



The Demon Next Door

ALI

By

Kate Austin

The Demon Next Door: Ali by Kate Austin

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The Demon Next Door: Ali

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Dedication

To Saeed, for my favorite brainstorming session ever—drinking beer in the sun on the Sunshine Coast talking about demons.

Chapter One

All women have that boy they regret. The one who took them to prom, promised them forever, and then disappeared.

That boy—that man—changed my life.

Twice.

The first time was the night of my senior prom. I'd been mooning over Mike Hubbard for months, hoping he'd ask *me* to prom. Even I, despite my besotted state, knew it was more than unlikely.

I was cute but Mike was the school god. Unlikely didn't come close to describing my chances.

His first three choices turned him down. Should that have been a clue? No shit, Shakespeare. And I was stubborn. Too stubborn to take even the most obvious of hints—still am, for that matter—and when he asked me, I said yes.

I lost more than my virginity that night. I lost my heart and my innocence and my faith in the intrinsic goodness of human nature. At least for a few months.

I spent several weeks—okay, sixteen to be exact—after my deflowering weeping in the shower or the stairwell of our apartment building so my mother wouldn't hear me. But then I met Jim, and then Darryl, and then Tom, and my tears dried up.

* * * * *

Why am I thinking about Mike Hubbard twenty years later? I had an email from him a couple of months ago. Not a word, not a sighting, not even a *Did you hear what Mike's doing now?* phone call from anyone in the past twenty years, and now this. It was as if he'd vanished right off the face of the earth only to appear again in my inbox.

Maryalice, I've been thinking about you, the email said. *Found your address on Classmates.com. Thought I'd check in.*

And I wrote back.

Mistake number two.

Not because there's anything wrong with *this* Mike Hubbard, but because I'm not sure I'm ready for a relationship. And it's clear this is what—sight unseen—this Mike Hubbard seems to want with *me*. Almost too weird for words.

The fortunate thing is that he lives seven or eight hundred miles away so I have time to think about it, the *it* being whether I want to see him at all. And if I do, what restrictions I want to put on the meeting.

We can spend time talking to each other, getting to know each other—which, not surprisingly, we never did back then—before I commit to a face to face.

I'm not gun shy, at least I don't think of myself that way. But I like being single. Relationships mean complications. Single means I can date when I want—or not. I can have sex when I want, with myself or with someone else. Or not.

The sex part is crucial.

Being single means variety. But even more than that, it means *newness*. I love having sex with strangers and, really, first dates are the best time to do that.

It usually goes like this.

I meet a guy at a coffee shop or in a grocery store or through work, often a supplier or a courier or an on-call IT guy. I never date anyone who works with me—something *always* goes wrong. We make that particular kind of eye contact that says, *do you wanna?*, with a response that says, *absolutely*.

So we go for a drink, then dinner at a hotel. They almost all have

those lovely old-fashioned dining rooms. Low lighting. Booths. Older, very discreet waiters.

I always suggest a restaurant in a hotel so it's natural to get a room there. Never my place—too risky—or his. The odds are he has a roommate or his place is a pigpen, both of which are guaranteed to spoil the mood.

By the time we head upstairs, we're ready. We've been playing more than footsies under the tablecloth. The elevator ride is foreplay. We stand in the lobby and wait until we're the only people there and then fall in through the opening doors and slam them shut so no one can join us.

We drop our briefcases to the floor and grab each other in a way that, even in discreet hotel dining rooms, is inappropriate. I tug his shirt out of his trousers, and he pulls my tank out of the waist of my skirt. We're careful not to rip off any buttons—that would be too obvious—but we do whatever is necessary to get our hands on some of that hidden skin we've been lusting after for the past two hours.

He rubs his hands—I especially like this part if he has calluses—across my belly and around my back. He moves up and down until his fingers hover just below my bra. Then, without notice, he'll slide up to discover the front closing. He opens the clasp and pushes the bra aside.

He strokes my nipples with his fingertips, and I tremble.

While all of this is going on, I'm concentrating on my half of the equation. I run my fingers over his belly. I like all kinds of male bellies. Slightly chubby ones, hard ones with a six-pack, and concave ones on thin, un-muscled men. Hairy ones. Hairless ones.

I touch only lightly, carefully. I circle his belly button. I slide my fingers along the skin beneath his belt. This always triggers a groan, a tightening of his abs against my hands and his fingers on my nipples.

The elevator ride only lasts a few moments and when the bell rings for our floor, we both step back and tuck in our clothes. I pull my jacket over my chest—my undone bra and erect nipples are a little too obvious.

The hallway is a blur but the door to our room opens like magic. No lights are ever on until I move to the bathroom, turn on the overhead,

and close the door, leaving only a sliver of light illuminating the bed.

No point in pretending we're going to do anything other than fuck, so we sit down on opposite edges of the bed and remove our clothing. There's something completely erotic about taking off your clothes in front of a stranger.

By the time my clothes are off and neatly folded on a chair, my pussy is damp and my skin is flushed. When he turns to me, his cock stands at attention, pointing like a dowsing rod having sensed buried water.

We stand for a moment, trailing our eyes over all that gorgeous bare skin. And it *is* gorgeous—no matter what he looks like—because it's *my* skin to play with for the next couple of hours.

This is where things can change. It all depends on how adventurous he is. Sometimes it's just *wham, bam, thank you, ma'am*. And sometimes—the best times of all—it's a long, slow glide into orgasm after orgasm until I can hardly bear it anymore.

But either way? I'm so hot by the time I get into the elevator that I only need his cock inside me to make me explode. I've had hours of foreplay, and I'm *ready*.

So you can see why I'm hesitant about Mike and his intentions. He hasn't come right out and said he wants a relationship with me, but he uses all the buzz words. The ones that make me nervous. Words like *home* and *kids* and *cooking* and *vacations*.

No way.

Vacations, for me, are solitary pursuits. New locations and new men with whom to have no holds barred, no strings attached sex.

But—and here's the rub—I've always been as curious as a cat, and I want to see what kind of man Mike's become. I want to see if he's grown out of the boy who callously broke my heart all those years ago. I want to see if the school god has turned into...what? A geek? A dweeb? A nerd? An insurance salesman? A used car dealer? Even worse, a mortician or a politician? Or a guy I'd take to a hotel dining room?

He *says* he's retired, but hasn't said from what—which is a red flag right away, because he's my age and only drug dealers or gangsters can

afford to retire before they're forty. He says he has three ex-wives but they're all his friends—definitely another red flag. And five kids from various wives—*and* he wants more?

The guy he describes is so *not* what, if I'd taken the time to think about him over the past twenty years, I could have imagined the school god turning out to be. The good news is that I've managed—so far—to restrict my curiosity to the online world, and I'm going to keep doing that for a few weeks yet. I may keep doing it forever.

But I doubt I'll make it that far.

My cat sense is tingling. I want to know who he is now, how he's evolved.

Is it obvious I'm lying? No kidding. I'll admit what I want is to take this sexy body and even more sexy mind I've grown into and show him who he screwed with twenty years ago.

I want revenge.

* * * * *

The cat and mouse game continued for a few weeks. He'd email me, I'd email back, we'd talk about his family and about my work. He'd talk—a lot—about me when I was younger.

He talked as if he'd been in love with me from the time we first met at thirteen. He remembered things about me even I didn't remember. And his memory of prom was the complete opposite of mine.

Oh, he remembered popping my cherry, but in his mind it was a joyous experience for both of us. He remembered the dress I wore—pink and fluffy and short. *I* didn't remember the dress. He remembered the car he drove to pick me up. He remembered the care he'd taken to bring a dark-colored blanket for the back seat.

In his mind, that made him a hero.

In my mind, that made him a dirty, rotten scumbag.

It made him an eighteen year old who would do whatever it took—including lying and cheating—to get into the pants of a naïve teenage girl. And then leave her crying on the damp grass in front of her

apartment building, her bloody panties wadded up in a ball in her hands.

And even worse, he'd leave her pregnant without a thought or a care. I was lucky I didn't end up with an STD as well. And lucky that I miscarried that child a few weeks later. Before I or my mother or my classmates or even my doctor knew what had happened.

I never spoke to Mike Hubbard after prom night, not until he emailed me.

But I'd always dreamed about what would happen if I ran—*ran* being the operative word—into him on the street. An accident, of course, but a fatal one. A long, drawn out, painful, but eventually fatal accident.

This was better.

This was going to be up close and personal.

I had spent the past few weeks planning my revenge. I still wasn't sure whether I'd get him all excited and tie him up and then walk away, or if I'd figure out some way to give him a disfiguring disease. Or I might tell the world—with the aid of blogs and Twitter and Facebook and MySpace—what a scumbag he was.

Complete with pictures. Doctored ones, of course.

Although tying him up and then taking pictures might be even better.

At this rate, it would take me months to figure out what to do, but Mike Hubbard was keen and the minute I said *yes*, he'd be in the car on his way down to the city. I had to be ready.

I wasn't.

Chapter Two

Ali knocked at my door on Friday afternoon. I knew it had to be my next door neighbor because no one else even knew where I lived—even my office contact was a post office box. I was pretty careful about that, given my sexual proclivities. We didn't even get Bible thumpers or charity collectors this far out of town. No one ever knocked on my door.

But when I opened it, instead of sweet, shy Ali, I found a flower box sitting on the stoop. I stepped out onto the porch and looked left, then right. I saw no one. No cars, no delivery vans, no bicycle couriers. Nada. A big fat nothing.

Which was kind of weird because Ali's place and mine were the only two houses at the foot of a cul-de-sac. That isolation was the reason I could afford to buy, and I assumed the same was true for Ali. The builder had grand plans—the faded sign advertising *Big Lots! Twenty new homes! All amenities!* still stood at the top of the road, but our two houses were the only ones built, and they were as faded as the sign.

So if anyone had delivered something and then knocked on the door, they should still be in sight. Or maybe I had only imagined the knock. I was pretty tired, and it *was* pretty late.

But I wasn't imagining the box. It wasn't your usual plain white cardboard. This box was covered with gold and black foil with a matching ribbon. No card, no florist's address. At least on the outside.

I took one more quick look around the neighborhood.

Still nothing. Still no one. Not even Ali's truck in the driveway. Which was another kind of weird because Ali was *always* home. Or maybe I should rephrase that—he was always home when I was. I hadn't had the nerve yet to ask him outright, but I wondered what he did for a living. Whatever it was, it didn't involve going out. Ali's truck never moved except when he turned it on to roll it up or down the driveway so he could Armorall the *bottom* of the tires once a month.

And how did I know he *never* went out? Because I had the kind of job that involved visiting the office only occasionally. I, too, was a nerd, or more accurately, a geek. At least in my working life.

I designed websites for my employers, and I'd go in for meetings with clients. Once in a while, I'd spend a day there just for the hell of it. Or to troll for new meat. But I had no routine and whenever I was home—morning, noon, or late at night—so was Ali. I'd grown to count on seeing his nerd self when I opened my door or looked out the window.

And he was definitely a nerd, but a nerd with a honking big black truck with all the bells and whistles. I lusted after that truck, but Ali wasn't much on catching hints—at least he never caught any of mine. Not about work, not about where he was from, not about when he shopped for groceries.

So where was he?

I shook my head, carried the box of flowers into the kitchen, and laid it on the counter. I checked again for an address or a card. Still nothing.

"Just open the box, Maryalice. There's no blood leaking from the bottom." The pep talk I gave myself wasn't exactly working. I lifted the box to my nose and sniffed. "No dead rats."

