

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

Mandy M. Roth

A woman with long, wavy brown hair is crouching in a dark, cave-like setting. She is wearing a red dress and black lace underwear. The background is filled with bright orange and yellow flames, creating a dramatic and intense atmosphere. The woman's expression is serious, and she is looking down. The overall scene suggests a theme of temptation or temptation.

DEMONIC
DESIRES

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Demonic Desires

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Dedication

To Nick. Your insight, encouragement and words of wisdom are always appreciated.

Prologue

Donatus Manlian bit back a smile as he held the door for the elderly woman. “Mrs. Rosière, I’ve told you every day for a month and a half that I’m more than willing to pick up the things you need at the store on my way home. I can even hire someone to do it for you.” It wasn’t the first time he’d offer to do that and he was sure it wouldn’t be the last either. The elderly woman was stubborn. Almost more so than he.

Mrs. Rosière smiled up at him, her eyes twinkling with merriment. “You’re a good boy, Donatus. A good boy. Don’t let anyone tell you different.”

If you only knew.

He kept a smile plastered on his face as she entered her home. Shifting the bag of groceries he’d taken from her when he’d found her walking home alone—again—he followed her in. The smell of freshly baked cookies filled the air and Donatus wondered how that was since she hadn’t even been home. He also wondered would it would have been like to grow up in home such as this, with a caring woman to look after him and provide a steady supply of love and baked goods. *You’d not be the jaded fool you are now if you’d been pampered.*

As he strolled past the endless rows of holy artifacts she had, he thanked his lucky stars that the days of bursting into flames the moment a crucifix came into play were long gone.

It had been over three hundred years since he’d had that problem. Of course, Mrs. Rosière was none the wiser. To her, Donatus was in his early thirties and an upstanding citizen. Hell, to everyone but his brethren, he was just that. It was laughable to a certain degree.

In reality, he'd spent all that time atoning for the evil he'd help reap upon the world and caging the demon that would always remain within him. Being a good boy didn't come naturally to him. He had to work at it. Harder than most.

"Would you be a dear and put the bag on the counter for me?" she asked, going straight to the cupboard and grabbing two glasses.

They had done roughly the same thing for over a month. He would find her walking with bags that were way too heavy for her and he'd help her home, and she would give him a glass of lemonade. The additional pep talks about how much the Lord loved him were always optional. It wasn't a topic he wanted to dwell on and she seemed to respect that, most of the time. On a few occasions she'd gone out of her way to quote scripture to him, citing various forms in which forgiveness was granted.

Some acts are unforgivable. Just like some men.

Not wanting to agonize over that which could not be changed, he went to work on unloading the bag. Mrs. Rosière shooed him away. "That will be enough of that. Sit down, relax. There's something I've been meaning to talk to you about."

Reluctantly, Donatus did as she requested. When she sat down across from him, his chest tightened. In the short time he'd known her, he'd allowed Mrs. Rosière to fill a position he'd never actually had anyone fill before – mother figure. Grandmother, even. "Mrs. Rosière, is everything okay with you? Are you sick?"

She snorted, waving a hand dismissively in the air. "Oh, I've been dying since the day I was born. We all have. Or most of us anyways." The glance she cast him made him wonder if she knew more about him than she was letting. "I want to talk to you about your family, Donatus."

"I have no family. I have friends I consider brothers but that's it."

She pushed his glass of lemonade in front of him. "No, you have a family out there. You just haven't taken the initiative to go find it. More to the point, you haven't made an attempt to find *her*."

"Her?" he asked, sipping his drink. He watched her carefully, doing his best to figure out where the conversation was going.

"Yes, her. Your wife. The woman you're destined to spend the rest of your life with, Donatus." She smiled, snow-white wisps of hair dancing around her pale face. The wrinkles nearest her eyes crinkled. "Tell me why you haven't looked for her."

He chuckled. "I wasn't aware I had someone earmarked for me, Mrs. Rosière." That wasn't entirely true. In theory, all supernaturals had a special someone. At least that's what people told him. He didn't really believe it. The idea of forces greater than one could conceive granting someone like him a wife were highly suspect.

"Well, you do and you've wasted too many years sitting back and doing nothing. A man your age should be out living life to its fullest, trying to find that perfect someone, that match."

Men my age are dust at best.

He held back from speaking his mind. It wasn't like he could really tell her he'd been alive for centuries. Even if she believed him, she couldn't have the knowledge. No one could. It would put too many lives at risk. Smiling, he tipped his head. "I'll start looking for her right away. Want me to bring any candidates past for your approval?"

A slow, knowing smile moved over her face. "That won't be necessary. When you find her, you won't need anyone else to tell you it's right. Your heart, your entire being will know."

"As romantic as that sounds," Donatus sighed, "I don't think happily-ever-after is for everyone."

Especially not men like me. Men who did unspeakable acts centuries ago and have to live with the harsh reminder daily.

"Donatus."

"Yes?"

"Have a little faith. It's not what a man is. It's what a man does."

Chapter One

Donatus inserted the tip of his swollen cock into the young beauty below him, fearing it would most likely be too big for her to take fully without pain. After all, she was only a human and their bodies weren't made to accept something the size of his member in shifted form.

Pushing in farther, Donatus felt the woman's nether lips spread until taut as a soft cry tore from her throat. The additional stimulation to his dick was so overwhelming that he worried he'd release in her before he truly got started.

She bucked beneath him, staring up at him with wide deep blue eyes. Her long, shiny black hair fanned out around her head, creating a halo effect that only made him—and the demon that had surfaced from within him—want to fuck her until she surrendered.

Sexy. Submissive. Mine.

Dragging an angel down to his level was the ultimate rush, one demons everywhere fantasized about. It had been a longstanding dream of his, especially in the height of his demonic days—to experience a piece of heaven, all the while knowing he was bringing a hefty dose of hell into the mix. The idea of filling her with his seed excited him almost as much as the thrill of knowing he would taste her flesh soon.

Donatus pressed his hard shaft into her, letting only one of the eleven inches his demon form had rest inside her. She gasped. Her eyes widened more as she bit down hard on her lip. For a split second he was unsure why he was bothering to take his time with this mortal. In his prime, he'd taken what he wanted without thought, without remorse. Yet here he was, spread out on her king-sized bed with its white cotton sheets, holding a female's legs open wide and the tip of his dick on the edge of ecstasy, worried that he would hurt her. That had never mattered to him before.

Why now? Why did he suddenly want to know that the beautiful creature below him was not only safe but accepting of him?

“Please,” she whispered, lust filling her eyes, “more.”

Sliding a long, clawed, dark red hand down her smooth leg, Donatus caressed her inner thigh and took in the scent of her arousal, careful not to cause her any harm. The mouth of her pussy squeezed his cock as he flicked a finger over her clit. Savoring the sound of her soft whimpers, Donatus rubbed the engorged pink bud carefully. He slid his tongue over his extended fangs and smiled wickedly as moisture glistened around his shaft.

“Your body wants me. Can you feel how eager your cunt is? Feel how wet it is, how much it desires me? It’s tightening for me. It wants every bit of me crammed in it. Doesn’t it?”

“*Mmm-hmm*. More.” She bucked under him again, causing her pussy to take even more of him. Donatus tweaked her clit, this time keeping steady pressure on it as he swirled his thumb. Moaning, the woman bit her lip and looked away from him.

Donatus knew exactly what the human was feeling. Long ago he’d used his gift to ride the wave of absolute terror that radiated from all the females he bedded. Now he found himself using it to pick up on her shame. She didn’t want to enjoy this. But she did. She more than enjoyed it. This was a fantasy she’d kept to herself for so long that even she’d lost count of the years. She’d longed for a demon lover. An otherworldly creature of the night to come into her life and make her feel again.

To make her body burn.

From the sweet smell of her cream and the continuing spasms in her heated core, he knew she wanted to be fucked as badly as he wanted to fuck her. That was why she’d summoned him. The spell she’d chanted softly had filled his ears, calling to him, making him shift into demon form—a form he’d not taken in over three hundred years. Her chant forced him to follow it, satisfy it, claim its owner.

“Yes,” she said again, biting her lower lip and moaning softly.

He pulled out slightly, letting her think he'd stop. The longing in her face and the need for release kept him from withdrawing from her completely. "Yes, what? Do you want me to take you?"

She whimpered and squeezed his cock tightly with the mouth of her vagina. "Yes. Please take me. I want this. I want you."

Using his full strength, Donatus slammed himself down on her, ramming his cock to the hilt. She screamed beneath him and held tightly to him as she panted. While slightly put off by the fact he'd caused her pain, he couldn't pull out and comfort her. Her tight pussy had a hold of him now and the demon had no intentions of leaving. She'd get used to the intrusion or at the very least become numb to the pain as he brought her to peak again and again. Perhaps she'd even pass out. Many had done that over the centuries.

No. I won't allow you to harm her, the man within the demon said. His need to give her pleasure was great.

Pulling back slightly, Donatus gasped as the walls of her pussy took hold of him, yanking on him, trying desperately to hold him to her. Something clicked inside his chest and he couldn't help but lean down and take one of her nipples into his mouth. His fang nicked the ripe berry as he drew it in slowly, causing blood to ooze to the surface. The woman suddenly gave off vibes of satisfaction, want, desire. He sucked on her nipple more, taking it in and savoring her sweet coppery taste as he continued to move his shaft in and out of her.

"Mine," he growled, rolling her nipple with his tongue as he fucked her. "Mine."

"Yes, yours. I'm *all* yours."

His entire body shook as the sound of her tiny animalistic grunts and whimpers flooded his ears, giving justification to why he was there. She'd wanted pleasure and he was doing his part to fuck her into oblivion. To give her all that she'd sought and so much more than she'd expected.

"Uhh, too much, too much," she murmured suddenly between clenched teeth.

"No. Not nearly enough. Wrap your legs around my waist and take all of me. I want to feel as though my cock is going up through your entire body. I want you moving beneath me, crying out as I fill you full of my seed. You will carry my child, woman. This I can assure you. And you will spend eternity letting me sink my cock into your tight little body anytime I want. Do you understand me?"

What the hell? Why am I saying this to her?

Something close to excitement passed through her blue eyes and the demon that rode him howled out at the erotic sight. "You like the sound of that, don't you?"

"Yes," she murmured, holding on to him tightly. "I want you to fill me with your seed. I want to take all of you."

"I want to hear you scream for me. Beg me to give it to you." The man, as much as the demon, needed to hear her acknowledge that she truly wanted him to mate with her.

She nodded her head. "I want you. Please."

"That's not good enough." He stilled, refusing to continue joining with her until she gave in to his demands.

She pulled at his hips, doing her best to try to make him fuck her again. He held his position. The moment her lower lip popped out into a pouty state, Donatus found himself leaning down to kiss it.

"Fuck me," she said, this time with more conviction, a fraction of a second before their lips touched. "Please, fuck me. I want you! I want all of you!"

Dropping his head down, he flicked his tongue over her other nipple. "Yes, scream for me." He bit down, causing a bit of blood to flow from it as well.

Donatus fought hard to yank away the demon. He succeeded in harnessing it enough to force his magik over the beautiful woman who was making his head spin with thoughts of eternity and children when he didn't even know her name. He let his

power caress her nipples and clit. She gasped and ran her hands down the backs of his arms slowly, tenderly.

Once he was sure she was indeed enjoying the experience, he eased back a bit, letting the demon take charge so he, the man within, could continue to concentrate on keeping her pleasure going.

Seizing one of her legs, Donatus lifted it high and crammed every last bit of his cock into her. She raked her hand out fast, catching the backs of his arms, clawing scratches into his skin. It only served to excite him more. The evil he carried took joy in her feistiness. Smiling, he fucked her harder, making the bed squeak and crack. "Take it, woman. Take it."

"Ahh, yes. Give it all to me," she cried out. Moving her hand out again, this time she took hold of his lower back and moved slowly down to his ass while she rotated her hips beneath him. "Harder."

Harder? Was she mad? Did she want his demon to lose itself in need and break her?

Donatus felt them then. The telltale signs that he was about to lose control fully. The demon within crashed through the thin barrier that held him back. His body twisted, contorting slightly. Instantly, his dark red lower half was covered in thick black fur. It was the same fur that covered him when he chose to assume his wolf form. Horns erupted from the sides of his head and his chin lengthened, taking on yet another facet of his many demon faces. Now his demon was truly free.

The woman's eyes widened as she stared up at him. He knew he looked like the devil himself and for a brief moment, both he and his demon were proud. Running his tongue over her neck, tasting her salty tear, he took a deep breath in savoring the sweet smell of her sex. She shivered beneath him. Her excitement that bordered on fear consumed him. A sexy smile covered her flushed face. Oh, it was easy to see that the little minx more than enjoyed herself. She bit her lower lip and nodded, her breathing erratic. "Mmm, horns." She moaned beneath him, caressing the back of his arms, looking frightened but not radiating fear in the least. The woman seemed to push her

anticipation, her arousal, over him, helping Donatus a tiny bit in his fight to take control of himself again. It was pointless and he knew it but even if he could grasp hold of the tiniest strand of control and maintain it, he could assure her safety.

He stiffened as her inner thighs shook and her pussy tightened in a spasm around his cock. She was coming, hard and fast. Afraid of missing the perfect opportunity to plant his seed, Donatus encouraged the demon to begin pumping her so hard and so fast that the bed rocked hard before giving out and crashing to the floor. He didn't stop. He fucked her harder than he'd ever fucked anyone. It was a given that she'd be bruised – they both would – when he was done but he needed this. He needed her. And from what he could gather, she needed him as well.

I more than need her. I want her for all eternity.

The demon and the man both had a moment of shock at his proclamation. Donatus seized the opportunity to take hold of the reins. While not strong enough to fight the half demon, half beast down, he at least had enough control to know that it was he who would offer her his seed. It was the man, his true form, that would produce their child. Not the demon.

A small smile crept over the beautiful creature's face as she ran her hands over his shoulders. "Mmm, that was perfect."

Donatus grabbed hold of her wrist and stared down into her eyes. "You like knowing that part of me is an animal right now. That you're taking all of me and that I can't seem to get enough of you."

"Yes. But you can't get enough of me either and you know it," she said, her voice low, sexy, sultry. "Admit that you need me as much as I need you. That you like the feel of my pussy around your cock."

She was right. There was no way in hell he'd ever get his fill of her. Something about her made his chest ache at the thought of leaving her. Making him feel at all while in shifted form was a miracle. "You're right, little one. I will never have enough of you."

The second his balls drew up and his body stiffened, he dropped his head down. Knowing exactly where to strike, he sank his fangs into her tender shoulder and pressed his cock deep within her, holding it steady as he came in waves.

"It's cold," she whispered.

Donatus already knew how cold his semen would be when it left his body. The colder it was, the less human was left in him. The very fact that she hadn't screamed as though he were inserting ice into her told him that the demon only had a small hand in this. The demon wasn't in charge and that warmed Donatus' frozen heart.

Have a little faith. The words played in his head and he struggled to maintain his fragile hold on reality.

Spurt after spurt of come jetted into her tight little pussy, filling her to the point that it seeped slowly from her while his cock was still buried deep. Licking her blood from his lips, Donatus stared down at her. "I claim thee. You are and will forever be mine. You will stand by my side, bear my children, honor my wishes and forever submit to me. I will protect you with all that I am and hold you above all others. For you are my mate, my wife, my soul."

A sharp, bitter cold wind whipped around them fast. It passed through him and headed straight for her. The moment it hit her, she gasped. It was then that what he'd just done truly sank in. He'd just tied himself to one woman for the rest of eternity. A woman he didn't even know. A woman who had to want him the same way he wanted her for the binding ritual to have actually worked.

The demon roared to life, furious at the idea of never being able to fuck another woman but confused because neither he nor the man he inhabited wanted to let go of the woman below.

How dare she lure me into this? How dare she entrap me?

Anger took hold of him as he drew his cock out of her. Staring down at her with hard eyes, he shook his head as the demon mocked him just below the surface. "Tell me

how you enthralled me, witch. How did you know the chant that would summon my demon forth?"

"N-no...not a witch. I'm a..." she panted, her eyes wide, though now they appeared to be filled with lust.

Flipping her over fast, Donatus stared down at her sexy ass and smiled slightly. "You've been a bad little witch. And I think you deserve to be punished. What do you think?"

"Please. I'll do anything." She glanced back at him and smiled. "To have you punish me, that is."

"Anything?" he asked, sensing her eagerness to play along.

"Yes."

"Good. Get on your knees. I want to fuck that sexy little ass of yours."

Her breath hitched. "You'll never fit. You'll —"

"I want that prize around my cock now. And I think you want it too."

She rolled and propped herself up on her hands and knees slowly, trembling. Moments later, he heard a faint sob.

"Did you hate me being in you that much?" he asked, pain stabbing at his chest at the thought that his wife couldn't bear his touch. "I'll stop. I have no wish to take what you do not offer."

The man within was shocked as ever by the demon's words. He was even more taken by the fact that he knew they were true.

Her body shook harder. "No. I'm crying because I not only liked it...I want more. *Why* do I want more? Why can't I get enough of you? Why do I want you to promise to not fade away — to not be just a dream?"

That was a question he couldn't answer. He wanted her just as badly. Hell, he had enough control of the demon to understand what he was doing now. Not only had he claimed the beautiful raven-haired woman who lay before him, he'd released his seed

in her. In the five-hundred-plus years he'd been alive he'd never once wanted a woman enough to claim her, let alone produce a child.

Running his finger through their combined juices that flowed freely from her cunt, Donatus rubbed them generously on his shaft before spreading the mixture over her hole. Pressing a finger in, he waited for the two quick pops he knew would come and held her steady as she screamed out, bucking against his finger, taking it all the way into her excruciatingly tight ass.

"Mmm, you've never had anyone in here before, have you?"

"No."

"Mine." Pressing the tip of his still-hard dick to her anus, he hooked an arm around her waist and pushed in hard and fast.

No sound came from her as she launched upright. If he hadn't have been holding her, she would have been off the bed. Instead, her ass now held his cock in a vise grip as Donatus began to stroke her swollen clit.

Moving against him, she began to ride his cock while on her knees. Laughing softly, he swatted her smooth ass cheek gently enough that it only made a slight slapping sound. She moved against him, moaning, and he thrust harder. Rubbing the spot where he'd spanked her, he moved a bit and slapped a new portion of her lush cheek. Grinning, Donatus took hold of the demon within and thrust it downward. Morphing slowly into his human form, the form she'd not yet seen, he continued to fuck her harder than he should just because it felt good. Pounding into her, he tweaked her ripe bud as he continued to take her tight ass. His cock swelled. Leaning forward, he wrapped his body over hers as he pumped into her. He rubbed her clit steadily, rhythmically and rolled her nipple with his other hand. "I want you to come for me, baby."

"Mmm," she murmured as she rocked back against him.

"Good girl. Now come." Donatus let his power surround their bodies, assuring that she'd come not only with him, but as she'd never come before. She climaxed instantly.

Her body went rigid as he continued to take her ass by storm. His cock twitched a moment before semen erupted from it, coating the inside of her ass with his magik, his power, his essence.

The second he pulled his arms away from her, she dropped to the bed. He rode her all the way down and rolled to his side, taking her with him. His cock was still nestled in her hot, tight channel while her breathing was shallow and steady.

Donatus pressed his lips to her ear and kissed it gently as he wrapped his arms around her, hugging her tightly. "Thank you, little one."

She never stirred as she slept in his arms, cradled against his chest, still holding his penis tightly in her ass. Withdrawing slowly, Donatus hugged her gently. The urge to keep her safe was like nothing he'd ever experienced. Where had she come from? Better yet, how had he come to be with her?

Looking around the room, he did his best to reconstruct the events leading up to this. He remembered going to bed early with a headache. His initial dreams had been plagued with the sounds of the one thing he'd never wanted to hear in his life again—the chant that allowed his demon to break free of the hold Donatus had on it. For a moment, he'd believed he'd been swallowed alive by the pits of hell as flames had shot up around him. The next thing he knew, he was in full demon form at the foot of her bed while she tossed and turned until her naked form was wound tightly in the sheet.

Donatus had done his best to force the demon out of the young woman's room but the moment she woke with a gasp and stared into his eyes, he knew he couldn't leave without having her. It wasn't until they'd gotten to the point of insertion that she'd shown any sign of fear. It was easy to see why. In demon form, his cock was thicker and longer than probably any other she'd ever seen. It still amazed him that she'd not only taken it but had liked it.

When he'd shifted back into human form, his penis had returned to its normal size. She either didn't notice or didn't care. In truth, an inch less ramming into her most

likely wouldn't make a big difference. Women complained about his size regardless of what form he was in.

As Donatus held the woman in his arms, he thought about what he'd done. *Gods help me. I've married a woman I don't even know.* Running his hand down her stomach, he let it rest on her lower abdomen. Though sure he'd planted his seed, he feared she may be more than human and able to reject it. If she truly was a witch, the laws of mates and whether or not she was truly his would apply. If not, he would still be bound to her but her body would reject his seed.

Instantly, his body was ripped from hers by an unseen force. It violently jerked him backward. The harder he fought to stay, the harder it yanked on him.

"No," he cried out, grabbing hold of anything and everything he could get his hands on. Knowing that whatever had him was going to win, his gaze went to his new bride. He didn't know her name or even where he was. For all he knew, he could be anywhere in the world or worse yet, another realm. "Wake up, baby."

Chapter Two

Wake up, baby.

Donatus woke with a start and searched his room frantically, trying to reassure himself that the demon he carried hadn't broken free and bonded with the most incredible woman he'd ever seen. It felt real. Hell, his parting words to the woman were still echoing in his head.

Glancing down, he found himself in the same red silk pajama bottoms that he'd fallen asleep in. He wasn't in shifted form. Exhaling, he let out a shaky laugh as he rubbed his hands over his face. "Pull yourself together. It was only a dream, idiot. You locked the demon away three hundred-fifty years ago. It didn't just decide to pop out last night and go get married."

Hearing himself say that out loud did little to comfort him. Surprisingly enough, Donatus was almost disappointed that it wasn't real. The image of the woman's beautiful body laid out before him was still fresh in his mind. She couldn't have been more than five four, with ample breasts and a tight, rounded ass. Her skin held a faint olive glow to it that offset her vibrant blue eyes and black hair nicely, drawing attention to her classic beauty. He could still feel her pussy wrapped around him, holding him tight while she begged him to fuck her harder. She was too perfect to be real and too spectacular to ever be his mate—his wife.

Moaning, Donatus rolled onto his back and covered his eyes with his arm. He knew then that Mrs. Rosière's talk had left his mind wandering with thoughts of finding his mate. His subconscious had certainly made sure the woman it created was perfect in every way imaginable.

