. "Anyway... he had this assessment thing to see if he could stay here rather than going back to Hell, but neither of us expected Lucifer to be the one to turn up to do it. And yes, Lucifer as in the devil. I had dinner with the devil. It was surprisingly civilized. He didn't tell me his name was Lucifer, obviously. I called him Colin. He had the carbonara in case you're interested."

I stopped for a breath, Melissa surreptitiously sliding her hand across the table to take hold of my mug of tea. She slid it back in her direction and took a deep sniff. "What are you...? I'm not drunk!"

Melissa steepled her hands in front of her, pasting the best expression of concern on her face that she could, which, given it was her, wasn't wholly convincing. "Is it drugs?" She reached over and patted my hand awkwardly. "Did it start off recreationally before you found yourself caught in a downward spiral? I can help."

"Can you?" There was no keeping the incredulity out of my voice. "How?"

Having decided it was free of any narcotics, Melissa shoved the tea back my way. "Well, I can't. Not really, but that's what people say in times of strife, isn't it?"

"Great," I said. "How lucky I am to have you as a friend."

"You are," she said, either choosing to ignore the sarcasm dripping from my voice, or more likely not even hearing it. Look up thick-skinned in the dictionary and there'd be a picture of Melissa next to it.

"Anyway," I said. "Val hadn't read the rules about staying here, so he didn't know that he wasn't supposed to get into a relationship with a human, or make sure that he kept his identity as a demon secret. So... Lucifer said he had to go back to Hell. One moment he was there, and the next he was gone."

Tears pricked my eyes at the memory of finding myself standing in the car park, lips still pursed but with no one to kiss, a passing woman tutting loudly like I was some lurking pervert. “So, yeah... that’s what happened. And that’s why I can’t contact Val. I don’t have a direct line to Hell. Val used animal blood to call home, but even if I had some, I didn’t take enough notice of what he did to reproduce it. And I’m not sure how Val’s parents would feel about me contacting them, anyway.”

I paused. I’d hoped that the more of Hell’s secrets I spilled, the more likely it was that Lucifer would appear, but so far, there was the same number of people in the room as we’d started with, which was to say that there was only me and Melissa. Maybe I needed to try harder. “Val told me lots of things about Hell. Did you know they have a Torturer of the Year award there? Val’s brothers win most years.”

“I did not know that.” Melissa wore the look of someone not only caught in the headlights, but who had been tied up there and couldn’t go anywhere else, even if she wanted to.

“They do. And a day in Hell is much longer than here. I can’t remember how long Val said exactly, but yeah, it’s longer.” Still no Lucifer and I was running out of facts to share. “They have all sorts of torture there. Burning and whipping and flaying and such.”

“Lovely.”

“And Val was three hundred and something.” I smirked. “I always did like an older man.” Still no Lucifer. I sat back in my chair and sighed. Lucifer obviously didn’t care what I said. An awkward silence hovered between us, Melissa opening her mouth to say something a few times but closing it without words coming out.

It seemed to take an age before she finally settled on something to say. “You have many faults, Jacob, but you’ve never been a liar.”

“I’m not,” I agreed. “I exaggerate and I might twist things ever so slightly, but I never lie.”

“Which means,” Melissa said, “that you’re either telling the truth or you’ve gone stark raving mad.”

“Option A,” I said, stroking Mr. Stripes again as he stirred on my lap, the purring starting up once more.

“So... demons... and Hell... and torture is a thing?”

“Yep,” I said.

“And you love him? I mean, you must do to have turned into this pathetic mess.”

“Thanks. But yeah, I love him. And now I need to find a way to live without him.”

Melissa tapped her fingers on the table and looked thoughtful. “Maybe not.”

I sat up straighter, a bubble of excitement forming in my chest. “What do you mean?”

“Murder someone,” she said. “And get sent to Hell.”

I slumped again. “Val made me promise that should the worst happen, I wouldn’t get myself sent to Hell. He’d never forgive me if I broke that promise. Not even if I turned up with an eternity’s supply of Jelly Babies. Besides, I don’t think I’d do well with torture.”

“You wouldn’t,” Melissa said. “I remember the time you nearly cried just from getting a paper cut.”

“I did not nearly cry.”

“There were tears in your eyes, and don’t tell me it was just your eyes watering.” She waved a hand in front of my face. “I can recognize tears. Like there is now when you talk about Val. That’s how I know you really love him, and that he’s not just another Randall, or another Mitchell, or another Greg, or another—”

“I get the picture... thanks.”

She went silent again until she finally stood from the table. “Well, I’ll see what I can do.”

I frowned. “About what?”

“About sorting this mess out. It’s what I do.”

I ran her words over in my head as I saw her out. Melissa had a reputation at work as being a bit of a fixer, but that was usually to do with broken coffee machines, computers with display setting problems, and finding out who’d been helping themselves to other people’s lunches. Demons and Hell were a little out of her remit, so I wouldn’t be getting my hopes up.



TIME SEEMED to drag now that Val wasn’t in my life, like he’d taken all the color with him to leave me with a drab existence, everything I’d once enjoyed doing no longer holding any appeal. It left me haunting my apartment like a wraith. A wraith with a cat who liked to follow me around as I wandered aimlessly from room to room, trying to find something that would hold my attention for longer than three seconds. It even made me long for Melissa’s company. At least she’d provided some distraction. But after leaving yesterday after lunch, I hadn’t heard so much as a peep from her. She’d probably already forgotten our conversation.

I wandered back into the living room, Mr. Stripes right on my heels. “I could go to the gym,” I told him. “But that will remind me of Val.” The problem was, everything reminded me of Val. I collapsed back on the sofa, contemplating the blank television screen, but making no move to turn it on because I’d flick mindlessly from channel to channel without watching anything. What were you supposed to do when your life had lost all meaning?