Now, this was getting ridiculous, because I had no frigging idea what a dead rat smelled like. So I shook the box gingerly, not wanting to hurt the flowers, if flowers were indeed inside. It felt like flowers to me, just how they'd feel in a foil covered box.

"Now open the damned box," I whispered.

I carefully pulled the top off and found a pile of the deepest red roses, roses the precise color of dried, scabby blood, piled

higgledy-piggledy one on top of the other. Well, what did I expect? I leaned down and took a deep breath. No scent. No surprise. I would have been more surprised if they'd had an aroma—roses had given up their perfume along with their thorns years ago.

Except these. They had thorns, big fat sharp ones. A few drops of my blood fell, disappearing into the petals.

"The card must be at the bottom somewhere," I muttered, lifting each rose from the pile as carefully as if I were playing pick-up sticks with my baby brother. When I reached the bottom, having counted exactly twenty-one blossoms, there was still no card. I rustled around in the tissue paper at the bottom. Nothing.

Why twenty-one? Why me? Why no delivery guy?

"Put them in vase, you idiot," I finally said aloud. "Someone's going to email you or phone you in the next few days and ask why you didn't call to say thank you for the flowers. Then you'll know."

But even after the flowers were crammed into my biggest vase and sitting on the window seat in the bay window, I was listing who might have sent them. The list was short.

Ali was it. The whole list. And the fact that he wasn't home on a Friday night—the fact that he wasn't at home *at all*—added a bullet beside his name. Not that it needed a bullet.

Because there was no one else.

Not one single person who knew where I lived and who might, even with the largest possible stretch of the imagination, have sent me flowers. My baby brother? Please. Don't make me laugh. If I didn't call him the first Sunday of every month, I would never talk to him. We weren't estranged. And he loved me. But he was too busy chasing girls and the next big deal, often both at the same time. So we compromised. I'd call him, and he'd talk to me when I did.

So where in the hell was Ali? And why was he suddenly sending me flowers? Red roses, at that.

Enough fretting about the stupid roses. I was only driving myself crazy, and I had plenty of better ways to do that than worrying about flowers from my neighbor. The second bedroom—now my office—and

the computer beckoned.

I answered.

* * * * *

I trolled through my computer, checking my email, my links, my contacts, my favorites. I finally read all of the unread emails in my inbox. I even went to my spam folder and checked every single one of the ads for Cialis and Viagra and a bigger dick and better orgasms.

I opened every one of the emails from foreign ministers looking for someone to help them collect their inheritance. And I deleted them all.

I checked out my favorite chat rooms. But nothing in them said, "I just sent you some blood red roses." Nothing jumped out and made me think, *Aha, that's who sent them.*

The only suspect was Ali. But what had changed between us since we'd stood at the curb yesterday afternoon chatting about the weather? Because we usually talked about the weather—nothing personal there.

Or in the discussions of how to get the sticky droppings from the cherry trees off the truck. Or the lengthy conversations about watering restrictions. Should we comply with them? Our addresses ended in odd numbers but we weren't really on a particular side of the street and the restrictions specified those houses on the odd-numbered side of the street. We were in a semi-circle.

We never did resolve that question, though we kept coming back to it. As we did to the mowing the lawn argument. In the morning, or at night? How high should the blades be set? How often should we water? How early or late in the season?

Our conversations were all banal and no matter how I parsed them, nothing leapt out at me. Nothing that would encourage the sending of roses. And certainly nothing about the number twenty-one.

We were both at least twenty years older than twenty-one. Although, now that I thought about it, I hadn't ever known Ali's age. Or his last name, for that matter. Or anything much about him other than he lived next door to me and spent all his time at home.

Oh, yeah, and that sometimes he didn't understand the most normal of things. I had to remind him to water his lawn for the first few months after he moved in. I actually had to *show* him how to use the mower. And the hedge trimmers. And, for Pete's sake, the hose and the sprinkler.

Ali must have grown up in a big city, in a huge condo building with absolutely no green around him. Because whenever I looked out my window and caught him outside, he was standing on his perfectly trimmed lawn looking out at the forest.

Oh, yeah, did I mention the forest?

It surrounded us, looming over the fences built to keep it out, and I always felt as if one more summer was all it would take for it to break through the chain link and start moving into our yards.

The builder had cleared a small area behind us, but had abandoned the project so quickly that nothing else had been done. I'd put up my chain link fence when I moved in, more to keep the raccoons and rabbits off of my grass than for any other reason. Ali had put his up as soon as he'd seen mine.

It kept out the critters, but the forest was a whole other matter.

Ali was fascinated with it, as if he'd never seen one before. Me? I grew up in this part of the world. I wasn't fascinated. Just tired of chasing out the pine cones that sprouted on my grass, the rabbits that ate my petunias, and the raccoons that rattled my garbage bins in the middle of the night.

My rambling thoughts were a way of keeping my mind off the flowers on the kitchen counter. They kind of scared me. Not the roses themselves—though the color was creepy, and I'd never liked red roses anyway—but the fact that they had taken my relationship with Ali to a whole different level.

And I knew, just as I always knew about men, that Ali was *way* too sweet for me.

One of the things I'd learned over the years was that it wasn't a good idea to get involved with a sweet guy. They were too easily hurt and, even though it didn't stop me, I always felt shitty afterwards. With

Ali, I'd feel far more than that.

I'd steamroll right over him. I'd eat him up and spit him out in a week. And then I'd have lost a friend and maybe, probably, almost certainly, made an enemy. One who lived right next door to me in the most isolated neighborhood in the city.

God, Maryalice, you're losing your mind.

I knew Ali would never hurt me. But I could hurt him. Badly. And for the first time, I didn't want that to happen.

Plus I was worried about him. Where in hell was he? He was *never* away from home. Not once in the entire two years we'd lived on this cul-de-sac together was Ali not home when I was. Something must have happened to make him actually get in that truck, turn it on, and drive away.

Come to think of it, how did he get his groceries? No one delivered out here. I knew, because I'd tried every grocery store in town. I'd tried every other delivery service, too. None of them were interested in the long drive past the outskirts into the wilderness. No pizza. No Chinese food. No nothing.

So how *did* the flowers get here, if Ali hadn't dropped them off? But if he had dropped them off, then where in hell was he?

I was going around in circles.

I sat in the window seat and watched the world darken around me. We had no street lights, of course, only the spotlights on my garage and Ali's. We'd installed them together at the beginning of last winter. They were programmed to turn on when a car drove up or something or someone walked by.

Mostly they turned on when I drove into my driveway or when a deer or a raccoon wandered into the front yard. Tonight, though, the area stayed dark, both inside and outside.

A ping from my computer woke me from my musings. Anything that would distract me from this state had to be a good thing, so I turned away from the darkness outside and toward life inside the box.

I'd figure out what to do about Ali later.

Much later.

Chapter Three

First I had to figure out what to do about Mike Hubbard.

His email, the first words of which were, *Did you get them?* waited for me on the screen. Ali might be missing, but Mike Hubbard was a much more immediate problem. Should I pretend I hadn't read his email? Just leave it waiting in my inbox until I could figure out what the fuck to do about it?

The IM screen popped up.

"Maryalice? I know you're there."

How did he know this? I looked around. No lights were on. Only the dim glow of the computer screen lit the room. I'd been so busy worrying about Ali, I hadn't turned anything on.

Besides—I shook myself—Mike was eight hundred miles away, across the mountains, in another state entirely. Even with Google Earth he couldn't see the lights on in my house.

Because there weren't any.

"Maryalice? Answer me."

I started to type, then stopped. I wasn't ready for this conversation. But it was too late.

"I know you're typing something, Maryalice. Come on, babe. Tell me what you're doing right now."

"I'm just hanging out," I wrote, trying to buy myself time to think.

"Did you like the roses?"

I couldn't type the truth. *They give me the creeps.* Couldn't type the

question that really gave me the creeps. *How did they get here?* But I had to say something.

"They're beautiful."

"Where are they? In your bedroom?" The little smirking smiley face at the end of that post blinked at me as I thought about what to do.

First, I changed the *I am available* sign to *Fifteen minutes*. Then I hurried around the house, turning on all the lights from top to bottom. I turned on the spotlight outside. I turned on the lights I'd installed on the backyard walkway. I turned on the lights in the garage and the basement.

I didn't feel any safer.

But I screwed up my courage and I went back into the computer room where the IM screen blinked at me.

"Busy doing what?"

Trying to decide how to get rid of you, you creep. Nope, typing that wasn't a good idea. Though, believe you me, I was tempted. I wanted to make him go away, at least until Ali drove back into his driveway. Despite his sweetness, Ali was a big guy.

And I'd spent—although I was only this minute admitting it—a fair amount of time this past summer peeking at him through my second bathroom window, the only one that gave me a perfect view of the part of his backyard where he worked out.

He had free weights and all types of what I assumed were martial arts weapons. I'd seen wooden swords, long, supple bamboo sticks, those things that Bruce Lee always flung around—*nunchakus*, or whatever they were called. Even, once, a huge sword I later learned was called a *scimitar*.

And there was Ali, his light brown body all muscle and movement. Not that ultra-buff kind of muscle that came from steroids and pumping iron. But that beautiful lean muscle that came from swimming.

I watched him work his biceps and triceps, and his shoulders, as he did dead lifts and ab crunches. I watched him spin those weapons with the speed of light. I watched the sunlight flash off the swords, heard the deep whoosh of the wooden sticks, the metallic singing of the nunchuks, which I learned was the nickname for the metal chains and sticks used by Bruce Lee and other martial artists.

He worked out every single day with a determination that seemed almost obsessive. If he had a job, maybe *this* was it. The hours he spent in the backyard, rain or shine. The hours he spent stretching—oh, my goodness, the *stretching*—and honing his body until it shone with sweat and his chest heaved.

And the best part? On the warmest days, he worked out in only a tiny pair of silky running shorts that were quickly drenched with sweat and hid absolutely nothing about his body.

Yep, my *ever-so-sweet* next door neighbor was drop dead gorgeous. In all possible ways.

Ali had never been inside my house, nor I in his. All our meetings had taken place outside, on the pavement or on the grass of our front lawns. Neither of us had invited the other into either backyard, and so I hadn't had to remember to hide the binoculars that now had a permanent place on my second bathroom windowsill.

But no matter how beautiful Ali was, no matter how lick-worthy I found his body, no matter how good he smelled when he stood next to me on the front lawn, I *knew* I couldn't have him. There were times, though...

And this was one of them.

I sat in front of the computer watching the lights blinking at me and tried to figure out what to do. What to say to Mike Hubbard, who had obviously figured out where I lived and had managed—in a way I could not yet figure out—to get those creepy roses delivered to me without me seeing how.

I switched my message to *Be right back* and hurried down to the garage, where I grabbed my garden shears and went back in through the kitchen. The roses stood in front of the kitchen window, outlined by the night. I took the first one, full of thorns, and stood over the garbage disposal and chopped it up. I started with the blossom, slicing through the tops of the petals, then another sharp slice through the thickest part of them.

They fell into the sink like drops of dried blood. I laid the stem on the counter, its tip hanging over the sink, then snipped it a dozen times from top to bottom. The hard green stick broken into pieces, with its huge

thorns sticking up, looked just as nasty lying there nestled on the bed of shredded petals as they had in the gold foil box.

I took the shears and pushed all of the debris into the garbage disposal, turned on the tap, and then pushed the button. And pushed it again.

I repeated the destruction until all the roses were gone.

Then I took the vase to the back door and opened it. I peered out to make sure there was no one around and flung the vase onto the fire pit. I'd burn it tomorrow.

