

# ONE HANDSOME DEVIL

By Robert Preece

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C/O One Handsome Devil

P.O. Box 4845

Dallas, TX 75208

## Chapter 1

The two women giggled nervously as they held the spell book Sara Slocum had found in her mother's old things. "Are you sure we want to do this."

"Have we gotten a boyfriend any other way," Sara's best friend Katra O'Hara reminded her. "Besides, what can it hurt?"

Sara didn't want to think about that. She read the words of the spell out loud, her eyes suddenly heavy.

"Keep chanting, I feel something."

She sputtered back to full consciousness at Katra's voice. "Let the powers of the east lend us strength," she said, trying to sound like the preacher at her grandmother's church.

"I think you already did that part," Katra whispered.

"This isn't working." Sara slowly closed the spell book. "I told you casting spells for boyfriends is stupid."

Katra giggled, but she sounded nervous. "Just your boyfriend so far. We'll do mine next. But I really felt something."

"Maybe you shouldn't have eaten all that chili."

"Oh, yeah. Well--"

Sara felt rather than heard a whoosh sweep through her Dallas apartment like a Texas Norther, dropping the temperature twenty degrees. Whatever it was cut Katra short, something of a trick all by itself.

The row of scented candles on the table in front of them flickered then winked out slowly, one by one. The room sank into a darkness more complete than should have been possible, even on a late-spring Dallas afternoon.

"It's just your air conditioning," Katra whispered. She didn't sound convinced.

"It isn't on."

Sara heard the sound of Katra flicking her lighter but didn't see the flint's spark.

"What the heck is going on. I just bought this lighter." Katra paused. "Hey, do you think this is magic? I told you I felt something."

Sara had felt something too, from the moment she'd touched her mother's book. She, not Katra, had suggested this seance even though she'd never believed in hocus-pocus. Of course Katra had been the one who'd suggested starting with the spell for summoning their true loves, and then insisting that they do Sara first.

"You think my mother hid that book for a reason?" Sara asked, her voice a whisper.

"We're thirty and single. We have to take chances," Katra snapped. "Besides, sitting around in the dark isn't any worse than sitting around with candles and no boyfriends. Our biological clocks aren't going to wait."

Sara hoped Katra was right. Sitting around in a candle-lit room asking the Guardians of the Earth to supply her true-love was asking for trouble, even though she didn't really believe in the Guardians of the Earth. An icy feeling trickled through her veins even though Dallas had been warm all spring.

"If you blew those candles out," Katra continued, "I don't think it was very funny."

"It wasn't me." Sara inhaled and caught a faint odor of sulphur. Funny, they'd used a lighter, not matches.

Katra's grip seemed way too strong for her tiny friend. The poor thing must be even more afraid than she was letting on. Sara gave a tug but Katra's grip seemed rock-solid.

"You're squeezing too tight."

"I'm not touching you."

Something gripped down even harder. She didn't remember Katra's hands having those calluses. "Don't kid me," she urged, but without much hope.

"You'd better be joking." Katra didn't sound like she was kidding.

Panic welled in Sara's chest. "Oh my G--"

"Don't say it." The voice was male and strong and it sent a tingle of sexual need, mixed with sheer fear, down Sara's spine.

"Don't say w--"

Katra interrupted with a scream. "There's a man here," she gasped after she'd made enough noise to

awaken people in Oklahoma City a hundred miles to the north.

"Free me from this blasted pentagram; I'll take care of any men," the male voice urged.

Sara didn't know what it meant, but the voice held a compulsion so powerful she wanted to do whatever it demanded.

"Tell me you learned how to do voices." Katra begged to be reassured.

"It isn't me." Sara put all her strength into yanking her hand free this time. The grip tightened around her fingers in a grip that stopped just short of pain. The evidently male grasp felt warm, almost sizzling, to her touch. How could she have mistaken this for Katra's touch?

"Let's get out of here." Katra's voice shook. There were a few more cigarette lighter noises, then a clunk as Katra evidently heaved the recalcitrant tool into the corner.

"Don't go without me," Sara begged. Admittedly she had been casting a spell for a man, but that didn't mean she was just going to glom onto any male that snuck into her darkened bedroom. She relaxed, pretending she had given up, then grabbed the candlestick and swung it, full force, at whatever was holding onto her.

The heavy crystal candlestick clunked, then shattered. If she'd hit the man who was holding her, Sara was certain he would have let go. Unfortunately, she'd misjudged her distance and smashed her own hand.

"Oh my God that hurts."

Evidently something caught the man by surprise. He didn't let go, but his hand jerked against hers.

"The wards," Katra breathed.

"Wha--" except Sara saw them too. Where they'd drawn the five sided star with sea salt, almost imperceptible blue lines glowed.

The faint light shouldn't have been enough to see by but Sara's eyes had adjusted to the dark. A male hand clasped hers where her hand crossed over the plane of the wards.

Using every bit of the strength her panic lent her, she yanked her hand away.

Even with all her force, her hand barely moved. Yet it was enough. When it reached the sea-salt boundary they'd drawn, a shower of sparks surrounded the male hand. It jerked, then dropped hers.

Sara collapsed to the ground panting as if she'd just run five miles. The eerie blue of the wards glowed more brightly now as if they'd sucked power from whoever they held trapped.

Sara gasped for breath, then struggled to her feet, reached for the light switch and turned on the overhead light.

If she'd thought the harsh glare of an electric light would explain everything, she was sadly mistaken.

Katra's earlier scream had something theatric about it. This one was real and from the heart.

The thing crouched in the midst of the pentagram was male all right. It wasn't a man, though. He looked instead like one of the demons from the stained glass windows in the old-country church her grandmother

attended. Small horn nubs protruded from a too-handsome face right at the hairline. He was shirtless and a pair of bat-wings extended from his muscular shoulders. What appeared to be a pair of leather pants did nothing to hide his male swell.

Ironically, Katra's scream gave Sara a moment's pause. A real demon, if such a thing existed at all, wouldn't look like a medieval fantasy. The thought was too absurd for words. And if he wasn't a real demon, he was a real something else. Like somebody's idea of a practical joke. Maybe one of their girlfriends had decided to play a game on them when Katra and Sara had shared their plans.

She took a deep breath. "Halloween isn't for another two weeks, so what's the big idea?"

"He's a demon," Katra breathed. "He's probably going to blast us both."

"There are no such things as demons," Sara declared with more confidence than she felt. If this was a costume, it was the most realistic one she'd ever seen. And if the rent-a-stunt services had a lot of guys with builds like this working for them, maybe she should look into a new line of work.

"Whoever told you there were no demons," the male voice declared, "lied."

Something in the male voice reverberated down her spine and set off hormonal signals Sara had ignored since high school. It had to be the tension, she reassured herself. Nobody could respond sexually to a freak in a cheap costume.

The demon flexed his bat wings, bringing his broad chest to fuller definition. Cancel that thought about cheap.

"You can drop your game now," Sara told him, trying to keep the quaver out of her voice. "If there are demons, they are symbolic, representative of the inclinations within us all." She held up a hand to forestall his objection. "But let's suppose that's wrong and there really are grubby little imps running around. You aren't one of them. After all, a metaphysical being couldn't have grabbed me physically."

"You know a lot about this, do you?" His voice sounded amused, practically condescending.

"Trust me, your costume is something out of fairy tales meant to frighten European peasants." Someone like her grandmother. If Nana had seen this costume, she would really have been weirded out. "Anyway, you did your job. We were scared for a second. Go home and tell whoever hired you that you deserve a bonus."

"No, I really don't think I'll go back home just now." His face contorted and his deep blue eyes flickered. It took Sara a moment to realize it was a smile. "Trust me, Hell is no place to rush back to. I could get used to being around here."

"Hand me the phone, Katra." She turned back to the supposed demon. "You may think this is a big joke, but the police will think it's breaking and entering. If you don't want me to call the police, you'd better tell me who you are and who hired you to play this nasty joke on us."