A knock sounded at the door and I leaped off the sofa to answer it. I’d had two Jehovah’s Witnesses call round a month ago. If they were back, I’d invite them in this time and we could chat about Hell. I bet they’d have an interesting take on it.

It wasn’t Jehovah’s Witnesses. It was Melissa, the excitement on her face my first warning. The second was that

she wasn't alone. "I brought a friend," she said, waving a hand at a dark curly-haired man wearing glasses, who I hadn't noticed initially on account of him lurking in the shadows.

He stepped forward, and I eyed him curiously. "This is Grant," Melissa said. "Isn't it funny how he looks so much like you? I couldn't believe it when we met. Grant, this is Jacob, the person I was telling you about."

I stared at him, and he stared back. "He looks nothing like me."

"I agree," he said.

We both lifted our hand at the same time to push our glasses more firmly onto our respective noses.

Melissa laughed. "Yeah, nothing alike." I didn't laugh. Grant didn't laugh either. We both turned in unison to offer Melissa a frosty glare that only had her laughing more. "Like two peas in a pod."

What was going on here? Was she trying to fix me up with someone? Was I meant to date this guy and forget all about Val? If so, it wouldn't work, because this guy was so far from my type that he may as well have been a woman. "Melissa," I started, determined to tell her in no uncertain terms that she was barking up the wrong tree.

She was already ushering Grant inside, though. "You can't just—" I didn't bother finishing my sentence. It would have been wasted when neither of them was paying the slightest bit of attention to me. Grant was busy unloading items from a backpack onto my living room floor, and Melissa was supervising like she'd be grading him later on his unpacking technique.

I let the door swing shut, stalking over to stand next to Grant as he upended a large bag of salt, moving it slowly to draw a large circle on my laminate floor. "Oh, please get salt everywhere," I said. "I love hoovering so much that I often invite people round to drop things just so I can have fun cleaning it up."

Circle drawn, Grant produced a stick of chalk and drew a series of straight lines. I peered at it more closely. “Is that what I think it is?”

Melissa nodded enthusiastically. “It’s a pentagram.”

“Am I allowed to ask why you’ve barged into my flat to draw a pentagram, or should I just stand here and be quiet?”

Grant made a tsking sound, and for a moment, I thought he was going to go for the being quiet option. “How else are we going to summon a demon?”

“Wait! What?” I said as I looked from him to Melissa. Melissa seemed happier than I’d ever seen her before, except for the time maybe when she’d been given an entire cake for the price of one slice because the coffee shop was closing and they were going to throw it out, anyway. Meanwhile, Grant had moved onto crushing something in a mortar with a look of concentration on his face.

Melissa nodded even more enthusiastically than the last time, her entire body moving with the action. “Isn’t it fantastic? I went to that little magic shop in the West End—”

“There’s a magic shop in the West End?”

“Yes. Just around the corner from that pub we went to for Harry’s birthday. You know, the one with the stuffed leopard. Anyway... I went there and told them what I needed.”

“Which was?”

“To summon a demon, and they put me in touch with Grant.”

Grant paused from grinding whatever it was he was grinding. “And you were in luck because I’d just had a cancellation.”

My head was spinning. “Wait. You do this a lot?”

Grant shrugged. “Pretty often.”

“And it works?” I tamped down on the spark of optimism blossoming in my chest. Grant was probably a crackpot who charged an exorbitant fee to mutter mumbo jumbo and then

made up a reason for it not having been successful. But... what if he wasn't? After all, I knew more than anyone that demons existed and could be summoned.

Grant frowned. "Of course it works, or I wouldn't be here. What's the demon's name, the one you want to summon?"

"Valvach." The spark ignited into a flame.

"Hmm..." Grant frowned. "Never heard of that one. Are you sure you wouldn't like one of the more well-known ones? Beelzebub is handy to have around. He knows how to get things done quickly. Or maybe Leviathan. Not as efficient as Beelzebub, but maybe a bit more approachable and less prone to fits of anger."

"I want Valvach." Even I could hear the longing in my voice, Melissa offering me a look of what I assumed was pity. Unfortunately, she hadn't practiced it in a while, or maybe ever, and it came off looking like she was suffering from an acute case of indigestion.

"Valvach, it is then," Grant said as he arranged candles where he wanted them before reaching into his jacket pocket and producing a box of matches. "One demon coming up."

"Wait," I said. "We summon him, and then what?"

Grant gave me a scathing look over the top of a lit match. "You tell him what you need doing, he does it, and then he'll return to Hell. It's a simple process dating back thousands of years. A contract as old as time."

"But I don't want him to go back. I want to keep him."

Grant laughed. When I didn't laugh, he sobered quickly. "Not possible, I'm afraid. He can only stay until the task is complete."

"What sort of tasks are we talking about?" Melissa asked.

Grant lit another candle and then paused. "Murder your neighbor. Defraud your workplace. Whatever you want, really. And of course, the cost is your soul." He turned accusing eyes on Melissa. "He knew that, right?"

I swallowed, the action taking a great deal more effort than it usually did, Melissa simply shrugging. “My soul?”

Grant nodded. “You can’t just get demon services for free. Everyone would have one on speed dial if that was the case. It’s a transaction. Your soul in exchange for whatever you want them to do.”

I’d already had “demon services” as Grant phrased it free for weeks, both in Val training me and having him in my bed. Never once had Val mentioned having designs on my soul. I’d have remembered if he had. “I’m quite keen on keeping my soul, actually.”