That had to be the cruelest wet dream he'd ever had. A hot chick who got off on being fucked by him in mixed demon form and who made him—*him*—want to marry

her? It was too fucking good to be true. *The gods don't just toss treasures like that at men like me.*

There was a loud jangle and he jerked around fast, ready and willing to kill something if he had to. Realizing it was only the telephone, he exhaled and decided to save killing things for another day. Laughing softly, Donatus grabbed the phone off its receiver. "Hello?"

"Where in the hell are you? You're late."

"Kal? What are you talking about? I'm not late." Glancing toward his bedside table, Donatus' eyes widened as he saw the time. "Oh, shit."

"Oh shit is right, Don. It's been fun covering for your ass. Tell me that she was the sexiest woman you've ever laid eyes on, that you wanted to stay locked inside her until the end time, and I might forgive you."

Donatus pulled back a bit from the phone, confused as to how Kallimoch could have known he'd been with a woman. It wasn't like he was prone to it anymore. Long ago he'd gotten out of the habit of seeking nightly pleasure. Now, he was content with a date or two a month. Some women stayed in his life for a couple of days. Some for a couple of months. In the end, he always walked away from them.

"Are you there? It was a joke, asshole. Want to tell me what's going on? It's the first day of the new school year and you're a no-show. That's not like you. It's like me but certainly not like you."

"I...umm...it's nothing." Donatus rubbed his eyes. "I didn't sleep very well. That's all. I'll be there in a little bit."

Kallimoch snorted. "In a little bit? Hmm, care to be any less vague? I teach women's studies, not comprehensive mythology. You let me in there and I'll start talking like I know those gods and deities you spend so much time trying to teach them about."

He groaned, not wanting to listen to his friend of four centuries whine anymore. "You do know most of them personally. Most of them can't stand you. Not that I blame them. You've screwed how many of their daughters and wives?"

Kallimoch chuckled. "Too many to count, old friend."

* * * * *

"You must be new here."

Turning slowly, with an armful of books, Ava found a man standing behind her. She had to take a step back to fully see him. The man had to be at least six foot six. Her eyes widened as he bent down toward her.

"Are you lost, scared to death of me or trying to figure out if I escaped the circus?" he asked, his hazel eyes seeming to twinkle. The side of his mouth pulled up slightly in a smile. "I'm Professor Kal Sokoll. If you'd like some help figuring out where it is you're supposed to be I can take a look at your schedule."

"No."

His arched a dark brow and nodded his head. Never once did his perfectly tousled hair move. For a man who appeared to have gone out of his way to break the mold of being a stuffy professor, Professor Sokoll seemed to take great pride in himself. It was clear by the gel in his hair and by his thin cotton designer sweater. He'd paired the light tan sweater with a pair of dark tan slacks that cuffed at the bottom. The best part of it all was that his shoes were top-of-the-line. Ava knew they must've cost a pretty penny—more than the average professor made. Then again, from what she'd been told Commiliton University was more than an average higher-learning establishment. It had all the feel and charm of a small college but offered everything a large university would—secondary degrees, an array of majors, all the perks with virtually none of the hassle. From what she'd learned about Commiliton, it went far beyond the norm. All professors, regardless of seniority, had not only their own offices but their own classrooms as well. They had all the provisions they needed to provide the students with a virtually one-on-one education. The school's learning atmosphere as well as the breathtaking campus had pulled her in.

Right now, the stack of books in her hand seemed to be growing heavier by the minute. Shifting slightly, Ava glanced around. "I'm looking for room 141B. They told me it was in this building but I can't find it to save my life."

"141B? That's one of the rooms that have been empty for years. If I'm not mistaken, it's going to be used for Norse mythology this year. I don't think there are any classes in there today—it's a new class and is starting a bit late. The administrators only decided to offer it a month or so ago. Manlian has been moaning and groaning for years to get more specialized courses offered. The man has a passion for mythology that is downright scary. I'm almost frightened for the new professor... Anyway, are you sure you have the right room?"

"That's what they told me. And it's hard for class to be in session when I'm not there." Ava smiled as Sokoll's expression went from smug to confused. "Is something wrong, Professor Sokoll?"

"No, but I think you may have an ego bigger than mine. I'm sure the new professor they have coming in may not agree with you. And you can call me Kal. Everyone else does."

Someone behind Ava snorted. She turned to find another tall hunk of a man standing there. His sandy blond hair was close-cropped. It looked good on him. His skin was bronzed and his body tight and toned, similar to Professor Sokoll's. "Please, Kal, no one has an ego bigger than yours. It's physically impossible."

"I'd tell you to bite me, Gun, but you'd enjoy that too much."

"Hi, I'm Gunter Hagen. Whatever Kal's been telling you about me is a lie." He thrust his hand forward.

Ava glanced at Gunter's hand and then at the stack of books in her arms. "Point me to room 141B and then I'll shake your hand. I need to put these down and grab more from my car. They're getting heavy."

Gunter and Kal were on her instantly, taking the books from her arms. Kal gave her a sheepish smile and winked. "Sorry, I should be forgiven for my lack of manners because I couldn't concentrate with you so close to me."

Shocked by his rather inappropriate statement, Ava just stood there a moment before she realized they were headed down the hall without her. Following them quickly, she soon found herself standing in front of a large walnut door with a gold plate reading "141B" tacked to it. "Hmm, I must have walked past this at least four times."

"This place has a way of keeping things hidden," Gunter said mysteriously. Then, turning to Kal, he demanded, "Would you mind telling me why we're in Fenaly's room? He's supposed to be in today to meet with Manlian, who I haven't seen yet so I'm not sure how that meeting's going to happen."

Ava smiled at Gunter as he set the books down on the large oak desk at the front of the room. "Care to tell me why you think I'm a man?"

Both men stared at her with shocked expressions. It was a moment she wished she could capture on film. Too bad she'd left her camera in her best friend's car. "Gentlemen?"

Kal stepped forward first and extended his hand. "Wow, sorry about that. You don't look a day over twenty-one and your arms were full of books. I thought you were a transfer student."

Ava smiled widely. "No worries. I get the bit about looking younger than I am often. It used to tick me off when I was in my teens. The older I get, the more I like it." She shook his hand. "Ava Fenaly."

"Welcome to Commilton, Ava." Kal gave her hand a tight squeeze and drew in a sharp breath before letting her go quickly. The look on his face screamed concern and shock.

Gunter touched his shoulder. "Kallimoch—errr, Kal—can I have a word with you in private?"

"If it's about me, I'm here," a deep male voice called out from the doorway. "Sorry I was late. You can quit freaking out and go back to teaching the ladies how to liberate themselves." A third tall man came sliding into the room on the soles of his dress shoes, nearly knocking both Kal and Gun over. Ava took a step back and stared at him with wide eyes. Something about him made her breath hitch and her body tighten. His very presence demanded her attention.

"Is there something in the water here that makes the men all giants? I'm just curious. I'd be interested in trying some myself if you could promise I wouldn't grow a beard," Ava mused as she watched the new arrival closely.

His silky light blond hair hung in varied layers around his square face and neck. The shag-styled cut softened his extremely hard features, leaving his emerald green eyes to stand out as he stared at her. Ava's body tightened as the stranger's gaze seemed to soak her in. If hers hadn't been doing the exact same thing to him, she'd have been uncomfortable. As it stood, she wanted to run her hands over his black ribbed turtleneck sweater before sliding them into that hair.

Seeing the three men standing in a row, Ava noticed that they were all around the same height. The newcomer was about an inch taller than the other two. His upper body was a bit wider than the others' and his dark gray dress pants looked as though they were smuggling something large enough to rock her world, or at the very least fuck her into a much-needed sound sleep.

Heat rushed to her cheeks as she thought about the erotic dream she'd had last night. At first, she'd assumed it was a nightmare. She'd wanted to scream when she awoke to find the enormous, dark red, devil-like creature at the foot of her bed, but no sound had come from her lips. She'd stared at its—his—naked body, oddly fascinated with how large he was. Everywhere. That demon had done things to her that no other man had dared and she'd loved every minute of it.

When she'd awakened, Ava had done her best to fall back asleep, hoping the dream demon would come back to her. As crazy as it sounded, she wanted more from him. So

very much more. Now, as she stared at the nameless stranger with eyes that seemed to look through her, Ava wanted to go to him and let him fill the void the demon from her dream had left.

Gunter looked from the blond man to her and then back again. "Donatus, are you feeling okay? You don't look so good."

"Pfft, you'd think he'd be well-rested after being close to three hours late today." Kal clapped the newcomer's back. "If I didn't know better, Don, I'd say you got lucky last night."

Gunter reached across and smacked Kal upside the head. "Show some respect." He glanced at Ava and pasted an embarrassed smile his face. "Sorry, we aren't used to refraining from very male behavior. Kal might be incapable of it, we're not sure yet. So far, we've ruled out that he never progressed past the point of being a Neanderthal but beyond that it's fuzzy."

Ava laughed. The sight of the three godlike men all staring at her with wide-eyed expressions was too much. "Please tell me I'm not the first woman they've had instructing courses here."

The man in the middle tripped over nothing, all while standing completely still. It was something that took a great deal of skill—or a total lack of coordination. She hoped it was the first but was willing to accept the second reason as well. "You...you're...umm, er..." he stammered.

Kal snickered. "Ava Fenaly, this tongue-tied semi-mute is Donatus Manlian. He's head of the religion and mythology departments here at Commiliton and teaches Comprehensive Mythology this semester. I believe he was doing his best to greet you but the poor boy couldn't get it out. Should make for one hell of a meeting today. Anyone want to record that for me? I'd love to sit around and laugh my ass off at him."

"Donatus, Kallimoch and Gunter. Those aren't names one hears every day," she remarked, sensing there was something different about these men, this place. When

Chloe had said she'd fit right in, that her service would be needed in all areas, she may have been more on the mark than Ava had first believed.

"His name is Gunterius but he goes by Gunter. I prefer Kal and Donatus answers to just about anything. Though Don seems to be the only variation we don't get smacked for. Feel free to take your chances. When I get a chance, I'll introduce you to the rest of the faculty. I'll warn you, they've had the same water and had parents as into unique baby names as ours were."

Ava nodded, giving Kal a soft smile as she brushed her hair over her shoulder. Donatus seemed to watch her every move carefully as if he were memorizing it. "Well, it's nice to meet you all. I'm excited to be here. Even though it does appear I'm the first female teacher this school has had. That's surprising to an extent."

"Commiliton only opened its doors to female students twenty-five years ago," Kallimoch explained, "so in truth it's in its infant state of growth."

Gunter snorted and held his gut as laughter erupted from him. "Kal, you should use that spiel every time someone asks why you teach women's studies."

Arching a brow, Ava glanced at the tall brown-haired man, doing her best to keep from laughing at him. To Kal, she said, "*You* teach women's studies. Hmm, that's...umm...interesting."

"You mean disturbing," Gunter suggested.

Ava shrugged as she bit her lower lip. "Nothing odd about that, I guess. Nothing at all."

Kal smiled and glanced toward the books on the desk. "You mentioned that you had more in your car. What do you say I help you get those in? My next class is in an hour so we should be able to chunk a good deal of this away."

Ava tried to take her eyes off Donatus but they refused to move. Scanning the edge of his stubble-covered jawline, she marveled at how blond the hair there was as well. Not one to normally find blonds attractive, Ava had never really took the time to notice

details about one before. His sandy eyebrows drew inward and for a moment she thought he might actually say something to her.

"You okay, Don?" Gunter asked again but got no response.

Ava finally tore her gaze from Donatus and shook her head. "Umm, I'm sorry, Kal. You asked me something and I can't seem to recall what it was."

"I offered to help get the books from your car."

But Ava was staring into Donatus' green eyes once more. Doing her best to push and keep her gaze off Donatus, she turned just a bit and focused on what Kal was saying. "I'm so sorry. I missed that again."

Kal and Gunter stared at one another for a moment. Knowing looks passed over their faces. Gun stepped slowly toward her. "If you want we can bring the stuff in for you. You can check out your room, learn the layout, whatever you need to do. Maybe the two of you could get a leg up on that meeting you're supposed to have later today."

Unsure why she was attracted to Donatus as much as she was, Ava thought it best to separate herself from him for a bit. "Thanks but I'll get it."

Not waiting for their response, she headed quickly for the door, taking a wide swerve around them to avoid touching Donatus.

Donatus watched as Ava walked out of the room, still unable to form a complete sentence, let alone think clearly. "She's real."

"Of course she's real, dumbass." Gunter sighed in disgust.

Kal shook his head. "Man, did you ever blow that one. I put out all the Kallimoch charm and all she could do was stare at you. So what do you do? Trip over thin air and forget how to speak. Smooth, buddy. Smooth."

"Well, I think we can safely say the *Kallimoch charm* repels women." Gunter made an attempt to swat Kal's head again, only to find Donatus grabbing his wrist and holding it tight.

"I dreamed of her last night." His cock twitched at the mere thought of the erotic dream. Being in her had been the closest to heaven that he would ever get. Even the demon within understood that.

"Huh?"

"I was in mixed demon form, shifted fully and...and she was in my dream." He stopped short of describing the details. The last thing he wanted was the group knowing intimate details about Ava.

"Right," Gunter offered sarcastically.

Kallimoch snorted as he shook his head. "I'd believe a lot of shit out of you, Donatus, but this is too much for even me to swallow. Though, I'm impressed with your newfound imagination. I've always thought you were a bit too serious, too anal. Hell, I'm surprised you aren't throwing up because you're late."

The idea of missing two of his classes didn't sit well with him. He wasn't one who flew by the seat of his pants. Donatus was a planner. Dreaming of a temptress, a woman so beautiful that simply looking upon her made his chest tight and binding her to him wasn't anything he had planned out. In fact, it was as far off from his ideas for the future as possible.

On the drive in, he'd thought of nothing else but the mysterious woman from his dream. When he'd entered the building and heard Kallimoch and Gunterius talking he'd run into the room, frantic to let them know he was there. The moment he looked up and found the woman from his dream standing before him, her baby-blue floor-length skirt hugging her slightly curved hips, he couldn't breathe. Seeing the tops of her olive-colored breasts peeking above the scoop neck of her white silk shirt had made him come close to seizing her and burying himself inside her right there on school grounds.

She's real.

Instantly, he felt as though he'd been punched in the gut. Leaning forward, Donatus held his stomach and fought hard to take a full breath. The reality of the situation had hit him full force, leaving his mind racing and his loins burning for another taste of her.

“Did I ever really have a first taste of her or was the dream just that, a dream—a premonition, maybe?” He clenched his fists and shook his head. “Oh gods, if it was real then she’s not only my wife but she could be carrying my child.”

“Carrying your ch—your *wife*?”

Donatus stood tall and stared at Kallimoch, unaware that he’d spoken aloud. “It’s nothing.”

Gunter took hold of his upper arm and squeezed it firmly. “No, Donatus. From what you just spouted off, I’d say this is far from nothing. When Kal touched her, she radiated some sort of power. I wanted to discuss it with him and then you came in. I think she’s human but something was up for a moment there, so I can’t be sure. Now, are you saying that you dreamed of mating with Ava?”

Donatus nodded reluctantly. His friends gasped and took a step back as though he was contagious. Maybe he was. Whatever the cause of it, he had to find out if the dream was real or not. Walking up and flat out asking her if she had dreamed she’d had sex with a demonic-looking creature who’d bitten her and promised to impregnate her didn’t really seem like a wise choice. His luck, Ava would go the authorities and file sexual harassment charges on him. Or worse yet, if the dream was real, she could end up going to the authorities and the media, testifying that demons walked the earth.

All that Donatus and the others had done to create a safe haven for others like them, outsiders, a group that couldn’t claim to be either good or evil, would be destroyed if the media caught wind of them.

Donatus blinked as Kal smacked him in the back of the head. “Hey, jackass, spill the story now.”

Chapter Three

Ava stood before the large wall of mythological relics and statues, still unable to get over how many of them Professor Donatus Manlian had. It was his collection of Valkyrie figurines that continued to draw her attention. They were exquisite, done in cast iron. Each held swords and shields as they faced whatever enemy they stood against that day. Beside them, Donatus had large collection of demon figures as well, each more monstrous than the next.

Opening her hand, she looked down at the protective charm she'd had such a tight grip on and thought of Donatus' emerald green eyes. The moment she'd first walked into his office per Kal's instructions, her gut had clenched at the sight of all the relics. Some were rumored to draw evil to the beholder and since Donatus possessed little to no positive energy pieces, she'd gone out to her car and brought something to help protect him. Why she felt the need to bother was beyond her but she did.

More curious was why she felt the need to give him this charm in particular. It had been with her all her life and had belonged to her father. The urge to find it and give it to Donatus was like nothing she'd ever experienced before. Knowing that fighting her gut was foolish, Ava had rushed to retrieve it for him. It was all she could do to finish unloading her car and putting her personal belongings in her room before rushing to Donatus' office.

Looking around, Ava couldn't find a spot where the charm wouldn't be obvious. As she looked back at his mahogany partner's desk with an ebony inlay an idea came to her. She glanced at the door and decided to make her move. Slowly, she walked to his desk, smiling at the sight of an ornate Viking drinking horn lying on the corner of it. It looked a bit out of place. Her guess was that Donatus had pulled it out to show it to the new professor of Norse mythology – her.

Ava leaned far over his desk to the point her feet left the ground. Sliding out his center drawer a tiny bit, she dropped the charm in and closed it. As she stood, she felt someone watching her. Her entire body lit with need. Exhaling, Ava did her best to get herself under control before glancing over her shoulder.

Professor Donatus Manlian stood in the doorway, staring at her with a questioning look on his face.

Dropping her head down, Ava sighed. "I swear that this isn't as bad as it looks. I wasn't rifling through your drawers. I, umm." The thought of telling him the truth didn't sit any better than that of lying. "I'm going to stand up now. Then I'm not sure if I'm going to die of embarrassment or not."

She followed Donatus' hot gaze. It centered on her upturned ass. His brows arched and his jaw tightened. Was he aroused? She was. The very sight of the man did things to her that she'd never realized seeing a man could do.

Ava's arm caught the drinking horn. The second she realized she was about to knock it off his desk, she gasped and reached for it. A large, warm hand clasped over hers as a solid body pressed her against the desktop.

Donatus' thick, throbbing cock nestled into the globes of her ass. The thin skirt she wore provided little in the way of a barrier. His zipper dug into her while his erection attempted to burrow into her. The thought of having it deep within her caused a torrent of cream to flow from her pussy.

Donatus laced his fingers in hers, clasping the horn and pulling it away from the edge. Ava went to stand, only to find that she was left rubbing her ass against his erect penis and her mound against the edge of his desk. Biting back a moan, she turned her head slightly, accidentally brushing her lips past his.

For a moment, Ava was sure that a spark of power had passed between them. She stood sandwiched between him and the desk, her breathing choppy, her panties wet and her body demanding to be satisfied.

"I'm sorry," she said, pulling the drinking horn closer to her body. "I didn't mean to—"

"Shhh." His hot breath blew over her cheek, leaving her legs shaking faintly and her chest thumping madly. "It's okay. I pulled it out for you. I thought you might like to have it."

"You can talk." She'd meant to make a joke but the breathy sigh that accompanied it sort of turned it into a phone sex operator line rather than a mood lightener.

He chuckled. "Yes. I can talk."

The sound of his deep voice only served to excite her more. It was familiar and erotic. Ava offered him a soft smile but wanted to give so very much more. Her fingers skated over the edges of the drinking horn. "I can't accept this. It's old, very old."

Donatus ground his hips slightly against her ass. "I thought of you when I walked back into my office this morning and knew—er—thought you'd like it."

"Professor Manlian, you don't have to—"

"Donatus."

Ava nodded. "Donatus, thank you but I can't accept it."

"You mean you won't." He pressed harder into her. "Yet you expect me to accept a protection charm that is as old, if not older, than the drinking horn. That hardly seems fair."

"No, I don't expect you to accept it. I expected you to never notice you had it. That's why I put it in your desk..." She stopped talking the instant she realized just how much she'd revealed to him. "You know it's a protection charm?"

"Yes." Using his free hand, Donatus reached over her, pressing harder against her, leaving Ava holding her breath. The very idea of moving enough to draw in air scared her. She was so close to coming already. He opened the desk drawer and pulled out the silver charm. Running his fingers over it, he gasped. "Mrs. M—Fenaly, it's amazing. I

haven't seen one of these since," he coughed slightly, "since I was visiting a friend of mine years ago."

Part of Ava wanted to point out that he still had her bent over his desk. The other half, the one winning out by leaps and bounds, said to let him pin her all he wanted. "Call me Ava and I'm not married."

He blinked for a second, as if he didn't know what she was talking about. Then he smirked. "Are you sure?" he asked, as if he knew something she didn't.

What kind of question is that? She let out a shaky laugh. "Yes. I'm sure. I'd remember that. Unless Vegas and large amounts of alcohol were involved."

"Why did you put this in my desk drawer?" he asked, sounding more curious than upset.

"When Kal let me into your office to wait for you, I noticed your collection of mythological things. You...umm...you were running behind for our meeting so I went to grab it. I just thought you should have it."

Donatus ran a finger over the charm again. "Is there a reason you think I need protection from evil?"

Ava sucked in a quick breath, shocked that he knew what the charm was for. "Do you think you could stand up now? One, this is awkward. Two, you're kind of heavy. And three, please see one again."

"Oh, sorry," he said, moving off her quickly. "I didn't realize I was on you."

"Funny, your cock figured it out just fine."

Donatus made a choking sound. "What?"

Ava stood slowly, stretching her back as she went. As she faced Donatus, she found him staring at her with wide green eyes. She glanced around. "What?"

"You said that my," he arched a brow, "cock figured out that I, um..."

Ava felt the blood rushing from her face as she covered her mouth quickly. Shaking her head, she tried to back away from him, only to bump into Donatus' desk. "I didn't mean to say that out loud. I lose control of my brain when I'm nervous."

He chuckled. The sound wrapped around her as he moved in closer, leaving her going to her elbows on his desk. "But you did mean it, Ava."

"Yes." She closed her eyes and could clearly see him sinking deep into her wet core as she clung to him. The image was so detailed and so arousing she had to shake her head to come back to reality. "I mean, no. I did not mean it."

Donatus folded his arms as he watched Ava's olive skin tinge with red almost instantly. She averted her gaze and he wanted to use that moment to steal a kiss from her lush mouth. When he'd walked in and found her ass being offered up to him, he almost took it. The dream he'd had of her had haunted him all day. He could almost feel her tight ass gripping him, holding him to her as he filled her with his seed.

She licked her lip and watched him through obviously lust-filled eyes. He leaned over her more, placing his palms on the desk and arched his brows. "You didn't answer me about the protection charm. Why would I need it?"

Ava looked toward his wall of various mythological items he'd collected throughout his life. "You have a lot of relics that are said to attract evil. I know it sounds crazy but people still carry lucky rabbit's feet. I just thought you should have a charm."

"Mmm." He moved in closer to her, leaving her no choice but to lie back or kiss him. "So you know a lot about what summons evil? Have you ever given it a try? Have you ever called on a demon before?"