"But you must know my name." He reared back, his wings extended until they brushed against the ward lines. Blue sparks flew at the touch of costume wing against wards that could not really exist. A scent of ozone joined that of sulphur. His voice sounded doubtful. "How could you have conjured me without my name?"

Sara shrugged. "All right, play it that way. Katra, dial 9-1-1."

"Uh, maybe he's got a gun. Why don't you call the police?"

Sara looked the supposed demon up and down. If he had a gun, it was well hidden. Those pants could have been painted on from the way they hugged his narrow hips and muscular thighs.

"All right, I will." She stood and took a step toward the phone, careful not to cross the sea-salt line on the carpet.

The supposed demon held up a hand. "You can call me Beljackoninan--uh, just call me Jack." As if he really had some ancient Babylonian title.

He showed Sara his teeth in that expression he must mean as a smile. At least they weren't sharpened to points. That would have been taking the costume too far. Still, those teeth looked strong and the grin could have been meant as a threat.

"Listen to me, little girl. I can--" He jabbed a finger in her direction. His finger met the line of the ward and a sheet of blue light swept up from the floor blinding Sara for a moment.

Sara hung up the phone and rubbed her eyes, trying not to breathe too deeply of the ozone-rich air. Jack glared at her and blew on his smoking finger. She was sure a finger couldn't actually catch fire but it had looked that way.

"That's a pretty good ward," he admitted.

"Thanks, I think." She wasn't a weirdo. Semi-naked men with fake wings on their backs and fake horns on their heads were not a turn-on for her. So why didn't she just call the police and have him carted off to the looney bin or Science Fiction Faire where he belonged? She'd do exactly that, except she was curious about those wards. Maybe somebody could have snuck into the apartment while she and Katra were concentrating on the spell. But what kind of equipment would it take to make the salt lines glow like that?

Still, he had to be a man in a costume. Any other explanation was silly.

Jack stretched again, this time careful to avoid the painful touch of the wards. It had been centuries since he'd last walked in the physical plane. Although he could never fully escape the pains of Hell, it felt good to be breathing again, to stretch his wings without bumping into a thousand other demons.

He couldn't believe his luck. The woman had actually summoned him without being able to remember his true name. Without that, she could never compel him to her will. Once he was free from these pesky wards, he would stride the earth like a king once more. Of course he'd have to get free fairly quickly. He didn't want to open a pathway for all the other demons in Hell. This was going to be his own personal pleasure.

He looked at the women more closely. Peering into their souls, he could read so much about them, their hopes, fears, their pride. An innocence and inherent goodness overlaid the shallow layer of toughness in the one called Sara.

That wouldn't help her. The two human women had been playing with magic, he saw, to attract men. Their mistake. The two women were certainly attractive enough to catch any man they truly set their heart on, but they hadn't and now he would use that fact to his advantage.

"If you choose to believe that I opened the door without you noticing, snuck into the room, blew out the candles, set up some magic spell to make your wards glow, and then imprisoned myself here, I won't

argue with you," he said. "Just use that silver knife to cut an opening through your wards and I'll be out of your lives forever."

"He has a point," the woman named Katra said. "How could he have done that?"

"You're a trained scientist," he reminded Sara. "So observe rather than leaping to conclusions." He decided to appeal to Sara's emotions. "If I was a criminal, it might make sense to hold me here until the police came. But of course you couldn't. You have no weapon in this apartment and I could walk out. Since I am who I say I am, you have me trapped. Yet it isn't right to hold a sentient being against its will. Your own morals must tell you to let me go."

"You think you know everything about me?" Sara sounded unsure of herself. Time to attack.

"You are easy enough to read, Sara."

"How did you know my name?"

Jack enjoyed watching Sara's body adjust to the shock. Her face flushed, then paled, but she stood up to him her fists so tight her knuckles whitened. He'd always appreciated a fighter, even a fighter of lost causes. With her long blonde hair, slender jeans-clad legs, and hazel eyes, the part of Jack that was male stirred in an instant reaction.

He suppressed that thought. Once he was free, he'd take his fill of humans.

"I know everything about you, Sara. I can see your dreams."

"Ridiculous."

"I'm serious. Look at me and tell me how I could be wearing a costume. Think about it and tell me how I could have come in without you noticing. Watch the wards and tell me if your puny science has anything that could explain what is going on here."

He gritted his teeth, then flung himself against the wards in an all-out attempt to break through or at least prove to himself that it was impossible.

The wards flung him back to the floor with as much ease as if he'd been the tiny imp Sara had accused him of being.

Damn.

Sara's smoke detector went off in a frightened squawk. Had the thing been trying to show her he really was trapped, or had it been seeking to escape and failed? Either way, she found it harder and harder to believe he really was a man in a costume. Too bad, because she hadn't met many men as attractive as Jack.

It took her a minute to climb up on a chair and unhook the battery that powered her detector. When she climbed down, she decided to take Jack at his word and really check him out--staying safely on her side of the wards. If she couldn't find any seams that held his wings on, she would have to believe there was something going on here other than just a bad trick.

She let her eyes have their fill with Jack's body and masculine face then settled down to serious business. There had to be seams where the fake horns met his head and more seams where his wings were attached.

It was hard, though. Her gaze kept sliding off the wings to ogle Jack's broad back.

"Want to help me, Katra?" she asked. Somebody had spent a fortune hiring this hunk and they might as well both take advantage of it. Who knows, maybe he had a friend and they could both get dates out of this.

"I'm looking, believe me," Katra muttered.

Jack shrugged his shoulders when she passed in front of him. "There are no hidden strings."

"That doesn't make you a demon. Maybe you're an alien." Anything would be better than one of the demons from her Nana's stories.

"You don't get more alien than a demon." Jack reached for Sara, then pulled back his hand when the ward started to glow a deeper blue. "Why don't you just cut away some of that sea salt and make a break in your wards?"

Katra tried to bring her heart rate under control without much luck. How Sara could just walk around Jack, checking him out like he was a piece of meat, was beyond her.

"Does your mother's book say anything about banishing demons?" she asked. She'd seen enough movies to know that just setting a demon free was unlikely to be a brilliant move. While Sara was her smartest friend, she wasn't always the most practical.

"Hum?" Sara dragged her gaze away from the hunk. "Oh, sure. It's in there. Except--uh, oh."

Katra didn't like the sound of that. "What?"

Sara's normally tanned face paled. "The spell won't work for twenty-four hours after you summon them."

"You didn't warn me about that."

"Because I was summoning a true love, not a demon."

"True love? Is that what brought me here?" The demon gave a short laugh. "I didn't know it was possible to mangle that spell so badly."

"Sara started to fall asleep in the middle of it."

The demon rubbed his forehead and horns as if he had a terrible headache. "I'm going to forget this ever happened." He paused, then gave Katra a grin that frightened her out of ten years of life. "If you don't want to use the knife, just blow on the lines. I'll be gone before you can say boo."

Sara might not be able to hurt a fly, but Katra had always been the tough one. "If we let him out, he'll probably just go and bother someone else. Twenty-four hours isn't that long," she told Sara. "He seems contained."

"For now," Jack observed. "You don't think these wards will hold me forever, do you?" His hand brushed against the invisible line again, once again setting off a shower of sparks. "Don't you see that they're weakening already? You want me gone. I can be quite a damper on romantic evenings, believe me."

"If that was a problem, we wouldn't all be here," Sara quipped.

Katra's brain raced. She wasn't dumb enough to miss the fact that Jack had asked a series of questions rather than simply told them he could break out. This could be an opportunity. "He seems to want out bad. I'll bet he'll give us three wishes if we let him go. Remember the way it happened in Aladdin?"

"Whatever Jack is, he isn't a genie," Sara observed. "Besides, are you sure you want to base your life on a Disney movie?"

"It isn't just Disney," Katra protested. "All of the fairy tales are the same. And it doesn't have to be a genie, either. Brownies or leprechauns or your grandmother Maura's Baba Yaga, they all give you wishes if you can catch them." She paused, feeling the smile on her lips. "This one is good and caught."

"Does she always go on like that?" Jack asked.

Sara nodded. "It's part of her dumb act. She thinks it attracts men."