I stepped back into the cover of the porch and stared at Ali's house. Not a single light was on, not anywhere. Not the garage light, the front porch light, nor the spotlight on the awning above the garage.

The absence of light scared me.

But the computer scared me more.

Chapter Four

Ali didn't like being away from home. In fact, he hated it.

He hadn't been off the cul-de-sac in nearly two years. Not since he'd met Maryalice for the first time. Even before then, he'd been pretty much a stay at home kind of demon, but having her there had reinforced his compulsion to keep out of the light. It wasn't exactly the light of day he was concerned about—it was what that light would reveal.

Him. To his brothers.

If they found him...

If they knew what had happened to him...

They'd kill him. Okay, they wouldn't kill him. They couldn't. Demons were indestructible *and* immortal. But they'd try. And he'd suffer.

Big time.

Forever.

And he wasn't prepared for that.

No one ever was, but pain and suffering happened to demons pretty regularly. It was part of their culture and was deeply embedded in their relationships with one another. He'd been both the recipient and the purveyor of such pain and suffering, and he preferred, even now, to be the purveyor.

Though if they found him after all these years, if they figured out what he'd done, he'd definitely be the recipient. And he wasn't ready.

Because not only would they do to him all the things he'd done to them and others, they would take him away from Maryalice. He couldn't

bear that.

That was why he was in this small town ten miles past his cul-de-sac, in this seedy bar, giving up his daily watching brief for her long-term safety.

This man, this *Mike Hubbard* had shown up on the cul-de-sac this morning while Maryalice was at work. He'd driven down the street just as Ali was getting ready to follow her. Something about the man got all his demon juices flowing, and Ali, reluctantly, had stayed home to see what he would do.

Ali knew she'd gone to work—probably the safest place for her—instead of shopping or for a night out on the town—a *sex trip*, he'd learned to call them once he'd followed her a few times, because of the way she was dressed.

Oh, her beautiful breasts were still outlined by her silk T-shirt, but she wasn't wearing a tank or a blouse unbuttoned down to *there*, nor was she wearing stilettos or a skirt slit up to *here*. She was wearing what he'd learned to recognize as her work clothes.

Maryalice's clothes fascinated him. She had so many of them. Different ones for different days, different seasons, and different events. She had T-shirts in dozens of colors, colors he was sure he'd never seen before. She had a dozen pairs of blue jeans in every shade of blue. In addition to those, she had pink ones and yellow ones and white ones. And Ali was sure he hadn't seen half of her wardrobe.

He loved her clothes, loved imagining the way they felt against her skin, the way they'd feel against his fingertips. He knew they'd feel good by the impressions on the faces of the men she met on her sex trips, knew they'd come off her perfect body easily because he'd watched.

He followed her every time she left the house.

Except *this* time...

But normally, when she got dressed in any of her going-out-of-the-house clothes, he'd race down the hill and into his Batcave, where he'd leap onto his Batcycle. A little corny, he knew, but he loved the movie with Michael Keaton. Maryalice had told him to watch it. And, then, being a demon trying to learn to be human, he'd also watched

every other Batman movie, though he believed the quality had deteriorated after Tim Burton left the franchise.

He'd wait at the stop sign around the corner until she passed in her little red hybrid, and then he'd put a couple of cars between them and follow her. Demons were very good at disguises. Part of their ongoing success was their ability to transform themselves.

So he'd turn into a bike messenger or a suit and tie guy or a woman walking on her lunch hour—she had to be wearing sneakers, because he never got the hang of heels. He'd transform himself until he looked like someone who belonged in her office, or the grocery store, or the hotel dining room.

He had to make sure she was safe. She never left the cul-de-sac without him. She never went *anywhere* without him beside her. Even at the hotels, he'd sneak into the room beside the one she entered or go out onto the balcony if there was one, and he'd watch and listen to make sure she was safe.

Because he couldn't live in this world without her.

He'd spent enough time watching television and reading newspapers to know this city wasn't safe for women, especially women like Maryalice who insisted on taking part in risky behavior—like sex with strangers.

The sheer eroticism of watching her naked and having sex—and it was just sex, even his demon self could tell that—with another man was just a bonus to his calling as her bodyguard. Though it *was* a pretty good bonus.

He had masturbated to that view a hundred times. He'd stand in the next room, his demon eyes ignoring the walls between them while she peeled off her clothes, her pretty as hell pussy peeking from between her legs as she walked toward her victim of the night.

Her delightfully full breasts bounced as she rounded the bed, her perfect ass beckoning him until he forced himself to step back to keep from ripping through the plaster and smashing his fist into the other man's face. Maryalice was *his* even if she didn't know it yet. Even if he could never act on it.

When he'd get over his initial anger, his temperature would rise and his heart would pound. His cock would lengthen in his carefully chosen loose, button front jeans until even their seams would stretch.

About the time Maryalice walked around the bed to reach the naked body of the *other* man, Ali would have to pop open his buttons. His cock would spring free without any assistance from his hands, though his fingers would be there waiting.

He'd stroke himself, balls to crown, slowly and carefully. He needed to get the timing right. He didn't want to come too soon. That would be irresponsible. Maryalice could still be in trouble and, if he were coming, he wouldn't be paying attention to *that* man. He'd be paying attention to the snake in his hands, the snake that took over from his brain.

Ali grinned at his imagery.

Demons didn't care much about sex, which was weird in a way, because they cared about every other vice imaginable. They loved to inflict pain, deep soul-searing pain, on anyone. Even their brothers. They loved to watch others inflict pain, especially when they inflicted that pain on someone who loved them.

They tried every new drug out there and even created a few of their own. But drugs didn't really work for demons, not in the long term—oh, sure, they experienced the high, but it wasn't anywhere near as good as their preferred high. *Pain*.

Ali, lord of the demons, was *really, really* good at pain.

At least, he used to be. Now he wasn't sure what he was good at except watching over Maryalice. And sex. He was sure he'd be *really, really* good at sex. With Maryalice. He'd watched enough to know what she liked. Sometimes fast, sometimes slow. Sometimes hard, sometimes soft. Maryalice loved sex the way he loved her. With every cell of her body and every molecule in her brain.

If he could just put the two things together, he'd be a happy demon. Happier even than he was when he finally allowed himself to let go and explode, when he finally believed that Maryalice was safe. When the *other* had left and Maryalice lay exhausted and smiling on the hotel

linen.

Then Ali could change his focus and deal with his aching cock.

He would tighten the grip he'd had on it since Maryalice first removed her clothes and stroke himself, harder and faster. He'd watch her body settle into the soft bed and imagine himself lying next to her, her breasts only inches from his mouth.

His cock would jerk and he would touch his thumb to the pre-cum spilling from the slit, using it to lubricate his strokes. The pressure would build up until his head felt as if it would explode, but no matter how close he was, he still kept his eyes glued to the woman in the bed next door.

Nothing was more important than her safety.

He would cup his balls with his other hand, rolling them in his palm, pulling the skin taut. He'd groan – he couldn't help himself – and stroke faster.

And faster. Harder.

Now. He would imagine ramming his cock into her cunt, imagine the feel of her silky, wet vagina convulsing around him. And when he came, his release was so extreme he would drop to his knees and wrap both hands around his pistoning cock.

He'd then allow himself a few moments to enjoy the sensation, and then he would return to watching Maryalice settle herself for a nap. She never allowed the nap to last longer than an hour. She would soon head home, driving down the hill to the cul-de-sac and into her garage, always, before morning.

* * * * *

The bar contained people who reminded Ali of his brother demons. Rough, tough and ready to rumble. Mike Hubbard, though dressed in a suit and tie, seemed to fit right in.

This comfort made Ali even more nervous than he'd been when he saw the man leave a box on Maryalice's porch. Ali had disembodied himself and hurried over to check the box before she picked it up. Flowers, he thought. But really *scary* flowers.

If Mike Hubbard was comfortable in this bar, Ali would bet his Batcycle that he wasn't a nice guy. Because no one in this bar was a nice guy. They were all mean and nasty guys. Ali had no trouble recognizing them. He'd once been a mean and nasty demon himself.

A mean and nasty demon was a creature no one wanted to run into. And not just in a dark alley. Running into a demon of any kind at any time sucked, but a mean and nasty one? Just a glance and the recipient of that look would be toast. That is, unless the mean and nasty demon was in a bad mood, and then the torture would begin. The beginning was the easy part.

The hard part was the ending. Because there wasn't one. Demons could go on forever. They were immortal, remember?

But Ali couldn't do that anymore—although maybe, just maybe, he could turn himself back into that mean and nasty demon for Maryalice's sake. If this *Mike Hubbard* was going to hurt her, he would be gunning for him. Just like Rambo or Dirty Harry.

Ali spent a lot of time at night watching movies. Demons didn't sleep much and even though he'd transformed himself permanently into a human being, most of his old habits stuck with him. Disembodiment. Transformation—though now it was much more difficult and temporary. Not sleeping. Seeing through plaster. Listening to other people's thoughts.

He was pretty happy about that since he'd met Maryalice. He needed all of those habits to keep her safe. And he needed all the new habits he spent hours cultivating—like martial arts and weightlifting and cooking and cleaning and shopping and lawn care—to keep her watching over him. So he could watch over *her*.

So here he was, right out in the open, in exactly the kind of place where demons would hang out, leaving Maryalice all alone. And himself hanging in the wind. Because he *needed* to watch over her, and he had a very bad feeling about this Mike Hubbard.

And the flowers had only intensified that feeling.

He might not know a lot about flowers but he knew that the blood red roses he'd seen through the foil box weren't normal. He wished he'd been able to stay around to make Maryalice feel better when she opened

the box, but he had to get after Mike Hubbard.

He stretched his mind out of the bar and back down to the cul-de-sac. From this distance, everything he heard was a bit blurred and, unless she was on the phone or had company—and she *never* had company; he'd never been past her front porch—he wouldn't hear her speaking. But he could tell from the vibrations that Maryalice wasn't a happy person.

He could hear—well, not exactly hear, but some weird equivalent of it—the clacking of her computer keys. The keystrokes sounded mad. And scared. Mostly scared, he thought, as he listened more carefully.

He shot a glance across the bar at Mike Hubbard, who sat hunched over something in a booth in the back. Blue light played over his face.

He, too, was on his laptop.

Ali looked at the front door and spotted a *WiFi here* sign.

Damn. Damn. Double damn.

This was not good.

But he had an idea. He just had to make sure he didn't go too far. He got up from his table, his pint of skunky beer in hand, and walked across the room, pretending to be drunk and more than a bit wobbly on his legs. When he got near the booth, he started to sway, spilling a little beer with each step.

He stepped right into the corner of Mike Hubbard's booth, the glass shooting from his hand and landing just where he'd planned it. On the keyboard of the glowing laptop.

Ali had to bite his lip to keep from laughing at the look on the man's face. He wanted so badly to pick him up by his nape and kick his butt from here to Timbuktu—wherever that was—but he resisted the temptation. Because he wasn't quite sure—okay, he wasn't sure at all—that Maryalice didn't want the roses.

He wanted to deal with Mike Hubbard but he had a demon problem. If he couldn't kick the man's butt, he had no idea what else to do. He'd been proud of himself for dumping the beer on the laptop. Now, though, he was stuck. Standing next to a booth filled with a very angry man.

Then that very angry man stood up.

Ali staggered back, still in his drunken disguise, and held up his hands. "Hey, guy, sorry about that. Must have tripped over something."

He did what he'd seen real drunks do in the same circumstances. He looked at the floor in front of him, at the floor behind him, and then shrugged his shoulders.