She looked as though she'd been slapped. "No. Why would I do that? My luck, they'd be real and come a-knocking."

Ask her if she dreamed of one.

Donatus ignored the sound of the demon's voice. It struggled to come to the surface and he knocked it down with ease as he stared at Ava. Her eyelids fluttered and his heart beat rapidly. "Is that something you study?" he asked, pushing his knee between her legs and gently spreading them. Her long skirt refused to open any farther, keeping him from laying his covered erection against her sweet-smelling sex. Every bit of him wanted to tear away the material between them and cram his cock in her, assure himself that Ava was his.

"I know a good deal about it but I wouldn't say I study it." Ava's moist pink tongue darted out again and Donatus fought hard not to capture her mouth with his.

"So you wouldn't know how to call a demon to you?"

He saw something flash through her blue eyes. Had she called to him, summoning his demon? Was it real?

"No," she said breathily. "I don't study any of that. Why, do you believe in it? Want me to call around and find you a demon summoner? Maybe you could talk it into sitting on your shelf. You could get one stuffed—that would go great with your collection." The tiniest of laughs escaped her.

How was it possible he'd foreseen her arrival in the most intimate way possible? More than that, why did he have traits associated with mating occurring? He'd sensed her when she'd fallen in her room. Sensing her pain, he'd abandoned his class and run across the hall to check on her. He'd found Ava dusting off her backside and calling the books scattered about her on the floor everything but their actual title. It was then he'd gotten the notion to dig out an old Viking drinking horn he'd acquired from a friend of his several hundred years ago.

Donatus had discreetly watched Ava for so long that close to twenty minutes of his class time had passed when he'd finally returned. Not one of his students complained. Not that he expected them to. When he'd wrapped up the class, he'd stood just outside her door, watching her organize her room. She'd come across as good-natured when she'd spoken to him this morning but he had no idea how funny and playful she was.

Someone had her cell phone repeatedly throughout the morning. At first, Donatus had been jealous, assuming it was a man calling her. For a brief moment, he'd almost lost it and shifted into demon form in the middle of the hall. When he heard Ava address the caller as Chloe, he relaxed.

Chloe seemed to be concerned with Ava getting settled in. Ava spent most of the time unpacking her room with the phone stuck to her ear. She'd made numerous attempts to hang up but the woman on the other end didn't take the hints. Ava made the most adorable faces as she went about her conversation. Never in his long life had Donatus thought anything was adorable.

It'd taken everything Donatus had to walk away and give her privacy. When he'd first arrived late for their meeting she'd been gone. Her scent lingered in his office but Ava was nowhere to be found. Panic swept through him. Instantly, Donatus had launched into a full-blown search for her. Minutes felt like hours as he tried desperately to locate her. The demon had even fought to come to the surface and aid in the hunt. The moment it showed an ounce of concern Donatus knew Ava was indeed important to him. If she wasn't already his mate, his wife, she would be soon.

Donatus smiled as Ava continued to look away from him, still embarrassed by her comment regarding his cock. She, of course, had been one hundred percent right. His cock never seemed to miss a beat around her. She made it not only stir to life but throb with a fury he wasn't sure would ever be sated.

"I think you're going to fit right in here," he said, doing his best to ease her discomfort.

"Why is that?"

"Because you call a spade a spade and a cock a cock."

Her lip quivered and Donatus' heart hammered in his chest. Thoughts of upsetting her more assailed him. The minute she snorted and burst into laughter, he exhaled and laughed as well.

"Gods, you're even more beautiful when you smile."

Ava stopped and stared at him with wide eyes. "Umm, thanks."

Shit, I said that out loud. She's rubbing off on me. Clearing his throat, Donatus tried to pretend he told someone she was beautiful at least ten times a day. He squared his shoulders and couldn't help but want to wrap his arms around Ava's tiny frame and lift her skirt high. The need to fuck her was great. His raging cock needed to sink into her body soon or it, along with the demon within, would burst. He held back from taking her.

Donatus stepped back and offered Ava a hand. She took it quickly, making him smile as he helped her to her feet. He walked around to his chair and opened his left-hand desk drawer. He pulled out a manila folder and glanced at Ava. "I was going over your schedule and I realized I have you down for a night class that meets on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I'll go ahead and get it switched around for you."

"Why?"

"Simple, I'd rather not have you working late and leaving campus after dark."

Ava's blue gaze slid over him and Donatus knew the look. Many demons had tried to intimidate him with that very stare. None had succeeded. He had yet to back down and this was a nonnegotiable issue. Her safety was his only concern.

"And this change came about when you realized I was a woman and not a middle-aged man?"

Yes, but the fact you are mine is weighing in heavy too. Donatus bit back what he wanted to say. "That has a great deal to do with it. I'm not trying to discriminate against you here, Ava. We've had problems with violence on the campus before. It's rare but it exists. We offer chaperones to the women on campus to assure they get back to their dorms safely. The offer extends to men as well. I'd rather be safe than sorry." He walked toward his desk, holding the charm she'd given him in a death grip. "I'll let you know what day and time the course will be on."

"I see," she said in a hushed tone.

"Ava, please try to understand that—"

"That you're late," Kal interjected, appearing in the office doorway. He winked. "Sorry but this thing should have been over a half-hour ago. We've got tee time in twenty minutes. We've got a back nine calling our names. Let's get a move on it."

Donatus cast his friend a warning look. "Go golfing without me. Ava and I just got started."

She glanced at her watch and leveled her hard stare on him. Donatus suddenly wasn't so sure he'd made the right decision regarding the rescheduling of her night class. She smiled. "It's fine, Professor Manlian. I have a few errands to run and then plans for the evening. I don't want to hold you up. Besides, it will be dark before too long. I wouldn't want to be out then, seeing how it's not safe for me and all."

"Don? Did you finally decide to speak only to stick your foot in your mouth? The room has a 'you're in trouble' vibe going."

Ava looked at Kal and offered up a saccharine smile, making Donatus see red. He was just trying protect her, not push her away. Kallimoch shot him a look and Donatus shrugged. Kal rolled his eyes and nodded slightly, indicating he'd try to help out. "Ava, when we're done golfing tonight we're heading out for drinks to help break in another school year. Would you like to join us?"

Ava glared at Donatus and he swallowed hard. The tiny woman was managing to do what no demon could ever accomplish—make him squirm with just a look. "Thanks, Kal, but I have plans for the evening already and someone in this room believes grown women he doesn't know need curfews, so I'd rather not make him spend the evening worrying about me. I'll take my chances on my own." She glanced at Kal. "But if you're up for drinks later this week, I'd be happy to join *you*."

Donatus didn't miss the emphasis. He didn't miss it and he didn't like it. She was his and no other man would dare be near her—friend or not.

Chapter Four

“Ava, stop looking around like you’re being stalked.” Effie, an auburn-haired beauty and longtime friend, danced slowly around Ava. “Granted, you are technically being stalked by a madman whose daddy is the end-all be-all of evil but, hey, he hasn’t found you yet.”

Ava rolled her eyes playfully and continued to stare around the large crowded bar. She’d been sure to insist that Effie and the others meet her out of town, not wanting to bump into any faculty members or possible students. In doing so, Ava had hoped she’d be able to relax and enjoy herself for the first time in years. She couldn’t. Something was watching her. Its intent didn’t appear to be evil but in her line of work, one never really knew what to expect until it was staring them in the face, sometimes with multiple eyes. Never a good thing.

At five foot eight, Effie stood four inches taller than Ava and at moments like this she liked to flaunt that. Though they both had on two-inch-thick heeled boots, Effie had a way of making it seem as though she was on stilts. She shook her black-lace-covered chest and turned in circle. The tank top she wore somehow managed to keep from showing off too much even though it was just layers of lace.

“Loosen up, Ava. That’s why you’re here. It’s time you stopped living in fear. He can’t get you here. Chloe told you that you’d be safe, able to relax and to get back to being you now.”

The minute Effie said it the feeling of being watched increased. Whoever it was had now taken a protective position, radiating the same energy Ava did when she went into what the girls liked to call mommy mode. “Hey, I’m here. Cut me some slack.”

“Leave her alone, Effie.”

Ava glanced at Yvonne. She'd known her all her life as well. Yvonne was just a smidge shorter than Ava. She was so petite that Ava had spent years and years hovering over her and the others. It wasn't until Chloe pointed out that Ava was smaller than most of the women she guarded too carefully that she realized she may very well have issues with mothering them.

Yvonne's newly short, choppy styled black hair suited her pixie-like features. Large brown eyes stared out from her oval face. The light cream sleeveless summer dress she had on made her already gorgeous cocoa-colored skin looked even creamier.

"Thanks," Ava said.

Yvonne shook her head. "Don't thank me. Dance and pretend like you're enjoying it or I will get on that stage and force you up there with me."

"I'll help her get you there," Effie offered, her blue eyes twinkling with merriment. "So shake the ass that those jeans are hugging and let us see those abs flexing."

Laughing, Yvonne shook her head. "I'm still shocked Ava wore just a tied halter-top and jeans. Normally, she's in full-alert garb. I'm always expecting the military to drop out of the sky and claim her."

Effie nodded and smiled. "I know. Our girl is stepping out. She's thinking of finally relaxing. Maybe we'll get lucky and she'll find that love she's been looking for."

"I have not been looking for love. More like looking to avoid it at all costs." Groaning, Ava gave in and began to move her shoulders with the beat, letting it run over her slowly.

"That's it." Effie joined her. "You need a man. Every girl needs a good stiff one every once in a while. You are no exception."

Ava let out a soft laugh, tired of having the same conversation. "Fine. You pick a guy and I'll *entertain* the thought of sleeping with him."

Effie's jaw dropped and Yvonne made a choked cry that sounded like a seagull. Effie drew her head back a bit and the strobe lights caught her pale skin and reflected

her blue eyes, making her look like even more like the siren she really was. "Get out! You're telling me that if I pick a guy, you'll give him a fair shake?"

"Mmm-hmm," Ava murmured as she put her hands in the air and shook her hips to the music. Someone grabbed her ass. Turning fast, she seized hold of the stranger's wrist and twisted it hard and fast. His eyes widened as he lowered to one knee. Ava smiled down at him and put more pressure on his wrist. "Hi, I seem to have found this," she held up his hand, "on my ass. Should it appear there again, I'll keep it."

The man nodded with a surprised, pained look in his eyes. Ava kept moving to the beat. "Good to know we agree on this." As she let go of him, the feeling of being watched increased. For a moment, she could have sworn that the entity was radiating amusement. Arching a brow, she glanced around the bar but couldn't find the source.

"Good luck with holding up on your end," Yvonne said to Effie as she pumped her body to the music.

Effie laughed. "I'm holding you to this, Ava. I'll pick him and you have to think about giving him a shot."

Yvonne turned as a tall hunk of a man approached her. The two paired off and began to bump and grind. Out of habit, Ava kept her eye on the man, not wanting to trust the life of one of her girls to just anyone.

Effie touched her hand lightly. "Ava, it's okay. Not every man wants to hurt us."

"Yeah, well, statistically ninety-nine percent of them do."

"Ava, you have a horrible take on men. Sure, you've been stabbed, mauled, shot and had the shit beaten out of you but still." Effie nudged her slightly.

Ava grinned. "Yeah, I can't understand it myself? Pfft."

A tall man with chestnut brown hair stepped out and touched Effie's shoulder. She turned, smiled and began to dance with him. Ava seized the moment to run from the dance floor. She went quickly to the bar, still unable to shake the feeling of being watched.

"What will it be tonight?" the bartender asked.

Ava smiled. "I'll take cranberry juice, please."

He nodded.

"Not a drinker or not drinking tonight?" a deep voice asked as a large hand touched her shoulder.

Terror seized hold of her with all it had. Ava drew in a sharp breath, spun around fast and threw her fist out. Something in her gut told her to stop. She listened, holding her closed fist directly in front of his midsection. As she looked up, she found herself staring into emerald green eyes. The second she realized they belonged to Donatus, she dropped her fist and pressed herself to him quickly, without thought. "It's only you."

He wrapped his large arms around her and held her tightly. He felt so safe, so warm, so hers. It didn't make any sense, she didn't care. Ava just needed the reassurance he gave her. It didn't matter that he'd been a jerk about her being out after dark. In truth, he'd been right to insist she not work late. The demons that made it their mission to find and kill her kind seemed to really love that time of the day.

After their last meeting she'd spent the rest of her day trying to decide if she should seek Donatus out and mend fences or not. Why she cared was a mystery to her, but she did. She cared more than she wanted to admit. Never before had she tried to hide a charm of protection for someone. That wasn't something she did. Donatus had some sort of hold over her. Not like the Host warriors tried to do—this wasn't evil. This was something far worse than that—it was something that could leave her heart broken if she allowed it to go too far.

Sighing, she shook her head. "Oh shit, I'm hanging on a man who is technically my boss." Thumping her forehead lightly on his solid upper torso, Ava groaned and backed away from him. "I embarrassed myself needing to make sure he's safe and then practically tackle him the minute I'm sure he's not one of *them*."

Donatus cleared his throat.

She stilled. *Tell me I didn't say all of that out loud.*

"Hey, hang away," Effie said, suddenly appearing next to her. "The stud didn't seem like he minded it one bit. I pick him as the guy you have to give a fair chance." She leaned in and whispered, "Plus, you let him touch you without fifty other men trying to pin you down while armed with swords or claws. Always interesting the first time that happens. Don't you think? We weren't sure you'd ever allow it to happen."

Rational thought temporarily left Ava and she forgot about everything but her friend and their conversation. She let out a soft, shaky laugh as she fought back tears. "Effie, I've never been like this before. I've always..."

Effie gave her an encouraging grin. "Ava, you've played mom to all of us for so many years and you haven't taken time to think about you at all. You never once showed any sign of weakness. We thought you were a robot. I know that what happened changed you. We all know that and understand it. But you think it made you weak. We think it made you real." She touched Ava's cheek lightly. "It's also okay to cry. And I think if you feel comfortable enough with this man to hold him while you talk to me about this, you should give in to it. I'm not picking up any sort of need to run from him. I sure know how to pick 'em. Don't forget your promise—a fair chance to the guy I pick. And I pick Blondie here."

"Talk about this with—" Ava went rigid. "Effie?"

"Hmm?" She arched her auburn brows.

"You 'let' him hear this?" It was easy for Effie to block humans from hearing what they shouldn't. She did it without thinking most of the time, her power was that strong.

Taking a small step back, Effie nodded, glancing back at Donatus for only a moment. She appeared to be thinking hard about something before exhaling deeply. "Ava, when I was eight, you told me to follow my gut, regardless what my head was telling me. I was just following your advice."

"It didn't occur to you that I could lose my job? Isolate a man who is most likely attached?"

She snorted. "Umm, sweetie. The man is practically screaming overblown protector. If he was spreading that amount of concern and energy around to more than one woman, he'd be out cold. And if I was a gambling gal, I'd take the odds your job is completely safe." Effie tossed her hand up—to block their conversation from Donatus and any other humans, Ava assumed. "Why you even bother to work is a whole other debate."

"Oh, I know," Yvonne said, coming up behind Effie. "Why *do* you work, Ava?"

Ava turned toward them, paying little attention to the man who stood just a few feet from her. Donatus seemed to fade away in her mind as she focused on her friends. "Where did the lesson of blending in go?"

They looked at one another and shrugged.

Ava sighed. "Why do I bother?"

Effie grinned. "Because you love us."

"Want me to call the rest of the girls for a group hug?" Yvonne asked.

"Okay, if we're going to get all touchy-feely I'm going to have to send you both back to Chloe so she can deal with you." Ava laughed softly. "She's the emotional one. I'm new to it all. Best I not try too much."

Effie's mouth dropped open. "Was that a smile and a laugh?"

"Holy shit, I think it might have been." Yvonne snatched Ava's cell phone from her hip. "I'm calling Chloe. It's clear that you're sick or something. You haven't been even close to yourself in a long while."

"Hey, I've been smiling and laughing all day. There is something about this place, these people that just make it feel okay to let my guard down for a bit."

Effie grinned. "Ava, I don't know if I should hug that hottie behind you or kick him in the jaw for doing what we should have been able to do—make you smile."

"You're acting like I walk around bawling my eyes out."

Shaking her head, Effie snorted. "No, Ava. That would count as showing emotion. You were so full of life before *it* all happened. Hell, we all walked in your wake in awe of how vibrant you were. It was infectious. You don't ever see yourself as funny, but you are, or used to be all the time."

"Chloe said she wants a picture." Yvonne slid Ava's phone back into its spot. She touched the tip of Ava's nose. "She also wanted me to tell you that she knew you'd find it here."

Raising a brow, Ava pulled back a bit. "I wasn't aware I'd lost anything so I'm almost scared to ask what she was talking about."

"Ava, she was talking about happiness. She, like the rest of us, only wants to see you smile again. I once watched you beat the living crap out of a den of vampires, laughing the entire time. It left me in stitches."

Effie shook her head while she stared at Yvonne. "That would be 'beat the unliving crap' out of them. And I still want to know why she started laughing so hard that she ended up in tears."

Snickering, Ava lowered her head a bit. "Well, the one had me off the ground and looked at that talisman I used to wear."

"The one you keep in a box now?"

"Yep." Ava shrugged and laughed. "I don't know what it means still, but I can tell you that his already pale face went completely white when he looked at it. Of course, he launched into the 'I'm not scared of you, little girl' routine. As he held me he told me it was a great honor to get to kill the future wife of an old friend. Some old friend who had 'found the light'."

Effie's forehead creased. "How was a bad guy wanting to kill you funny?"

"Oh, well, that was funny too—like he even could. But the part about being married is what sent me into the laughing fit." Ava put her hand out and motioned to them and then back to herself. "Imagine me being a wife, a mother."

Their eyes widened. "Oh, Ava, your poor children won't be allowed more than a foot from you. They'll grow up getting stepped on by their overprotective mommy."

Yvonne glanced at Effie and laughed. "That and her poor husband would be scared to even glance at another woman because of her massive collection of weapons. He'd invest in those things horses wear to keep them from seeing all around them."

Ava rolled her eyes. "That or one of those cones animals with stitches wear."

Effie snorted. "Ohmygods, I think our girl made a joke. We missed you, Ava."

The bartender set the cranberry juice on the counter. Ava watched as Effie grabbed it and brought it to her nose. She took a deep breath in and shook her head. Motioning to the bartender, she set the drink on the bar. "This has alcohol in it. She can't have that. None of us can."

The bartender laughed. "What, are you allergic?"

Effie took hold of his collar, pulled him to her and licked her lips. Ava shook her head, knowing what was coming. "No. Ava, isn't allergic. But it does seriously impair her ability to sense *very* bad things. If she can't sense bad things and they get a leg up on her, she's dead. So when a stranger brings my girl a drink with alcohol in it when I can guarantee she didn't order it that way, I've got to wonder why that is."

The bartender rolled his eyes. "Yeah, well, sensing 'bad things' is hard work."

Yvonne went to the bar fast and hopped onto it. She sat close to the bartender and winked. "I get so tired of people mocking that. If you had any idea how hard it is to sense powerful evil, the kind that's older than you can imagine being and so full of rage that tapping into its mind could kill you, you wouldn't comment."

Effie jumped up on the bar too, flanking the bartender. She winked at Ava. "That little girl, she can still sense them. Regardless how powerful they are and that tends to scare the biggest of the bad."

"Yeah, and Lucifer *hates* that about her."

Ava snickered. The second the girls began going on about demons and the devil, humans either played along or ran. She leaned into the calming warmth behind her and smiled, thankful her friend possessed the power to block the man who was comforting her from hearing all that was going on. He sipped his drink and appeared to carry on as if he didn't even know she was there.

"Well," Effie winked at the bartender, "that's just *one* of the things he hates about Ava. I think the biggest may be the fact that for ten years she's been a constant pain in his demon ass."

Yvonne nodded. "That and he seems convinced Ava's going to mate with one of the Lost Warriors, forever sealing the guy to the side of good."

Ava huffed. "That idiot thinks that about all of us. He acts like we were put here to be the other half of every one of the smart demons that got the hell away from him." She put her hand out in a dramatic fashion and lowered her voice. "You will not take that which is mine, little woman. You are weak. Nothing more than a child in a league of creatures as old as time. You should not even be here. You should have been exterminated when the rest of your pathetic cause's warriors fell. You survive only because of traitors. Had they not have turned against their master you would be as dead as your dear family. The powers seek to reward the traitors for what they deem to be an incredible show of courage and good within them. I seek to destroy them."

Effie snickered. "Insert evil laugh now."

Ava kept going. "It is not courageous to run from your master. They are cowards. Cowards that will know no happiness. You see, child, you will die here and now for the sins of a man you do not even know. He shall not know what it is to hold a child of his own in his arms, nor feel the love of spouse. He shall forever wander the earth fighting the demon within him, alone. The others will suffer as well. In the end they will come to me begging for forgiveness for turning on me. It is then that the final lesson will be taught."

Laughing, Ava rubbed her throat. "Okay, I can't do it anymore. He likes to launch into dramatic mixes of Latin, English, Italian, just about anything that comes to mind. I especially love how he singles me out of the bunch. Like I'm with ex-Host members daily just a-waitin' to snag me one. Mmm, I've always wanted me a demon. Honey, Mommy's going to the store, don't get too close to Daddy, he might eat you." Ava made a funny face and winked. "If Daddy starts speakin' in tongues, throw up the sign of the cross and put garlic around your neck."

Yvonne stared at Effie with wide eyes as she burst into laughter. Effie piped up with, "Host guys have the biggest dicks I've ever seen."

Ava dropped her head into her hands and groaned before looking up at the ceiling. "You tell me that I'm supposed to train them to stand up for those who can't and to protect the gates to the heavens yet you send me women like these. Where exactly is that angelic portion you promised?"

"What?" Yvonne asked. "It's hard not to notice something the size of what they're lugging around."

Effie grinned. "And it's impossible to count the number of times they talk about it, try to get it in us or basically worship it."

The bartender let out a snort before hooting like an owl. "Oh, you girls are good. This is one of better stories I've heard." He looked at Ava. "So, care to tell me how you're still standing here? After all, you were up against the devil himself."

Ava shrugged. "I don't know, dumb luck?"

Effie narrowed her eyes. "You're still here because you refused to bow to that bastard. You didn't crawl at his feet. Ava, you fought to stay standing when your wounds were mortal and you were completely alone."

"He's still listening," Ava whispered, motioning to the bartender.

Effie didn't appear to care. She'd no doubt wipe the man's mind clear of what he'd heard before they left anyway. She hopped down from the bar and cupped Ava's chin.

"You are the reason we only lost a few. Had you fallen he would have taken every one of us there. He'd own our souls. We'd serve him, not you."