"Hey, it works." Katra put her hands on her hips. Not that she'd had a lot of luck with men lately. She tried to forget anything she'd ever heard about deals made with the devil. This wasn't the devil, just some demon--probably a misunderstood one.

Sara turned to face the devil-thing. "Is she right? Are you here to grant our wishes?"

Jack's laugh hardly qualified. "You summoned me. Is that what you want? Wishes? All right, free me and I'll give you three requests."

Katra didn't know much about demons but she knew plenty about men. They were big on promises until they got what they wanted. Then the deal got changed.

"I can make wishes any time. Are you going to make them come true, or just let me wish away?"

Jack's smile looked completely artificial. He had been planning to trick them, just as she'd suspected. "It would depend on the request, of course."

"Are you sure you aren't a human man?" she asked. "That's just the kind of offer they'd make. We make our wishes, you decide you don't like them, then you blow us up or possess us or something." She turned to Sara. "Either your demon is pretty stupid, or he thinks we are."

"He thinks we are," Sara agreed. She was flipping through her mother's book now. "There's got to be some way to banish him back where he came from in less than twenty-four hours. I don't think I could stand this."

The demon glared at Katra, then tried another artificial smile. "I'm not all-powerful so don't even think about asking for world peace or a cure for cancer. How about, if I can't grant a wish, I'll let you take another."

That sounded better. Of course he might not be able to grant any at all. Sort of like the last guy Katra had dated. Actually, the last seven guys she'd dated. Still, if he couldn't do squat, Katra would just help Sara send him back. Only there was one other trick. "What happens after our three wishes each?"

"I said three, not three each."

"Oh, yeah," Katra groaned. "Like I've just been dying for one and a half wishes."

When she and Sara had visited Central America together, Katra had always done the bargaining. Nobody could believe anyone who acted as dumb as Katra did could be smart. Well, she might not be a



scientist like Sara but she wasn't anybody's dummy either. "Three each, big guy. Or else we light the candles and send you back to wherever you came from."

"You think I'm afraid to be sent back to Hell?"

He was asking questions again, instead of answering, Katra noticed. So he was afraid. This was too easy.

"Now that I think about it, I saw this movie where the guy got nine wishes. Shall we say five for me and four for Sara?"

Jack shook his head. "Three wishes each. Make them good. There aren't any makeup exams here. And I'll let you go afterwards so you won't have to waste a wish on self-protection. It's a fair offer." He almost choked on the word fair.

"Deal," Katra said. She started to reach out her hand but stopped short of that glowing line. She didn't trust him that far.

"You said you won't hurt us after the wishes. So what does happen?" Sara demanded.

"Your friend said we had a deal."

Sara shrugged. She must have noticed how nervous Jack was about going back to Hell too. "Sue me."

The demon scowled and raised his hands to the walls that held him in but stopped short of giving them another light show. "I grant your requests, then I leave. You'll never see me again. Unlike you two, I have worthwhile things to do with my existence."

"What happens to us?"

"You keep what you wished for."

"How can we know you aren't lying?" Katra demanded.

"Why would I lie?"

He was asking questions again.

"Demons are supposed to be the fathers of lies, remember?"

His wings flared. "I don't lie."

For some reason, Katra believed him. Maybe because of the way he'd weasel-worded before.

"I know what I want, then," Katra decided. "I want a cute guy with enough money to take me out to nice places, a car that runs for more than ten miles without breaking down, and, uh, I want to win the lottery. Tonight."

"Katra, don't--"

"Done," the demon declared before Sara could finish her thought.

"Oh, I'm sure."

The phone rang. Sara had a really bad feeling about this.

"Or maybe a vacation place in Hawaii," Katra continued. "Remember the time we went to Maui and I met that lifeguard?"

"When you almost drowned yourself five times before he noticed you, you mean?" Sara asked, ignoring the phone.

"I do what works. I got a date out of that lifeguard, which is more than you did. I get a lot of dates out of my dumb act too." She put on a simpering face. "Oh, I just don't know what I'm going to do. I could never change a tire all by my little self."

The phone rang again.

"You'd better get that," Katra suggested. "Maybe it's the Spanish Inquisition or something."

"I'm not expecting--"

Despite the tension, both women broke into giggles. "Nobody ever expects the Spanish Inquisition." They slapped hands. Monte Python strikes again.

Jack glared at them. Well, maybe with his bat-wings and horns, he was expecting the Spanish Inquisition.

With all the patience in the world, the phone kept ringing.

"All right, I give up." Sara reached for it but she didn't take her eyes off the demon. She knew he'd bolt given half a chance. "Hello."

She listened for a moment. It was obviously Katra's mother, but she was screaming so loud, Sara couldn't make out any words. Finally she pulled the handset away from her ear.

"It's for you."

"For me or the demon?" Katra asked.

"Very funny. It's your mother."

"Oh, great. She's probably wondering why I'm not hanging out at the bowling alley picking up men. She wants a grandchild so bad it hurts--me."

Still, she took the phone. "Hello."

Katra listened, obviously able to get a little more from her mother's screaming than Sara had.

After a minute or so, the screaming died down and Katra hung up the phone. She glared at Jack. "What did you do?"

"Three wishes." He paused, then looked at Sara. "Next."

Since Katra's mother screamed like that over winning a free burger in the McDonalds' scratch-off game, Sara hadn't taken the call too seriously. But Katra looked like she was going to faint. "What's the story with your mother?"

"That's what I need to find out," Katra answered. "Are you going to be all right if I go home? Either my mother has flipped out or my wishes just came true."

"I'll be fine," Sara told her. "If he could hurt me, he would have hurt both of us by now."

"I don't mind waiting. You can make your wishes and then let your demon go."

"Did your mother say there's a man waiting for you?" Could it be a coincidence that a man had showed up just after Katra had made her wishes?

Katra nodded. "That's what she said."

"Then you'd better get over there." Sara stared at the demon trying to suppress the truly randy thoughts that his naked torso created in her mind. "Are you planning on zapping me or something if Katra leaves?" Sara asked the demon.

He gave the two women a scowl. "I promised I would just leave you with your wishes. I am not planning on hurting you."

She might be crazy, but she trusted him. "Tell you what," she told Katra. "Call me in an hour and if I don't answer have my grandmother send out her minister. A few shots of holy water should keep this fellow under control."

"Maura's church doesn't use holy water."

"Well have him pick some up. Do I have to do everything around here?"

Both women giggled again. Men might come and go, but a friend was a special thing.

"You'd better get before your new boyfriend gets bored waiting for you," Sara observed.

Katra looked worried. She got.

## Chapter 2

Sara walked to her kitchen, grabbed an old bottle of wine out of the refrigerator, and poured herself a tumbler full. She swigged down half the glass. The liquid felt harsh going down, reminding her of why she didn't drink. She took another large slug and felt a little more in control of herself.

"I'm waiting," the demon reminded her.

A horrible sense of guilt swept over her. Her grandmother had raised her with Southern manners. "Would you like a glass?"

He shrugged. "I'm waiting for you to free me."

She poured him a glass, set it next to the ward, then lifted it up with a fireplace tongs and handed it to Jack. "Cheers."

He didn't look happy but he took a sip. His face twisted in distaste. "Demons are hard to poison."

"I only use it for cooking. I don't really know what's good." She took another sip, using the time it bought her to think about the insane ideas that were going through her head, about whether she dared set him free, and whether she would have the strength to send him to Hell. Even if he was a demon, he probably had friends, maybe little baby demons waiting for his return from a day at the office. Or did demons have babies? Or wives? The idea of a girl-demon waiting for Jack to come home made her distinctly

uncomfortable.

"Don't waste your pity on me," Jack told her. He made a small gesture with one hand. "Try it now."

She took another sip from her glass. The flavor had completely changed. Her heart sank like the Titanic. Until now, some part of her had still wanted to believe Jack wasn't what he appeared to be. Turning her kitchen wine into a taste sensation convinced her in a way nothing flashy would have. He was the genuine article.

"That wasn't a wish," she protested.

"Merely a repayment of hospitality." He raised an eyebrow. "I didn't want you to sicken before you free me."