"Definitely something," he said, backing away.

He knew he wasn't going to get away with backing up from this guy, not with the red in his eyes. Oh, yeah, that was another thing left over from his demon self—the ability to see the colors of emotions. Red, that dark, deep, brilliant red, meant anger.

Ali laughed again, silently. He hadn't needed to see the red to figure out how mad the man facing him was. He should be proud of himself. He'd learned more about reading emotions than he'd thought. Maybe being a human being was getting easier.

He backed up more quickly, stepping on a few toes as he hurried as fast as possible, moving backward toward the front door.

It wasn't fast enough.

Mike Hubbard moved like the bulls he'd seen on the bull riding championships on the country sports channel. Fast and low and taking no prisoners.

He head-butted Ali just below the belt—a low blow, the boxing announcers would call that. And it hurt like hell. It was the little differences between human beings and demons that were always surprising Ali. He'd been pretty aware of what the big differences were.

Love was at the top of the list. He didn't remember any demon history talking about love. Or families. That was a big one, too. Demons didn't procreate the same way humans did, so they didn't have families.

This small difference—the getting butted in the nuts difference—made Ali double over and squeal. He hadn't known that particular sound could come out of his mouth.

When he rolled out of the ball in which he'd wrapped himself, Mike Hubbard stood above him, his arms folded over his chest and the red in his eyes slightly lighter. Inflicting pain seemed to relax this dude.

Ali recognized the stance—very demon-like.

“You,” Mike Hubbard growled down at him, “fucking ruined my laptop. You owe me three thousand bucks, and I want it *now*.”

Ali wanted to laugh. What did the guy think? He carried three grand in the pocket of his jeans? *Puh-leese*.

“Sorry, dude. I’m really sorry.”

He stood up, wincing at the pain in his groin, but willing to do whatever it took to get out of the bar without another fight. He needed to learn more about Mike Hubbard and, more importantly, he needed to get home. Maryalice wasn’t safe with this guy on the loose. That deep red scared the shit out of Ali.

“I’ve got about \$500 in my pocket, and I can get another \$1000 from the ATM just outside.”

He glanced over at the laptop hissing on the table. It was a couple of years old—Ali’s geekiness being more than Maryalice’s imagination—and probably could be replaced for seven or eight hundred bucks.

“Or I could fix it for you for free.”

He pulled a card out of his shirt pocket. *Al Dimona, Geek on Call*, it said. He handed it to Mike Hubbard, who squinted at it and then grimaced.

“Nah, just get me the money.”

Mike Hubbard may have been an asshole and a mean and nasty guy, but he wasn’t stupid. He was going to be ahead by a wide margin.

Ali thought about it for a minute. “Okay. But I want your old laptop.”

The other man hesitated for a minute, looking over at the drenched keyboard, and said, “No problem. It’s yours.”

* * * * *

The drive home was hell. Ali could transform himself, but he couldn’t transform the Batcycle into a nice, soft-riding sedan. Bouncing with that hard seat between his legs, bouncing over the old-fashioned,

bumpy country lane that led to the Batcave, hurt like hell. But he didn't let the pain slow him down. He had to get to Maryalice before Mike Hubbard had a chance to get into his car and drive back down to the cul-de-sac.

He pulled into the Batcave and sat for a minute, the vibrations still ringing in his head and teeth and especially his aching balls. Swinging his leg over the seat almost killed him, but he managed it with a groan. He stood, swaying, on the spotlessly clean concrete slab that held the Batcycle.

Then he walked over the driveway to the road that led to the cul-de-sac and pulled himself gingerly into the cab of the truck. He sighed in relief as his aching balls settled onto the soft calfskin seat. He turned the key in the ignition and adjusted the heating element in the seat to high.

He'd just wait until the seat warmed up. Her house was only a two minute ride away. Those thirty seconds couldn't make a difference, could they?

Ali concentrated for those thirty seconds on willing away the pain. It didn't work. Yet another of the small demon-to-human differences he hadn't counted on.

He closed his eyes and thought of Maryalice alone in her house.

"Time to go," he whispered to himself. "I can't wait any longer."

Chapter Five

Maryalice sat in front of her computer and shivered. She'd reached to turn it off when Mike's icon had disappeared right in the middle of a sentence—without coming back—and had stared at the screen for five full minutes waiting to see what would happen next. That blank screen scared her almost as much as the roses had.

And that reminded her...

She hurried into the kitchen to make sure she had actually ground up the roses in the garbage disposal. The damp circle where the vase had sat on the countertop remained but the roses were gone. Not even a lingering scent remained to remind her of their existence.

The house next door was still dark, with no lights on anywhere. In addition to worrying about Mike Hubbard, she began to worry about Ali.

Where was he?

Ali never left the cul-de-sac. He was even more of a stay at home guy than she was a stay at home gal. And she only left for the few hours she spent at the office every week and for the occasional play date, though she'd even slowed down on them lately.

First date sex was getting stale. She wasn't sure exactly why, but something had turned it from exciting to just another form of boring. And if there was one thing Maryalice hated more than anything else, it was boring sex.

She'd spent her entire grown-up life trying to keep her sex life exciting.

She read erotica of all kinds, from the most literary of literary, to the dirtiest of the dirty. And she loved it all.

She had dozens of sex toys, some made for use in company, but most of them made for single play. A small dresser next to her bed was filled with rubber and leather and small vials.

She had clitoral pleasure gel. She had pleasure enhanced warming lubricant. She had flavored oils and scented gels.

She had half of dozen Japanese cock rings with the tiniest battery hidden inside their clit stimulators. She had butt plugs—including vibrating ones—and butt beads, and every kind of vibrator imaginable. She had water-proof ones, black ones, green ones, big ones, and small ones. She had soft ones, and ones harder than any man's cock.

She had attachments for her vibrators—her favorite was a spiny pink cap that fit on almost every vibrator and, oh, did it feel good. She had The Rabbit and the Sinnflut and the Mini Vibe.

And as for bondage? She had all kinds of toys. Her favorite right now, though, was non-sticky duct tape. Right now she enjoyed the pink and the black, but thought she might go back for red.

She had handcuffs, ticklers, nipple clips, and vibrawhips. She had the tiniest of tiny whips. She'd thought about a sex sling but that was going a little too far. She enjoyed toys that added to her sex life, not ones that took it over.

And she'd enjoyed every one of her toys, mostly alone, but occasionally she put something interesting in her handbag when she was going out for a play date with the right kind of guy, the guy who gave off the *I'm willing to try anything if you are* kind of vibe.

Right now, though, that dresser kind of creeped her out. Because maybe her love for first date sex had somehow brought Mike Hubbard back into her life. Maybe she would have been better off with a full-time, long-term boyfriend, even if that did mean vanilla sex for the rest of her life.

Maryalice wasn't one to believe in karma, but even she could connect *these* dots.

But what was she going to do about it?

And where in hell was Ali?

His lights still weren't on, and his truck wasn't in the driveway. Had he gone away on holiday? No. He'd have asked her to water his lawn and see to his bird feeders.

She'd never met anyone more engrossed in birds than her next door neighbor. He loved them all, from crows and seagulls—the scavengers of the world—to hummingbirds and wrens and robins. He spent hours poring over his bird books. Maryalice knew this because she could see both his backyard and front porches from her house. Ali wasn't a guy to spend much time indoors.

In fact, though she knew he had a bedroom and a bathroom and a kitchen and a living room because his house was a twin to hers, she wasn't sure he ever used any of them. He had to use the kitchen, however. No one delivered out here, and he had to eat. And he had to use the bathroom. He was always spotlessly clean and smelled like...

Ali smelled like heaven in a weird, spicy kind of way.

But the living room and the bedroom? She wasn't sure about either of them. Whenever she looked out her window, she saw him. Didn't matter whether it was morning, noon, or the middle of the night. Ali was sitting on the front porch reading. Or in the back yard exercising. Or putting up another bird feeder. Or watering or trimming his lawn.

He had to sleep but she had no idea when he did it.

He *had* to sleep, didn't he?

Well, you couldn't prove it by her.

But he did eat. She saw him sometimes sitting on the front porch in the sunlight with a piece of fruit in his hand, studying it as if it were some foreign species. And this wasn't star fruit or dragon fruit or even a mango. She was talking about an apple or an orange or a peach.

The look on his face was bemused and enthralled, as if he'd never seen an apple before. He studied it with the same kind of concentration he brought to the birds in his yard and the flowers in his garden. He studied all of them as if he were an alien and this were a completely new world to him.

And maybe it is.

Maybe Ali whatever-his-last-name-was was from another place entirely. Maybe he'd just arrived in this small town from some big city on the other side of the world, a place where customs were different, where there were no gardens and no fresh fruit. Maybe he was from some war zone somewhere, and that was why he was so content on this tiny cul-de-sac with only one neighbor and no cars other than her red hybrid and his big black truck.

Because, no matter what else she knew about her neighbor, she knew how much he loved being here. It was so obvious no one could miss it. He glowed with contentment. And his house and garden reflected that glow.

Maryalice's house, on the other hand...

Well, it wasn't quite so glowing.

But if she *did* give up first date sex, she might have more time to compete with Ali in the home and garden sweepstakes. She smiled for the first time since she'd found the roses on her doorstep. She could see herself on the computer ordering magazine subscriptions to *House and Garden* and *Better Homes and Gardens* and *Architectural Digest*. She could see herself shopping for wallpaper and paint and new carpet. She could see herself getting a credit card from some big DIY store. She could even see herself using it. Maryalice just couldn't see herself painting or laying carpet or putting up wallpaper. As they say, *that's not my forte*.

But it seemed to be Ali's.

And that was definitely tempting. Because he hadn't been in her house any more than she'd been in his. Meaning, basically, never. Not a single step over the threshold under any circumstances.

Oh, she'd asked him more than once to come over for dinner or drinks or just to share a cup of coffee. "Come on over," she'd say, "I'll make you a cup of coffee. You can see the new coffeemaker I bought yesterday."

Or, "I'm cooking pies for a bake sale at work tomorrow. Why don't you come over and be my taste tester?"

"Thanks," he'd say, "but I'm busy over here. I'll just have a glass of iced tea on your porch."

The next time she asked, he'd say, "Not right now, but why don't you come over in half an hour? I'm just putting away my tools, and I'll make you a cup of coffee."

Renovations might be just the way to break the ice. Not that it was *exactly* ice, more like warm, unmanageable pudding. Their relationship was soft and warm and kind of squished right through her fingers when she tried to define it or change it.

Ali seemed perfectly comfortable with it just the way it was. They saw each other all day, every day, they talked for hours, but never got any further than that. She'd never even touched him. Not once. Not even the slightest accidental brushing of her arm against his or the touch of his fingers on hers when she passed him a cup or a glass.

And what could she say?

The more she saw of him, the more she wanted to touch him. All of him.

An engine roared up the road and Maryalice stepped back from the window, then ran to the door to make sure it was locked. She checked the windows in the front, and then hurried to the back door to check that lock as well. Unnecessarily, because it was Ali's truck coming down the hill to land in his driveway.

No locked doors in this cul-de-sac. Only the two of them lived here, and Ali was *always* home. And he could, she'd decided, be a pretty scary guy if he wanted to be. Except today, of course. He hadn't been home today.

The one day she'd needed him.

She stepped out onto the porch and watched the truck pull into the driveway next door. There was something wrong with it, though it took her a while to figure it out. There was bird dung on the windshield and actual mud on the mudflaps. The paint was dimmed by road dust.