Ava gasped and shook her head. "You do *not* serve me. You are beautiful independent women who choose to stand and do what's right. I would never demand that you —"

Effie pressed her fingers to Ava's mouth, silencing her. "Ava, we do serve you. We do it because we love you. We believe in the cause. You're the reason we were all raised in safety. When the council on Valhalla wanted to send away those of us who carried no blood of the Valkyrie in us, you stood before them unwilling to allow that to happen. That left you, just a child yourself, to oversee us. You ensured that we had the knowledge of your ancestors. You made sure we learned our own history and abilities as well. Most importantly, you kept and continue to keep us unified."

It was all too much. The idea that they looked to her as a savior had never occurred to Ava before and she didn't like it one bit. "Stop making me into something I'm not, Effie. I'm not perfect. I'm not a leader. I'm just me." Glancing down, Ava did her best to push the guilt down. She knew that she didn't do all that she could have. The second she felt the tickle of evil dancing on her skin she should have sent the others away. She should have known that the ultimate evil had finally come to handle the matter himself.

Yvonne jumped down and came at her fast with her finger out. She jabbed Ava in the chest lightly. "If I ever hear you thinking that again I will gather every one of us so we can take turns kicking your ass for stupidity. Ava, you couldn't have known. The very fact that you caught that *he* was coming when you did saved so many lives. No one else I know can sense the devil before he arrives. He just sort of shows up. But you did. You sensed him. What did you do with the few seconds you had?"

Ava stood silent.

"Ava, tell me what you did!"

She sighed and dropped her head. "Told you and Effie to get Chloe and the others."

“No, honey, you didn’t tell us anything. You magikally hurled our asses to Chloe. Something you didn’t even know you could do. I don’t know about Effie, but I can guarantee that I wouldn’t have gotten out of there in time to bring help without you doing it for me. I blinked and I was standing with Chloe. That’s not normal, even for our kind.”

Effie pulled on Ava’s chin, forcing her to look up. “I will never forget when we returned. The sight of you standing face-to-face with the father of all evil is something that I hope I never have to see again. Ava, you had no use of your left arm and I’m fairly sure if you tried to walk you’d have collapsed.”

Yvonne nodded. “Chloe said that the bastard shattered Ava’s hip when he kicked her. Not to mention he’d ripped a rather nice hole through her abdomen after breaking her arm in four places.”

“No,” Ava said, softly. “He didn’t do it. He couldn’t. Each time he tried to touch me, something repelled him. I don’t know what it was. It was like I burned him without trying.”

“Then how the hell did you get wounded so badly?”

Ava sighed, not wanting to relive any of this. “When I was little Arik told me Lucifer had the power to control the weak, the evil, the dead. He wasn’t just telling me stories to feed a child’s imagination. He was spinning the truth in a way that a child could soak it in. The way a child could learn so they’d know what to expect in the event they face it later in life.”

Effie gasped. “Ava, are you telling me that Lucifer turned the girls we lost against you?”

Yvonne clutched her throat, her eyes wide. “No. Ava. No.”

Reluctantly, Ava nodded. “Yes, he did. And two of his sons helped, laughing as girls I loved – and still love – with all my heart came at me. When they weren’t strong enough to take me down, the sons joined in. When that didn’t work, the rest of the Host with him swarmed me. I swear that I fought back but there were so many. Too many to

count and I was so worried about all of the girls who were barely still alive. I turned to look back and the next thing I knew a werewolf Host warrior had his arm buried past his elbow through my lower stomach."

Ava's face creased with pain at the memory. "And as the were pulled his arm out, a vampire slammed into me from the side. I felt the bones in my arm and hip breaking but couldn't do anything to stop it. I was too focused on the were who'd ripped the hole in me. I will never forget his face. When I see him again, I will be the last thing he sees before he dies. He took something from me that I can never forgive."

"Shh, Ava, we know you gave it your all. Hell, you gave it more than that. You put everything you had into beating them back and you won." Yvonne touched her arm lightly. "You won."

"Nobody wins when people die, Yvonne. Lucifer will never die and when he gets me, which he will, Chloe will step in and fill my spot." Ava pointed at Effie. "You will stand by her side. I think that all here can admit that Chloe, while powerful, doesn't have what it takes to always do what needs to be done. You do, Effie. And you have a certain quality that the girls will follow."

Yvonne nodded. "She's right, Effie, you do."

Effie's face hardened. "We aren't going into this because Ava isn't going anywhere. That piece of shit tried to take her from us and found out she was a hell of a lot more than he bargained for. He won't..."

Ava laughed. "He underestimated me once, Effie. He'll not make that mistake again. When he comes for me again, I won't walk away from it. I've come to terms with that. So should all of you. He is pure evil. Being bested by a female, one he's hated from day one anyway, isn't something he'll let go. Chloe knows. It's why she insisted I leave the area. She seems to think I'm supposed to be here. I think Lucifer couldn't give a shit where he kills me, only that he gets the honor of being present when it happens."

Yvonne stroked Ava's upper arm gently and shook her head. "Ava, you like to think it's you against him. It's not. When he came at you he came at all of us. We love

you and if Lucifer thinks for one second that we'll stand around twiddling our thumbs while he tries to finish what he started, he's dead wrong."

"We aren't the only ones who will stand against him, Ava. You've made so many friends with people and things none of us would have dared to. They won't stand for him touching you again." Effie wiped her eyes and smiled. "When we appeared and found you, you were terrified. We all were. But you stared the devil in the eyes and refused to let him have your girls." She snorted. "Hell, you even told the man that he wouldn't touch the Lost Warriors either."

"That was amazing," Yvonne said. "And I know you. Your word is your bond. You'll fight to the death for demons you don't even know—have no idea if they're committing acts of evil or not right now."

"They aren't," Ava said softly.

Effie ran a hand through her long auburn hair. "And how do you know that?"

"Don't get Ava started on remembering the Lost Warriors gathering us together and defending us against their own kind. She wasn't even two yet. The girl firmly believes they're the reason we ended up on Valhalla's front doorstep. She also believes we did something to them. That we showed them the light they were looking for."

Effie burst into laughter. "Oh, yeah. A bunch of evil guys that spent thousands of years torturing, killing, maiming humans and killing our loved ones took one look at us as children and hung up their evil ways, found some children who were about to die and suddenly found the light. Umm, no. I'm not buying it. I'm a year older than Ava and I don't remember anything about that day. How can she?"

"How does Ava do anything?" Yvonne asked. "She's amazing. Let's celebrate her finding her smile again and—"

"And remind her that she swore to give the guy I selected for her a sporting chance." Effie grinned mischievously. "I selected the hella hunk behind her. He seems perfect for her."

"Whatever you do, don't send me a friggin' card like Chloe did," Ava said, smiling.

"Why?" Effie smiled. "What did she do now?"

"She sent me a card that was in some ancient language. Not Latin but close. I called and asked her what the hell it said and she told me to sound it out." Ava snickered. "I stood there like a child reading that out loud while she laughed her butt off on the other end of the line."

"Did you figure it out?"

Glancing at Yvonne, she shook her head. "That's the weird part. Once I was done reading it, Chloe just sighed and told me to go get some sleep, that I'd have some interesting dreams. She said I had a big day today and that everything would be fine. Okay, she's my best friend. I love her to death but she can be a freak when she wants to be."

Effie snorted. "I'd be scared if I was you. Chloe's life mission seems to be keeping you safe and happy. When she thought you wouldn't recover from your wounds, she refused to leave your side. She literally sat by your bedside the entire week. We had to force her to eat."

"Yeah, that's no surprise though. You're like a sister to her. The shocking thing was how Chloe kept mumbling about how she should have made you call *him* to you before it happened. That *he* could have prevented it." Yvonne looked at Effie. "Who the hell was Ava supposed to call?"

Drawing in a deep breath, Ava stretched and hit a wall of muscle, remembering Donatus was close. "Ohmygods, tell me that you thought to block him from hearing us. I mean, I'm assuming you did. Right?"

Effie's eyes widened. "Shit. Umm, excuse me, hella hunk, but you don't really believe any of this, do you?"

Donatus remained silent and still as a statue.

Yvonne shook her head and forced out a long laugh. "Oh, we kill me sometimes."

Pulling her cell phone off her hip, Ava handed it to Effie. "Call Chloe and tell her I'm coming home. I'm sure I'm fired for being crazy and make sure she comes and gets me if he has me locked up. Oh, and deny any charges I was stalking him. I didn't know he'd be here tonight."

"Yeah, right," Yvonne huffed. "You want to talk stalkers, talk Buite. That man is like a bloodhound when it comes to you, Ava. I half thought he'd show up and demand a dance."

"Right before he called Daddy to tell him that he found her and was claiming her."

Ava smacked Effie's arm lightly. "Buite has never said that."

Effie sighed. "How can you hate the big baddy yet tolerate one of his sons?"

"I hardly call what I do, tolerating. It's more like...hmm...okay, I tolerate him."

"Buite?" Donatus asked.

How she'd again forgotten he was there was beyond her? That wasn't something she did. Feeling comfortable around people she didn't know wasn't common. In fact, it was unheard of. "Yvonne, you aren't helping the situation."

Turning slowly, Ava stared at the snug black T-shirt that showed off the chiseled chest hiding beneath it. Swallowing hard, she forced a smile to her face. "Hi, Professor Manlian, I thought I'd use the old 'hug him and toss bizarre friends and comments at him' approach to breaking the ice." As her gaze moved over his full lips, she couldn't seem to tear it away. "Did it work?"

He bent down quickly and captured her lips. Ana opened her mouth to protest and he slipped his tongue in. Heat flared through her body. The sweet invasion of his tongue in her mouth left her moaning softly as she moved to her tiptoes.

The second Donatus lifted her off the ground, she gave in to his pull and wrapped her arms around his thick neck. His tongue swept across hers, making her body tighten. Ava returned his kiss, licked the inside edges of his lips and sucked gently on his mouth. Her nipples hardened against his solid chest. They scraped over him, a mix of

both pain and pleasure for her. They needed attention and they needed it now. As her abdomen tightened, Ava's pussy began to demand the same thing. It wanted his hard cock. So did Ava.

From the feel of the steely erection pushing against her body, his cock wanted to be in her equally as much, maybe even more than she wanted it in her. He let out a low, sexy growl and started to untie her top.

"Okay, kids, I think a room may be in order," Effie said with a chuckle.

Ava stopped kissing Donatus and pulled back from him, her eyes wide and her face flushed. "And now I just kissed my boss."

A slow, sexy smile splayed across Donatus' handsome face. "You didn't."

"Oh good."

He lifted her slightly, leaving her feet dangling. "Your boss just kissed you."

Instantly, Ava pushed off his chest in an attempt to get down. It didn't work. "Down. Put me down."

Biting his lower lip, he shook his head. "I like being able to look you in the eyes. I love how blue they are."

"I can never look you in the eyes again." She continued to wiggle in his arms. The second his bulging cock rubbed her mound just right, tweaking her clit in the process, Ava stopped moving. Moisture pooled at the apex of her thighs. She gasped as pleasure shot through her entire body.

"You fight demons, huh?"

Oh gods, he thinks I'm crazy.

"Of course not." She smiled broadly. "I teach Norse mythology and sneak protection charms into unsuspecting men's desk drawers."

Effie and Yvonne gasped.

Ava ignored them. As she went to speak to Donatus the feel of evil crept over her slow at first, then fast. She drew in a sharp breath when she realized it was close. "Donatus, put me down. Please."

"No."

"Effie, whammy him now!"

Effie tossed her hands out and hit Donatus with a blast of power. He let go of Ava instantly. Dropping to the ground, she kissed her hand, releasing power into it, and pressed it to his lips. "I'm sorry."

Yvonne giggled. "Why are you apologizing? He can't hear you. To him and other humans here, time isn't moving."

"Better question is, why did you make me slap him with that?" Effie asked.

"We've got at least three vampire Host in the club with us. Two are guarding the back door. They haven't sensed us. They're scouting for something, someone—but not me." She gasped when an image flashed in her mind. "Effie, find a man here who is the about same size and build as Donatus. He's got short dark blond hair. His name is Gunter. Yvonne, read me and help her find him. Kal, quite the self-proclaimed ladies' man, will be with him. Dark hair, similar build. Get them to a safe spot then mask their presence. Take Donatus with you."

"What? The Host are looking for your boyfriend?"

Ava shook her head. "No. Well, I don't think so." She waved her hands in the air. "He's not my boyfriend. I know they're hunting for Gunter for sure. I get the sense the three men are inseparable. If I sense that, the Host will as well. They'll not hesitate to kill one to bring out the other." She pointed at Effie. "Keep them safe. Block what's going on from the humans. Yvonne, quick—make me sexy, alluring, every man's wildest dream come true."

She stood before Yvonne and waited for the magikal transformation to occur. It didn't. "Yvonne. Do it now. I need to lure five Host to one area quickly. Looking like a porn star would really help right now."

Yvonne bit her lip. "Umm, you own a mirror, right?"

"Now is not the time to start – what? Of course I own a mirror."

"When you get home stare in it for a while." Yvonne ran behind Effie. "I've got an image of the men we need to find in my head. Let's go before two and two click for Ava and she realizes she really is that hot."

"What?"

They ran off fast into the frozen crowd. Ava let out a deep breath. "Wonderful, you forgot one of the men you're supposed to keep safe."

Glancing up at Donatus, she sighed. "What in hell did you do to me? I don't kiss just anyone. I don't worry all day about men I just met and certainly don't think about how many ways they can please me." She let out a soft laugh. "Remind me to ask that again when you're coherent."

As she went to walk, she noticed Donatus' lip quivering as though he were biting back a laugh. Ava stepped closer to him and poked his chest lightly. When he didn't respond, she exhaled. "Don't do that. I'm already going to have to cast one hell of a powerful spell to make you forget everything except saying hi to me. I really don't want to walk around thinking you're immune to it."

She froze when she realized that Donatus was now her responsibility. "Shit, seduction won't work if I'm dragging a six-foot-five barbarian with me." Ava shook her head. *Think, Ava. Think. You've been out of the game two months. Not a lifetime. You can't leave him alone... Think of something else.*

The sound of trouble filled her ears. Listening closely, she caught the echo of a woman begging for her life that seemed to be coming from outside. Ava sensed something else. Tossing her hand in the air, she spoke softly, knowing the message would go straight to whom it was meant for. "Son of a bitch – Yvonne, do not let Kal or Gun out of your sight. Two vampire Host have an innocent pinned down. I think they're doing it to draw Gun out. I'm not sure why." *What the hell do they want with a human?* "They're thinking about him while they're cornering her. Send Effie for

Donatus now and then have her meet me out back with the other three. Tell her she can pop a nipple if she wants to lure them. I know how much she likes to do that.”

Grabbing hold of Donatus, Ava pulled him toward an isolated table to await Effie. She waved her hand in the air and the music level reached eardrum-piercing proportions. Ava bent down, seized the wooden chair next to her and slammed it down fast, smiling as the sound of it breaking was drowned out by the loud music.

She glanced down at herself and groaned. “Great, the one night I decide to dress like a girl, I need a place for weapons.” Eyeing Donatus, she let a slow smile move over her face. “I’d steal your T-shirt right now if I wasn’t one hundred percent positive that I wouldn’t be able to stop undressing you at just the shirt. Heavens help you if I decided to have my way with you. I’m not sure you’d make it out alive.”

Yanking her flared pant leg up, Ava slid a broken piece of the chair into her boot. She repeated the steps on the other leg. It was then she felt the woman’s fear again. “Don’t move.”

Turning, she moved through the crowd with a speed humans didn’t possess. Pushing through the back door, Ava did her best to appear intoxicated. “Susie? Susie, are you out here?”

Spotting two men near the far end of the building, Ava knew they had the woman pinned. One turned and stared at her. A slow smile played across his pale face. He chanced a glance at his partner and nodded. “Come,” he said to her, putting his hand out.

Ava did her best to pretend to be under his spell. It was difficult considering she’d never actually been enthralled by one before, but she had seen enough humans put under to at least imitate them. The victims normally looked as though they were moving through molasses and only seeing the vampire in question.

The vampire glanced at his friend as he spoke. “Call the others. This should prove to be most interesting. Two wonderfully delicious snacks. Though I’m thinking I might do a little more than whet my appetite with the new one.”

The woman they had pinned to the wall stared at Ava with wide, terrified eyes. As much as Ava wanted to shout out that she was coming to help, she couldn't. She needed the vampires away from the woman first. Even with her supernatural speed, she'd never make it in time to aid the woman if they struck out.

Ava sensed the other three vampires before she saw them moving in from behind the two before her. They'd apparently taken the front door. Effie would no doubt be extra-pissed when she got her hands on them. Ava giggled and kicked a foot out innocently, doing her best to look like a horny, drunk woman hell-bent on getting laid. "Mmm, no one told me that all the sexy ones played out here. I would have come sooner."

It took all she had to not choke on her own words. Ava waited, smiling softly as the group of vampires walked away from the woman, concentrating on her instead. They flashed fang at her and she used that opportunity to play the victim. "What..."

They looked at one another and laughed. "Something the matter?"

Sensing another presence behind her, Ava glanced over her shoulder and found Donatus there. Instantly, Ava turned and rushed at him, needing to know he was safely away from the vampire Host members. The back door opened. Kallimoch and Gunter rushed out, heading straight for her.

A flash of red shot out behind them, taking them quickly to the back wall of the tiny alley. "Damn, you men do not listen!" Effie shouted as she held them to the wall. It was quite a sight, the thin five-foot-eight redhead pinning two men who were almost a head taller than her. Somehow, Effie pulled it off. The buzz of her power moved through the air, holding Kal and Gunter to one spot.

Yvonne ran out and joined them in the alley. "The other three disappeared. I heard them mention a master. We should get word to Ava." She glanced over and spotted her friend. "Or just let her overhear me saying it."

Gunter and Kal looked at Ava with wide eyes. Kal tried to break Effie's restraints. "What the hell are you doing, Ava? Get your ass behind Donatus, now!"

Ava would have responded but she felt the rush of evil behind her. Donatus went to move and Ava unleashed her power, pinning him in place. She pointed at him. "I will deal with you in a minute."

Looking over her shoulder, Ava aimed at her target, a long-haired blond vamp. She twisted her waist, lifted her right foot and kicked it straight out. Her heeled boot came into contact with the vampire's upper chest, sending him hurtling backward.

"Ava?" Kal sounded shocked.

"She's not going to answer you," Yvonne said with a laugh. "Right now she's probably running heavy metal songs through her head or thinking up creative ways to wipe your memories clean."

"Let us go. She needs our help." Gun sounded winded.

"Gun, that's what they call you, right?" Effie asked. "She does not need *our* help. In fact, if we step in, she'll be pissed at us. Ava needs this. It's been two months since she exercised her abilities."

"Abilities?"

A second vampire moved at Ava fast. Smiling, she took a fighting stance and waited. As he sped toward her, she jumped into the air and changed out her front foot with her back one. The vampire wasn't expecting that. The second Ava kicked out hard, she caught him in the head.

Reaching down, she pulled a stake from her boot and slammed it into his chest. A cloud of dust surrounded her, coating her quickly. Groaning, Ava did a full body shake, hoping it would fall away. "I forgot how much I hate that."

"Oh, I know. It's hell to get out of your hair, isn't it?" Yvonne called from the sidelines. "I once spent an hour trying to get one of those gooey vamps out from under my nails. It makes you want to get to bring them back to life and kill them again just because."

Ava glanced back and shook her head. Something rushed her from behind, slamming into her hard. It pushed her toward the wall at an alarming speed. Yvonne gasped. Ava locked eyes with her and sighed. "Have a," she ran up the wall that the vampire was doing his best to ram her into and flipped high over his head, "little faith in me please." The second her feet touched the ground, she thrust the stake through the vampire's back, taking care to be sure she hit his heart.

The vamp burst into flames. Ava tossed power out quickly, coating herself in cold to douse any flames that attempted to touch her. "Effie, hold Donatus!"

Donatus watched with bated breath as Ava struck out at another vampire. It took everything in him not to fight the hold her friend Effie had on him. It would be easy to toss it off but it would also cause Effie great pain. That wasn't something he wanted to do, if he could help it. Ava cared greatly for her and wouldn't take kindly to her being injured.

Gunter tried to break the hold, thrusting out against it. Effie punched him hard in the face and snarled. "Do that again and I'll kill you for the Host bastards that seem to want your sorry ass so bad."

"You have to be the biggest bitch I've ever met."

Shocked that Gunter of all people called a woman a bitch, Donatus stared at him with wide eyes. The second he saw the hungry yet determined look that Gunter had in his eyes, he smiled to himself. The man was taken with Effie, that much was clear.

Effie punched Gunter again, dropping her power for just a second. Donatus seized the moment and threw power out at the remaining vampires. They went to dust instantly, covering Ava in a large cloud she would no doubt hate.

She stopped dead in her tracks and looked around. "What the—"

A bright flash of white surrounded Ava. Donatus went to run for her but found himself being held in place by an unseen force. The energy was different than Effie's.

Ava's eyes closed as her body seemed to be cradled by the light. His heart thumped madly in his chest, unsure if she was merely sleeping or injured. "Ava!"

"Yvonne, Effie, return home immediately," a soft feminine voice said.

Donatus looked around but found no sign of the voice's owner. All he found was the typical dark, slightly damp alley that always seemed to draw the seedier side of the supernatural.

Effie snorted and punched Gunter again. "This asshole needs his memory wiped and his attitude adjusted. He had the nerve to grab my ass and tell me he wanted to see if my hair was as red on my pussy as it is on my head."

Gunter growled. "That wasn't me. That was Kal. I tried to tell you that but you were too busy kicking me in the gut."

"Oh, would you stop whining about that already?" Effie nagged as she made a move like she was going to hit him again. Gunter jerked. She laughed.

"Effie, come home now," the voice called.

Yvonne snickered. "Chloe, let me grab Ava quick. Way to put her to sleep. If she remembers any of this she's going to be pissed. The last time you knocked her out she couldn't remember anything that had happened to her two days prior to that. I think you did it to cover up the fact you ruined her favorite sweater."

A soft chuckle came from nowhere. The sound moved over Donatus, radiating peace and harmony. "I remember, Yvonne. I didn't hit her with quite as much energy so she'll only lose hours, not days. But leave her there. Donatus, you take Ava and don't let her fight anything else. Not even something as small as what she did tonight."

"Small?" Kal huffed. "The hot voice thinks Host are small. I don't know if I should thank her for giving me a dick so hard I can now hammer nails with it or laugh at her assumption that Host members are no real opposition."

The girls laughed. Donatus didn't. He looked around and took in a deep breath, understanding who the woman must be – Ava's close friend Chloe. "I get the sense that

me stopping her from doing what she was born to do is going to be huge, Chloe. Don't get me wrong. No part of me wants Ava doing this but why are you, her best friend, telling me to stop her from doing what she loves?"

"Because I'm excited about being an aunt and want my nephew to have time to develop in her. And I'm hoping her husband would want the same for his wife and child."