"I liked you better before you got nice." What was she doing? She couldn't be flirting with a demon she had caged up in her living room.

"Don't count on it."

Well, that squelched that. She plopped down on her couch and stared at the demon. He had to be getting uncomfortable. She and Katra hadn't been thinking of anything so large when they'd drawn the wards.

"I don't know what to do with you," she admitted.

"Make your wishes and I'm gone. It's easy."

"Why am I suspicious that Katra's wishes won't turn out the way she thinks?" Sara had read this plot before. Wishes always came with strings. Until she knew which of them was the puppet and which the master, she wasn't going to touch the bait.

The supposed demon stared at her. His eyes glittered like the darkest, bluest sapphires--in fact, she could actually see the star in them. His body almost trembled with anticipation. He ran a tongue over his lips--a tongue without a fork, Sara was glad to see. She didn't know what she would have done if he had a snake tongue to match his bat wings.

The sensuous quiver that passed through her body could have been fear, or it could have been a purely sexual response to the intense maleness he exuded. Probably a little of both, Sara admitted to herself.

"I can't be responsible for your suspicions." He paused for a moment, staring at her. "Sara. It's your turn. Three wishes. Then set me free."

She decided to ask her question again. "Will Katra be happy with her wishes?"

Jack looked sad. "Demons cannot create happiness. That comes from within and, uh," he glared at the ceiling, "elsewhere."

She'd already noticed he had a way of avoiding questions he didn't want to answer. "All right, did she wish wisely?"

"She wished for what anyone would want. Enough wealth for comfort, love and family, and freedom."

The more he evaded her questions, the more he convinced Sara he was hiding something--something important. "And will she get those?"

"Does anyone--"

"Answer me yes or no."

He considered her for a moment before answering. "No."

Sara collapsed to the floor. "I was afraid of that."

"Could you release my bonds? It would be more comfortable to discuss your wishes if I was freed from this cage."

Each time Jack moved, he brushed against the blue lines that contained him. Each time, his body convulsed in pain.

She'd never been able to stand seeing a bug in pain, let alone a handsome male. Still, her brain warred against her heart. She'd read enough of her mother's book to know that setting loose a demon in the middle of Dallas would be like launching a nuclear strike.

"I'm very sorry," she told him. "I'm afraid to let you go."

He stared at her, letting his sapphire-blue eyes explore her form until they seemed to peer deep beneath her surface. "You have claustrophobia, don't you?"

He really could see within her. She'd never admitted her weakness to anyone, but that was part of the reason she'd chosen to become a petroleum geologist--so she could spend her life outside. Of course her promise to her parents had also played a major role. Had they suffered from a similar problem?

"Maybe."

"My feelings are similar. I can't stretch, can't extend my wings, can't really move. I must get out."

"But--"

"If you don't let me out, I can make your life quite unpleasant."

All of the sympathy she'd started to feel vanished at his threat.

She put her hands on her hips and stepped toward him. "Listen, if you think you can--"

Almost imperceptibly, his body tensed as she stepped closer. If she hadn't been quite so attuned to his muscular chest, his sexual frown, she might not have noticed. At the edge of the glowing blue line, she stopped short.

"You tried to trick me, into stepping across the barrier."

He sighed. "Of course."

Jack sensed time getting away from him. It was an unusual feeling. With all the time in the universe to contemplate their fate, demons learn patience. Being trapped in a cage so close to freedom was worse than any type of claustrophobia Sara might understand. Something would discover him, held helpless, before too very long. When it did, he would be in trouble. In that case, the best he could hope for was an angel to send him straight back to Hell. The worst was that he might be discovered by another freed demon.

"How come you can change my wine and grant Katra's wishes, but you can't hurt me?" Sara demanded.

"Your wards keep me from leaving. They don't hold in my powers. If I wanted to hurt you, I could." If he wanted to spend a painful part of his existence trapped in a magician's wards while every demon and angel under creation tortured him. He had to get out of here.

"Why won't Katra get what she was hoping for?"

At least Sara was still interested in her wishes. He kept looking for the strings he needed to pull. "I'm compelled to find loopholes."

She seemed puzzled. "Can you give me an example?"

"Do you wish me to?"

She laughed. "You must think I'm pretty stupid. I'm not going to waste a wish on that."

He shrugged again. "Then this one is free. Let's suppose you wished for peace on earth. Since peace sounds exactly like p-i-e-c-e, I could grant your wish by having sex with you lying in the dirt. Piece on earth. Your wish is gone. It's simple, really."

Sara backed away from the wards as if they would burn her rather than him. He couldn't believe he found this human female sexually attractive but, quite obviously, he did. He was probably echoing Sara's obvious desire. It was the kind of weakness that could get him destroyed.

Pull yourself together, girl, Sara urged herself. There was no way he could know she'd temporarily lost control of her fantasies.

"Of course that is what you were thinking of wishing for, isn't it?" For just an instant, Jack's eyes seemed to hold all the wisdom of the universe, and a sadness that would crush any woman's heart.

"I suppose you read my mind?"

"It isn't hard. I could teach you to do it, for a wish."

Sara had imagined loving a man who could actually know her desires without her having to ask. Now she knew she wasn't ready for it in real life. Not all of her thoughts needed to be shared with the entire world. Certainly she didn't want to be bombarded by the thoughts of those around her. That was probably the loophole here. "What else can you see?"

"I see that you're looking for a man." He shook his head. "Finding the right man won't be easy."

"Why? What's wrong with me?" Sara might never be asked to pose for the cover of Glamour, but she didn't think she was that hard on the eyes.

"You won't settle for a guy just because he's cute and willing. Also, you don't put on the little-girl-lost act like your friend Katra. You intimidate the men you meet."

"I'll have you know that I'm very easy to get along with," Sara flared. She'd always worried that she could come off a little too much the intellectual. That didn't mean Jack had to rub her nose in it. "I have a lot of friends and I have interesting hobbies, and I'm a geologist so I make good money and meet a lot of people through work."

"Oh, yes. Let's not forget about that little thing you have with your temper."

"That's ridiculous." Sara stepped toward the exasperating male, her fists in balls. At the glowing wards, she stopped abruptly. "I don't have a temper."

Jack laughed. "I'm not saying it isn't pretty, but then again, what attracts me may not attract the human male. What I am saying is that any man who you'd be happy with would be someone special. Someone who can keep you under control."

Had Jack said he was attracted to her? It would be evil to tease her like this if he wasn't interested. Of course, he was a demon. Jack was supposed to be evil.

The rest of what he'd said finally penetrated. Keep her under control? "That's the most sexist, egotistical, chauvinist, ugly thing anyone has ever said to me." She was angry enough to spit. Unfortunately, all spitting would do was prove Jack right.

"If you say so," Jack grinned. "I'm not saying I can't do it, you know. Just that it'll be hard to find a man for you. One that wants to stick around for a while anyway. But go ahead, make your wishes. I need to get along with my business."

"Don't rush me."

Sara was attracted to him, that was obvious to Jack. Unfortunately, her attraction just made her more suspicious. He'd have to find some way around this block.

"So tell me, what should I wish for?"

"How should I know what you want?" He hoped she wouldn't notice he hadn't answered her question.

"You're a demon, and you already said you can read my mind. So tell me. And don't try to twist your answer around, either."

"Maybe you should wish for what your friend wished for. Happiness in love, comfort in her surroundings, and enough wealth to enjoy life and contribute to the betterment of others."

"And maybe I shouldn't, huh? You can do better than that."

"I won't tell you what to wish for."

Sara took one step closer to the wards.

Jack inhaled. Her scent revealed much about Sara. Her confusion, fear, and sexual interest in him all showed as strongly as words on a page. Sara's reaction to him heightened his own sexual awareness of her. He hadn't experienced desire for hundreds of years, but he'd never forgotten.

This could be a very bad idea. Jack didn't trust himself around human women. They didn't play by the same rules demons did.

"What happens when I let you go?"

When Sara had first summoned him, he'd felt a sense of relief so profound it had almost let him forget the tortures he constantly endured. With every passing moment, the wards pressed more tightly against him.