When Ali stepped out, he hesitated before walking toward his porch. He didn't turn toward her, didn't raise a hand in greeting. For the first time since the day they'd met, Ali ignored her presence.

Maryalice felt like she was back in high school and her best friend had walked past in the hallway to hug another, more beautiful, more

talented, more popular girl.
She felt like shit.

* * * * *

Ali struggled to walk normally. He knew he was unsuccessful but as long as Maryalice didn't follow him into his yard, he would be okay.

He wanted to get onto his porch and lie down in the upholstered lounge chair and meditate the pain away. For that, he needed peace and quiet.

Maryalice was exactly the opposite of that for him. He couldn't be around her without wanting her and, even now, with his balls aching and his stomach on the verge of explosion, seeing her watching him made his cock quiver.

He wanted her, wanted her like he'd never wanted anything else.

But he couldn't have her. Not now, that was for damn sure. And not ever.

If his brothers found him, if they found him with a *human* woman, they'd sew open his eyes, sit him down and then kill her. Slowly and painfully. While he watched. It's what he would have done once himself.

And it didn't matter which of his brothers—Reza, Arash, Armin, any of them really—had become the lord of the demons. Each one of them would do as he would have done. And each one of them would enjoy every minute of the torture.

He wasn't sure what they'd do with him. No demon had ever left before, so there was no precedent. But he was sure it would be nasty.

Ali had a bigger problem than Mike Hubbard when it came to protecting Maryalice. Much bigger. The size of a full-grown demon bigger.

* * * * *

Ali sat down on his porch and seemed to settle into the lounge chair as if every bone in his body ached. Maryalice had never seen him so

still and silent before, and she wasn't sure what to do. But she knew she couldn't leave him like that.

So she squared her shoulders and walked across her lawn, her driveway, and his driveway, then up his sidewalk with its perfectly trimmed edges and perfectly aligned and cleaned stone work.

She paused for a minute at the bottom of the stairs, but he didn't speak, didn't tell her to stop, so she walked right up those stairs and sat in the chair next to him. Her chair. The one she always sat in. And that made her a little more comfortable.

"Ali?"

No movement. No answer.

But she could see his chest moving as he breathed deeply, in and deep out, as if he were meditating. She waited until his breathing seemed a little more comfortable before she tried again.

"Ali?"

His eyes opened, and he settled his gaze on her face. His lips moved in what she thought he meant to be a smile, although it appeared closer to a grimace.

"Are you okay?"

He still didn't speak, but he nodded his head slightly and then closed his eyes again.

"You're not okay. Can I get you anything?"

He didn't answer, and she wasn't sure what to do. So she did what she had always done with Ali, right from the beginning, when he wouldn't talk to her at all.

The first day he moved in, she'd wandered over to say hello and to get to know her only neighbor. He didn't say much, although he did volunteer his name. But Maryalice was nothing if not stubborn. She wandered over every single day, sometimes two or three times a day.

And she asked questions. She asked about his house, about his truck, about his job. She asked why he had moved into *this* house. She asked what he was going to do about the disaster that was his yard. She asked where he came from. She asked about his family.

What she learned from those early months was that Ali wasn't

really a talker, or at least he hadn't been back then. And even now, when something was bothering him or he didn't know the answer, he just shut up. Pretty much completely.

So she sat in her chair and she did what she'd learned to do with him. She asked questions, and she kept asking them because she knew that when she finally asked the right question he would answer.

"Where were you today?"

No answer.

"Do you need anything?"

No answer, though she thought there might be a slight lightening of his expression, the movement that meant she was getting warm. *Ah, he does need something but the question's too vague.*

"Would you like a glass of water?"

Not quite right, a slight twitch of his eyebrow meant she was closer. And she knew if she brought him a glass of water he'd drink it.

"An aspirin?"

A slight nod, though she could tell from the expression on his face that she'd still only gotten part of it.

"How about a heating pad?" That was a total stab in the dark. Why would he need a heating pad?

"Please," he said, his voice not exactly shaky, but sounding as if it came out of a part of his body that didn't usually participate in the act of speaking.

For the first time in their friendship, Maryalice touched him. She stood up, leaned over, and put her hand on his shoulder. Just for a moment. He was burning up. His temperature was at least ten degrees hotter than it should be.

"You need an ice pack instead of a heating pad," she said. "It'll feel better on your hot skin."

He nodded and leaned his head over to rest on her hand.

Maryalice couldn't move. She was locked to the porch floor as if someone had glued her shoes to the wooden beams. A flash of heat raced through her from her toes to her vagina, and then up to her breasts and on to her lips.

She bent her head to his temple and kissed him, lightly, and then said, just as lightly, "I'll be back in a minute. Don't move." The last, she thought, was probably unnecessary. She wasn't sure he *could* move.

She hurried into his house, through the living room she'd thought she'd never see, past an absolutely perfectly decorated bedroom, and into the bathroom. The tiles were cream shot with an amazing copper, and the shower was big enough for three people—though right now she would be happy with just her and Ali.

Maryalice hesitated before she opened the medicine cabinet. That was a bit too much like prying, but she needed the aspirin. She found a small bottle on the top shelf and, trying not to look at anything else, grabbed it and slammed the cabinet shut.

Then she went into the kitchen. It looked like it had been designed by Martha Stewart or someone on *Home and Garden Television*. It was gorgeous, reminding her of the kitchen she'd always wanted. In fact, it *was* the kitchen she'd always wanted. The *exact* kitchen she'd always wanted. The kitchen she'd designed on her computer and printed out and put in her dream book.

The one she kept in the drawer of the table on her front porch.

She shook her head in disbelief and opened the freezer looking for frozen peas, ignoring the piles of steak and other meat, ignoring the fact that Ali had way more food in his fridge than she had in hers.

There they were. Funny how everyone, whether they cooked or not, whether they ate at home or not, always had frozen peas in their freezer. Even Maryalice had frozen peas in her freezer, and she *never* ate peas. She hated them. Maybe subconsciously everyone kept them for moments like these.

She opened the cupboard above the sink and found the glasses right where she kept hers. She grabbed cold water, a tea towel, the aspirin, and hurried back out to the porch.

She and Ali had a whole lot to talk about.

Later.

Chapter Six

Maryalice came back out onto the porch with her hands full and her mouth shut. Ali usually loved listening to her no matter what she was saying—or asking—but not today. Not right this minute.

Because he wasn't sure he would be able to resist her questions. He was too tired and sore to maintain his usual equanimity with her around, too tired and sore to ignore the pull of attraction he felt for her, too tired and sore to do anything more than take the aspirin—did it work on demons? He didn't know. The bottle was unopened.

Just one more of the human things he did by rote, did because Maryalice or a magazine or the television set told him that's what humans did. They had aspirin in their medicine cabinet and frozen peas in the freezer compartment of their fridge.

They mowed their lawns and trimmed their hedges.

They shaved every morning, and they went to work.

Or some of them, like Maryalice and Ali, worked from home. *She* went into the office for a few hours every week. He never left the cul-de-sac. At least as himself. And never, until today, when Maryalice could see him do so. But he was pretty good at pretending to be a computer geek, even if he had to say so himself.

And he did have to say so himself. He didn't have any clients. The only client for *Al Dimona, Geek on Call*, was himself. He spent the time while Maryalice was sleeping or otherwise occupied at her house surfing the net.

And every day he felt himself becoming more human. Taking aspirin, he felt, was a very big step in his quest for true humanness. But the emotions—pain and fear and love—were even bigger steps.

Lust—that he was used to, though the strength of the lust he felt for Maryalice was unprecedented in his experience. And that was probably because he didn't just lust after her body. He loved her.

He'd admitted that to himself not too long after they'd first met. He had been out in his front yard dazed by the sharp delineation between her yard and his. Her grass was cut, while his came up to his knees. She had flowers, and he had weeds.

Her garden, like her house, looked cared for. His house, like his garden, looked neglected.

And he had had absolutely no idea how to transform his garden into hers and even less of an idea where to begin to transform his demon self into a human being.

Maryalice had helped him with both.

Maryalice was the only reason he was still here. If not for her, Ali was sure he'd have figured out a way to kill a supposedly indestructible, immortal demon. Being human wasn't fun, and it wasn't easy—at least until Maryalice came along.

Now he wouldn't give it up, not for anything.

Not even to get rid of the worst pain he'd ever experienced.

So he waited for her on the lounge on the front porch and wondered what he could tell her. What could he say to her that would make his condition seem at least reasonable? He had no frigging idea.

And Mike Hubbard? What about him?

He could tell Maryalice he'd seen someone on her porch earlier and, just by coincidence, had run into him at a bar in town. Nope. Especially as he hadn't been off the cul-de-sac—at least to her knowledge—since the day they'd met. He wouldn't blame her for finding that story suspicious.

But he had to find a way to explain himself.

"Ali? I've brought you some aspirin." She held out her right hand containing two white pills, and her left hand waited with a glass of water. "Take these."

He took the pills and popped them into his mouth. He didn't need... Wait. They tasted like the most bitter of roots. And they were all dry and crumbly on his tongue. He grabbed for the glass of water and drank it down in one swallow.

It didn't help.

He coughed and handed the glass back to Maryalice, gesturing for another. He coughed again, the bitterness seeping into his tongue. The crumbs, bitter and scratchy, were caught like burrs in his throat. He couldn't stop coughing.

She came back and handed him another glass of water, stooping to kneel beside the lounge chair and rubbing her hand across his back.

"Take it easy. Aspirin go down the wrong way sometimes, and you just have to wait it out."

Maryalice handed Ali the bag of frozen peas. He looked at them, then at her, and then back at the bag of peas. He didn't say it, but it was obvious what he was thinking. *What in hell do I do with these?*

She would have thought a guy like Ali would know all about the recuperative effects of a bag of frozen peas, spending so many hours training hard. But once again it was as if he'd come from a whole other world, where frozen peas didn't exist or at least weren't used for headaches or sore muscles.

"You put it where you hurt," she pointed out. "On your head or your black eye or your sore muscles. It takes the pain away."

He looked at her as if she were stark raving mad but all he said

was, "Turn around."

And she did.

She heard a moan of relief, then the sounds of his body rustling in the chair, presumably trying to get comfortable.

"I need a towel," he whispered. "They're in the linen closet."

She laughed inside at the idea of a man, any man, yet particularly Ali, knowing *and* calling a linen closet by its proper name but she went inside and came back out with a copper-colored bath towel, an exact match to the streaks in the bathroom tiles.

Ali had turned off the porch lights, and all she could see was the dark shadow of the chairs and his body lying in one of them. She reached for the switch.

"Don't turn on the light. It hurts my eyes."

She sat on the lounge, her leg up tight against his, and handed him another two aspirin. "You should take these as well. You bought baby aspirin and it's not strong enough. Here's some more water."

He looked at the aspirin tablets now in his hand as if they were going to bite him. Maryalice had to laugh. Men were such babies. She could remember her dad looking at aspirin with exactly the same expression on his face.

"Swallow it fast," she said. "Don't let them dissolve on your tongue."

He grimaced and complied.

Ali wanted to smile but it hurt too much. He didn't have a fever. He'd just never let Maryalice get close enough before to sense his much higher body temperature. Luckily, now that she had detected the heat, she simply thought he was sick.

He *was* sick. He felt nauseous and wasn't sure he could bear any pressure at all on his groin, but the idea of the ice cold peas tempted him. He had taken the bag from Maryalice and then didn't know what to do.

Their relationship had never been in the slightest bit sensual, except of course in *his* head. And *his* cock. But she'd never once looked at him with any sort of sexual reaction and he didn't think he could press the ice pack to his groin with her sitting there.