Suddenly, it felt as though someone had sucked the air from his chest. Donatus stared at Ava and then turned to look at his friends. They looked as shocked as he felt. As Chloe's words settled, Donatus let out a soft laugh and shook his head slightly. "It was real?"

"Yes, Donatus. It was real."

His body tightened as a ripple of anger moved through him. "You did it. You had her call me. Why? You know what I am. There's no way you could have given her that chant on the card without knowing that I'd come in demon form."

"I didn't know what or who you were, Donatus. Ava did." Chloe paused for a moment. To Donatus it felt like an eternity. "Since we were little she's been adamant that Host warriors turned on their own kind to protect us from harm. She is also convinced that you and the others who dared to defy Lucifer took us to Valhalla's doorstep to assure that we'd be safe from the evil that tried to follow."

Thinking back to the day he stormed into the tiny village, hell-bent on wiping out the remaining members of the cause, he shook his head. He killed things and carried out his master's orders. Or at least that's what he'd done until he pushed into that village and entered a tiny villa. He'd stepped over a man's dead body and found a mother, near death, clutching her daughter to her. The little girl was just a baby really but when she looked up at him with eyes so blue that they seemed to look through him, no part of Donatus could harm her.

The child's mother smiled when she saw him even though he was in full demon form. The woman's response to him shocked him to the point that he shifted back into a

man and stood before her. She willingly handed the child over, told him to take her to safety and follow his heart. He did. From that day forth, Donatus fought the evil within him and never returned to follow Lucifer's orders. The strangest part of it all was how many other Host warriors had had a similar experience that day. They'd all stuck together, fighting evil and slowly, over the centuries, lay down roots around the university.

Donatus shook his head and laughed. "The odds of Ava being the child I took to Valhalla are so remote that it's—"

"Is it that hard to believe you would sense your mate instantly and want to protect her at all costs, regardless of the fact that she was but a child, Donatus?"

Kal snorted. "Oh man, did you pick up the wrong kid. You picked one up that would strap a ball and chain to you. I'm glad the rugrat I grabbed isn't my mate. The little blonde thing bit me."

"You deserved it," Chloe said sternly.

Donatus ignored her statement. "Ava was just a baby. How can she remember me?"

"That I'm not sure of now. But I can assure you that she has dreamed of you. Two months ago, she was mortally wounded. I sat by her side, seeing everything that ran through her mind. You were there, Donatus. Deep in her mind, she'd stored every detail about you. She even memorized your demon form. Ava had hinted that she had to find you from time to time to me but I wasn't sure you really existed or if you were just some larger than life thing she created to rationalize how we came to be on Valhalla. But when I saw you, through her buried memories, I knew you and the rest of the Lost Warriors were not only real but good men. If I'd have known, I'd have had her summon you sooner. She wouldn't have gone up against Lucifer on her own. She would have been home, swollen with your child and in the safety of your arms."

Donatus stood there, soaking in all that Chloe had to tell him. He'd roamed the earth for so many years that he'd long since given up hope of ever finding true

happiness and he never expected that if he had a mate, she'd be a warrior for the side of good. "She's really mine? She's really my wife?"

"Yes," Chloe said, laughing softly. "She's really yours, Donatus. So is the child that grows within her now. If kept safe, he will grow to be a defender of good—like his father and his mother."

A chorus of gasps sounded behind him. He ignored them. "If kept safe? What aren't you telling me?"

Chloe sighed. "When Lucifer attacked Ava, he knew the exact places to strike. He had his puppets..."

His chest tightened. "They ripped a hole through her reproductive organs, didn't they?"

"Yes. I couldn't believe that the two of you had managed to conceive. Ava needs to have time to adjust, as does your son. She's in a vulnerable state and no part of me wants to see her lose the little one. She, as we all did, believes that the attack left her unable to have children." Chloe released her magikal hold on him. "Go to her, Donatus. Show her that she's not only safe now but loved as well."

Donatus covered the distance between himself and Ava in a blink of an eye. He took her from her cradled safety and held her tight. Looking down at her sleeping peacefully in his arms, a flood of emotions tore through him. He bit back the tears that wanted desperately to flow and shook slightly. "Thank you."

"No. Don't thank me. It is all of us who owe all the lost ones a thank-you." Chloe chuckled. "Though in the end, it evens out."

"Wait," Effie cut in, "are you telling us that our mates are the Host who saved us?"

"It would appear so. Though I'm sure that there can and will be exceptions to that."

Effie snorted. "Oh, like hell. I am not about to tie myself to some jackass ex-bad guy."

"Don't worry, sweetheart," Gunter bit out. "I can't think of one guy I know who'd willingly take you. He'd be crazy to sign up for an eternity of getting bitched at for things he didn't even do. Sure, you've got everything and more right where it should be and can make any guy hard indefinitely but to put up with that temper just wouldn't be worth it."

"Oh, like you'd know how I am in bed."

"I don't need to know. That award-winning demeanor says it all."

Yvonne snorted. "Would you two shut up? I'm so going to curse you both to be destined for one another if you don't."

Donatus brushed stray strands of dark hair from Ava's olive-colored face, still not believing she was truly his. "She'll hate me when she finds out, Chloe. She made jokes about Lucifer trying to stop our joining and how her demon husband would eat her young."

"Yet she gave you a protective charm that had been her father's. Do you think she'd hand it to just any man?"

The charm had been her father's? He couldn't accept it. He wasn't even worthy of her let alone her loved ones' keepsakes. "Come and get her."

"What?" Gunter asked. "You're kidding. That little bundle of energy in your arms is your wife, your future. I will not let you hand her over to anyone."

"We're marked men, Gunterius. She's part angel, part Valkyrie. I don't deserve her and she surely didn't do anything bad enough to have to have me."

"Donatus, take her for the gift she is and cherish her," Chloe said, soothing his nerves a bit. "She won't break. She won't disappear if you blink. She thinks you're human. Use the opportunity of slipping under her guard to let her see how much she loves you."

"Sweet, you get to fuck an ultimate kick-ass chick."

Growling, Donatus turned slightly and leveled a hard stare on Kallimoch. "Never speak of her that way again."

"Donatus, loving her won't harm her," Chloe told him. "Having sex with her won't hurt her either. In fact, your semen contains some of your power. Your power only helps her in carrying the child. Take her and go. I can't keep her out much longer, she's already fighting it and I don't want to see her hurt. More importantly, I don't want to deal with her when she wakes up."

Chapter Five

Ava opened her eyes slowly, not wanting to but knowing it was past time she did. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the light and her mind to register what she was seeing. Hunter green walls with white molding reached heights she'd only seen in the council chambers on Valhalla. An arched doorway allowed her to see a bit of a Regency dining room table and chairs. The cross-patterned wood floor pulled her eyes to the edges of what could only be a sitting room.

The ivory-colored Victorian chaise lounge that she found herself lying on was exquisite. The velvety fabric caressed her skin just so and the additional feel of the matching angora throw over her bare legs left her in an aroused state. The smell of sandalwood and vanilla surrounded Ava. Her brow crinkled as she tried to pinpoint where she was.

Ava glanced down at herself and noticed that she had on only her bikini-cut panties and a man's white button-down shirt. Pulling the angora throw around her waist, she stood slowly. A large oil painting hanging on the wall behind the chaise lounge caught her attention. It showed a warrior and a demon locked in chains, bound together and fighting to be apart. The man was in the plane that appeared closest to the viewer, leaving Ava to believe the man would win. The pained look on the warrior's face said the artist knew the man still struggled hard even though he was in the lead.

The warrior's eyes were familiar. The deep emerald green reminded her of Donatus'. Long waves of blond hair spilled over the warrior's broad shoulders. His shirt was torn open in front, showing a large gash near his right, lower abdomen. The demon that was bound to the man was deep red with horns on the side of its head and dark black fur on his lower half. It looked so much like the demon from her dream that

she backed away with surprise. The warrior's eyes held her close. Gasping, Ava reached out toward the wounded warrior as tears filled her eyes.

Instantly, her stomach twisted into a knot. She rubbed the back of her neck, trying to stop the rise in her body temperature as nausea washed over her. Ava held her hand to her abdomen and tried to take a deep breath. It didn't help.

"Ava, what's wrong?" a deep voice asked.

Glancing up, she found Donatus standing in the doorway, wearing a pair of loose-fitting light jeans and a white T-shirt. Seeing him dressed casually with no shoes on made her crave him even more. He looked like a hunky beach bum surrounded by old-world nuances.

He took hold her arm gently and heat surged through her. The nausea faded away only to be replaced by the need to touch him. "Ava, honey, what's wrong?"

Honey?

"Nothing," she whispered, taking another look around the room and landing her gaze back on the painting. "Where am I and why are you here too?" She glanced down at the white shirt she had on and froze with sudden realization. "Ohmygods, I slept with my boss. How?"

Donatus arched a brow as a sly grin spread over his face. "I'd like to think you understand how all of that works."

Ava let him pull her all the way into his arms. She snuggled her face against his chest and couldn't seem to stop her arms from sliding around his waist. "Care to tell me how it is I ended up in this place with you?"

Donatus chuckled and the warm sound ran over her skin. "This place is our home."

"*Our* who? You don't live with Kal and Gun, do you?" She couldn't picture anyone living with Kal.

"Uh, no." Donatus caressed her back lightly. "Do you like it?"

Ava nodded. "From what I've seen, it's beautiful."

"Hmm, sounds to me like someone here doesn't remember much about last night."

"No, I remember everything." She bit her lower lip, hoping he wouldn't ask her about it because she still had no clue how she'd ended up in his house. At the moment Ava remembered running into him and getting kissed by him but nothing beyond that.

Donatus lifted her off the ground and pressed his lips to hers. She gasped, allowing him access to her mouth. His warm tongue darted in and danced around hers, caressing it in a way that left her chest tight and pussy damp.

Pulling back slightly, Donatus' hot gaze ran over her. "Remember doing that?"

"Yes," she answered honestly. Ava ran her hands through Donatus' shaggy blond hair and drew his bottom lip into her mouth. Sucking gently, she moaned and additional heat and moisture flooded her sex. He plunged his tongue into her mouth, invading it in the best possible way.

Donatus slid his hands down Ava's back and cupped her ass, remembering how good his cock had felt buried deep in there. A low growl came from somewhere inside him. He almost drew back from Ava until he realized that he was the one making it. The tiny woman in his arms drove him mad with need. She could make him forget anything. The taste of her sweet mouth was maddening and the intoxicating smell of her natural scent left him in a state of need.

When he'd brought her home with him, he'd originally gone straight to his room with her. Ava had tossed and turned, unable to get comfortable. He left long enough to get her a glass of water and had come back to find her missing. It was another moment when he and the demon within synced perfectly as fear took hold of them. He tracked Ava to the sitting room and found her on the chaise lounge where she was now resting. It wasn't until Donatus noticed the demon within him receding quickly that he glanced at the painting one of the monks of Greosciarius had done for him hanging on the wall.

He'd been told the painting was blessed to ensure that he would always stay one step ahead of the demon he was tethered to. Ava had felt the negative energy in his office and had brought him the charm to counter it. It stood to reason that she sensed it

in his room as well. Since Donatus cared little for his own safety he'd never gone so far as to worry about what he chose to surround himself with.

After watching his young wife struggle to find peace next to him, Donatus made mental note to handle the rest of the rooms of the house soon. He held Ava in his arms, smelling her arousal and desperately wanting to find his own peace within her silken depths. Unable to help himself, he slid her wet panties aside and pressed a finger into her tight core. She drew in a sharp breath. He smiled wickedly. "Mmm, remember that too?"

Ava jerked against him, driving his finger into her pussy. "Umm."

"Umm?" He enjoyed teasing her too much to stop. They'd done nothing other than sleep last night. He inserted a second finger and Ava cried out as he spread her more. Thrusting his soaked fingers into her cunt, Donatus reveled in the scent of her cream that seemed to permeate the very air around him. "You're so tight, Ava."

She responded by moving up and down slowly, riding his fingers as she went. His insides clenched as he fought the demon within. Unable to wait another second, Donatus walked their bodies to the chaise lounge and laid Ava out on it. She looked so exotic. Glorious. Fuckable. His.

Carefully unbuttoning the white shirt she wore, Donatus couldn't stop staring at her. He knew what his face must look like. Hell, she probably thought he was a virgin with his shocked expression but he couldn't help himself. Ava was everything he had ever dreamed his wife could be—and so much more.

Donatus dropped his head down as he straddled the chaise lounge. He licked the edge of her nipple and smiled as she bucked under him. The smell of her arousal increased to the point that he wasn't sure he'd even make it into her pussy before he came. Control had never been a problem for him before. Ava had turned his world upside down. That was one of the reasons he loved her.

Love her? The demon within laughed, knowing Donatus wasn't ready to admit he loved anything or anyone. Staring down at Ava, licking her hard nipple, he fought back

the demon and the feelings she stirred in him. He nipped playfully at her pebble-like nipple. Ava yelped and grabbed her breast, pushing his mouth away fast.

“I’m sorry, baby. I didn’t mean —”

Ava offered him a small smile. “Shh, I didn’t mean to push you off.” She bit her lower lip, teasing him just enough that he wanted to thrust forward and drive his cock through her panties. “They’re sore. I don’t know why. They’ve never been like this.”

Donatus’ chest tightened. Ava had no idea that he was her husband — or that she carried his child. She’d no doubt take that news badly but he couldn’t stop how he felt and for the first time in centuries he was happy.

Kissing her nipple lightly, Donatus locked eyes with Ava. “I promise to be gentle.”

He moved down the length of her body, planting tiny kisses on her olive skin as he went. When he reached her panties he couldn’t stop himself. Instantly, Donatus ripped them from her body. She drew in a ragged breath as he parted her slit. Staring at her pink pussy, he could think of nothing more than tasting her cream. He drew her clit into his mouth and rolled it gently with this his tongue.

“Donatus,” she panted.

He chuckled into her pussy as he continued to tweak her sweet clit, savoring the honey taste of her cream as he went. The odd angle he stood at made it hard to do what he wanted. Taking hold of her hips, Donatus moved back farther, pulling Ava with him. When he had her aligned with the end of the chaise lounge, he went to his knees on the floor and buried his face in her drenched folds.

He thrust a finger into Ava’s heat and sucked gently on her clit, causing tiny animalistic noises to flutter from her. Their eyes locked and for a moment, Donatus couldn’t breathe. Her beauty, her trust and her absolute abandonment were right there, leaving Ava stripped bare before him. He knew this wasn’t like her. She wasn’t one to hand a man everything, yet that was what she’d done with him.

A pang of guilt went through him as he thought about allowing her to believe they’d had sex the previous night. While they had been together, it had only been

during what they'd both assumed was a dream. Donatus thought about telling her the truth but her body picked right then to tighten. Ava's pussy quivered as she gasped and reached down to touch him. He kept going, sucking and tweaking her clit while he finger-fucked her. The taste of her cunt was divine.

Moving down just a bit, he lapped her cream, savoring every bit of it, knowing it was forever his. No part of him had ever believed he could tie himself to one woman for eternity but as he watched Ava toss her head back while he continued to lick her juices, he knew he'd never tire of her.

Unable to take it anymore, Donatus rose quickly. He was in such a hurry to get into her that he didn't even bother to undress. He lifted Ava and moved her higher onto the lounge. She opened her legs wide, just in time for him to release his cock from the top of his pants.

Donatus couldn't help but smile as he pressed the tip of his dick to her heated core. Ava didn't bring up protection because she assumed he was human. It made sense. Being immortal meant they weren't susceptible to human diseases and could carry none of their own. And with the Valkyrie and angel blood in her, Ava would never conceive a child with a human male. She'd only be able to do that with a supernatural. It didn't work the same way for supernatural males. A male could get a human pregnant with ease, but it could only happen with a supernatural if she was his true mate.

And from what Chloe had said the previous night, Ava firmly believed she couldn't have children. But it was good that she didn't push for protection. Their child needed what he could offer and he needed to release as much into Ava as he could.

Pushing his cock in ever so slightly, Donatus stopped moving, allowing Ava's excruciatingly tight pussy some time to adjust to his size. Her blue eyes widened as her channel walls pulled taut.

"You won't fit," she said softly.

"Mmm, baby, I'll fit. I promise. I've been there already, but you remember that, right?" He looked down at Ava and ached for her even though he was technically in her, with her, married to her. "Do you want me to stop?"

She ran her hands up and around to the back of his neck. She licked her lower lip. "No. Now kiss me and remind me of what we did."

Not one to turn down an offer from a beautiful woman, Donatus captured her mouth with his and kissed her passionately. As she drew his tongue into her mouth and began to suck on it like it was his cock, he lost all control and thrust forward, driving himself in to the hilt.

Ava screamed out in his mouth and he drank it away as he held his hips against hers and rubbed her body with his. Her pussy eased its hold on him just enough that he could move without worrying about hurting her. She wrapped her legs around his waist, giving him even deeper access.

Donatus took care to press his lower abdomen against Ava's clit, wanting to give her every ounce of pleasure he could. She felt so good, as though she truly was made for him. Each thrust sent him closer to the edge of coming.

"Donatus...there. Right there." Ava grabbed hold of the back of his arms, making his need to find release in her even greater. "Harder."

"I don't want to hurt you."

Ava dug her nails into the backs of his arms and tossed her head back. "Fuck me harder."

The demon within pushed up fast, almost breaking free. Donatus held it down. Sweat beaded on his brow as he fought to keep control. Needing to concentrate on something else and wanting to please Ava, he gave in and began rhythmically pounding his cock into her. She cried out and bucked beneath him. He would have stopped if he wasn't picking up on her desires. But she definitely wanted it.

Ava's legs tightened and quivered around his waist. Her breathing became irregular at best before she held it. Driving himself in deep, Donatus stayed there as his

balls tightened and his come shot forth. Ava's pussy milked him as she hit her zenith as well. The mouth of her vagina ate at him, pulling and grasping at his cock as he continued to fill her with his seed.

"Oh, Donatus," she panted, holding tight to him.

He captured her mouth with his and slipped his tongue in as the last of his seed filled her, hopefully helping to give added power to their son.

"Well, I certainly didn't remember that," Ava whispered so softly that a human wouldn't have heard her.

Donatus bit back a laugh and kissed her forehead gently. "I don't want to pull out. Can I stay here for eternity?"

Ava instantly radiated sadness. "I wish you could."

"What's that mean?"

A soft purr came from her and Donatus' dick instantly came back to attention. Ava laughed and moved beneath him. "My, my, my, you sure have a quick recovery period." She ran her thumb over his bottom lip as sadness filled her blue eyes. "I need to get my butt to work. I've got classes today."

He kissed her thumb.

She jerked up a bit, still pinned under him. "What time is it?"

"Ava, we have plenty of time to make it to campus. Relax and let me love you."

Let me love you? Was he mad? Thinking about how much he loved her was insane enough but taking a roundabout way of confessing it to her was too much. He opened his mouth to redeem himself and stopped as a puzzled look came over Ava's face. "What's wrong, baby?"

"Donatus, why does it feel like I've known you all my life?"

He winked, not wanting to tell her the truth. "I have that sort of face, I guess."

Her blue gaze raked over him. "Mmm-hmm, now that you're done lying to me why don't you take advantage of having that hard cock of yours still deep inside me?"

"You're going to be the death of me." He rotated his hips slightly. "But I should probably inform you if that's the case I'll die a happy man, Ava." He pumped into her. The combined juices from their lovemaking left her pussy wet and extra warm. Simply rocking and rotating while pressed against her had him beyond stimulated.

"There. Right there," Ava whispered, feeling his cock against her G-spot as she arched her back and countered his moves.

"Mmm, tell me how much you like this."

Her eyelids fluttered as she locked gazes with him. The hot, hungry look in her eyes damn near drove him to release just by looking at her. "Your cock feels so fucking good. Like it was made just for me."

"Come," he whispered, releasing enough power to cause her to as he plowed into her and held tight. A spasm tore through her core and she gripped him tightly, crying out beneath him. He came in hot waves, soaking her with his power, his essence, his seed. "You were made for it. For me."

* * * * *

Ava pushed the pancakes with caramelized bananas around on her plate and did her best to look as though she was eating. Donatus set the morning paper down and shook his head slightly as he smiled. "Honey, if you don't like my cooking you don't have to eat it."

"No," Ava said quickly. "It's not that. It's just that my stomach is a bit off this morning. I hope I'm not getting some sort of flu. I'd hate to know that I passed it on to you."

A knowing look passed over his handsome face. He touched her hand lightly and the nausea receded almost instantly. "I don't think it's the flu, Ava."

"Me either since I felt it disappear the moment you touched me." She rolled her eyes and chuckled. "I know that sounds crazy."

Ava took a bite of her breakfast and moaned as the sweet taste of the caramelized bananas filled her mouth. Donatus looked pleased that she enjoyed what he'd spent so long making. She couldn't help but smile when she realized he was happy. Glancing into the sitting room, Ava watched as light filtered through the circular window and illuminated the painting of the demon and the warrior.

"There is something about that painting that makes me love it and hate it. I'm not sure I've ever had that type of a reaction to art before. Normally, I swing one way or the other. But that just infuriates me and makes my heart break when I see it. Where did you get it?"

As Donatus went to let go of her hand Ava tightened her grip on his. "Please." She glanced down, a bit embarrassed. "Don't let go. Your breakfast is delicious but I'm not kidding when I say you ease my stomach."

He stood slowly, maintaining contact with her as he moved toward her. As Donatus picked her up like she weighed nothing, Ava laughed and cupped his scruffy face in her hands. "What are you doing?"

Staring down at her, he winked. "I'm loving the way you look when you smile and," he sat down in the chair she'd been in and drew her onto his lap, "I'm making sure you eat."

Ava grinned and went to climb off him. He held fast. "Donatus, I'm not going to make you act like a human chair while I eat."

"You didn't make me do anything." He caressed her cheek gently. "I'd be crazy to turn down having a beautiful woman sit on my lap while she's wearing only a shirt."

Shifting awkwardly, Ava blushed as she thought about Donatus tearing off her panties. She ate slowly, doing her best to avoid bursting into flames from the amount of heat that continued to rush to her cheeks as she thought about how the sex with him had been. Never before had a man made her body feel so satisfied yet so hungry for more.

Donatus rocked her back and forth gently as he nipped playfully at her neck. "Have I told you how happy I am that you're here, Ava?"

"No." She shifted a bit. "Can you tell me what's going to happen at work today? I feel like I should stay on the other end of the campus and avoid making eye contact with you."

"Why?" He pulled her back to him.

Ava let out a soft laugh. "Because I don't expect this to be any more than it is and I'm scared to death of bringing any attention to it at work. The rest of the faculty doesn't need to think I'll go home with them too. You don't know me that well and I'm sure you think this is a lie but I do not normally go home with men."

Donatus stiffened. "Ava, what exactly do you think this is? Just casual sex?"