Grant sighed. “Listen, do you want to do this or not?” He checked his watch. “I’ve got an appointment at three with two old dears who need a demon to do the landscape gardening. Apparently, the quote the gardening company gave them was too high. They’ve been quite pushy, so I don’t want to be late.”

Did I want to do it? I was desperate to see Val again, my entire body yearning for it, but if it was only for a short time and it cost me my soul, it would count as breaking my promise to him. “I—”

Melissa interrupted. “When does Jacob have to give his soul up? Before or after the task is complete?”

“After,” Grant said, his body language reeking of impatience. “They must complete the task before you’re obliged to sacrifice your soul.”

“So...” Melissa said slowly. “If I’m understanding this correctly, if the task isn’t completed, Val can’t go back and he can’t take Jacob’s soul, right?”

“I suppose,” Grant said, “but there’s no such thing as a task that can’t be completed. Some might take longer, but everything can be done, eventually.”

A slow smile spread across Melissa’s face. “Not necessarily. Not if there’s a loophole. Haven’t I always been good at finding loopholes, Jacob?”

I nodded. There was no disputing it. If there was a way of getting out of doing something, or finding an easier way of

doing it, Melissa always found it. It wasn't necessarily that she was lazy. She just preferred more time eating cake and less time working. "What are you thinking?" I said somewhat cautiously, previous experience having taught me that Melissa's loopholes could range anywhere from complete genius to unadulterated disaster and rarely lay between the two.

Ignoring my question altogether, Melissa waved an imperious hand at Grant. "Come on then, let's get on with it. I'd hate for two old dears to have to put up with long grass for a minute longer than they need to."

"Shouldn't we—?"

"Trust me," she interjected, wrapping an arm around my neck, her grip strong enough to make me wonder if she'd ever done any wrestling.

It was doubtful it was going to work, so what did I have to lose?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

What's at the end of the queue?" a bald, bespectacled man asked, his suit looking like it had seen better days. Which it undoubtedly had. Even designer suits didn't stand up to torture for long. Give him another year in Hell and it would be nothing but rags. We did eventually replace clothing, but it would be more overalls than suit.

I lowered my book, this part of Hell quiet enough that I could get away with reading without worrying too much about anyone seeing me. Zeggal had given me a strange look when I'd asked him for some love stories the next time he was on the surface, but he'd come through for me, delivering them in a brown, paper bag accompanied by a furtive glance to check we weren't being watched.

The one I was reading featured a poor servant girl who'd found herself indentured to a sexy older Count. I'd reached the part where she was having fantasies about him while scrubbing the scullery floor. Eventually, he'd notice her and despite their very different social standings, they'd embark on a passionate love affair. I assumed by the end of the book she'd be the lady of the manor, but there'd be lots of trials and tribulations to overcome before they reached that point. Just like I'd had to do, when I'd been forced to watch Jacob moon over Randall for weeks.

"Sorry?" I said, not quite having caught what the bald man had asked, too busy reading Clarabelle's—that was the servant girl's name—dreams of one day having a room of her own without having to share it with three other women. I winced. I wasn't supposed to say sorry. A good demon didn't apologize

to the people they tortured. A good demon called them names and demeaned them. And I was doing my best to keep to my side of my bargain with Lucifer and be the best demon I could be. It just seemed like most of the time I fell short of the ideal.

“I asked,” the man said with the air of someone rapidly losing patience, “what exactly we’re queueing for? I’ve been standing in it for hours and I never seem to get any closer to the front.”

Jacob’s idea was working well. It certainly got people hot and bothered. There might not be any screams, but after the first few hours, a fine mist of suffering hung in the air. It was a gentle suffering, some of the more refined demons choosing to spend their lunchtime breathing it in. “I can’t tell you.” Remembering just in time, I added an insult, “you... nincompoop.”

“I want to see the manager.”

“I am the manager.” I was. Given that this had been my idea, they’d placed me in charge, my parents saying how proud they were, even if it hadn’t been wholly convincing. They had been relieved, though. At least, it was something I could do without messing up. Even I wasn’t that poor of a demon that I couldn’t stand in one place and supervise a queue.

“My feet are hurting,” a woman three places back said. “Every time I try to sit down, though, the queue moves and I risk losing my place.”

It did, fine-tuning still being added to ensure that the experience was as unpleasant as we could make it. It wouldn’t be torturous if they could just sit whenever they felt like it. The queue inched forward again, the people in it obligingly taking the half step required before coming to a halt again. A man who had killed all three of his wives got into a scuffle as a woman who had embezzled millions from her father overtook him in the queue. Aware of what was expected of me, I made sure my book was out of sight before lifting a hand and pointing at the woman. “Security! Back of the queue for her.”

Two demons immediately appeared from nowhere and seized hold of her. She struggled against their grip. “No! I’ve been in this queue all day. I can’t start all over again. Please.” When her plea garnered no response, she broke down in sobs, her cries growing gradually fainter as she was frog-marched to the back of the queue.

I hardened my heart and pretended that her distress didn’t bother me. This job might be better, but there were still moments that made it difficult. I missed the gym. I missed days spent helping people to better themselves. And it went without saying that I missed Jacob. I’d taken to sleeping longer just because my dreams were the only place I knew I could see him. My mother had joked that I’d picked up human traits, and I hadn’t corrected her.

Returning to my book, I picked up the story of Clarabelle and her stirrings for the Count with the jet-black hair and the face that never smiled, zoning out the speculative chatter about what they were queuing for. Although, someone commenting that it might be the way out of Hell made me smile at their optimism.