"I promised I wouldn't hurt you."

"But you will hurt others."

"I let people hurt themselves. It's simple, really."

"I'll just bet." She looked sad. "I can't let you go."

Panic welled over him at the certainty he saw in her stance. "I can't hurt anyone who doesn't deserve it."

She laughed. "You mean you can't hurt the one percent of us who has never done anything wrong? That's not good enough. I'm not much of a church-goer anymore, but I was raised right. Setting a demon free on Dallas isn't the type of thing I was brought up to do."

His wing brushed against the ward and the ethereal shock jolted him again.

"I'll send you back as soon as I can."

Panic shot through him. "No!" He forced himself to take a deep breath, almost as if he had been human and needed to breathe. "Imagine the smallest cupboard in your kitchen, one you can hardly get into. Then imagine it pressing in on you until you couldn't breathe, couldn't move, couldn't do anything but feel the weight of the earth pressing against you and the heat of the fire burning on your skin. That's what you brought me from. Compared to that, this prison is a vast paradise."

He watched carefully for her reaction. Most humans would see only the power this gave them. If Sara took that path, he might have to serve as her slave for a time, but sooner or later, he would have his freedom and her soul.

Sara's face crumpled. She was thinking about her own claustrophobia, he knew. He'd hit too close to home. "It seems that I'm stuck."

"Not if you can make the right wishes. If you make them ironclad, you can protect yourself and everyone around you." That was the theory. In practice, it had never happened.

"You think you're pretty smart, don't you?" she demanded.

For the first time he could remember, Jack laughed for real. His surprise was so complete, he pulled himself out of it almost instantly. "You're joking, right? I'm a demon, remember. That means I was involved in the single stupidest decision in the history of the universe. Add to that what happened today. I, a supposed Prince of Demons, was captured by two sex-deprived humans with enough talent between them to, maybe, make a coin flip heads fifty-one times out of a hundred, and I'm being held captive by a hill of salt. Oh, yes. That makes me brilliant."

"Are you really a prince?"

"A lot of us are. Being a prince of demons is sort of like being head of a cell block. You'd a lot rather be somewhere else."

Sara touched her tongue to her lips, then folded her arms under her breasts. From another woman, both gestures would have been provocative, challenging. From Sara, they were exciting in the way that only innocence can excite.

"What would you wish for?"

He smiled bitterly. "I'm a demon. I can have anything I want."

"Except?"

"Except what really matters, of course."



"That sounds depressing."

"Try it for a few thousand years and then we'll talk depression."

"Have you ever thought about becoming something else?"

"That isn't possible."

"What if I wish it?"

"Wishes don't work that way."

"Do you know what Katra and I were doing in our seance before you showed up?"

"I wasn't paying attention. I was going about my business when I got sucked in like Dorothy and the Oz thing."

"What we were doing in our seance was calling for my perfect mate."

"Yeah? Well, make a wish and I'll yank up the best that's available right now."

"I think it's too late for that."

His stomach sank. He didn't like the thoughts floating on the surface of her brain.

"What are you talking about?"

"I think you're my perfect mate."

### Chapter Three

Katra tried to keep her heartbeat under control as she shifted her aging Chevy Corsica into gear. Her car hadn't felt so solid for years. Just additional confirmation that things were finally going right in her life. She forced herself to grin. Who would have guessed a seance could lead to this.

The aging double-wide she shared with her mother and sister needed jacking up and a paint job. Well, they wouldn't have to worry about that. Now that she'd won the lottery, Katra figured they could move into something a little more comfortable.

Today being her day for miracles, she even found a parking place only one door down in the trailer park--next to a shining Jaguar. Now that was definitely new. Nobody in the trailer park drove anything like that.

Katra slammed her car door and headed for home.

"Mom, it's me."

"Hello, darling daughter." Her mother met her at the door simpering. When Minnie talked like that, Katra knew she was in big trouble. In general, the only thing that kept her mother from being permanently glued

to the television set was sleep.

"Hi mom, what's up?"

"You have someone to see you." Minnie's sing-song voice was another giveaway. Minnie wheeled her massive body out of the way, letting Katra see who was waiting.

Katra forced herself to look. What kind of man was Jack likely to choose? For that matter, who dated women on a demon's orders? This just might have been a bad idea after all.

The man was gorgeous. Dressed in an unstructured linen suit over a black t-shirt, he could have stepped off the cover of GQ. His slightly long blond hair hung over his collar giving him the air of a Saxon pirate.

"Well, hello," the vision purred.

She stuck her hand out and stepped forward. "I'm Katra O'Hara."

The man looked at her hand for a moment then broke into a white-teethed grin. "I'm devastated that you don't remember me, Katra."

He hardly looked devastated. In fact, he looked good enough to eat. Not that Katra believed in doing that. At least not on a first date. She wracked her brain but came up empty. "I'm afraid I don't."

"Derrick Benton. We were in Chemistry together."

"Derrick saw the announcement about you being teacher of the month in the Morning News," her mother gushed. "He said he was too shy to ask you out in high school."

More good news. He wasn't just some sneaky vulture who'd heard about her lottery winnings. With Minnie for a mother, word would definitely have gotten around.

"He doesn't look shy any more," Katra's sister Mona observed. Katra couldn't remember the last time Mona had worn anything but a nightshirt around the house. Now she was wearing a cocktail dress--Katra's only nice cocktail dress--and pearls. The extra fifty pounds Mona carried around made it certain that the dress would be Mona's from now on.

Mona was right, though. Derrick didn't look shy. Katra didn't have any memory of Derrick being shy in High School either. He'd bounced between cheerleaders starting when he was a freshman.

"I've been living in Seattle but recently moved back to Dallas," Derrick explained. "When I saw your name, I thought I would look you up." He paused a moment. "You look great."

Yeah, sure. Katra had a sneaking suspicion she smelled like fire and brimstone after her run-in with Jack. She hadn't bothered with makeup since she had planned on spending the day helping Katra clean her storage shed, and her jeans had big rips in the knees and in the seat. Perfect.

"What were you doing in Seattle?" she asked. If she could just trust her mother and sister for ten minutes, she would run into her room and change. The way Mona looked at Derrick, though, Katra wasn't sure he would survive even five.

"I worked for a software company." Derrick smiled. "Microsoft bought them and I ended up without a job and with a pile of money. So I came home. I figured I'd look around and maybe start something myself."

"Software. I don't remember you being one of the computer jocks at school."

Derrick laughed easily. "Not programming. That's too much like work. In sales, all you have to do is talk the game. Trust me, I can manage that part."

Katra didn't doubt it. She also didn't doubt that he must be having second thoughts about his visit about now, what with the trailer park and her mother in a moomoo. A hundred and eighty pounds of Mona vamping like there was no tomorrow could put off even a dedicated boyfriend, let alone someone she barely remembered from high school. Of course, Katra smelling like fire and brimstone only made things worse. "Why don't you wait out here for a couple of minutes while I change. Give me ten minutes and I'll buy you a cup of coffee at Starbucks."

He cast a quick look at Mona. "Uh, maybe I could wait in your bedroom. You know, talk to you while you changed."

If she hadn't seen that glance, Katra would have been concerned she had a pervert on her hands. Since she had, she felt only sympathy. Mona could try the patience of a saint. And Derrick definitely didn't look saintly. Thank goodness.

"All right, I'll change in the bathroom and you can talk to me through the door." She opened her bedroom door, then wished she'd thought before opening her mouth. Stockings and bras hung drying from every doorknob and yesterday's jeans were still plopped at the foot of the bed where she'd dropped them before collapsing last night.

She took a deep breath. Well, no point in hiding the real Katra from Derrick. Sooner or later he'd discover who she really was. "The place is a mess but if you can stand it, you're welcome."

Derrick didn't seem disgusted. He looked around, his gray eyes taking in everything in the room as if he was a cop or something rather than a software sales guy.

"Sit on the bed," she offered. At least she'd made it that morning. When he complied, she made a quick tour of the room, scooped up most of her laundry, and headed for the bathroom.