She nodded. He growled, making her shiver. "Honey, this is a far cry from casual and I want to shout it off the rooftops. I want the entire world to know that we've found each other."

Ava arched a brow. "Found each other?"

He lifted her hand in his and kissed it gently. "Ava, do you think it's common for people to meet each other and not be able to breathe, talk, think? Do you think it's common to do what we've done and feel what we've felt with nothing more between us than casual, ho-hum feelings?"

"No," she answered, noticing his cock lengthening under her.

Donatus kissed her neck gently and rocked her again. "What would you say if I told you that we were meant to meet each other, meant to be instantly attracted to one another?"

"What? Like soul mates?" The idea, while intriguing, was ridiculous. She couldn't mate with a human. "Unless you can turn into a demon that used to serve the darkest lord out there, that's unlikely." She laughed, leaning into him.

"And if I can?"

"Mmm, then you should probably know that the devil's pissed and that he won't be attending the wedding he's spent so long trying to prevent." Ava couldn't hold in her laughter. Donatus didn't help matters when he began to tickle her ribs. She moved around on his lap, trying to get him to stop. All she succeeded in doing was making herself horny and giving him an erection that had to hurt.

Donatus lifted her quickly. Before she knew it, he had the head of his cock pressed against the entrance to her wet core. She gasped as he eased her down on it, stretching the lips of her pussy over his long, thick shaft. Her breath hitched as she took him to the hilt.

Leaning back against him, Ava began to rock her body, riding him with a slow determination. It felt as though his cock was impossibly high in her, filling her to the point she couldn't help but gasp every move she made.

"Ava."

"Uhh, yes?" she asked, doing her best to focus on him while she took every inch of him.

Donatus reached around and rubbed her clit, making her jerk on him as pleasure shot through her entire body. "I can and I did used to serve him. Your stomach is upset because you're carrying my child, honey. You're my mate, my wife, my soul."

Laughing softly, Ava rode him harder. He was such a good sport, so open to accept the things he'd overheard that she couldn't help but love him more.

Love him? Shocked by the word love entering the equation, Ava slowed and glanced toward the painting in the sitting room. Her chest tightened and her breathing grew shallow as she stared at the warrior's green eyes and the demon's dark red skin.

You will carry my child, woman. This I can assure you.

The demon's words ran through her head. No.

I claim thee. You are and will forever be mine. You will stand by my side, bear my children, honor my wishes and forever submit to me. I will protect you with all that I am and hold you above all others. For you are my mate, my wife, my soul.

No. It couldn't be. There was no way Donatus was a Lost Warrior. He was a good man. A human professor of mythology, not a monster. And there was no way she could get pregnant, least of all by a human. Laughing, Ava rode him harder and pressed his fingers against her clit. Her orgasm struck without warning.

Donatus pulled on her hips, holding her to him as her legs tightened and her stomach clenched. She felt his come filling her as his cock twitched. As she sat on his lap, letting him soak her in his seed, she gave in to the peaceful feeling he created for her.

Chapter Six

Ava moved onto Donatus' lap, licking her lips, her eyes fixated on the massive erection standing straight in the air. Donatus chuckled as she moaned. She gave him a hard look. "What? You think this is funny? I feel like I need you in me every second."

"You do," Donatus said, laughing. He picked her up easily and helped her to ease over him. "That's it, baby, take it all."

Ava gasped as his thick, long cock stretched her once again. She clung to him as her body relaxed a bit. Her already wet pussy seemed eager to devour his steely shaft. It was the rest of her that was scared of being consumed by Donatus that caused her reservation.

Now, as she found herself blissfully impaled, she tried to rationalize her behavior but couldn't. With her short skirt hiked above her hips and her white thong moved to the side, Ava gave in to her strongest urges by riding Donatus in his office where anyone could walk in. It was so far from her normal behavior that she'd almost called Chloe but held back.

The burning need to see Donatus had left her practically running to his office after her second class was finished. When she'd arrived, he didn't bat an eye. He looked up from his desk, put his hand out and nodded. It had only been several hours since they'd left his home but she needed him more than anything else in the world. The second her hand touched his, Ava felt the magik move between them. How a human had gained control not only of her but her heart as well was a mystery to her. But he had.

"This isn't right."

He palmed her breasts through her light cyan poet-sleeved shirt. Pulling on the tie holding the upper portion together, Donatus freed a breast. Ava drew in a ragged breath as he kneaded it lightly. "It's not only right, Ava, it's perfect." He ran his thumb

over her erect nipple. "I'm sorry that they're so tender. I didn't know that would happen to you."

Puzzled, her brow furrowed. "It's not your fault." She continued to move up and down on him at a leisurely yet stimulating pace.

Grinning, he nipped at her mouth playfully, driving her mad with need. "I'm hardly an angel, Ava."

"I know," she whispered, riding him slowly, enjoying every minute of being filled to the brink. "You're part demon. You mentioned that already." Shuddering, Ava clung to him as a ripple of pleasure moved through her inner thighs driving her need onward.

Donatus took hold of her hips, leading her as she fucked him. He drew her nipple into his mouth and sucked gently, caressing it with his tongue. The second Ava felt his finger pressing against her clit she went wild, riding him harder, faster in the quest for an orgasm.

"That's it. Fuck me. Take it, woman. Take it."

Ava's orgasm tore through her as Donatus' coarse words rang in her ears. *Take it, woman. Take it.* The demon from her dream had said that.

His jaw was slack and his eyes closed as he shot his seed deep into her. She cried out and clung to him. Donatus' eyes snapped open. He lifted her off him quickly and set her on her feet. He smoothed her white skirt and instantly went to work on stuffing his still-hard, wet cock back into his dark olive green flat-front pants. He barely got the second snap closed just as the door to his office opened.

"Hey, Don, I did some checking on—" Gunter stopped in mid-sentence when he saw Ava standing there.

She blushed, hoping that it wasn't obvious that she'd just been well and thoroughly fucked. "Well, thanks, Professor Manlian. I'll touch base with you later."

Gunter's gaze moved over her slowly. When it reached her stomach, it stopped. "Hi, Ava. How are you feeling?"

"Fine, and yourself?" She wasn't sure why he seemed so interested in her health. She glanced at Donatus as he moved toward her and shook her head slightly. The last thing she wanted was the rest of the faculty members to find out that she was fucking a man she'd only just met. A man that also happened to be her boss.

Donatus gave her a small, sexy smile and winked. "It's okay, Ava. Gunterius knows what we are to each other."

Shocked, Ava narrowed her gaze on Donatus. "And what exactly would that be?"

Gunter snorted. "Damn, Don, your own wife doesn't even acknowledge you."

"Wife?" She pointed at Donatus. "If you called him and got him to play along with your little game about being my demon mate then I'm calling this over now. It was fun to play along for a bit, Donatus, but it—"

Instantly, the temperature in the room dropped. Ava shivered and tried to figure out what had caused it. Donatus took hold of her arm and turned her to him fast. His emerald green eyes hardened. "We are more than just friends and you know it. I told you the truth. You didn't want to accept it."

Ava glanced nervously at Gunter before forcing a smile to her face. "This is a talk for another time."

"This is a talk for now."

"Donatus, please." Ava rubbed the back of her neck, doing her best to try to keep her face from flushing. "I need to get back to my room. We'll talk later."

"No. We will talk now." Donatus tried to pull her into him but Ava refused to budge.

"Professor Manlian, I don't think that will be necessary. I have nothing further to say regarding this matter." Ava jerked her arm away from him as she let her gaze run cold. Her heart wanted her to pull him close and tell him that she loved him. Her head told her to walk away. For once, her head won out.

* * * * *

Ava stared at the tables full of people at the bar as she held one hand over her ear and her cell phone in the other. Walking out on Donatus at his office had seemed like a wise choice. That was hours ago. It no longer held the same vigor. "Chloe, you need to speak up. I can't hear over the music."

"Where in the world are you? I can rule out a party. You're way too uptight for those anymore."

Rolling her eyes, Ava tapped the red wall next her with her fingernails. "You'd stop picking on me if you knew what the hell I've been doing – or, rather, whom."

"You found a man you like. This is bad how?" Chloe laughed softly. She'd taken the news of Ava being with Donatus well. A little too well. "Listen, I've already told you that Commilton is the place for you to be."

"This is bad because the guy is trying to be sweet and play along with the entire mate scenario that Lucifer drew out for me. He has no idea it's not a joke to me – that people I love have died because of this. That he'll die if a Host member happens upon us while he's pretending to be someone he's not, Chloe." Ava groaned and pressed her forehead to the cool wall a second before she thought about how many people had touched it. Jerking back fast, she groaned again. "I can't do this. I miss all of you too much and starting over isn't as fun as they'd like you to believe. I'm needed there. I need to oversee things, help guide the –"

"Ava, you can't come back here now. It's not safe for you and you know it. We're doing our best to keep a lid on what's going on but it's hard. If you show up and the media sees you, we might as well paint a target on your chest. Besides, I like this Donatus guy and think you should give him a chance, Ava. What would you do if he is who he claims to be? That would mean he's your husband and that you're carrying his child. Is that really so bad?"

Nodding, Ava gave in and leaned against the wall again. She sighed when she realized Chloe couldn't see her head shake. "Please don't do this too."

"Why?" Chloe asked. "Answer me. What would you do if he's for real, Ava?"

"I don't know. I'd probably break down into tears and be scared to be with him and terrified to be without him."

"You don't really think he'd hurt you, do you?" Chloe cleared her throat.

Ava dropped her head against the wall in hopes that some sort of sense would sink in. None did. "Maybe. Gods, Chloe, I don't want to think about Donatus being capable of unspeakable acts of evil. In my dream, the demon... While it didn't hurt me, it did radiate the will to do whatever was necessary to have what it wanted. Chloe, if that was real and the demon was Donatus then yes, I'd be terrified of him. But I know in my heart he would never hurt me. And could a demon promise that? It makes no sense. You wanted an honest answer. There you have it."

"I can assure you, Ava, that your mate would never in a million years hurt you. He'd die to protect you and your child."

Groaning, Ava rolled her eyes. "I'm done doing the hypothetical thing, Chloe. Something big is coming. I can feel it."

"Big as in a hung-like-a-horse stud who is staring at you as we speak with nothing but concern in his eyes? Or big as in we need to be prepared to come to you on a moment's notice?"

Tipping her head to the side, Ava scanned the tables and found no signs of anyone staring at her. Kal and Gunter were busy talking with some women who'd recently arrived and the rest of the faculty members in the bar seemed to be in a deep discussion. She'd artfully managed to avoid Donatus since the outburst in his office and had made it through the day without incident. Gunter had been the one to insist she get out and enjoy herself. With the feel of evil pressing in on her, she was beginning to think it wasn't such a good idea. Not to mention her stomach had been in knots from having limited contact with Donatus.

"I'd go with option two if I were you. The Host and the Keres would like nothing more than to see my head on a platter—or a stake. I'm sure they don't really care so

long as it's no longer attached to me. I bet Lucifer has a spot picked out on his wall to have it mounted."

Chloe sighed. "Are you in any physical danger?"

"No. At least I don't think so. Not yet anyways."

"Could you be a bit more vague? I'm not sure you lost me enough." Chloe was clearly annoyed, biting out each word. "I can tell you this much, you are not to fight anyone or anything. Get to Donatus and send for me. I'll get in touch with Effie and Yvonne. They'll come join you soon. I repeat, Ava, do not try to fight anything."

Ava ran her fingers over the wall again, this time letting her guard down enough that she felt the presence of powerful magik. For the first time in her life, Ava couldn't tell if it was good or evil. "Tell me why you suggested Commiliton University to me when so many other places would have taken me on. And tell me why you're pushing me to go to a human male if the friggin' devil shows up."

"Because I'm willing to see the truth and accept it. And because I love you too much to let anything happen to you, Ava." The concern in Chloe's voice warmed Ava.

Ava went to answer and stopped when she sensed something was wrong. Looking around the bar, she could find no signs of trouble. The feeling didn't go away and she'd learned long ago to trust her gut. "Chloe, I have to go."

"Ava? What's wrong?"

"I don't know."

A choked sob came from Chloe. "Oh gods, they can't have found you. Not yet. I swear my dream showed me you'd be safe, Ava. Get to Donatus now! Don't fight back, Ava. You and the—"

The feeling eased a bit, taking Ava by surprise. "I'll be fine and I'll call you later." Shutting her cell phone, Ava turned to head to the ladies' room, happy that the loud music had given away to something slower and softer. The second she found a pair of emerald green eyes staring down at her, she froze—not out of fear, but fascination.

She stared at Donatus. Could he really be her mate?

Donatus moved his head and his shaggy hair flipped out of his eyes. She wanted to touch his face, get close enough that she could stare into the jade-colored jewels he looked upon her with, but that would require the ability to move. Currently, she was rooted in place as she took in the sight of him.

"You left before my last class got out. I wanted to talk to you," he said, not sounding mad but not sounding extremely pleased either. "I wanted to fix things between us, Ava. I know this is a lot for you to take in."

"I'm not in the mood to play this game tonight, Donatus. I agreed to come out because Gunter and Kal didn't leave me an option to say no. Kal threatened to pick me up and carry me here. I don't think he was joking."

Donatus smiled. "He wasn't. He wants us to work past this as much as I do."

"Why?"

"Because he's excited about being an uncle and wants his best friend's wife to be happy." Donatus' hand went to her cheek. He stroked it gently as she couldn't help but tip her head into his palm. She knew she should push him away, act shocked by his words, do something to show him the move was awkward. She didn't. Closing her eyes, Ava let the calm that seemed to spread out from his hand wash over her. The feel of his thumb tracing over her lower lip made her nipples hard and her entire body ache for more. It wanted attention too – all of it.

Ava realized that she not only had her eyes closed, her face tipped into Donatus' hand, but was also sighing. Her eyes snapped open and she went to take a step back, mortified. "I...can't do this. I'm sorry."

Donatus quickly closed the gap between them and bent down. "You're so tiny. I still have no idea how it is you're going to carry our child."

"Maybe you're just freakishly tall and I can carry our child just fine. Thank you very much."

Why did I say that? I'm not pregnant.

His green gaze raked over her slowly. Each spot it rested on heated quickly. When it landed on the apex of her thighs, Ava shifted awkwardly as cream filled her panties. A smile that seemed to ooze sex appeared on his face. "Would it make it feel more real to you if we married the traditional human way? Would you believe that you are my wife and you do have our little one trying desperately to survive in you?"

"Please stop mocking me. I told you I was only joking with my girlfriends. There is no devil, no mate thing, nothing. Just plain old me. I teach Norse mythology and am the most boring woman ever put on this planet. Now if you'll excuse me." She pushed past him quickly and headed to the table full of men to grab her sweater and handbag, shocked that a man who had barely spoken to her all day could suddenly be such a jerk.

Gunter stood as she approached and pulled her chair out for her. "Are you enjoying yourself tonight, Ava?"

She grabbed her thin white sweater and matching handbag. Shoving her cell phone inside it, she smiled at Gunter and nodded as her gaze wandered over the table full of men. "I did. Thanks for the warm welcome."

"You're leaving?" Kal asked, motioning to her handbag.

"Yeah, I have a class at seven-thirty in the morning and I'm not settled in at home yet. Not to mention that I'm exhausted. I don't know how you boys do it but I can't go out every night like this. I'm getting too old to keep up with all of you."

Gunter touched her back lightly and chuckled. "No one put a time limit on getting settled in our New England hamlet, did they? I say leave it be and enjoy yourself, Ava."

A tall, skinny brunette stumbled a bit and spilled some of her drink onto Kal. "You should stay. These guys are the best." She pointed around the table and blinked several times before giving Ava an odd look. "I know I'm drunk."

The brunette's friend, a tall redhead, laughed. "Just a little."

They clung to each other as they continued laughing. There was something a little strange about them. "They're the big catches. If you're lucky enough to grab their eye, then you go with it. The whole town knows that. Hell, the whole world knows that."

The redhead thrust her arm in the air, beer sloshing out of the top of the bottle she held. "Women *die* for a chance to get a ride on one of them. You must not have gotten a taste. It's like nothing you've ever done before."

Ava stood still, showing no signs of being shocked or outraged. Every part of her wanted to tell the woman just how many rides she'd taken on one of them but she held back. Instead, she tried to sense something, anything about them that would tell her why her instincts tossed up red flags the minute they began to speak. Other than the obvious fact that they were annoying, Ava found nothing.

"And here you are running away from the whole lot of them." The brunette shook her head and gave Ava a dirty look. "You must be the stupidest woman on earth. Are you the stupidest woman, Ava? Or do you think you're clever enough to play the game?"

Clever enough to play the game? How does she know my name?

Ava watched them closely, and the knowledge that they were more than human crept over her. It was clear they were potential threats. She readied herself for trouble and carefully kept her face devoid of emotion.

Kal's eyes widened as he scooted his chair away from the two women. "Ladies, I think you've had enough."

"Hardly." The brunette staggered a bit more and pointed directly at Ava. "I come in here tonight, after I had to spend years and years trying to work my way into your inner circle only to find this new bitch sitting at the head of the table."

"Yeah," the redhead offered.

Kal stood quickly. "Come on, I'm calling a cab for you. I think it's time to go home. The *last* thing we need is for the two of you to start trouble in here."

Ava watched the women for any further clues as to who or what they might be. She found none.

Gunter took her sweater from her hands and smiled. "I've been meaning to ask if Donatus managed to work things out with you? I didn't mean to walk in and cause trouble."

"Yes." She glanced around the bar and found no sign of him. "I think I liked him better when he was silent and tripping over nothing. At least he wasn't being a stubborn ass and having temper tantrums."

Gunter looked as though she'd slapped him. "Are you sure we're referring to the same Donatus? The guy I know doesn't piss women off anymore – umm – I mean, he's not one to get comments like that."

"Sorry, that came out harsher than I intended." *No it didn't.*

Ava smiled sweetly as Gunter held up her sweater for her. Sliding her arms in, she suddenly found him pressed close to her back. When his lips pressed against her ear, Ava froze.

"Donatus is a good man, Ava. A really good man. I don't know what he said or did but I'm guessing he's sorry for it. Give him a break, the man is clearly in love. And you are his wife, sweetie. That's how it works for us." Gunter stood and she turned to look up at him. He grinned innocently. "How about I walk you to your car?"

Someone was staring hard at her – she could feel it. The weight of it hung heavily to the air as she glanced around the bar nervously. Whoever it was wasn't pleased. Unable to locate the source of the animosity she sensed, Ava let out a shaky laugh and shook her head. "No, I'm fine. I don't think I have anything to worry about here. Well, maybe crazy best friends of a man who thinks he's my hubby but that's all." *That's all if you disregard the stench of evil and the fact that I'm positive something bad is about to happen.*

* * * * *

Donatus watched from the shadows of the bar as Gunter held Ava's sweater out for her. The minute Gunter leaned down into her Donatus saw red. The demon within him fought to come out. It wanted to rip Gunterius' head from his body. His hands itched and his body burned, wanting desperately to let the demon out, let it have its revenge for someone daring to touch his wife.

My best friend and my woman? No.

Not wanting to scare the entire bar, Donatus held a tight grip on the demon and waited for Ava to leave before storming toward Gunter. Narrowing his eyes, he came up behind him. Gunter turned around slowly.

"Hey, I was just talking about —"

Donatus seized hold of Gunter's neck. He lifted him high in the air and went to throw the man.

"Hey!" Kallimoch said, appearing next to him suddenly. He yanked on Donatus' arms hard enough to bring them down slightly but not hard enough to free Gunter. "Put him down, Donatus."

The demon within him beat madly at his hold on it, wanting to be free. His nostrils flared and his body shook, fighting with all its might to keep the demon down. Donatus glared at Gunter. "If you even think about touching Ava again I will kill you."

The rest of group had stopped talking amongst themselves and were now staring at him. He didn't care. The only thing that mattered was Ava and he wasn't about to let Gunter or anyone else touch her.

"Donatus, he didn't do anything. If you want to be pissed off, get pissed over the way Niki and Terri treated Ava."

Tipping his head to the side, Donatus stared at Kallimoch. "What did they do now?"

"I don't even know where to start. All I know is that Sig needs to put a leash on them soon before I do it." Kal rolled his eyes and reached behind Gunter's suspended body for his beer. "Who the hell even let them start hanging around us?"

"You did," Donatus and Gunter said simultaneously.

Looking hard at Gunter, Donatus shook his head. "I trusted you like a brother."

"And you always will, jackass. I told Ava you were a great guy and that you were sorry for whatever it is you did. I also told her that she really is your wife. But I've got to say that if you acted anything like this with her, it'll be me kicking your ass. Not the other way around."

"How can you even insinuate that I'd hurt my wife?"

Gun gave him a hard look. "Because I carry the same evil in me that you do and I can recognize a potentially explosive situation when I see one, Don."

Donatus shook his head. What the hell was he doing? Attacking one of his closest friends was something he'd have done long ago, when the demon controlled him. "Something's wrong with me."

Kal gave him a "no shit" look. Gunter cleared his throat, reminding Donatus that he still had the man lifted off the ground. Setting him down, Donatus rubbed the bridge of his nose hard. "I need one of you to beat some sense into me. I'm completely in love with a woman who spent her life knowing I existed but can't come to terms with me being with her now."

"What you need to do is run your ass out to that parking lot and see if you can find Ava. Eat crow, apologize until your face is as blue as your balls and pray to whatever in hell we're still allowed to pray to that she forgives your stupidity."

"Kal, I fucking hate it when you're right."

Chapter Seven

Ava hit the unlock button on her keychain and watched the lights on her car blink. Sighing, she rolled her head a bit, doing her best to loosen some of the tension in her neck. Suddenly, the hair on the back of her neck stood on end. Her gut said *Run to the car*. Her brain told her to stand her ground and protect the innocent as she was born to do.

Duty and honor won out just as they always had and Ava slowed her pace. Something was lurking, watching her every move and radiating a confidence that would surely be its downfall.

"Oh look, it's the slut who thinks she's too good for the boys. Too good for us even. Did you see the way she looked down on us?"

Ava stood her ground, not turning to look at the brunette from the bar. Using the gifts she'd been born with, Ava pushed her power out and scanned for the woman's exact location. The minute she found it, she smiled.

"Damn, Niki. Bitch won't even turn around. We must not seem like a threat to her."

The air around her began to crackle slightly and pressure began to build. The smell of something burning filled her head and her stomach tightened. Too many times before Ava had felt the same things happening around her. Every time they did, it meant that at least one of the Keres was near. They were the female version of the Host. Evil to the core and loyal to the devil.

Turning slowly, Ava made sure to keep her guard up as she faced the women from the bar. The brunette smiled cruelly. Ava held back from attacking. If they hadn't already figured out who and what she was, she wasn't about to tip her hand.

"Is that it, Ava?" the brunette asked. "Do you think you're too good for us? Too good for our men?"