The next hour passed quickly. Clarabelle was in shock over the Count having kissed her when voices in the distance had me stashing my book behind a rock. It was in the nick of time, Korzolloth and Vergollun appearing seconds later. “Valvach, you are to return home immediately,” Korzolloth said. “Vergollun will take over your duties.”

“Immediately?” His urgency had my heart beating faster. “Has something happened?” Was it one of my parents? Some sort of accident?

“Immediately,” Korzolloth said. “Go.”

Not stupid enough to argue with senior demons in case it got back to Lucifer, I went. It wasn’t long before walking wasn’t fast enough and I broke into a run. If one of my parents was hurt, I needed to be there.

The house was a hubbub of activity when I reached it. “There you are,” my mother cried as soon as I walked through the door. She was okay, then. My father? I would have asked,

but my mother had me by the arm and was tugging me down the long corridors of my childhood home.

“We couldn’t believe it when the news came through,” she said. *What news?* “Not that it isn’t wonderful, darling, it is, but there’s a lot of preparation to be done. You need to shower. You need to change into clothes far smarter than the ones you’ve got on. We need to run through some important things before you go.” *Go where?* “We do not want to get on the wrong side of Lucifer again, do we? Especially not so soon. He was extremely kind and generous to let you off with nothing more than a warning, but we mustn’t test his patience.”

We’d reached the stairs now, my mother showing no signs of slowing. She paused for breath and I finally squeezed some words in. “What’s going on?” At least I was fairly certain now that me being asked to return here was nothing to do with the ill health of either my father or my brothers.

“You’ve been summoned, Valvach. Isn’t that wonderful?”

I dug my heels in, bringing us both to a sudden stop, even my mother’s pace not enough to withstand the force of my sheer bulk. “What? There must be some sort of mistake.”

My father rounded the corner in time to hear my comment. “That’s exactly what I said.” He cleared his throat, quickly adding, “No offence.”

“None taken.” I turned back to my mother before she could launch into motion once more and the opportunity for greater clarification was lost. “Did they mix my name up with someone else’s?”

My mother shook her head. “No. It was very clear. They even spelled it.”

Jacob. I quickly tamped down on the thought. Jacob didn’t know how to summon demons. He hadn’t even known they existed before I’d erupted into his life. Besides, he knew better than to offer his soul for a few snatched moments with me. He’d made me a promise, and I knew Jacob took his promises

seriously. “Who summoned me?” I asked as we arrived outside my bedroom door.

My mother tutted. “You know we don’t get given the details. You’ll find out when you get there. Just like you’ll find out what they want you to do.” She opened my bedroom door and gave me a little push when I didn’t immediately step inside. “Shower, best clothes, and then downstairs to the summoning circle as quick as you can.”

She rushed off back the way she’d come, leaving me to ponder what was going on as I undressed and stood beneath the hot water, the showers in Hell very similar to the ones on the surface. What if they wanted me to kill someone? Could you tell them they’d summoned the wrong demon for the job? I doubted it somehow, and just like my mother had pointed out, I’d already flouted Hell’s rules once. I couldn’t afford to do it again. If they wanted me to kill someone, I’d just have to kill them. That’s what good demons did. I just hoped it was someone who deserved it.

I spent a long time in the shower, most of it contemplating what the easiest way of killing someone was should it be required. And by easy, I meant quick, painless for me *and* for the person being murdered, and preferably not messy. Poison seemed to be the best option. Where did you get poison from on the surface? I hadn’t seen any poison shops during my time there. Everything else, but not poison. Did Amazon sell it?

Thankfully, time worked differently in Hell. Hours could go by while I got myself ready, but for the person who had summoned me, it would be instantaneous, like they were stuck in a frozen tableau while I had all the time in the world to contemplate what I was walking into.

Brostraxol breezed into my room while I was getting dressed, the plain white shirt and black trousers I’d chosen oddly reminiscent of the outfit I’d worn when Jacob and I had gone to the restaurant with Lucifer on that ill-fated day. *Jacob*. No matter how hard I tried not to think about him, all roads led back to him. Would I get the opportunity to see him while I was on the surface? The chances of me being summoned in the same country, never mind the same city, were slim to non-

existent, though. I should have learned his phone number and then I could call him. There was a human saying that seemed to fit my thoughts perfectly: shoulda, woulda, coulda. There were a lot of things I'd do differently should I have my time again.

Brostraxol had leaned himself casually against the wall, doing nothing to hide the glint of amusement in his eyes. "I hear you've been summoned, little brother."

I continued fastening the buttons on my shirt. Brostraxol had been summoned dozens of times. He seemed to be the demon of choice for ritualistic murders, his little personal touches really appreciated by gang members. "Apparently, so."

"Perhaps they need a book reading to them," he said, more amusement leaching into his face.

"Hopefully."

"Or... some flowers arranged."

"You're not funny." With the last button fastened, I went to stand in front of the mirror. I looked good. A little glassy-eyed if you looked too closely, but otherwise good. I could do this. It was just a case of fake it till you make it. Another human saying. I was a veritable treasure trove of them, thanks to Jacob. *Jacob again.*

"Are you ready?" Brostraxol asked.

Was I? That was an excellent question. I'd spent decades wanting this, wanting to feel like other demons, wanting not to be the one who always got passed over. But that had all been before Jacob. There were only two periods of time in my life. Before Jacob and after, and everything before paled into insignificance, Jacob showing it up for just how empty an existence it had been. I took a deep breath in. "As ready as I'll ever be." I wondered if it would be a country where they had Jelly Babies. It would be doubly cruel if I found myself somewhere with no Jacob and no Jelly Babies. Now, that would be torture.

To my surprise, Brostraxol stepped forward and tweaked one of my horns. It was the demon equivalent of a hug. “What was that for?” I asked.