What she saw in the mirror had probably frightened Sara's Demon let alone an innocent salesman. She turned on the faucet and plunged her face into the water. "So who have you kept in touch with since school?" she sputtered once she'd caught her breath. It was a desperate attempt to find something to talk about.

"Hardly anybody," he answered. He named the football team's quarterback, three of the cheerleaders, and the class president. "How about you?"

"Just Lena Bovade who teaches at my school and Sara Slocum. Remember her?"

"Blonde, skinny, brain-and-a-half, liked bad boys but didn't put out?"

It wasn't the kindest description but it was definitely Sara. "Yeah. She's a petroleum geologist now and we're still best friends."

Katra hunted through the stack of bras until she found the miracle one, then pulled a thin low-cut sweater from her closet and finished the outfit off with a pair of tight-fit black slacks. Dressed like that, she wasn't afraid of anything or anybody.

"Wow," Derrick breathed as she emerged from the bathroom. "You're definitely all grown up now."

Katra fought back a momentary and completely irrational disappointment. She'd chosen to dress sexy and he appreciated it. What had she expected?

"I'm not looking for a lover forever, just for a while," Sara told Jack, explaining her irrational offer to herself as much as to him. "It's not like you don't find me attractive." If she'd read that wrong, she'd take herself out back and put herself out of her misery.

The demon reeled back as if struck by Sara's words. Despite his unpleasant earlier experiences, he brushed against the wards. Again, his touch set off a storm of blue sparks.

"I'm a demon," Jack protested. "You were looking for a boyfriend. Well, just ask. I'll get you one like I got Katra. That's probably why your magic brought me."

"I asked for a boyfriend. I didn't ask for someone to grant me a wish."

Jack sighed. "Are you always this illogical or did you damage something when you cast that spell?"

He was still trying to make her mad, Sara could see that. Still, he had a point. What did it say about her if the spirits of the earth thought her perfect date was a demon straight out of Hell?

"Ten minutes ago you were saying that I should look at things more rationally. Well, ration this. I was looking for my perfect mate, casting magic, calling my perfect mate. Then you showed up. We made a pentacle and it's so strong you can't escape it. If the magic didn't work, what are you doing here? If it did work, you're it."

"I can't be your perfect mate."

Sara had to agree with that. What the magic had to be telling her was that there was no perfect mate for her. That she would have to make do with a purely physical relationship. Still, despite a few minor irregularities, like bat-wings and horns, Jack definitely looked like he could hold up his own end on the physical side. She'd been good for too long. If she wasn't going to be happy-ever-after, at least she could work on happy-right-now.

"You'll do."

Jack sank to the floor. He moved with a boneless grace that made Sara's insides quiver.

"Couldn't you just take your three wishes and let me go?" he demanded.

She sucked in a quivering breath. Maybe she had misread him. She wasn't the world's leading expert on males, by a long shot. And demon males might be different from human males. It wasn't as if she'd force him to go to bed with her. She'd rather go without than be anyone's pity-lover. Still, Jack's look held more than a little desire. And she couldn't remember having felt this randy even when she'd been in high school and Mike Soesby had taken her to the prom.

"Just tell me what's wrong with my reasoning," she demanded, "if you can. I didn't ask for my soul mate to be a demon you know."

Jack turned his deep blue eyes up at her. "Women always think they are going to save the bad boy. Well, it never works. Besides, a demon is worse than any bad boy who ever lived. We can't be saved."

She winced. He was hitting below the belt with that since her history was littered with bad boys and broken hopes. She decided to give it one more try. "Don't be patronizing and answer the question."

Jack sighed and crushed his fingers into fists so tight his knuckles turned white. "You're a human and I'm

a demon."

"Mixed species, huh?" It sounded gross, and maybe Jack thought about her like she would about her cat. "If you honestly don't desire me, you're off the hook?"

Sara held her breath. She wanted to cover her ears closed rather than listen to Jack's reply but had to hear.

"Of course I desire you. I'm a demon."

"You keep saying that like it's the worst thing in the world."

"Not only the world. The worst thing in creation."

"Spare me. You have power and you can't tell a lie. Most girls would kill for a man like that."

"Girls who hang around with demons learn to kill, if they live long enough."

She shuddered, but she could see through his strategy. "Well, I'm not planning on hanging around with you that long. I'm just looking for a good time and I think you're it. I guess I'll just have to settle for one handsome devil tonight."

Jack shook his head as if he couldn't believe her foolishness. "I could get you a guy a lot better looking than me. One missing the horns and the bat-wings." He gave a slow, easy spread of his wings and hovered inches from the ground. "These little accessories make trips to the beach a little outre."

"I don't like the beach."

Jack's eyes narrowed. "All right, this is my final offer. In addition to good looking, he'll have a decent job and won't mess around any more than the average guy."

She sighed.

"I'm not done," Jack protested. "Also, I'll find some intelligent. I'll even make sure he has a sense of humor."

Sara folded her arms across her chest and stared at him. His eyes followed her movement, lingered on her breasts for just a second.

A thrill shivered through her at the brush of his awareness, his unstated acknowledgment of her as a woman. "You don't listen too good, do you? You're stuck with me. Besides, there isn't a guy in the world with a decent sense of humor. They all think the Three Stooges are funny."

He looked confused. "The Three Stooges are funny."

"See."

Jack's lips curled up. "All right you got me. But I'm not a guy."

He might not be a human, but Sara's internal radar told her he definitely was all guy. "Jack, get it through your horned skull. I don't want your three wishes. I don't trust you to deliver them. What I trust is the magic that brought you here."

Jack set his jaw and glared at her.

He looked so darned cute she was almost tempted to jump across the glowing blue wards and pat him on the head. That definitely wouldn't be a good idea.

Cute wasn't a word she would normally have associated with a six-foot plus demon with a build that a human would spend years in the gym trying to cultivate. If she stretched it, his little horns might be classified as cute. If he combed his hair right, they probably wouldn't be visible at all. Folded down or not, his bat wings weren't cute. What they were was interesting. Were they fully functional, she wondered? Could he pick her up in those strong arms and fly across Dallas like Superman with Lois Lane in the old movies? That would be sexy, not cute.

What made Jack really attractive, she realized, went beyond the physical. Demon or not, he was the only male she'd ever known who would really listen when she talked, who acted like she mattered not because she was a potential sex partner, but because she had something special to say. He might sulk a little, but Jack didn't seem to think it was his god-given right to have her fall at his feet. Tempting though that might be.

Jack stared at the hardwood floor for a moment, a faint gleam in his eye. His hand blurred as he raised it over his head, then plunged it into the floor.

The oak planks shattered at his touch, but his hand splashed back, burning with more of the blue sparks. "Damn."

"It isn't that easy to escape your fate," Sara told him. "I'm resolved to bear up to mine. Maybe you should do the same."

"Don't get philosophical on me. Just let me go."

"I've heard that demons make great lovers. Why don't you show me."

Jack shook his head. Could his sapphire-blue eyes actually hold regret? "Demons do not make good lovers."

"How come?" With a body like his and the male equipment barely hidden under his leather pants, Jack would turn female heads in a convent.

"We make lousy lovers because we hurt our partners. Not just emotionally. Physically."

A little physical pain went a long way for Sara. "Are you just saying that?"

"I told you I couldn't lie."

"But why?"

"We lose control." He cast his eyes around the room, searching for something. Finally he spotted a quartz crystal she had picked up during a visit to Arkansas. "Is that rock important to you?"

"Not particularly."

"May I have it?"

She picked it up and started to hand it to him, then stopped. "You want me to reach inside the wards, don't you?"

"Let's just say I have mixed feelings."

She tossed him the crystal. It passed through the glowing ward without slowing.

Jack caught the stone, stared at it, then squeezed his hand together.

Powdered crystal sifted through his fingers, the dust sprinkling onto the floor.

"That was not difficult," he explained. "Imagine what would happen to your body if I lost control, even for a moment. Do you dare trust me to stay in control of myself?"