"What?" Her voice was wearing its usual, *god, Ali, what's wrong with you now?* tone and it made him laugh. This time, right out loud. "Ali? What's so funny?"

The pain and nausea overwhelmed his usual restraint.

"You are," he replied. "You talk to me as if I'm a child. I assure you, I'm very far from being a child."

He almost spit out the end of that sentence. *I'm almost five hundred years old.* Even in demon years, he was an adult. More than an adult. He was the fucking lord of the demons. Or he used to be.

Could be again, he supposed, if he wanted to go back and fight whichever of his brothers had succeeded in winning the throne.

Nope. Definitely didn't want to go there or do that.

The disgruntled look on Maryalice's face made him laugh again and gave him the courage he needed to gingerly place the bag of peas on his groin. He groaned.

Her hand settled on his thigh. "Wait it out," she said. "It takes a few minutes for the cold to penetrate and start easing the pain."

He could sense her almost unbearable curiosity. This close, he could hear her much more clearly, though still not exact thoughts. She wanted to ask what had happened. But more than that, she wanted to know what had taken him from the cul-de-sac. What had changed to make him do something he'd never done before? Something he'd tried desperately to avoid doing?

He didn't know what to tell her, but knew he had to tell her something. Maryalice was just like the cougar in the forest behind his fence. That cat was always sniffing around, wanting to know who and what he was. Ali's scent was different than the humans who had wandered into the cougar's path, and he knew the animal wanted to find out why. He figured one day he'd take the time to tell him. Not now, though. He had to deal with Maryalice.

"Someone was on your porch this evening. Someone who didn't belong there." He figured he'd start there, and that maybe it would be enough.

"A man?"

"Yes. He dropped a box on your porch and then disappeared around the corner of the house. You picked up the box, and I followed him."

"Why?" Her face was taut with fear. She'd obviously expected him to say something else, and the man on the porch scared her.

She moved closer to him, their legs touching all the way from hip to toes. Ali sighed and settled more deeply into the lounge chair. *In for a penny, in for a pound.* He'd heard that saying in some old movie and he'd liked it, the same way he liked so many of the aphorisms used by humans.

This was the first time he'd had a chance to use any of them, and he wished he could use it out loud. Still, he followed its urging and pulled Maryalice down until she rested next to him, her head just inches from the shoulder that ached for the weight of her.

A tiny noise came from her mouth, a sigh to match his. Her breath, sweet as raspberries—Ali's favorite human food—and as warm as a summer's breeze, wafted over his lips. He licked them, gathering in every molecule of her.

The peas were doing their job. His groin had stopped aching with pain and started aching with Maryalice's nearness. Getting this close to her was *not* a good idea.

But he couldn't seem to care.

Maryalice's curiosity had dimmed the minute Ali had pulled her onto the lounge beside him. It had been replaced by the lust she'd been feeling for him for months, the lust she'd been adamantly denying.

She couldn't do that anymore.

And neither could he.

The bag of peas was swept aside by a big, hot hand. Maryalice couldn't help but see why he'd moved it, though she suspected if he'd left it there for another moment, it would have fallen off on its own. The bulge was huge, and even in the darkness of the porch, she could see it pulsing.

Don't moan, she told herself, it's embarrassing. And maybe that bulge isn't for you. Maybe he's turned on by ice.

But the way he stroked her hair and her shoulder told her his burgeoning cock was all hers. Now what?

Did she make the first move? Or did she wait?

She was stumped. She was so used to telling Ali what to do. She'd been doing it for two years, treating him as if he were from another planet. And for all she knew, he was. His accent wasn't one she'd ever heard before, and his lack of knowledge about the simplest things... Well, if he wasn't from another planet, he was definitely from another country.

Maryalice realized the decision was already made for her. Ali's hands had moved from her hair and her shoulder to her arm, stroking the skin from shoulder to wrist with definitely sexual intentions—confirmed by the further growth of the bulge in his jeans. She refused to wait any longer.

Maryalice threw herself into the action, rolling over until she was face to face, body to body, with Ali. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled his face toward her.

"Kiss me," she whispered.

Her world exploded. The man kissed like he wanted to devour her. Not just her lips, but her entire being. This was a first date kiss of Oscar quality and she was just lying there, completely engrossed in his lips, in the way his hands touched her arms, the way he stroked her back, always stopping just short of where she wanted those hands to be.

Time to reciprocate.

Maryalice traced the whorls of his earlobes, the tightly wound tendons in his neck, then moved to the muscles in his shoulders. Her fingers wandered across the neck of his T-shirt and delved inside to the skin she'd been craving for months.

He was everything she'd expected and more. His soft skin masked the hardest of muscles, the kind developed over years of working out. Long and lean and supple, they tempted her in ways she'd never imagined.

She gave in to the temptation.

Chapter Seven

Ali couldn't believe it. He'd promised himself he wouldn't do this, wouldn't take the chance he would hurt Maryalice or that, even worse, his brothers would find him and go after her to punish him.

Yet here he was, his arms wrapped around her, his tongue in her mouth, and their legs tangled together. Here he was, his cock throbbing against her belly, and all that pain gone, vanished as if by magic.

And why hadn't he thought of that himself? Demons, even ex-demons learning to be human beings, had the power of transformation. He could have transformed the pain, made it disappear, turned it into something else, or just made his body ignore it. Duh. He had plenty of options. He hoped next time he'd remember them.

Maryalice and Mike Hubbard had turned him into an idiot. Mostly Maryalice, he thought. Every time he thought about her, he swore he lost brain cells. And every time he thought about her and Mike Hubbard and those creepy flowers, his anger caused him to lose even more brain cells.

He had to stop this. Right now. Before it was too late.

"Maryalice."

She wriggled herself closer and rested her head on his shoulder.

"Hmm?"

"Maryalice." He tried again, tugging at the arm underneath her so he could move away.

"Ali."

Her voice saying his name purred into his chest, sending shivers of

heat through him. She never spoke to the men in the hotels this way. Ali wondered what that meant, then realized he didn't care. It was obvious she was more than happy to be right where she was. And if he was lucky, she'd be happy to stay there.

"Maryalice." This time he sighed her name and listened with more than his ears. She really was purring, her breasts rubbing against his chest each time she exhaled, her heart pumping hot blood through her veins, blood that to his demon sight appeared to sparkle with light.

He lifted his hand and watched the blood in his veins—his once-demon blood—echo hers, moving quickly, throwing off a light he'd never seen before.

Ali was *so* done.

Whatever he'd told himself about protecting Maryalice, about not getting involved, was over. He *was* involved, and he'd just have to protect her from the inside. He smiled. This was going to be fun.

Maryalice rested her head against Ali's chest, listening to the light, rapid beating of his heart. She wanted to breathe with him but his chest moved so slowly she feared she'd faint if she did.

Fast heart, slow breath.

Obviously some after-effect of all that martial arts training. She wondered what other feats of control were part of his repertoire. From the tightening of his arms around her shoulders and the pulsing of his cock against her belly, she was pretty sure she was going to find out.

And soon.

She could hardly wait.

"Ali," she raised herself from his chest and purred into his ear. "Maybe we should go inside."

His muscles tensed and he said, "You're right. It might not be safe out here."

"What do you mean?"

What she wanted to say was, *How do you know?* but she wasn't sure he did. Wasn't sure she wanted to know that Mike Hubbard had inflicted that sort of pain on sweet, shy Ali.

"You know exactly what I mean, and we're going to talk about

your stalker. But right now..."

He draped her arms over his shoulders, put one arm around her back and slid the other beneath her knees. Then he stood up from the lounge with her.

"Right now, we're going inside. And we're going inside *my* place where it's safe."

Maryalice didn't care where they went as long as it was close. Because she wanted to get naked with this man. *Now*.

He carried her through the front door, slamming it shut with a kick of his heel, then turned to press a single button on the security panel. The air around her changed, as if she'd been tucked into a bubble, and she forgot everything except Ali.

He had her wrapped in his arms as if she were the most precious thing in the world to him. His lips rested on her forehead as he strode through the rooms that mirrored her house in only their layout. He wasn't even breathing heavily as he turned into the master bedroom at the far end of the hallway.

He kicked that door shut as well and touched another button on another security panel. Maryalice would have to ask him about his security obsession. Later.

Much later.

Ali couldn't believe *she* was here, in the house he'd stolen from her dream book. He'd bought the furniture she craved, painted the walls the colors she'd imagined, done everything possible to make his house look exactly like the house she dreamed about. Hoping, he thought now, that when she saw it she'd want him as much as she wanted the house.

But she didn't look away from his face, gazing up into his eyes as if the sun shone in them. He shook his head in bemusement.

"Maryalice." He wasn't sure he could say more than her name but he had to. "Are you sure about this?"

"Ali, you're my best friend. Hell, you're my only friend. And I've wanted you since... since *forever*. Of course I'm sure. And if you don't let me do something about this..." She pointed at the bulge in his jeans. "I'm going to spit."

He hesitated.

"Aren't you sure?" The fear on her face was enough to break his heart, his now-human heart.

"You are my best friend. My only friend. And you're the woman I've wanted since I can remember. But my life..." He didn't know how to continue.

"My life, too," she said. "But will it make any difference to *this* moment knowing the mess our lives are outside of this cul-de-sac? We'll have plenty of time to talk about that. About our pasts, about who we *used* to be. Later."

Ali knew she was right. But he was scared. Scared that his brothers would somehow find him. Scared that Maryalice would soon find herself in the middle of a fight she knew nothing about and didn't deserve.

But she kissed him, and he stopped worrying about anything except getting his hands on her beautiful body and his cock into her pretty as hell pussy.

Everything else could wait.

Chapter Eight

Ali wasn't sure where to start. He'd watched Maryalice on her sex trips, taking note of what she liked and what she didn't. He'd dreamed of how *he* would be better than all of those men put together. He'd fantasized about this moment every night since he'd first met Maryalice, and now he had no idea what to do.

But Maryalice did. He didn't think it was because she was more experienced—she wasn't—or that she was more eager. She couldn't be. It was because she was less discombobulated—one of *her* favorite words—by this extreme shift in their relationship. And although she was scared—he could feel the faint taste of fear on her lips—she wasn't scared into immobility. Only he was.

So he followed her lead, just as he'd always done.

She leaned into him, and he leaned back until they were as close as two beings could be. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and he did the same, trapping her within his embrace.

She lifted her face to his, and he lowered his to meet it. Their lips met, softly at first, as they explored each other. Her lips tasted of honey and raspberries. He lost himself in her, inhaling her essence as he deepened the kiss.

He opened his mouth and grabbed her bottom lip with his teeth, rolling it between his lips and teeth until she moaned. And then he began to nibble until her moans became whimpers of delight.

Their tongues met in a tangle. First in her mouth, then in his as she

followed his lead. The moans were now his as she took his lower lip between her teeth and bit down. *She* had no hesitation. She knew exactly what she wanted and didn't worry about whether or not he'd like it.

The last vestige of restraint left his body, and he released all of his love and lust and urges from the chains he'd used to hold them.

The bed. He had to get her on the bed. He picked her up again, took a few steps across the bedroom, and dropped her right in the middle of the king-sized bed. He vanished his clothes and hers—he didn't care if she saw him do it—and fell down on top of her.

Curiosity mingled with passion in Maryalice's eyes, and he knew he'd have some serious explaining to do once they caught their breath. But for now, he focused on the passion.