He gave a lopsided smile. “Ever since you got back, you’ve been all grown up. Sad, but grown up. I just wanted to tell you that even if this goes horribly wrong, which...” He sped up his words. “I’m sure it won’t, but... if it does, you’ll always be my favorite brother.”

“Your favorite one?” There was no hiding my surprise. “Does Izrimoth know that?”

Brostraxol’s smile grew bigger. “Of course.”

“Oh wait! I get it. He’s your chief competition for the Torturer of the Year award, while I’ve never factored into it. That’s why I’m your favorite.”

Brostraxol didn’t confirm that was the reason, but he didn’t deny it either. He followed as I left my bedroom and made my way downstairs before my mother could come looking for me. As it was, she met me at the foot of the stairs, taking hold of my arm again and tugging me into the living room where a summoning circle had been set up in the corner, the sight of it making this all too real.

All I had to do was step into that circle and it would transport me to the home of the person who had summoned me. Assuming they were at home that was, and not in the middle of a graveyard, or wherever it was people crept off to when they summoned demons and didn’t want anyone to know. I might not have been summoned before, but I’d heard all the stories. Poor Ugran had once found himself in the middle of a fairytale castle, that summoning having been an accidental one. He still couldn’t see anything pink without having flashbacks. Luckily for him, there wasn’t a lot of pink in Hell.

Gorzaren stood at the side of the summoning circle, ready to officiate. He’d held that position in Hell for as long as I could remember. Due to the lack of torture it entailed, I’d once looked into the possibility of taking it on, only to discover that it came as part of a retirement package. Offered only when a

hectic torture schedule wreaked havoc on an aging demon body. It explained why Gorzaren always stooped a bit, his stance often giving the impression he was about to fall over. It was the same with a lot of other jobs in Hell, like weapon maker, or record keeper. Either that or they required a considerable number of years spent in torture first. A number I was nowhere close to achieving.

I pulled my gaze away from Gorzaren and to my mother as she shoved a piece of paper into my hands. “Read this, darling.”

“That didn’t work so well last time, did it?” my father pointed out, prompting my mother to snatch the paper back, a whole three seconds after she’d given it to me.

“You’re right,” she said. “I’ll read it to you.” She cleared her throat in an officious manner before beginning. “Below are the laws of summoning. You must abide by all these rules before entering the summoning circle. Failure to do so will cause the summoning to be classified as null and void.” She paused to make sure I was listening. I gave her a nod to show I was, Brostraxol letting out a snort. I’d never witnessed one of his summoning ceremonies, but I bet he’d never been mollycoddled like this. Not even for his first one. But then he’d never broken rules and had to be escorted back to Hell by Lucifer himself, so I supposed it was understandable.

“Rule one,” my mother said. “You must—”

“How many are there?” I interrupted to ask. If this was anything like the other rules in Hell, it might take a while and I might need to sit down.

She shot me a look that said she didn’t appreciate the question in the slightest before grudgingly answering. “Ten.”

Ten I could cope with. I waved a hand at her and she continued.

“Rule one. You must establish the terms of the contract before any other conversation is had. That means you must ask them what’s required of you.” She lifted her gaze to mine.

“I’m rephrasing these, by the way, to make sure you understand them.”

That explained the lack of thy, thus, and henceforth. She seemed to be waiting for something. “Thank you,” I ventured, my mother’s satisfied nod telling me I’d gotten it right.

“Rule two. You must clearly establish that the price of completion is their soul, and that this is non-negotiable.”

I offered the expected nod.

“Rule three. You must formally accept the terms of the contract. If you don’t agree, you will be returned to Hell henceforth. That means immediately,” my mother clarified. “You must not step outside the summoning circle before that point. Rule four...” Maybe I should have sat. “Once the terms of the contract have been accepted, you must do everything in your power to complete it in a timely manner, with at least one attempt made every few days. The only exception to this is if a time limit has been set. Rule five. During your contract, you must keep your identity as a demon secret from anyone but the people present at the summoning.” She gave me a pointed stare, and I had the good sense to look sheepish. Yeah, I hadn’t done so well at that last time.

She rattled off rules six to ten in quick succession, most of them to do with the more nitpicky side of things, like having to stay with the person who had summoned me and how to ensure receipt of their soul at the end of the process. Once she’d finished, she folded the piece of paper and handed it to me. I put it in my pocket with as much solemnity as I could muster.

“Are you ready, son?” my father asked.

“I am.” I’d reached the point where I wanted to get it over and done with so I could come back to Hell and finish my book. Poor Clarabelle didn’t understand why the Count was avoiding her. Neither did I, really, but I’m sure it would become clear in time.

“Hang on!” my mother said as I took a step toward the summoning circle and the waiting Gorzaren. She brushed an

imaginary bit of lint off my shirt and did my top button up. "Maybe a tie," she said, looking to my father.

"He's fine as he is," he said. "They want demonic abilities. Not a fashion model."

"Please, if we could," Gorzaren said with a flick of his hand at the circle. "I've just received news of another summoning. They'll be expecting me."

I stepped into the circle before my mother could find something else to worry about. "It's going to be fine," I reassured her. "I'll follow the rules this time."

"Have fun," Brostraxol said, my father just offering a smile.

And then Gorzaren was reciting the incantation, the walls of my parents' house shimmering until they were no longer there at all. Even though it only took a matter of seconds for me to cross dimensions, those seconds were long enough for my palms to sweat and for my heartbeat to thunder in my ears.

The shimmering stopped, solidifying itself into different walls and a familiar painting. Familiar because Jacob had owned the same one. Come to think of it, the walls were the same color as Jacob's as well, realization slowly sinking in even before I turned to face the small group of people responsible for summoning me.