"Hum?" Sara stared at the small mound of sand on the floor of Jack's star-shaped cage. Even if she wasn't looking for forever, could a demon who couldn't be sexual without ripping her to shreds really be her perfect mate? But was Jack right about his control? Could he be exaggerating the danger?

"I'm not exaggerating," he told her.

She started, then glared at him. She'd have to get used to the mind-reading thing.

"I have a low tolerance for emotion," he continued. "I get drunk on it."

Sara wanted to run but the smallest sag in Jack's shoulders stopped her. He looked like he hated this part of himself as much as she did. She wracked her brain, hoping for a storm. "Maybe you need to build up your resistance. How long has it been between lovers?"

"Hundreds of years," Jack admitted. "I didn't like the cleanup afterwards. Even if you're right though, how many women would you want to sacrifice until I have built up enough resistance to control my urges? Do you have any friends you want to volunteer?"

The wards glowed a brighter, paler blue as he leaned toward her. His eyes pierced into her soul, daring her to answer the question he must be thinking was as difficult as the riddle of the sphinx.

"Hum?" The seeds of a terribly enticing idea started percolating through Sara's brain. "Perhaps you need assistance in keeping your control."

"I'm not--" Jack broke off when he caught her eyes. "No. That's impossible."

"It really isn't that different from where you are now."

"Tying me down to your bed and having your way with my body is a very bad idea."

The wards pinned Jack's arms and legs to the four corners of the bed, their strength holding the bed together, preventing him from using his strength to simply rip the iron headboard into scrap metal.

"Are you comfortable?" Sara's voice was soft and throaty.

"Demons are never comfortable."

She reached into a bowl and removed a large chunk of ice. "I thought you might want to cool down."

The fires that burned him came from inside rather than without, but he didn't protest when she brought the fist-sized ice crystal to his chest.

"I'm a little afraid of what we're doing," Sara confessed.

He read her, learning that none of her three previous lovers had ever allowed her to control the pace of

their lovemaking. For better or, most likely, worse, that would change tonight.

"Be afraid," he urged. "It isn't too late to stop." Desire racked his body and cursed him for a fool in arguing against what she wanted, what he wanted.

"Don't spoil it."

She slid the ice across his chest, down the ridges of his abdomen. Sara was breathing a little faster now and her own heat flushed her face. "It melts so fast."

"My body temperature is higher than yours." Jack intended to speak calmly but the sensations of Sara's warm soft fingers mixed with those from the cold hard ice to create an experience he'd never felt before, never considered even possible. He ended his sentence in a gasp as she brought the ice to the line created by his pants and ran it across his lower abdomen.

"You like it," Sara breathed. "Why not admit it?" She felt empowered, he knew. Well, she should. Her wards held him as if he was the weakest imp.

"Maybe," he admitted.

"Do you bite?"

"Maybe," he repeated.

"Let's find out." She brought her lips down, brushing against his own, then passing to blow lightly into his ear.

A tremor wrenched his body as his instincts warred with his control. He could still command his body, but barely. Sara's actions, her pure appeal, endangered both of them. No one, human or demon, had ever aroused him so completely.

"Stay calm." She breathed the words into his ear. The combination of sound and touch sharpened his need.

His erection swelled, aching to be free from the confining pants. He signaled his body to loose some of his pent-up heat to burn them off, leave him naked. No response except a brightening of the blue wards that held him to the bed. She'd warded against his magic as well.

Sara looked at him disappointed. "You are straining against the wards. Do I have to tighten them?"

"Don't toy with me," he warned. "I won't always be tied to your bed."

Sara laughed. "Maybe you're right. I'd better take advantage of the situation while I can."

She ran her tongue down his neck. "Umm, you taste good."

She smelled good. Only it was more than just a scent. She might be playing at wickedness now, but Sara was anything but evil. Jack inhaled her goodness, at war with himself between the pain it caused and its brief reminder of long-denied heaven.

Sara cut off Jack's melancholy thoughts by kissing him.

This kiss started with a brush of lips against lips, but she didn't move on as she had before. Instead, she deepened the touch, pressing harder against his lips, nibbling at them with her teeth.



Without thought, he opened his mouth. Did he intend to speak, to protest, to bite? He wasn't even sure himself. Then it didn't matter. Sara seized her moment of advantage and plunged her tongue into his own mouth.

His own tongue met hers, thrusting against it, then yielding again. She tasted of strawberries and nature and earth.

A splash touched his face. He opened his eyes without knowing they had been shut and watched another tear fall from her eye and strike his cheek. "You kiss beautifully," she told him.

"Did I hurt you?"

"I'm hurting myself."

He couldn't argue with that. He was the tool in her self-destruction. Now, though, he'd passed his limits. He didn't want her to stop. Instead, he wanted, needed, this sexual union. He craved her even more painfully because he knew she could never give him more than a brief respite from the agony. Human women didn't give themselves to demons. They had to be tricked. But not Sara. Sara had shed tears for him. It was clearly impossible. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Oh don't be sappy." She kissed him again, hard but without opening her mouth to let his tongue retrace its exploration.

She pulled away, her amber eyes stared into his own, then traced the form of his body spread-eagled on her bed.

"I'm wondering why you are still wearing your pants."

Sara's hands trembled as she slid her sewing scissors up the hem of his pants and snipped.

Jack jerked, moving so quickly she almost lost her grip on the leather fabric. Had she hurt him? A terrible thought occurred to her. "These aren't part of you, are they?"

Jack laughed. She loved it when he laughed. It made him more human, somehow, and yet more perfect as well.

"They're just clothes, like you're wearing."

The hint was a little broad but she ignored it. Sara felt more comfortable with the idea of a naked demon in her bed than she did with her own nudity. Her previous lovers had mocked her slender figure. Would Jack be disappointed?

The swelling beneath his leather pants gave her hope that Jack would find her exciting despite her limited assets.

She eased the scissors up and snipped again.

His legs trembled against her touch as she moved the scissors up again.

"Do you need more ice?"

"No." He almost croaked the answer.

"I think you do. But I need to finish this first." She did need to. If she stopped, she knew she couldn't

continue. She'd never been the aggressor, never demanded that a man satisfy her needs. Instead, men had their way, then rolled over and went to sleep. Jack wouldn't roll anywhere until she was ready.

Sara gave the scissors one more cut, then slid the sharp blades up the leg in a continuous ripping tear.

His right leg lay completely bared. It wasn't hairy, which surprised her a little, but it was fully muscled, glowing with heat. A pulse beat in an artery across the top of his thigh.

She bent and kissed the pulse where it throbbed. Did demons have blood? From the heat, Jack could have liquid fire flowing through his body.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw his excitement stretching a tent of the remnants of his pants.

"You like that, don't you?" she asked.

"I am not immune to pleasure."

She reached into the ice bucket and selected another frozen block. "Let me know if this hurts."

"You can't hurt me." Did his voice sound regretful? Surely that didn't make sense.

"Good." She pressed the ice to the artery, then traced its path up his thigh toward Jack's still-covered hips.

"Oh, Sara." Had he named her before? She didn't think so. She liked the way her name sounded on his lips.

She knew their's was a physical thing. Jack was right about their lack of a future together, but she was a woman. She wanted to at least pretend there was something more here.

Her hand rested on his upper thigh only inches from where his arousal beckoned. The entire cube had melted. As she watched, the water evaporated from Jack's hot skin.

With one hand, Sara reached for another cube. With the other, for his erection.

"Oh, yes." The words seemed to drag themselves from Jack's unwilling mouth.

"Oh my." If she'd harbored any remaining doubts about him being a man in a costume, they were gone now. If the rest of his body was warm, his erection burned. If the rest of his body was large and well formed, his penis was huge and, perfect.

"I'm not sure--"

"You can stop." Jack's expression warred with his words. He didn't want her to stop. That was obvious. Did she dare continue? She wasn't playing with a toy. She was handling something powerful, something that could hurt her.

She brought the hand with the ice to his scrotum, then pressed her lips to the head.

Jack groaned the agony, or excitement.

Jack's hips bucked in desire and need, making her wish she could please all of him with her mouth.

"Save that for when you need it," she urged.

"Trust me, it will be there."