Ava stood still and smiled ever so slightly, knowing it would infuriate the demons masquerading as humans.

The redhead's mouth dropped. "Niki, I think that would be a yes. I don't know about you but I haven't wanted to kill a human this bad in decades."

Niki wagged her dark brows. "Me either."

Ava waited for the women to morph into full Keres form. They didn't. That surprised her. "What do you want?"

"To show you that you aren't Mrs. High-and-Mighty."

"That would be Miss because I'm not married and I beg to differ with you. I *am* high-and-mighty."

Both women glared at her. Terri's smile was purely wicked. Ava watched as she allowed her sharp fangs to extend downward. Still, the woman held back from doing a full shift. That worried Ava. Were there more Keres in the area?

"Shall we show her what she's begging to differ with?"

Terri nodded as her eyes swirled to red. Niki's did the same. Ava considered pretending as though she was scared but didn't feel like bothering. The two women stalled a moment and gave her a questioning look.

"Why doesn't she look terrified?"

"Because," a deep male voice said, "she knows she can take you both easily."

Ava backed up a step, recognizing the voice and unsure where Buite, one of the head warriors of the Host and full-time stalker, would materialize. A large hand clasped her upper arm and she bit back a scream. Turning her head, Ava found the dark-haired bastard she'd come to loathe yet couldn't seem to bring herself to kill.

"Hello there. I would say boo but I doubt you would even do me the honor of pretending to be scared of me. Although it would be in your best interest to do so." Buite tightened his grip on her arm and she bit her inner cheek to keep from whimpering. "Tell me how you came to be here?"

Ava didn't answer him.

Buite jerked on her arm hard, sending pain shooting up it. "Did you think you could run from me, Ava?"

I'd hoped.

She kept her expression as blank as she could while doing her best to keep track of the two Keres. Buite leaned into her and took a deep breath. Every bit of Ava wanted to shiver and run the other way but she knew better than to show Buite any sign of weakness. "Get your hands off me."

"Or what? Will you call your warrior to defend you since your dear friends have no way of knowing you are in danger, Ava?"

Warrior? Could he mean Donatus?

Buite walked in a slow circle around her, his black eyes raking over her the entire way. "I do love to find you all dressed up, Ava. It's always such a treat when you aren't in your slaying garb. Of course, anything you are or aren't in is fine by me. I like this." He ran the back of his finger over her clothed breast. "It makes me want to unwrap the prize beneath it."

She batted his hand away from her chest and glared at him. "Touch me again and you won't be getting that hand back."

The other women laughed. Buite glared at them. "Silence."

Ava couldn't hold back her smile any longer.

"What is it you find amusing now, Ava?"

"Nothing, really. I just wish I'd have thought to tell them to play dead. Do you think it would have worked? They are such good little trained puppies for you."

He gave her a cross look and took a step toward her. His bare, muscular chest pressed against her face as his large arm quickly wrapped around her. Buite took in another deep breath and laughed. "Ah, I knew you would bend to our will one day, Ava. Tell me who the lucky bastard that managed to finally get under your shell is. I

shall see to it that he is rewarded. To bed one such as you is something I have dreamed of doing for ten years."

Ava's chest tightened. *Please don't mean Donatus.* "Kindly get your chest out of my face. If I wanted something that's been touched by thousands and riddled with creepy-crawlies, I'd go back into the bar and lick the pay phone or the red wall outside the ladies' room."

"Master, she dares to speak to you like that?"

Ava thrust one of Buite's heavy arms off her and looked past him. Arching a brow, she stared at the brunette. "Obviously I do." Standing straight again, she glanced at Buite. "Always going for the ones with the highest IQs, aren't you?"

He shook his head slightly and sighed. "Why have I not disposed of you yet?"

"You know, I ask myself that very same question every time we meet up and I keep coming back to how boring my life would be without some insane demon stalking me."

Buite leaned down. Ava ducked below his arms and backed away quickly. He growled as his eyes swirled with flecks of red. "You dare to deny me the pleasures of your body yet you allow another of my kind to have you. I have to admit, Ava, this hurts my feelings."

The very idea of Buite having feelings to hurt made Ava laugh. "I have no clue what you're talking about. I have not, nor will I ever lie down with anything even remotely close to what you are."

Buite ran his hand down his torso and took hold of the top of his black leather pants. The second he started to undo them, Ava backed up more and drew her power up around her. He chuckled. "You run when I offer you my body and spew lies about never allowing one of my kind to be with you, to fuck you. Why is that, Ava? Do you really think that you are any better than we are? We were all the same once. It was mere chance that put you on the side of good. That's all."

"We are nothing alike, Buite. I didn't sell my soul to anyone. It's mine free and clear. I'm not the devil's lapdog."

His jaw tightened. "Is that really what you think I am? The devil's lapdog?"

"The thought has crossed my mind."

"Ava, he's my father. What would you have me do? To go against him is beyond foolish. Shall I summon the ones you hold dear to your heart to remind you of this? Shall I summon Father so he may show you himself?"

She narrowed her gaze on him and took another step backward. Bumping into something, Ava turned to find a dark gray demon standing there. He stared down at her with a horrifying expression that told her everything he wanted to do to her and so much more.

Next to him stood a row of Keres with Host warriors littered amongst them. "Are you really that afraid of me that you needed backup, Buite? I'm unarmed and alone."

Buite laughed. "Ava, I have learned to never underestimate you. It is one of the reasons I wish for you to accept my claim on you. I wish to spend eternity with a woman who not only stirs my loins but —"

"Plots ways to kill you in your sleep? Hmm, let me think about it." Ava glanced at the row of evil surrounding him and shook her head. "I'm going to have to say no. Sorry, ask again in a year or so to see if I changed my mind."

"Agree to accept me now or I will not intervene. I will allow them to rip you limb from limb. Then I will see to it that your remains are delivered to your people as a show of my power." He sighed again. "I would have been willing to allow you more time to think on the issue but smelling another of my kind on you tells me you are more than willing to accept us. It is only me that you hesitate with. You will learn to care for me in time."

Ava stood tall and laughed. "I will never accept your offer, Buite. I'm willing to take my chances with your lackeys instead."

Instantly, Buite was pressed hard against her back. He wrapped his arms around her quickly, cupping a breast with one hand and her sex with the other. "You dare to speak to me this way when you have allowed another demon inside you? He sank his

dick deep into you, Ava, and with your permission. You reek of his scent. If I did not know you better, I would say that you accepted more than just his body, Ava. I would say that you accepted his claim on you. Tell me, is it true? If you belong to another, I will be forced to kill him and possibly you, depending on my mood.”

“You’re already planning on letting them *try* to kill me now. Can you pick a reason you’ll kill me and stick with it? I’m getting a headache trying to keep up with your rules.”

Buite grabbed her chin and pulled her head back. “Do you wish for me to end your life, Ava? Is that what you want? Tell me what warrior sank deep into your proud little pussy and I’ll send them all away. I will allow no harm to come to you.”

“Bullshit,” she spat. “I think we both know I wouldn’t let a monster near me.” As she said it, she thought about the demon in her dream. Ava had not only let a monster near her, she’d begged it to fuck her harder. Her breath caught in her throat as she vividly remembered the dark red demon laying claim to her as he filled her with his cold semen. Donatus’ insistence on being her husband – and a demon – hit her as well.

You will carry my child, woman.

You’re carrying my child, honey.

You’re my mate, my wife, my soul.

The moment the image of the painting at his house entered her mind, her chest tightened.

Ohmygods, I’m a fucking idiot. I can’t pretend to be in denial anymore.

“I sense that you fully believe that you would never allow one of us to touch you but you have, Ava. Trust me. I smell him all over you. He’s powerful. Tell me if he claimed you.” Buite slid his hand lower and stopped on her low abdomen. He gasped and jerked her hard to his body. “Tell me if he claimed you!”

“Let go of me.”

"Answer me, Ava. Tell me who took you without your full knowledge. I will see him torn to bits for what he has done to you."

"I won't warn you again, Buite. Get your hands off me."

He didn't move. Ava gave up attempting to reason with him and thrust her magik hard at him, sending him hurtling away from her body. The demons surrounding her shifted into human form quickly and stared at her. Unsure why they didn't attack, Ava looked around. The second she saw Donatus, Gun and Kal standing outside the front entrance to the bar, staring in her direction, her heart leapt to her throat. Time should have been frozen for them. What the hell were they doing outside?

"Are they friends of yours, Ava?" Buite sounded amused as he stood quickly.

"Keep this in-house, Buite. Don't air our dirty laundry in front of uninvolved parties."

He chuckled and she knew he would more than air their issues if she didn't do something fast. Her mind raced with a way to keep Donatus and the others away. Nothing came to her.

"Ava!" It was Donatus.

They moved toward her quickly. Each step they took made her want to scream at them more and more.

"Accept my claim. Tell me who touched you and I will assure you that he will not die," Buite said, his voice even and cold.

Ava stared at Donatus. His green gaze hardened, holding her attention and making her lose track of what Buite was saying. Kal and Gunter had the same hard looks on their faces as they flanked Donatus' sides. They truly looked like a wall of deadly gods coming toward her. Each one exuded confidence and power. And rage.

Donatus pushed his way past the Keres and headed straight for her. Ava shook her head slightly but he didn't stop. "Ava, I was hoping you'd still be here. I wanted to make you understand that I'm not lying to you."

“Umm, it’s fine, really. You didn’t need to come out here for that. It’s no big deal, really,” she said, doing her best to keep her fear for their safety out of her voice.

Donatus glanced around at the others. “Care to introduce me to your new friends? Niki and Terri I know, but I can’t say that I’ve seen the rest of the group around these parts before.”

There was something in his voice that sounded dangerous. Ava forced a smile onto her face. “Oh, I bumped into Terri and Niki as they were meeting up with their friends here.”

Buite chuckled. The sound made her cringe. “Don’t be modest. We are your friends as well, Ava.”

She shot him a nasty look. He winked and flicked his wrist toward Donatus, Kal and Gun. His warriors began to circle them slowly. Ava’s heart went to her throat. She did something she’d never done before—she caught Buite’s eyes with hers and silently begged him not to hurt the men.

Tipping his head slightly, Buite cocked a dark brow as he moved closer to her. “Ava, is there something you want to say to me? Something you wish to accept or perhaps tell me?”

“It can wait until dinner tomorrow night.” Ava’s gut clenched as she waited for Buite’s response to her obvious offer of spending time alone with him.

Donatus moved in close to her and grunted. “The two of you are going out on a date?”

Buite chuckled. “It would appear so. Tell me, Ava. Which of these men do you fear for so badly that you would finally agree to meet me alone?”

Ava froze. No part of her wanted harm to come to any of the men—let alone Donatus. She’d play along and give Buite what he wanted if it meant keeping Donatus safe. “What are you talking about, Buite? You asked me out and I said yes. These guys have nothing to do with that.”

"Liar!" Niki shouted. Looking toward Buite, she smiled wickedly. "I saw Gun, the dark blond one, hugging her in the bar."

Buite's nostrils flared as he directed his attention to Gun. "Is this true?"

Ava could hold her tongue no longer. She glared at Niki. "For a chick who did more than announce how she couldn't get enough of them you sure the hell tossed one out for the slaughter. Either they aren't that good or you're a demonic piece of shit that I will more than happy to—"

Niki tilted her head downward and looked at her through hooded eyes. "I was right, Master. She protects Gun."

"Master?" Gun sounded shocked.

Suddenly, the demons swarmed Gun and Kal. Donatus remained free only because of his close proximity to her. Ava stared at Buite. "Don't do this. They've done nothing. They're innocents here, Buite. Even you have shown an ounce of humanity when it came to innocents before. Your fight is with me. Not with these men. Let me send them on their way with your word they won't be harmed."

Buite put his hand out. An invisible rope seemed to latch onto her, instantly yanking her to him. She slammed into his hard chest and would have bounced off had he not caught her by wrapping an arm around her waist. He stared down at her with eyes as black as night. "You refuse to accept my claim. Then you lie and tell me that you would never accept anyone like me, a monster, into your bed and then have the nerve to play off my need to please you, my need to make you see that I am more than the monster you like to label me as."

He cupped her chin with his free hand and forced her face to remain still. "Call him to you, Ava. Summon the one you allowed to fuck you. The one whose cock you welcomed into your body, a body I have sought after only to be refused time and time again. Bring him to me and I will consider allowing your friends to live. Although allowing the one they call Gun to walk away may prove to be too much for me."

Ava shook her head and looked Buite in the eyes. "I'm not lying to you, Buite. I swear on all that I stand for that I have not, nor will I ever accept a demon's claim on me. Why would I? It makes no sense. You know me."

Buite tightened his grip on her chin and brought his face dangerously close to hers. His hot breath blew over her skin as he spoke. "Call him. Bring me the one who dared to touch you."

"Let them go, Buite. We can discuss this then."

He laughed. "The more you push me to release the humans the more I wish to hold them tight. You are much more cooperative with their lives on the line, Ava. Why is that? Is Niki correct? Do you fight your own defiant personality to protect the life of this Gun?"

"Don't make me do this, Buite. Please."

"Take your hands off her." The sound of Donatus' voice shocked Ava. It was hard, cold, terrifying.

Buite glanced over her head and smiled. "You have no idea what you are dealing with here. If you attempt to interfere, I'll snap her neck—and then yours." He smiled down at her. "Ava, don't make you do what? Call forth the demon that fucked you and bit you, filled you with its essence? Or don't harm your friends?"

Unshed tears gleamed in her eyes. "Don't make me do this in front of them."

"Do what in front of them?"

"Don't make me kill this many demons alone in front of them. I can't wipe something that massive from their minds without the help of the others and you know it."

Niki laughed hysterically and the other demons followed suit. "She's outnumbered, unarmed and has to worry about protecting three humans, yet she has the nerve to take that stance."

Buite's lips curved into a slow, lazy smile. "Ava, I would like to apologize for her ignorance."

Niki gasped. "How dare you..."

Ava touched Buite's chest lightly. "I have never asked you for a thing, Buite. I'm asking you now to let me send them away. Let me wipe their minds of this. I don't want them to see this happen."

"You mean that you do not wish for them to witness you becoming every bit of the monster you accuse me of being. Every bit of the monster you let slide between your legs and fuck you. How many times did he come in you, Ava? How many times has he dipped into you? How many times have you been his whore when you refused to be mine?"

"This is the last time I ask nicely, Buite. Let them go, please."

"Accept my claim."

Ava allowed her gaze to go hard. "You can accuse me of whatever it is you think I did but I can assure you that I will never accept you or any of your kind. I have not spent my life standing against the likes of you to be any one of your whores. I thought that you might be different from the rest, Buite. I have always believed that you, unlike the others that have come after me, had a piece of you that you didn't hand to your father. I foolishly thought the rumors I'd heard were true—that members of the Host could fight what they'd become. You've shown me that is not the case."

"I will not walk away from my position of power, Ava. Not even for you."

Ava snorted. "Damn good thing because I wouldn't take you anyway."

Buite's nostrils flared as his long dark hair lifted in the sudden blast of icy wind that surrounded them. "I will show your human friends no mercy now and when I am done with them, I will deal with you. First, I'll enjoy watching you try to protect them and yourself, Ava. I have never seen you fight against this many opponents without the others. My father said it is most amusing. Now I get to see for myself."

“Are you so willing to sacrifice your men and whores?”

He laughed. “You are good but you are not that good, Ava. You carry no weapons and you have the support of no one. And you have not battled anything since my father gave you a taste of what he could do.”

Ava pressed her palm harder into his chest and he let go of her chin. Slowly, she turned to find Donatus staring at her with a mix of hurt and anger. She glanced at Gun and Kal. Both seemed shocked, confused by what was going on. She couldn’t blame them. “I’m sorry you walked in on this. It was never my intent to bring this here. I will leave by morning and I won’t return. You have my word.”

“Assuming you live, bitch!” Terri shouted.

Ava used that moment to send a blast of power through Buite’s body, launching it high into the air and suspending him easily. “Call them off, Buite.”

His eyes widened. “Ava, have you been holding out on me? How is that you’re doing this?”

“Let’s just say that when I almost lost my life at the command of your father I tapped into a little something special that my parents left behind.” Smiling, she put her hands in the air. “Spear.”

Instantly, a spear slightly taller than she was appeared in her outstretched hands. Keeping it high in the air, she looked into the night sky. “Fire.” The spear lit with a blaze of blue. The flames didn’t burn her or even warm her skin. Ava was shielded from her own magik and she knew it.

Buite stared down at her as wonder seemed to fill his dark eyes. “You have a direct connection with Valhalla! How can this be? Your parents kept you hidden away from all lines of your past, hoping we couldn’t link you to Odin and the Valkyries.”

Anger flashed through Ava. “And you know this how, Buite? Did you find out when your legion killed them or when you perhaps destroyed the rest of my family?”

Buite shook his head. "It was not my legion of Host that attacked that day, Ava. Had it been, I may very well be sitting on your side now. I don't know if I could have allowed someone to harm you either. Part of me wishes to thank the warrior who saved you and another part wants his head on a platter. I have been the one pursuing you, not him. I'm the one who should be your mate, not a defector."

He spun in the air, attempting to fight her hold on him, but Ava increased her power, keeping him in the same spot. "What I have yet to understand," he said with struggle in his voice, "is how you don't come across as the age you truly are. You should feel as though you are three hundred and fifty, yet you surfaced for the first time only years ago. And you smell as though you are just a child—a mere thirty years old. But my father has sworn that you are the product of an angel—one of the Powers That Be to be exact—and a Valkyrie. He has assured me that they perished by the hands of the third legion of Host and that Valhalla refused to accept you all."

Ava laughed. "Someone lied to you, Buite."

"So," he tipped his head slightly, "you're not the product of such a union?"

"Oh, I am. They lied about Valhalla. It was a safe haven for the children left in the aftermath of your kind's wake. A wonderful man took me to Odin's doorstep. And in Valhalla—"

"Time moves differently," Buite finished for her. "So you truly are only thirty human years old? How is it you fought my father back, Ava? How were you strong enough to survive him?"

"I didn't think I was. Just when I was about to call it a day and let him kill me, I looked into the eyes of my loved ones and knew that I'd never let him touch them. And when he foolishly brought my supposed mate into it, he signed up for one hell of a battle. No part of me was even slightly willing to allow harm to come to a man who sacrificed all he knew, all that he was to save my life." She smiled and twirled the blazing spear around. "Call them off the humans or you will lose them all."

"No."

"Then you wish for them to die?"

Crossing his arms over his massive chest, he shook his head. "What do I care if they die? I have thousands more waiting to take their places. I simply don't have it in me to harm you and I'm hoping they harm you enough that you lose the child you now carry."

He knows I can't carry a child. Ava eyed him suspiciously before turning toward Donatus. Her brow furrowed as she tried desperately to make sense of it all. Buite gave her no time to think about it all.

"Attack the humans and Ava," he called out.

Instantly, demons rushed her. She didn't hesitate. Ava lashed out with the spear. The second it made contact with the first demon, the creature burst into flames and screamed out as it fell to the ground. Sensing another demon moving in behind her, Ava spun fast and tried to take a wide stance. The skirt she wore prevented that.

With the flick of her finger, Ava sent her power flowing over her, changing her work clothes to a pair of black pants and a matching tank top. Never having done that before either, Ava took a tiny moment to be impressed with herself. When she looked down at the kick-ass black boots she'd given herself, she nodded. "Okay, I'll admit it, that was cool."

Niki and the other females had sprouted large, birdlike wings. Long talons broke free from their fingernails and their eyes went to pure red. "Kill her," Niki ground out between fanged teeth.

"No!" Donatus shouted out as he rushed toward her.

Ava launched herself high into the air and spun in a wide circle with her blazing spear held out straight. It struck several of the Keres, instantly engulfing them in flames. As she fell, Ava tucked herself into a tiny ball and flipped over in the air once before landing on her feet.

Glancing up, she found Gun, Kal and Donatus fighting with the Host warriors. They should have fallen the moment the warriors struck out at them. They didn't.

Something struck her from behind as she stared at Donatus. Ava hit the ground and rolled onto her back to find Terri above her, talons extended and pressed to her throat.

"You are no better than us, bitch. Without your weapon you're nothing but a scared child."

Ava kicked up hard and fast, catching Terri in the stomach and launching her high into the air. She sprang to her feet, taking hold of her spear on the way up. A demon charged at Donatus' back while he fought with another and Ava's heart beat wildly. She ran at the demon full-force. "Donatus, get down!"

He dropped and Ava swung out hard with the spear, catching the demon's neck and severing its head. It instantly burst into flames. Donatus stood quickly and yanked her to him. Her entire body felt as though she too had gone up in flames as she leaned into him. Afraid of hurting him with the blazing spear, Ava tossed magik around Donatus, Gun and Kal, desperate to protect them from harm as much as she could.

Donatus cupped her cheeks and stared down at her. "Go, Ava. We'll handle them and then come to you."

Her eyes widened. "What? No. I'm not...no." The idea of leaving him to face the demons horrified her.

"Ava, go."

Before she realized it, she had her arms wrapped tightly around his waist and her head against his chest. He felt safe, right, familiar. "I can't leave you. I won't leave you."

"I promise that we'll be fine. Go, and I'll come to you. You have my word."

On the verge of hysterics, Ava kicked Donatus in the shin. "Are you crazy? Why aren't you freaking out? I want to freak out and it's my job to kill them. I can't believe that you guys are taking this..." She stopped in mid-sentence. "Donatus, you really are a Lost Warrior."

He looked away from her for a moment. "I couldn't stop the demon when you called him to you, Ava. In truth, I didn't want to stop him. You're my mate and I couldn't have walked away from that."

Ava squeezed his arm. "And a baby. We're —"

Donatus' mouth captured hers, cutting her off. Stunned, she stood there while his warm tongue thrust into her mouth, beckoning hers forth with the promise of pleasure. Ava didn't attempt to fight it. She knew it was pointless. She'd fallen in love with him and there was no defense for that.

Pressing her body to his as hard as she could, Ava moaned when she felt the length of his erection against her stomach. Donatus' hand moved to her lower back. He caressed tiny circles there that mirrored the movements of his tongue, causing her to melt in his arms.

Suddenly, Donatus jerked back fast. Ava reached for him. It wasn't until she saw the Host warrior behind him that she realized he'd been hurt. The demon was shifted into the form of a walking wolf. The lycan ripped its clawed hand back and blood spattered on the pavement.

Time seemed to slow. She heard someone scream out and realized it was her. Donatus spun around to face the lycan, allowing Ava a firsthand look at the damage the warrior had done. A large chunk of Donatus' back was now missing. He staggered just a bit and a fear like Ava had never known took hold of her.

"Run, Ava!" he demanded. "Run and save the baby."

"I can't leave you!" she screamed out as loud as she could as her power fought for complete freedom.