There was a man who looked very pleased with himself, who for a moment I thought was Jacob because of the similar hair, build, and glasses, but it wasn't him. There was a woman who I remembered being introduced to at the party with Jacob. She seemed to be trying to catch flies with her mouth, which was odd, but each to their own. And then last, but not least, his face a sight for sore eyes, there was Jacob.

The momentary burst of pleasure at seeing him again didn't last long, only one thought going through my head. What had he done?

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Holy fucking shit! Grant hadn't been full of crap, because there he was—my beautiful demon. Standing right in front of me in all his gorgeous, red-skinned splendor. I reached across to close Melissa's mouth, her jaw hanging so low I was concerned Mr. Stripes might mistake it for a cave and try to climb in.

I beamed at Val. He didn't smile back. Which was... unusual. In fact, he looked downright grumpy about something. He just needed the grumpiness hugging out of him, and I knew just the man to do it. Eager to get my hands on him, I rushed toward him, coming to a sudden halt as Val held up a hand. "Wait. There are rules," he said. He pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and studied it for a moment. "What task do you require completing, human?"

Human! I frowned. "It's me, Val. It's Jacob." Had they erased his memories? Could Hell do that? *Would* they do that?

"He's got a tail," Melissa said.

"Yes," I said. "He has. And it's very flexible. Almost like a third hand." There was no keeping the purr out of my voice, Grant and Melissa competing for whose eyebrows could lift the highest. Grant won the competition by the slimmest of margins.

"And horns," Melissa added, her voice full of wonder. "And he's red."

"Yesss, Melissa," I hissed. "He's a demon." I waved a hand at the circle of salt, the candles, and the sprinkling of Jelly Babies I'd provided when Grant had insisted an offering

linked to the demon was required. It had either been that or Mr. Stripes, and as I wasn't sure what happened to the offering, whether Val would be honor bound to eat it, Jelly Babies had seemed safer. Val would never forgive me if I forced him to eat Mr. Stripes, particularly when he'd given the cat his word he wouldn't. "We wouldn't have needed all this if he wasn't, would we? I'd have just called him up and said, hey, come over, we need to talk."

I turned my attention back to Val, his expression still neutral. If he didn't remember me, that was fine. We'd just fall in love all over again. At least this time, we could get straight on with it without me wasting time on Randall. "Oh, right, the task..." I cleared my throat. "Melissa," I said out of the corner of my mouth, "What's the task?" She hadn't seen fit to share her supposedly brilliant plan, so this could still go tits up with the forfeit being my soul and an eternity spent in Hell. I was putting an awful lot of trust in the woman who I'd once told Val I wasn't wholly convinced was really my friend.

She leaned forward and whispered in my ear, her words prompting my own entry in the how-high-can-your-eyebrows-go competition. And I reckoned I'd gone straight into the lead. "That's ridiculous."

Melissa smiled smugly. "It's not. It's perfect. It's a task he can never complete. Ergo, he stays here. You keep your soul. I don't have to look at your miserable face every day. Everyone's a winner." She nudged me. "You have to say it, though. If I say it, he might think I mean me, and that's going to cause all kinds of problems."

I took a deep breath before turning back to Val. "The task is..." I trailed off. Even saying it seemed ridiculous, but if Melissa was right then maybe, just maybe, it could work. I lifted my chin. "The task is to impregnate me." I was sure that if Val had eyebrows in his demon form, then he'd be making his own entry in the competition. As it was, he had to settle for his eyes going wide. "Get me pregnant," I said, in case Val didn't understand the word. "Put a bun in my oven. Make me a member of the pudding club. Put a Joey in my pouch. Knock me up. Get me with child."

“I think he gets it,” Melissa said drily.

“You can’t do that, right?” I asked, sudden doubt assailing me. What if there was demon magic that could do that? I had a sudden image of myself, pregnant and soulless, my ankles puffy and my back killing me. If that was the case, Melissa was getting joint custody whether she wanted it or not. And Grant could have the baby at weekends, simply for the crime of being here.

“No. I can’t do that.” Val was frowning as he dropped his gaze to the piece of paper again. “But this says that if I agree to the contract, I have to keep trying.”

“I’m all for the trying,” I said, my cock already swelling at the memory of how pleasurable sex with Val was. “We can try all day every day, if you want? Well... except when I’m at work. I don’t think Mr. Hargreaves will agree to conjugal visits as part of my employment contract.”

“TMI,” Melissa said.

I glared at her. “Shush. I’m trying to negotiate a demon contract here.”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, pardon me. All this wouldn’t even be possible without me, you know?”

“I know. And trust me, I’m grateful, but can I be grateful later please, when I’ve ironed out the practicalities of my demon contract?”

Despite pulling a face, she went silent, which was about as much as I could ever hope for from Melissa.

“And the soul thing?” I asked Val cautiously. “Because I kind of like my soul. I mean, I never really thought much about it before, but now I have, I’m keen to hang on to it.”

“Your soul is due as payment once I’ve completed my task,” Val stated.

“So once you’ve got me pregnant, then?” He nodded. “Which you can’t do?” He nodded again, a glimmer of a smile appearing at the corner of his lips. So he did remember me. We were just toeing the official line. That was fine. I could do that.

So long as we did it quickly, so I could get to the hugging and the touching and the kissing and the sex and the bit where we lay in bed together and stroked each other's faces. "Do you accept the task, demon?" I asked.

"I accept," Val said. "Do you agree to give up your soul once the deed is done?"

"I do," I said as solemnly as I could, which wasn't that solemn, considering I couldn't keep the smile off my face.

Val gave a little bow. "Then I am at your service, human."