Maryalice had always known there was something odd about Ali, and his magic trick with their clothes only confirmed it. But right now she didn't care about anything other than getting her hands and lips and teeth on his beautiful body. It felt like molten gold against her. Tan and buff, steel sheathed in silken soft skin.

She pushed at him until he rolled off her and she followed, grabbing at his shoulders and pushing him flat on his back. She centered her pussy over his cock and touched down. The heat was intense as she stroked him with her damp cunt, moving slowly from front to back. He clenched his teeth tight, as if forcing himself to stay still.

She reinforced that with an order. "Don't move. I want to get to know your body."

He grunted from between his clenched teeth. She took that as a *yes* and carried on with her exploration. Already her vagina was beginning to spasm. She wouldn't be able to resist impaling herself on his cock if she didn't turn to something else. She slowed the stroking and leaned forward until her nipples touched his chest.

The hair there, crisp and black with a few streaks of gray, had just the right amount of abrasiveness, and she rubbed herself against him like a cat. The sensation almost overwhelmed her and the spasms intensified. She wasn't going to come without him inside of her, but she wanted to touch every inch of him.

She didn't know what to do, what to choose. What if this was their only time? What if they never did this again? She didn't want to miss a thing.

"I don't think I can wait," she whispered, dropping her forehead to his.

"You'll wait," Ali replied. His plans did *not* involve the *wham bam, thank you, ma'am* she so often seemed to favor. Good thing he retained some small semblance of control.

He flipped her onto her back and sat on his heels, exploring her with his eyes.

Marylalice was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. Her hair was soft and curly against her head, and her eyes were the most brilliant shade of green. They were now hooded and sultry. He'd tried to mimic that green in the plants he'd bought and nurtured but nothing in nature even came close.

And her body? One of the things he'd found surfing the net was Mark Harden's *Artchive*, and he'd spend hundreds of hours exploring the art of the world, from Basquiat to Rembrandt, from Winslow Homer to Ansel Adams, from Emily Carr to Georgia O'Keefe. Maryalice was more graceful than the ballerinas of Toulouse-Lautrec, more voluptuous than the woman of Gauguin, more beautiful than the Mona Lisa.

He ran his hands over her face, savoring the sensation of her breath on his palms, the quick nip of her teeth as his fingers passed over her mouth. He leaned down and breathed her in, letting her essence enter his body and forcing his into her, exchanging their life's breath.

She was *his*, not just because of this exchange, but because of the past two years, because of the new life she'd taught him to live. He knew now that what he had seen as an accident—his desire to try a different life—was much more than that. It was something that had been pre-ordained.

He didn't know who or what had done so. What he did know was that his demon brothers were going to get the surprise of their long lives just as soon as he could figure out exactly how to engineer a similar accident for each of them.

Maryalice breathed Ali's sweet breath and knew her life had changed forever. No more play dates, no more first dates, no more sex with strangers. This man, this odd, sweet man full of contradictions, was the one for her. Forever.

She kissed him with all the love and tenderness she could muster. She *would* be brave enough to tell him how she felt. She *would*, for the first time since Mike Hubbard, surrender to a man.

"I love you." She whispered the words into his mouth and felt the jolt run through him as he deciphered them. She had no idea what he would do, how he would respond, but she'd known the minute he'd first kissed her that she had no option but to strip herself bare—in more ways than one—before him.

"I worship you, Maryalice. With every bone in my body, with every year of my existence, with every good thing I've ever done, with all that I am. I love you and give up to you every evil thing in my past. I hope you can forgive me for who I've been and what I've done."

"Ali," she whispered again. "Whatever you did before you arrived on this cul-de-sac is irrelevant."

He laughed, and she raised her head.

"You have no idea," he said, "and I promise I'll tell you later. But right now? I have other plans for my mouth."

He ducked his head and began a slow, detailed, drugging exploration of every inch of her body. Maryalice tried not to squirm but every inch he touched came to life, blossoming beneath his tongue and his fingers. As if each new place he explored were a blade of grass springing from the earth at the beginning of spring, not in slow motion, but in fast forward.

She heard moaning and knew it was hers, knew it was a sound she'd never made before, not with any of her play dates, not even with the toys in the dresser beside her bed.

His tongue laved the tops of her breasts, lingering on her areolas but not touching her nipples which were puckered and hot for him. She shifted, just slightly, and his head stilled as she forced her nipple into his mouth. He bit down, just hard enough to send a burst of moisture from

her pussy.

"Oh, Ali," she cried.

He suckled her, moving from one breast to the other, while she begged him not to stop. She was close, so close. Maryalice knew she'd come if he didn't stop.

He did.

Ali wanted Maryalice to lose herself completely in their love-making, to lose herself in a way he'd never seen her do, not even once in all the times he'd stood in the room next to her play dates. He wanted to hear her beg him for more.

He wanted her to want only him. No other man. Not ever.

And he knew what she liked.

So he moved down to her belly. Most men ignored the parts of her body that, to them, weren't directly related to the sexual experience. Ali wouldn't make that mistake.

He nipped at the slight curve of her belly, thrust his tongue into her navel, licked and sucked and nuzzled every inch of that luscious, warm skin. She wriggled beneath him, but his weight kept her where he wanted her.

"Hurry," she pleaded. "I can't wait."

He said nothing as he settled between her legs, moving them apart with his shoulders until he could reach the tender skin at the tops of her thighs. A bite hard enough to leave a mark had her squealing and shifting beneath him, trying to get his mouth where she wanted it.

He moved farther down her body, lifting her legs so he could suckle on the backs of her knees. He brought the soles of her tiny feet to her mouth and nipped at the mounds beneath her toes, then sucked each toe into his mouth, working at it until he could smell her arousal.

She smelled like raspberries and freshly mown grass. She smelled like new life. She was *his* new life.

He rolled her over and began the exploration again. Starting with her calves, he molded the muscles beneath the skin with his hands while his tongue worshipped every inch of her tanned, supple legs.

When he reached the perfect curves of her ass, he lingered. He'd

watched her for months bending over in her garden to nurture the hundreds of plants there and each time he'd dreamed of this moment. He caressed her cheeks, rolling them beneath his hands, taking small and then bigger nips of her skin.

Each time his teeth touched her, she held her breath as if waiting for the next burst of sharpness.

"You like this?" he asked, though he didn't need to. He'd been using his demon senses to monitor her reactions. It was clear to him that she was enjoying every single thing he did to her. He knew when to slow down, when to speed up, when to apply more pressure, when to back off.

He knew, though, that he was pretty close to the stage where he would no longer be able to consider only her needs. His cock was throbbing. He was desperate to get inside her, but he was going to make damn sure she had the ride of her life with him. And that meant just a few more minutes of torture for him.

He placed his hands beneath the curves of her ass and lifted her to his mouth.

Maryalice had been ready to explode for what felt forever but when he started on her ass, she wasn't sure she could stop herself. The trouble was that she wanted that gorgeous cock inside of her before she came, not after. She just wasn't sure that Ali's plan—and he *definitely* had a plan—was going to allow her that pleasure.

She wasn't, never had been, a woman who enjoyed multiple orgasms. She wanted her one orgasm, the one Ali was making sure eluded her until he was ready, to be with him.

"Ali."

She squirmed out from under him though giving up his hands and mouth on her just about killed her.

"I want to come with you inside me," she said. "I only ever get once chance, and I want you with me."

Ali laughed, an almost sinister laugh that sent thrills right down into her bones. "You're going to have way more than one chance tonight," he said. "I'll make sure of that."

Maryalice shrugged. She hadn't noticed his stubbornness before,

but she wasn't stupid. Ali would do what he would do and she would enjoy every minute of it, even if it meant she'd have to wait until tomorrow—and there would be plenty of tomorrows to come, if she had her way—to have him inside of her at exactly the right moment.

She pushed him down onto the bed and straddled his perfect butt.

"My turn," she said.

"Our turn," he replied and whisked her off him with the ease of a man swatting away a fly.

He had her under him and wrapped in his arms before she could say a word.

"I've been thinking about this for months, Maryalice, and we're going to do this together, okay?"

He hesitated, and Maryalice wondered why. The shy, sweet Ali she thought she knew had somehow transformed into a man who knew exactly what he wanted and was ruthless—and smart—enough to get it. She waited.

"We'll only have one first date, and I want this to be different from all the others."

Maryalice stifled the squeal in her throat and waited for the rest of his explanation. It was easy to do while he stroked her back and shoulders, while his cock nestled against her cunt, all hot and throbbing and driving her insane. Patience, she thought, you have to have patience.

"I know what you do in the evenings," he said. "Another one of the things I'll explain later, if you'll wait."

"I'll wait for the explanation," she said, "but I won't wait for *this*."

And she thrust her hips up as hard and as fast as she could. Oh, she thought. *Finally*. That beautiful thick cock seated itself within her as if it belonged there, as if it were coming home. It reached right to her cervix and, without a single movement from either of them, the spasms began.

She stopped breathing.

She waited for him to move, waited for him to do what any other man would have done. She should have known better. Ali *never* did what she expected, never did what any other man would do.

He reached down to where her hands rested on the curve of his

butt and took them into his. He lifted them to his face and kissed each knuckle, each finger and finger tip, slowly, one after another, all without moving a single muscle below his waist.

He smiled at her and she caught the sheen of tears in his deep blue eyes, tears that echoed the ones in hers.

"I love you, Maryalice. I'll love you forever."

She let the tears fall, and he licked them from her eyelashes and her cheeks with the lightest touch of his tongue on her face. When he lifted his head, his cheeky grin seemed to say *no more waiting, babe, hang on for the ride of your life*.

Her pussy fluttered. His cock was moving, growing longer, growing thicker, bumping tight against the walls of her vagina, brushing every sensitive spot from front to back, but his hips hadn't moved at all.

He put her hands on his shoulders and then released them, his own traveling down until they once again grasped the curve of her butt. He lifted her, just a few inches from the bed, and that was all it took.

The flutter became an explosion.

Ali grunted and finally began to move, his cock sliding in and out of her, first slowly, and then, once she'd begun to breathe again, more quickly. She gasped. The single orgasm she'd expected was over but her pussy didn't get it.

His hot cock pistoned into her and, with each stroke, her cunt reacted. Maryalice held her breath. *Could it possibly...*

It could.

Her nails dug holes in his shoulders, and Ali groaned. She had to come again. And again. Everything depended on her knowing that *he* was different from her play dates. But those nails in his flesh, those groans in his ear, that pretty as hell pussy spasming around his desperate cock, made it almost impossible for him to restrain himself. But Ali hadn't been lord of the demons for nothing.

He rotated his hips and was rewarded by a scream and the pulsing of her around his straining cock. He took one stroke, so deep he thought he might touch her heart, and then let go.

Heaven.

Chapter Nine

The next morning Maryalice rolled over in Ali's bed—now she knew why other women were always talking about how much they loved sleepovers—to find him leaning on his elbow watching her.

"Morning, beautiful," he said, a huge smile on his face. "Are you hungry?" He said it in such a suggestive manner, her pussy clenched and moisture pooled on her thighs.

"Starving." She tried to duplicate his tone and knew she'd succeeded when his eyes became hooded and his smile disappeared.

"No, really," she laughed. "I'm starving. I could eat a horse."

"Horse? I've never seen that kind of meat at the store."

Once again, Ali's oddity struck her, this time reminding her of all sorts of things she'd been willing to ignore last night. This morning was an altogether different matter. Breakfast first, though.

"It's an expression. Means I'm so hungry I could eat the most humongous breakfast going. Come on over to my place. I've got plenty of food for both of us." She hoped that was true.