Gunter and Kal were suddenly next to Donatus. The three of them broke the warrior that had attacked Donatus in two. Too stunned to comment on what they'd just done, Ava just stood there, covering her mouth as she continued to stare at Donatus' back.

Something seized hold of her, lifted her high in the air and snarled in her ear. "You, bitch. You can't have all of them."

The second Ava heard Niki's voice she came to her senses as they went even higher into the air. Slamming her head back, she caught the Keres in the face, causing her to loosen her grip. As she did it, Ava realized just how high they were.

"You want me to let go, fine," Niki said, releasing her hold on Ava.

Ava's stomach dropped as she fell toward the earth. Ava sent a blast of energy over the Host and the Keres, carefully shielding the professors from it as she weakened the enemy.

"Ava, no!" Buite called out a second before she struck the pavement and darkness surrounded her.

Chapter Eight

Stirring slightly, Ava blinked several times, doing her best to focus even though her head felt like it was about to splinter into a million tiny pieces. Slowly, she focused in enough to see clearly. A pair of amber eyes gazed at her from under a veil of sandy blonde hair.

“Hey, sleepyhead. I was beginning to wonder if you were planning on waking up to see me while I was here,” Chloe said softly. She brushed her long, straight locks of hair out of the way and winked.

Ava couldn’t help but smile. Reaching out quickly, she caught Chloe’s hand in hers and squeezed it. “Chloe, Buite found me in less than a week. How?”

“I don’t know. None of us do. The only thing I do know is you pulled one hell of a stupid stunt.”

Ava looked Chloe up and down as they lay face-to-face on her bed and chuckled. She didn’t question how it was she’d gotten home. She knew her friend was powerful enough to assure such a thing happened. “I’m diggin’ the wings-bikini mix. Was it too much to toss some pants on?”

“Yes. I knew what you were going to do a half a second before you did it, Ava.” Chloe sat up fast and gave her a hard look. “Why in the hell would you deplete your power knowing you were falling the equivalent of fourteen stories, Ava? Are you insane? Do you have some sort of fucking death wish?”

“Okay, we need to go over the rules for angels with mouths like yours. Second, we need to go over what it is we do, Chloe. We guard the gates of the heavens and protect the innocent. Our lives mean nothing if they’re harmed. I knew the risk when I did it and I knew my odds of surviving were way better than theirs so don’t.” Ava’s chest

clenched tightly. "Ohmygods—Donatus. He was hurt. A lycan Host thrust its claws through his back... The hole was huge."

Covering her mouth with her hand, Ava choked back a sob as she looked down at her stomach. "The baby? Chloe—Donatus and the baby?"

"The baby is fine, Ava. He's a fighter and may possibly be as stubborn as his mommy."

Ava's chest tightened as she bit back tears. "He?"

Chloe nodded.

"And Donatus? Call Arik now!"

Chloe's eyes widened. "I will not call *him* here!"

"Chloe, please. I need him to check on Donatus. I have no way of tracking him. He does."

"He's a demon in the worst way, Ava."

Ava bit her lower lip and shook her head. "He's not evil, Chloe. Why can't you see that?"

Chloe stood tall and extended her wings out wide. They were as wide as she was tall and at five ten, Chloe was pretty damn tall. "I see only what he's shown me, Ava, and I think we both know that I'm not at all impressed with him. Just as I'm not impressed with Buite. But you have always let him get away with more than the others. Why is that?"

She gasped at her friend's accusation. "I do not let Buite get away with more than the other Host leaders. I just thought...er...I thought at one time that there was a tiny spark of good in him. That's all. Arik used to tell me stories of Host who had managed to overcome the evil that had inhabited them and I..."

The air in the room began to move without warning. Chloe face grew hard and she shook her head. "Arik should not have been permitted on Valhalla's sacred ground. In fact, he wasn't supposed to be there at all, Ava! Do you know that he can lead his

legions into there any time he wants? How are you going to feel when we get word that he's destroyed all the people we love, all the people we hold dear?"

Ava's temper boiled to the edge and she had to fight to keep from screaming at Chloe. "Arik would never hurt anyone we love."

"Really? Care to tell me why it is the man spent so many years trying to convince you to run away with him? To leave the safety of Valhalla and never look back? To leave us?"

Ava sensed something in the room with them and propped herself on her elbow, looking around slowly for them. She found no one. The feeling of someone being there didn't go away.

"Call Arik, please. I'm not feeling quite like myself and if I even attempt to make contact with him without being able to mask my presence Lucifer and Hades will sense me instantly."

Sitting up too quickly, Ava had to take a moment to catch her bearings. "Dammit, Chloe, call Arik, please. I need to check on Donatus."

"No, I'm not going to let him ruin things for you. He can go find some other women to screw. His days with you are done."

The wave of nausea she'd been fighting struck full force. "Chloe, help me to the bathroom, now!"

"Oh gods, Ava, you're so pale. Are you..." she stopped in mid-sentence. Her wings disappeared, leaving her human-looking but still tall and gorgeous. Chloe ran to Ava, pulling her up quickly and helping her to the bathroom.

Dropping to her knees before the toilet, Ava allowed herself to be sick. Chloe pulled her hair back and held it from her face as she stroked Ava's forehead.

"Honey, I'm sorry I got you all worked up. You really didn't know that you're expecting?"

Flushing the toilet, she moved to the sink and washed her face and hands. Reaching up, she took her toothbrush and toothpaste down as she watched Chloe in the mirror. "If you ever bring Arik's name into anything even close to what you said again I'll throw up on you. That is sick in the worst way, Chloe. You know what? It's so disgusting I might throw up again just because."

"I need to go talk to the others about all this. Will you be okay alone?"

"Tell me if any of the men with me died."

Chloe gave her a warm smile. "No. When I got there I had to practically wrestle you out of the arms of a man who didn't want to let you go, Ava. The two men with him didn't have much luck getting him to listen to reason either when it came to you. I finally had to knock him out cold with power to help you."

Relief washed through Ava. She let out a soft laugh and hugged Chloe tight. "He's alive?"

"Yes, honey, your husband is alive."

"Husband." Ava nodded. "Right, I'm not sure how I feel about that."

Chloe winked. "You don't have much of a choice. Plus, you seem a little too concerned about him to not care for him."

"I need to know he's okay, Chloe. I can't explain it but I have to know. I have to see it with my own eyes or, in this case, hear it with my own ears."

"Is he tall with a sort of stylish-looking blond hair thing going on and does he have the deepest green eyes you've ever seen? And does he look like all the guys at the big gods' dances we all grew up going to? All the men you seemed to ignore making passes at you then because you were too busy drooling all over the dark-haired ones?"

Ava stood there, her chest hammering. "He's not hurt in any way?"

"Oh, I'd say he's more than fine now." Chloe looked toward the ceiling as she chewed on her hair. It was a nervous habit she'd always had.

"Chloe?"

Chloe put her arms in the air and morphed into an old woman with white hair. She smiled warmly.

“Do I even want to ask what’s up with the glamour and pretending to be an elderly woman?”

Chloe nodded. “When I read you after the attack, I saw that your mate was real, Ava. I also saw how wrong I’d been for not encouraging you to summon him. That being said, I couldn’t let you do it until I knew for sure that Donatus wasn’t evil, that he was a good man. I had to be sure before I gave you the summoning spell. I love you too much to lose you.”

Ava’s eyes widened. “Chloe, did you use the grandma getup to spy on Donatus?”

“No. I used it to encourage him to have a little faith. He needed to be told the truth before he claimed you. He needed to understand that it wasn’t what he was but what he did with his life.” She morphed back into her true self and smiled. “He’s a wonderful man, Ava. He’s also very good at carrying groceries.”

“Huh?”

Chloe winked, conjured her wings and disappeared. The second she was gone, a light flashed near the countertop, making Ava jump slightly.

“I hate it when you do that!” she shouted up into the thin air. Taking a closer look at the counter, Ava found a small baby-blue quilt lying there. The second a handbook on surviving the first year of marriage materialized, Ava shook her head. “You are getting on my last nerve, woman.”

Ava headed straight for the bathtub and turned the water on. She adjusted the temperature to just this side of hot and let it run. She lowered herself to the tile floor and touched the water pooling in the tub. “Valhalla, help me control this,” she muttered under her breath. “Arik, it’s me. I need a favor.”

The water before her slowly filled with an image of a tall man with chestnut brown hair that hung to his chin in wavy hanks. His blue eyes locked on her and he smiled. “Ava, how are you this morning?”

She wrinkled her nose at the sight of his goatee. "What's up with the facial hair?"

Arik ran his hand over it. "Don't you like it?"

"Let me guess, the ladies like it."

"Yep. What favor do you need?"

"I need help finding a man." The second she said it, she regretted it.

"Oh." Arik's eyes widened. "I'm good but I'm not that good. You're a bit too demanding and, well, scary for the circle I hang with, and considering the crowd I hang out with on a daily basis that says a lot."

"Walk away from all of it, Arik. You know you can. Others have done it."

"Do you have a name, picture, anything I can use to help you find this man you want?" he asked, changing the subject.

Knowing better than to push him, Ava nodded. "Donatus Manlian."

For a moment, Arik looked flabbergasted. He opened his mouth and then closed it again before giving her a questioning look. "I'm sorry but did you say Donatus?"

"Yes, why?"

"Does this Donatus have blond hair, green eyes and is built like an ox?"

"Well, I never really thought of him as an ox but the rest is right. Do you know where I can find him?"

He rubbed his chin. "Why?"

"Please, I have to know he's okay. That's all I want. I just need to know he's safe."

"Okay, well, I think you'll see that he's fine soon enough. Bye, Ava. I love ya."

"Wait," Ava said quickly. Arik tipped his head. "I just wanted to tell you that you're going to be an uncle."

He gasped. "You're pregnant?"

Ava nodded and reached out to touch the water near Arik's hand. "Walk away from being an angel of death, Arik. You're the only family I have left and I'm tired to

lying to everyone. Chloe thought we were...oh gods...I can't even say it without throwing up again."

Arik's face twisted up. "Yeah, don't say it, little sister. I'll be sick too."

"Will you think about walking away? They shouldn't have sent you undercover, Arik. They knew you could never return without the taint of evil. Don't continue to work for them. I don't care if they are the good guys. They lied to you and they kept you away when they knew the village was being attacked."

He ran his hand over his goatee. "I know what they did, Ava. I'm almost four hundred years old. Don't think for one second that I have ever forgotten what they took from me — from us."

Ava bit back tears. "Arik, you have spent thirty of my years and over three hundred of your own more than making up for it. Without your help I wouldn't have known how to protect myself, let alone teach the girls. I hate keeping who you are to me a secret. I never really told you that I love you."

He smiled. "I know you do. That's why you can't tell anyone. I have enemies on both sides of the fence, sweetie, and they would love nothing more than to hurt someone I love. And Ava, I love you. I'm so happy for you. Will I be permitted to visit once the baby comes?"

Shocked, Ava drew back a bit. "Of course you will. You're my brother, not a heartless murdering bastard — not a monster."

"I know it's fine with you, Ava. I was asking your husband." Arik chuckled as he ended the contact.

His image disappeared instantly. She dropped her head down on the side of the tub with a thud and groaned. "I need ordinary people in my life. I currently hang with none but freaks."

Sighing, she pulled off the tattered shirt she still wore and cast it aside. Ava rose slowly and worked the remains of her clothing off, carefully taking her white thong

with it. The idea of finding Donatus—and a hot bath—drove her on. Dipping her foot in, she found it acceptable and climbed into the large tub.

Moving to take a step out, she growled and shook her head. “I can’t even take a damn bath and clean off Keres blood. Damn you, Manlian. What did you do to me?”

“Hmm, I’ve been waiting to ask you the very same question, Fenaly.”

“Donatus?” She was scared to turn around and not find him there.

“Yes?”

“Are you okay?”

He chuckled. “I expected you to yell at me for being here. I didn’t expect you to be concerned for me. But to answer your question, yes. I’m fine.” He took a step toward her. “I heard Chloe. The baby is okay, but are you all right?”

Joy surged through her. Unable to control herself, Ava spun around fast. The second she saw him standing there in his dark gray dress slacks, no shirt and no shoes or socks, she took a step toward him. Her wet foot touched the bare tile and went out from under her.

Strong arms took hold of her, pulling her up. Donatus’ hold on her sent fire through her lower region. The minute her wet breasts crushed against his hard chest her nipples hardened. Desperate to feel more of his skin pressed to hers, Ava ran her hands over his back and immediately thought about the Host warrior taking a chunk out of him. She tried to turn him but he wouldn’t move. “Donatus, please.”

Chuckling, he took hold of her wrists and brought them to his face. He planted a kiss on one, sending shivers down her inner arms. “I’m fine. You don’t need to worry about me, Ava.”

“How could I not, Donatus?”

“Honey, it’s okay. I’m okay and thank the gods you’re okay. I don’t ever want to see you do something like that again, Ava. I couldn’t get to you in time. None of us could. You hit the ground and...and...I couldn’t breathe. I thought you were gone. I

didn't want to let go of you. If Chloe hadn't have taken matters into her own hands I'm sure I'd still be sitting there holding you."

Ava stared up into Donatus' eyes and wiggled against him slightly, feeling his thick erection and wanting desperately to unclothe it, touch it, feel it in her. Fighting the urge to push him onto the floor and have her way with him, Ava smiled. "I was so worried about you."

"I was worried about you too, baby." He held her tight. "I thought you'd wake up and hate me. If I could change what I am, I would, Ava. I'd take the demon out and just be a man who loves you."

Loves me.

Ava stared up at him a moment, soaking in what she'd just heard. Her brow creased as she tried to make sense of it all. For so many years the mere idea of being mated to a ex-evil being had turned her stomach but now, as she stood before Donatus the very thought of not having him with her was terrifying.

"Ava, say something." The pain on his face broke her heart.

Touching his cheek lightly, Ava let a slow smile move over her face. "There is one thing I can't forgive you for."

"What?" he asked fast.

"I had to find a spell to fix my bed the morning after you paid me a late-night visit." She put a hand on her hip and smiled. "Do you know how hard it was to find my spell books when they were still packed away?"

Donatus didn't move. He just stood there, looking down at her. For a moment she thought he'd trip over nothing again. When he cupped her chin and bent his head down, she exhaled. "I love you so much, Ava."

"I love you too." She held his wrist and tipped her head just a bit. "But you have to promise not to eat our young."

Donatus laughed and the warm sound moved around her, leaving her feeling safe and loved. "I can promise not to eat our young but I can't promise not to eat you." He gave her a sexy grin.

Taking hold of Donatus' pants, Ava worked them down a bit. The turgid shaft of his erection was thick and ruddy. The bulblike head was large, round and leaking the tiniest bit of pre-come.

Letting out a shaky laugh, he reached for her breast and caressed it gently with the back of his hand. "I'm fighting with all I have not to pick you up and take you against the wall, Ava. The demon in me is dying to come out and play with you again. He's fighting me with all he has too."

Ava wrapped her hand around his shaft as best she could and planted a kiss on his bare chest. Remembering the painting from the sitting room, she glanced down at his lower abdomen. There was no sign of a scar there. It hit her then what the wound in the painting meant. "Donatus, you talk about the demon like he's separate from you. He's not, is he?"

Shaking his head, his jaw dropped slightly as she pumped his shaft repeatedly. "No, honey, he's not."

"So you were born the way you are. Am I right?" Ava asked, running her thumb over the head of his cock.

"Yes."

"Then don't separate yourself from him or you will always fight it."

He gasped. "Ava, I've spent over three hundred years keeping that evil down. Letting him out now would be—"

"The best way to learn to recognize that the demon isn't evil. Because you aren't evil, Donatus. You are a wonderful man that made me fall in love with you instantly." She stroked his cock faster. "Give me all of you. I want to know my husband fully."

Donatus didn't wait. Reaching around Ava, he lifted her high in the air and she wrapped her legs around his waist. The feel of having his wife in his arms, knowing that she was safe was overwhelming to the point that he had to pay attention to just how tightly he was holding her.

He wanted to take his time with her. He wanted to give her so much pleasure that she would beg him to stop but he couldn't wait. The demon within him was pushing toward the surface, hell-bent on coming out if his cock wasn't sated soon.

Pressing the tip of his cock against her heated core, Donatus kicked his pants aside and held her to him. He stepped into the large bathtub as he stared into her beautiful blue eyes. She tried to push down on him, take him into herself, but he wouldn't let her. He needed to make sure she was ready to receive him, ready to face what might happen.

"Please, Donatus."

"I don't want to hurt you, Ava." He stared down at her. "Honey, I'm terrified of losing you."

"Did you lose me when you laid your claim to me and helped create the life I carry now?" she asked, softly.

"No."

"Then what makes you think you'll lose me now?"

Donatus couldn't take his eyes off his wife. She was so incredibly beautiful. Dropping his head back down, he pressed his mouth to her and moaned as her tongue greeted his. She tasted so sweet, so pure that he couldn't help but delve deeper, exploring every bit of her he could.

She laced her fingers in his hair and kept him close to her—as if he'd ever even entertain the idea of leaving her. Donatus' senses heightened as the demon rose closer to the surface. Ava's arousal clung to the air, making his cock throb painfully with the need to be in her.

“Fuck me, Donatus.”

The demon thrust forward, causing his arms to shift. His muscles bulged as his skin changed to a deep dark red. Panic welled in him. “Ava.”

She cupped his face and kissed his lips. As her tongue swept over his lower lip, his lower half shifted into demon form as well. His cock lengthened and he couldn’t hold back. Surging forward, Donatus buried himself in Ava’s tight, wet pussy.

Gasping, she clung to him, biting down on his lower lip. The second he felt blood welling, he tried to stop thrusting into her, fearing he would hurt her, but she clung tightly to him and gently sucked the blood from his lip. Moaning, he gave in to the need to fully consume her.

Donatus moved down fast, holding her to him while he laid her on her back in the oversized tub. The now-lukewarm water surrounded them. He made sure her head was above water before he continued his slamming thrusts. Her pussy fisted him tightly, pulling him back into her body as they panted in unison.

“Yes, Donatus.”

Straining to keep from crushing her, Donatus held his upper body in a semi-push-up position as he fucked his wife in partial demon form. Each thrust into Ava left the pull of the demon weaker and weaker. As Ava planted tiny kisses on his shifted arms he wanted to howl out and soak her entire body with his come, staking his claim on every inch of her.

Water sloshed out of the tub but neither of them cared. Donatus rhythmically pounded his cock into her, loving the feeling of her core holding him to her while he rubbed his lower abdomen against her clit. Tiny gasps came from her as she wrapped her legs around his waist.

“Let go, Donatus. Let me have all of you.”

Against his better judgment, Donatus gave in, allowing the weakened demon to take hold and rise fully. The buzzing and tingling in his low back indicated the start of a

full shift. Dark hair spread over his lower half, his chin lengthened and horns sprouted on his head.

Ava didn't scream. She pulled on the back of his neck and captured his mouth with hers, kissing him with so much passion that it made his chest tight. When she drew back, she looked up at him through lowered lashes. "I love you, Donatus."

Something inside him snapped. The wall he'd spent so many centuries building to keep the man and the demon divided crumbled. The demon seemed to circle around him, pulling, yanking, demanding. As Donatus dropped his head down to recapture his wife's lips he felt the human portion of him rise fast and wrap itself around the demon, merging with it, controlling it, becoming one with it.

His body shifted back into human form instantly, though he still thrust into Ava with the power of the demon. It was then he knew she was right. He was one with what he'd carried and he controlled it easily. Smiling, he thought about what else he could control.

"Come for me, baby. I want to feel your hot pussy holding me tight as I fill you full of my seed."

Releasing his power, he let it wash over Ava. She jerked beneath him and cried out as her pussy clenched. As the orgasm ripped through her, Donatus gave in to the need to release. Drilling into her, he stayed rooted in place as his cock pulsed out waves of semen, filling her completely.

He held tight to her. "Ava, baby, are you okay?"

A blissful look came over her beautiful face. "Mmm, I'm better than okay."

Epilogue

Ava smiled when she caught sight of Donatus waiting rather impatiently outside her doorway as her students filed out one by one. He pushed past the last two students and made his way straight toward her. Reaching out, he lifted her white blouse and placed his large palm against the tiny swell of her lower stomach.

"Mmm," he said, dropping his head down and kissing her, "I've missed you."

Ava laughed. "Honey, you just saw me an hour ago and an hour before that and an hour —"

"Are you trying to tell me that I'm crazy for missing my wife and wanting to spend every second with her?" He gave her a lopsided sexy grin. "I don't want to miss a second more than I have to with you, Ava. I spent over three hundred years waiting for you. I'll be damned if I spend any more time away from you or our son."

Glancing down at her stomach, Ava laughed. "Sweetie, you have another five months to go before he'll be here. Enjoy it. They tell me we'll forget what sleep is and worry nonstop."

"Hmm, I do that now so I'll be nice and conditioned."

Ava sighed, seeing the concern on her husband's face. He lived in fear of her being attacked by Lucifer and it was taking its toll on him. "Donatus, we'll stand up against *him* when the time comes — and win. I can see that now."

He closed his eyes and nodded. "I know, baby. I'm allowed to worry about the two of you. You're my family, my love, my soul. You are all that I am, Ava."

She pushed on his chest lightly. "Hey, I already agreed to try for another child once our son gets here, stop laying it on so thick. You aren't getting three."

Donatus nipped playfully at her lips. "Why not? I'm a big guy. Three should fill me up nice and good."

Laughing, Ava stood on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek. "I said I was sorry for accusing you of trying to eat your young."

"I know." He winked. "I like to tease you because you let me eat you then." He eased her onto her desktop.

"Oh no you don't."

"Mmm," he said, lifting her skirt slightly while he spread her legs. "You should use your power to close the door now, Ava. I'm about show you how good I've gotten at allowing parts of me to shift at will. I think I'll start with my tongue."

"I love you." Ava ran her hand over his cheek lightly.

Donatus kissed her inner thigh and looked up at her with emerald green, glistening eyes. "And I love you."

About Mandy M. Roth

I grew up fascinated by creatures that go bump in the night. From the very beginning I was odd and creative—a combo every mother hopes for. After studying art all the way through school, I majored in it at college. One rather unexpected child later, I changed my major and finished with a great balance of art and business. I'm working on my MBA with a concentration in marketing but it's taken a back seat while I plug away at the keyboard.

I live in Ohio with my husband and three boys. They definitely keep me busy. Between convincing one he really doesn't need to have his eyebrow pierced, listening to the middle one's philosophy on life and pulling the youngest off the countertop, I do manage to eke in a very small amount of writing time during the day. More often than not, my writing is done from 8 pm until 3 am.

If the following years are half as good as my first one in writing, I'll be a happy gal! I'm doing something I love, meeting tons of new people, have the greatest readers in the world and the support of my family. The only thing I still don't have is that hot lycan on a motorcycle. I'm working on it, though.

Mandy welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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