That sounded interesting. Like he had to do everything I said, which was a concept I'd certainly be exploring later. "Then... why are you still standing all the way over there?"

Val rushed forward so quickly he was little more than a blur. I buried my face in his chest and held on tight as he wrapped his arms around me. "Val," I said, my voice shaky. "I didn't think I'd ever get to see you again. I've missed you so much."

Val buried his nose in my hair. "Jacob." He didn't need to say anything more than my name, every emotion from longing to happiness embedded in those two syllables.

I turned my head to the side to find Melissa and Grant watching us. "Some alone time would be good," I said. "Unless you want to watch me making up for lost time with my demon lover?"

"No, thanks." Grant said, already gathering his things together and shoving them back in his bag before making for the door.

"Melissa," I called out as she went to follow, waiting for her to turn back before I continued. "Every Friday after work, you and I are going to that little patisserie near Euston where they do all the fancy cakes. You're going to eat as many as you want and I'm going to pay."

"Really?" Her eyes shone at the thought and I wasn't sure I'd ever seen her look more pleased.

"Really," I said. "Now go."

She went, the door clicking shut in their wake to leave Val and me alone, those thick demon fingers of his stroking through my hair. I stood up on my tiptoes and I kissed him, my libido roaring back to life after having been dead for weeks. “I need you naked,” I said breathlessly. “In my bed. Or on the sofa. Or anywhere really, but definitely naked.”

“Here,” Val said, shedding his clothes before lying back on the carpet. I stripped out of mine just as fast, wasting no time in pressing my naked body to Val’s, our cocks aligning as we started a slow grind, with our lips still fused together.

“Love you... missed you...” I said between kisses. “Don’t leave me again.”

“I can’t,” he said. “Not unless I get you pregnant.”

And then we stopped talking as I fell on Val’s cock with all the zeal of a man denied his favorite plaything for far too long.

Val growled. I moaned. And it was wondrous as we reacquainted ourselves with each other’s bodies and everything we could do to them.



“I’M LAID ON SOMETHING,” Val said, his chest still heaving from all the exertion. I’d been on top and I’d ridden him like he was a horse in the Grand National. Only without the whip and the jockey gear. Not that Val had complained during either of his orgasms. He levered his ass off the floor, lifting our combined weight easily and inching his hand under his backside to extract whatever it was. He frowned at the squashed red Jelly Baby he held between his finger and thumb.

“Jelly Babies,” I said by way of an explanation. “We needed to make an offering to get you here.”

Val popped the Jelly Baby in his mouth, a look of pleasure crossing his face as he chewed. I peeled an orange one off the

back of my thigh and offered it to him, that one going the same way as the first one. “Are you angry at me?” I asked.

Val paused mid-chew. “Why would I be angry?”

“For bringing you back here.” I propped myself up on one elbow. “Although technically, if you’re going to blame someone, blame Melissa. I didn’t ask her to go searching for demon summoners. She came up with that all on her own. You met him. Grant. The man who looked nothing like me.”

Val’s smirk said he didn’t agree. Whatever. I wasn’t planning on summoning any more demons, so there was no reason for our paths to cross again. Anyway, I didn’t want to talk about Grant. Not when there were more important things to discuss. “I took you away from your family without giving you the choice. Now you can’t ever go back to Hell.”

“I never wanted to go back in the first place, remember? It wasn’t my choice to return.”

“Lucifer,” I said with a sneer. “That man really is the devil.”

“Anyway, I can still call and talk to them,” Val said. “They’ll understand.” He ran his thumb over my bottom lip, his tail curling possessively around my thigh. “Wherever you are is where I want to be.”

I lay back, the corners of my mouth starting to hurt with all the smiling. I had a feeling that was going to be an ongoing issue until I got used to having Val around again. There was a creak as the door opened, followed by the soft pad of paws. Val let out a high-pitched squeal. “Mr. Stripes! You kept him.”

Mr. Stripes broke into a run to get into Val’s arms, a frenzy of stroking, head butting, and purring following, the mutual love fest almost enough to make me jealous. “Of course I kept him. He was the only one who missed you as much as I did. We had lots of long chats about it. Mr. Whiskers is in the bedroom, as well.”

“Mr. Whiskers!” Val said, his tone reminiscent of a child who’d gotten out of bed on Christmas morning to discover an enormous pile of Christmas presents waiting for him. “This is

the best day ever. I get a Mr. Stripes, a Mr. Whiskers, and a Jacob.”

I was glad I'd made the list, even if it was in third place. I passed another red Jelly Baby over. It was covered in salt from the summoning circle, but given Val's culinary preferences, I doubted he'd care. And chances were, he'd prefer it.

When Val leaned over to kiss me, his cock already hard against my thigh, he tasted of salt, Jelly Babies, and a future I hadn't thought possible just an hour ago.

EPILOGUE

JACOB

SIX MONTHS LATER

Well?" Val asked as I came out of the bathroom with the little plastic strip held in my hand.

"Bad news," I said, holding it up so he could see the single blue line that ran across the middle of it. "I'm not pregnant."

"Oh no," Val said with zero inflection to his voice. "That's terrible news."

"Isn't it?" I said, unable to keep the grin off my face as I unceremoniously dropped it in the bin. "I guess we'll just have to keep trying."

A matching grin slid onto my lover's face, and it took him a few seconds to get rid of it so he could muster a sigh. "More sex."

"More sex," I said, moving forwards to wrap my arms around his waist and rest my head on his chest.

"Now?" Val asked hopefully.