She did have cereal, three or four kinds, including Cap'n Crunch, and knowing Ali's proclivity for sweet things, that would probably be enough. But she'd add toast—she was pretty sure there was some not-too-old bread in the freezer—and some orange juice and coffee.

That would have to be enough.

She blew Ali a kiss, got off the bed, and searched for her clothes. She found her panties at the foot of the bed and her bra and T-shirt near

the door. Her jeans, though, seemed to be permanently missing.

Ali was looking for his clothes on the other side of the room.

Something thwacked her on the back of her head, and she turned to find her jeans on the floor behind her. "Where were they?"

"Tangled with mine underneath the bed." He held up his jeans and one of her sandals. "Couldn't find the other one, though."

She lifted up the bedskirt and found both it and Ali's sneakers. She waited until he turned around and then tossed them at him, missing him with one but striking him right in the middle of his back with the other.

She grabbed her sandals and ran out the front door and across the dew-damp grass to her front porch where she stopped with a lurch. Another gold foil box sat half inside the door and half out, holding it open. She hyperventilated, bending over to get a breath. Just one.

A big, warm hand settled on the small of her back.

"It's okay, love. It's going to be okay. Sit down." Ali led her over to the Adirondack chair in the corner of the porch and eased her down. "Wait here."

She nodded. She wasn't going in that house. *He* could be in there. And she wasn't opening the box, either. No more blood red roses for her.

Ali picked up the box, shook it a little. Felt like more flowers to him, and he would have smelled anything truly gross long before now. He placed the box on the table right inside the door. If that Mike Hubbard was in the house, he wanted to have both hands free.

He checked the living room. No one. The dining room. No one, but he was pretty sure Maryalice wouldn't have left the chairs all higgledy-piggledy—another one of the odd phrases he'd learned from her. Mike Hubbard had been in this room. He could smell him.

His temperature rose, higher and higher, the heat making the few clothes he was wearing almost unbearable. And that made him even angrier. Ali admonished his demon self. *Maryalice is right outside. Be careful what you do.* He didn't want her to find out the truth about him this way. He wanted to tell her over a lovely dinner, with a bottle of wine, or two, inside her.

He was pretty sure he wasn't going to have that luxury.

Someone was in Maryalice's office. He could hear the clicking of computer keys and the quick, shallow breaths of someone in a hurry.

Mike Hubbard.

Now what? Ali knew the law, he'd watched enough cop shows on television to know what would happen if he killed the man, or, perhaps, what would happen if he killed him and the body was never found. He reached out with his demon sense and tickled at the hunger mind of the grizzly bear that lived in the forest behind him. Bears knew only two ways to be, hungry or asleep.

Ali wanted this mama bear to be hungry, and he wanted her cubs to stay right where they were. He could manage that.

The mama bear would be a few minutes getting into range, leaving a swath of forest between her and her cubs, and he would be a few minutes dealing with Mike Hubbard. Then he'd carry him over to that particular swath of forest, wake him up, and get mama grizzly headed back to her cubs.

What happened next wasn't up to Ali. He didn't have that kind of control over the animal mind. It was up to Mike Hubbard and the mama bear. Good thing he had that kind of control over the human mind.

Mike Hubbard sat at Maryalice's computer as if he belonged there. He was trolling through her file listings, occasionally stopping to open one and then close it in disgust.

"Not here," he muttered. "Not here either. Where in hell would she keep it?"

Ali didn't give a damn what *it* was, and he wasn't going to give Mike Hubbard time to find it. He stepped up behind the man as silently as a spider stalking its prey, alerting him to his presence by the snap of his hand against the back of his neck.

"Were you invited here?" he asked, his left hand tight around the man's neck and his right rolling the computer chair away from the desk.

Mike Hubbard gulped when he saw Al Dimona standing over him, but he recuperated quickly. "I'm an *old friend*," he said with a nasty intonation in his voice, "of the woman who lives here. So I'd be grateful if you'd get the fuck off me."

"He's no friend of mine," Maryalice said.

Not happy she'd followed him, Ali silently cursed her curiosity.

Mike Hubbard tensed. "I'm not? Wasn't I the one who popped your cherry all those years ago? Haven't you been playing push me-pull you on the computer with me for the past two months? Don't you—"

"Not another word," Ali snarled. "Not. One. Single. Word.

"Maryalice, you have to leave. Now. Go on over to my place and wait for me. I won't be any longer than an hour."

He should have known better than to try that with Maryalice. She was as stubborn as a mule. He wondered why all the great metaphors were animal ones, but didn't have time to think about that right now.

"I want to know what you're going to do with him. I want to *see* what you're going to do with him. And whatever it is..." She hesitated for a moment, took a deep breath, and said the one thing he couldn't possibly have expected. "I want it to be permanent. Can you do that?"

"I sure can." He grinned at her over the head of the soon-to-be-dearly-departed. "I can do just exactly that."

"Can I watch?"

If there was one thing he hadn't ever considered about Maryalice, it was that she would have such a ruthless streak. He liked discovering that about her. It would make dealing with Mike Hubbard a whole lot easier.

"There won't be anything *to* watch, but you can help me with him now."

Ali took the belt from his jeans and the one from Mike Hubbard's waist and buckled them tightly around Hubbard's elbows and wrists. He was going to make good and sure the man knew exactly why he was going to spend some time in the forest with a mama grizzly.

"So," he said, swivelling the chair to face Maryalice. She stood in the doorway, an evil grin lighting her beautiful face. "What are you doing in Maryalice's house?"

"She asked me to visit her. When she wasn't home, I figured I'd wait. The door was open."

Ali laughed. "I shut that door myself. And the chisel marks on the lock were still hot when I opened it."

"I never invited you here," Maryalice said. "I would *never* invite you. You... You..."

Ali wanted to laugh at the outrage in Maryalice's voice. He'd never seen her so angry, not even when a bike messenger ran into the side of her brand new car and took off before she could stop him. She'd been hopping mad for weeks, spending hours every day driving through the city looking for him. Good thing she'd never found him, because Ali wasn't sure exactly how to deal with an assault charge.

He swung the chair around again so Mike Hubbard faced *him*.

"I'm not a woman you can frighten with creepy roses or veiled email threats," he said. "I'm the kind of man who *does* the frightening. And more."

The man tried to swivel around to face Maryalice again. Ali stopped him from moving.

"Maryalice is *mine*. You made a terrible mistake when you came onto my territory and touched *my* woman."

"I never touched her."

"You did so, you creep."

At least this time, Ali thought, Maryalice wasn't sputtering. And even though she hadn't told him so, the fear in her eyes at the sight of the second gold foil box had made it clear that Mike Hubbard was more than just an unknown stalker.

He would never ask Maryalice what had happened between her and Mike. It had obviously been a long time ago. He just wanted to make sure it never happened again.

He pulled the man out of the chair and stood him squarely on his feet. He took one swing at the man, a big right hook, and Mike Hubbard collapsed to the ground in front of him.

"What are we going to do with him now?" Maryalice asked.

Ali met her eyes. "He's going to take a little walk in the forest. A mama grizzly is waiting for him."

"How...?"

Maryalice knew there was a whole heck of a lot about Ali she didn't know, and the mama grizzly was the smallest part of it. "You can

tell me all about it later." She glared at him. "*All* about it."

Ali smiled as he slung Mike Hubbard over his shoulder and headed for the door. "I'll be back in an hour. Breakfast, first. Okay?"

"Breakfast first."

Chapter Ten

Cap'n Crunch. Milk. Peanut butter and raspberry jam. A loaf of bread. The toaster was plugged in beside the table so Maryalice didn't have to move. Two glasses, two mugs, two plates, two bowls, two knives, and spoons. The coffee was brewed and the orange juice sat beside the toaster.

She smiled at how domestic it all looked.

It would be even better when Ali walked through the door. She'd left both the back and front doors open. She knew he'd just waltz right in as if he owned the place. And she guessed he did, just the way she now owned his place. She had no questions, no doubt about that.

They were together. Forever.

She heard his footsteps in the front hall and hurried to meet him. She threw herself into his arms and rained kisses all over his face. He rained them back.

"I missed you," she said.

"No more than I missed you."

"He's gone?"

"Yep."

"Good."

The breakfast nook had never sparkled the way it did with the two of them sitting on the old bench, their thighs touching and their hands passing bits of toast and spoonfuls of Cap'n Crunch back and forth.

When they were finished assuaging their hunger, Maryalice looked

over at Ali and lifted her eyebrows. No words were necessary.

"I'm a demon, or rather, I *was* a demon. And yes, I was a mean and nasty demon, the lord of all the other mean and nasty demons. There are no good demons. So I'm no longer a demon, I'm human. At least partly."

Maryalice patted his crotch under the table. "Whatever you are, it's good enough for me. But how did you stop being a demon?"

She marvelled at how calmly she was taking this information, even though it made sense of all the things that had niggled at her curiosity over the past couple of years. Of course he wasn't human. Or at least he hadn't been for long. She didn't know a whole lot about demons—who did except other demons? But she knew a whole lot about Ali and whatever he had been before, he was now a good man.

"I stopped being a demon by accident. I was out late one night when something flew off the bridge deck above me. I wasn't paying attention. I was chasing after something at the time and instinctively reached to grab it.

"It was a little girl dressed in pink, screaming her lungs out. I wanted to drop her to the ground and run, but I didn't. I don't know what stopped me but there I was, the lord of all the demons, standing under a bridge with a baby in my arms. I should have dropped her, I knew that, but..."

Maryalice moved along the bench until she was sitting in Ali's lap with her arms around his neck and her face snuggled into his shoulder. She wasn't sure whether the comfort was for him or for her.

"And then the oddest thing happened. She stopped screaming and started gurgling. I looked down into her face and she was laughing up at me, her tiny hands pulling at my hair and her little feet kicking at my belly.

"I fell right then and there. The laughter of that little person changed my life. Forever."

"What happened to her?" Maryalice was almost scared to ask but she really, really wanted to know.

"I heard a woman crying, '*Sara, Sara*' from the bridge above. I floated us up, and there was Sara's mother. A man stood behind her with

a knife to her neck. I was glad I was still a demon. It made it easy—both physically and emotionally—to pull her away from the man, hand Sara to her mother, and throw the man off the bridge.

“I watch over her now. They’re both happy. I found out later that the man had been stalking Sara’s mom for years. They’d just moved to that town, and he found them when she left Sara’s daycare one night.”

Maryalice wasn’t sure what to say, so she said nothing. Just nuzzled deeper into Ali’s shoulder and wrapped her arms even more tightly around him.

He sighed. “My brothers have no idea what it’s like to love someone. But Sara opened the world to me, and now there’s you.” He turned to look at her and kissed her temple. “I wish I could give them what I have.”

“Why can’t you? All you have to do is engineer a few accidents.”

Ali looked at her, his heart in his eyes.

“I could do that,” he said. “I could definitely do that.”

Author Bio

Kate writes women's fiction, magic realism, paranormal, and erotica. She writes short fiction, poetry, and novels. She's had dozens of stories and poems published over the years, and her eighth book, *Seeing Is Believing*—about a woman who sees death in photographs—was published in October 2007. Her stories in the Pleasure Club series—*The Nymph* and *The Nun* are available from Cobblestone Press.

She blames her mother and her two grandmothers for her reading and writing obsession—all of them were avid readers, and they passed the books and the obsession on to her. You can contact her at her website at www.kateaustin.ca, her blog at www.kateaustin.blogspot.com, her group blog with her fellow Witchy Chicks at www.witchychicks.blogspot.com, or find her on Facebook.