I laughed. No one could ever accuse us of not having an active sex life. Even after being together for months, it hadn't waned in the slightest. And although we were being super careful to ensure we fulfilled the terms of the demon contract so that Hell couldn't find a loophole to separate us, it had nothing to do with that. We just had a lot of lust to get out. Val never failed to do it for me whether he was in human form, demon form, or some weird mixture of the two that sometimes occurred when he was tired.

"Later," I said. "You need to call your parents. It'll give you a chance to report the latest pregnancy test to them." Truth be told, we didn't need to do the tests. It wasn't like one of them was ever going to be positive, but it amused us, so we kept doing it. Every couple should have a monthly tradition. It

was just that ours was more unusual than most, but then we were the first human and demon pairing to cohabit.

Stepping over Mr. Stripes, who'd decided that the middle of the kitchen floor was the perfect place to sleep, I got the blood out of the fridge and passed it to Val. He took it, wandering off to mutter the nonsensical words—they were to me anyway—that opened the lines of communication between here and Hell. “Say hello to Bangror and Mirrolok for me, and your brothers if they're there.”

Things had been decidedly strained between us at first: Val's parents not seeming any more comfortable conversing with a human than I was talking to demons who liked torture, and chatted about it with their son like it was nothing more meaningful than the weather. Eventually, we'd found a middle ground where we could at least pass the time of day.

Given my parents had moved to Scotland a few years back, Val hadn't met them yet, but with a visit planned in a couple of weeks' time, it wouldn't be the case for much longer. I had a feeling it was going to be an interesting meeting, but I had faith that my parents would take one look at how sickeningly in love I was and forgive Val his quirks. And besides, Val was more nervous about the meeting than I was. As long as he didn't sprout horns and a tail at the dinner table, it would be fine. Although, given how short-sighted my parents were—my myopia being genetic—he probably could, and they wouldn't notice. Anyway, he'd already taken time off work, Bobby having jumped at the chance to give Val his old job back and not seeming at all fazed by Val leaving him in the lurch, so there was no getting out of it.

My phone rang, and I answered it without looking at the caller id.

“Jacob!” Melissa said with what sounded like genuine pleasure in her voice. I rolled my eyes. Yes, she'd been responsible for me getting Val back, but for some reason, my gratefulness had waned. “I was beginning to think you were avoiding me.”

“Why would I avoid you?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Grant thinks that maybe you’re...”

I zoned the rest out. Ah yes, that’s right. That was a major contributing factor to my current feelings about Melissa. She couldn’t shut up about Grant, the two of them having started dating a few weeks back. Which was all kinds of weird if you asked me, and made me feel all icky that maybe she’d always had secret designs on me. Now, the weekly cake meeting, which I’d kept up, martyr that I was, was an hour devoted to Melissa sharing every single thought Grant had ever had, which given he thought of himself an expert on everything from politics to sport, was a lot.

I suffered ten more minutes of Melissa sharing Grant’s theories about the universe before I made my excuses, hung up, and went to find Val.



VALVACH

“Have you spoken to Lucifer?” I asked my father once we’d gotten my mother’s complaints about the murkiness of the connection due to me still using animal blood out of the way. I always asked that question, the residual worry of Lucifer terminating the contract ever present in the back of my mind. After all, he set the rules, so if he really wanted to, he could change them, even if they had been in place for thousands of years.

The answer was always no, Lucifer having been busy the past few months. Which... busy was good. Busy meant I was probably flying under the radar, and he had far more important things to think about than one useless demon having found their way back to the surface.

“I have,” my father said, making me sit up straighter.

Picking up on my tension, Jacob turned from where he’d been trying to work out how he was supposed to fit the last batch of books I’d bought onto a bookcase already groaning under the weight of the previous ones. The novelty of not having to hide them still hadn’t worn off for me, even if Jacob was getting concerned that if I carried on the way I was, we’d have to abandon the apartment to books and move out.

“And?” I asked, my heart pounding. Abandoning the unsolvable book crisis, Jacob came to stand by my side, his fingers resting on my shoulder. I covered his hand with mine and we both held our breath.

My father’s brow furrowed, as if he was struggling to remember. “He said that if you were abiding by the terms of the contract, and you’d learned your lesson from the previous time, that he wasn’t concerned, that a contract is a contract and no matter how irregular the request is, he can’t be seen to interfere. “

Everything after that point was a blur, Jacob and I waiting until the connection to Hell had been severed to celebrate the news that my parents hadn't seemed that interested in. To Jacob and me, though, it was a major victory. Somehow, we'd beaten the odds to be together, and even the king of Hell himself didn't intend on breaking us apart for bending the rules.

"Lucifer doesn't care," I said as I swung Jacob around, a barely awake Mr. Stripes watching us from the kitchen doorway with wide eyes.

Jacob palmed my cheeks and planted a noisy kiss on my lips. "It's the news we've been waiting for."

It was, the specter of Lucifer turning up in less time than it would take for either of us to blink, having hung over us for months. It was tremendous news. The best news. It needed celebrating, and there was one way of celebrating that Jacob and I were particularly good at.

Jacob giggled as I threw him over my shoulder and carried him to our bed. He bounced as I dropped him. I didn't immediately follow him down onto it, taking a moment to admire this gorgeous man that I'd somehow made mine despite everything. Instead of telling him I loved him, which he already knew anyway, I growled, a flush of arousal immediately lighting up his cheeks.

He lay back, spreading his arms and legs like a starfish. "Are you going to force me to carry out depraved sex acts?"

I smiled at the echo of a past conversation. "Yes. Yes, I am. Lots of them."

"Thank fuck for that," Jacob said. "Just make sure they're especially depraved."

I would. There were three things in life I didn't have any intention of giving up. Books. Jelly Babies. And Jacob. My love for all three knew no bounds.

THE END

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