She straddled his hips pressing the dampness of her jeans against his hardness and ran her hands down his chest. Her grandmother had claimed that demons were angels, banished from heaven. Jack looked like a tortured angel.

He groaned, then arched his back, pressing his hips against hers, ignoring the shower of sparks from the wards she'd set to keep him from moving. His eyes darkened, the star in its pupil elongating like that of a cat.

"Take off your clothes."

She wasn't sure if he was ordering or begging. Either way, she didn't intend to let him take command.

"You'll never learn control if you rush," Sara reminded him.

"I'll never learn control around a woman like you. You must be part demon yourself."

"You wouldn't say that if you'd met my parents." From what she could remember, they had been as sexually repressed as possible. From what she'd seen, her birth was something of a miracle. Certainly she'd never been blessed by siblings.

"You're beautiful," he told her.

Sara's hands trembled as she unbuttoned her blouse. Would he laugh? If he did, she was going to take her old boyfriend Ralph's advice and get her breasts operated on.

Jack's eyes darkened further until she could barely distinguish the difference between black pupil and midnight blue iris. "So beautiful," he repeated as she slid the blouse down her arms.

He wet his lips--an instinctive gesture she could tell he hadn't intended.

That, more than his words, persuaded her that he meant it. He found her body attractive, compelling, and special. That knowledge gave her the confidence to unhook her brassiere.

Sweat beaded on Jack's forehead. Even through her jeans, his heat seared her. A rush of power she'd never imagined swept over her. He hadn't rejected her. His eyes fastened on her small breasts as if they were great treasures.

Sara leaned forward until her body touched his. She brushed her lips against his, but continued, sliding her knees to his waist.

Jack caught one of her breasts in his mouth, nipped down its hardened point. If he lost control now, as he'd promised he would, she would be in real trouble.

Sara gritted her teeth in a panicked moment of fear, then forced herself to relax. She wasn't normally a risk taker, but this was different. She had no choice.

Jack's tongue swirled around her nipple bringing it to even greater peaks of arousal.

She moaned, pressing herself against him so he could take all of her breast into his mouth.

His small horns pressed against her face and she looked at them carefully for the first time. They were alive, a part of him rather than an appendage. She grasped one in her hand and pressed her mouth over it.

Jack shuddered.

She had found another erogenous zone. Demons could be such fun.

His mouth opened wider, tugged harder until her entire breast seemed absorbed into it. His tongue moved fast. Faster than she would have thought possible.

The sensation gathered in her breasts, then spilled down her spine to her womb, to where her clitoris pressed through her jeans against his erection.

"Oh." The mini-orgasm subsided and she pulled herself back. "I didn't know that was going to happen. I guess demons aren't the only ones who can lose control."

Jack nodded. "But you didn't rip me into pieces. Some might view that as a key difference."

It took her a moment to realize why he looked disappointed. "You really think we're stopping, don't you?"

"Why would you want to continue."

"Because we can do better."

Sara pulled herself away from his mouth, then stood next to the bed. She yanked at her jeans. Why hadn't she worn something impractical like a miniskirt and a thong bikini? Instead she had jeans and a pair of cotton briefs.

Jack's eyes said he didn't mind--that he approved of her the way she was. It hardly seemed possible, but Sara wasn't going to complain.

She stood, naked, and let him survey her, flaws and all.

"You are beautiful, inside and out." He spoke gravely, as if intending that she remember his words forever.

"As are you." Her voice came out breathy, excited. Well, no big surprise there. She cleared her throat. "Let me just get those pants the rest of the way off and we'll decide what to do next."

"Oh. Am I involved in the decision?"

She laughed. "You just get to sit back and take it."

"There are worse things."

She rip-cut the other leg of his pants leaving his body as naked as her own.

Her thighs burned with need for him, her womb ached to be filled with him. Still, she feared what would happen if she thrust herself on his erection.

Well, she'd said Jack needed to learn control. Both of them could learn it together.

She turned to the CD player near her bed and put on Vivaldi. Music should help.

"You can't kill a demon but you are coming close," Jack protested.

"You don't like Vivaldi?"

"You know what I mean."

She knelt over his head facing his body. He couldn't move, the wards held him in place, but his breath brushed against her as he tried to reach her with his intimate kiss.

Keeping herself just out of his reach, she leaned forward and seized his erection in her hands again.

"Oh, yes," he moaned.

Sara lowered herself just a fraction of an inch. Now his tongue could barely reach the folds of her womanhood, still short of her liquid core.

His tongue caressed, more gently than she would have dreamed possible.

Any of the men she had dated would have rolled her over now. Her body was prepared, lubricated, and ready. Her mind needed more. Would Jack have had the patience she needed if her wards did not hold him? Someday, perhaps soon, the answer to that question would matter more than anything in the world to her. For now, she let herself be swept away in the tender touch of his lips and tongue against hers.

Losing control for just a moment, Sara pressed herself harder against him. He responded, his tongue entering deep into her, finding that mythical G spot only Katra of her friends professed to believe in.

She tried to wriggle free but lacked the strength. Instead she spilled her hair over his erection and waited for the explosion she knew would come from within her.

It came.

Slowly, shaking, she pulled herself away from him, overly sensitized to his touch. "Thank you, Jack," she murmured. No one had ever had the patience to bring her to satisfaction that way. Not that she'd taken long. Jack made her as randy as a cat in heat.

Jack nodded. Waves of heat radiated from his body as if he was an oven. "It was my pleasure."

"Not entirely. But speaking of your pleasure."

Sara looked at his erection, still held in her two hands. There was no way that monster would fit inside of her. Still, if she stopped now, she would be the laughing stock of her girlfriends and, more importantly, would regret it forever.

I won't get pregnant with you, will I?"

"Not unless you wish it."

"Not. Not wishing it." She wanted to be very clear on that. An unplanned pregnancy would be hard enough without having to explain why her baby had bat wings.

She turned around to face him, then straddled his hips again. Doing this while naked was different, hugely different, than it had been with her jeans on.

She brushed herself against his arousal.

He moaned.

Slowly, she lowered herself two inches onto his swollen erection.

She felt like she would split. She felt as if she would never be happy again if she didn't go through with this.

She took a deep breath, afraid to go further, yet afraid to stop. She looked at him, seeking a clue.

Jack's eyes opened as if they'd always been shut, letting her see into him, into his thoughts, his desire, his need. For him, now, at least, his desire for her dominated all other thoughts. He needed her.

Perhaps nothing else could have given her the courage. Jack's need did.

She plunged herself down on him. If this killed her, what a way to go.

She heard herself scream. Not a death scream--instead, a cry of pleasure. Her body miraculously accommodated his, yet he filled her absolutely. His heat made her aware of every inch of her body--including inches she had been certain didn't exist.

She moved herself on him, feeling his texture against her length.

She lowered herself again, then bent and kissed him.

The wards showered both of them with sparks that felt like angel kisses as Jack's body found the rhythm that joined them.

Impossibly, so short a time after her orgasm, the pressure built up inside her again.

Jack moaned, his eyes glazed with desire.

She raked her nails across his hard chest and he bucked harder into her.

Sara clenched down with all of the muscles of her womb, holding him as if she could hold an angel against his will.

He shuddered.

The tingle of his seed inside of her released the last gasp of her restraint. She slammed her hips into his, taking all of him, then gave herself to the orgasm that swept over her like a sandstorm wiping out all vestiges of civilization.

His wings appeared from behind his back and pressed her against his chest, covering both of them, caressing, holding, protecting. Loving?

## Chapter 4

"I've had a great time but I've got to get home," Katra whispered. She couldn't remember ever watching the sun rise with a man--certainly not on a first date. Derrick's attentiveness, his evident concern for her, had made the hours fly. He hadn't even pushed when she'd set the limits for their caresses.

"Why don't you take the day off?" Derrick suggested. "We could grab some breakfast at the Mansion, then take a look at one of the places where I'm thinking about opening my office. After that, we could stop at one of the malls and pick up a few things for you."

"I'm a little strapped this month," Katra answered. At least she was until she followed up on her lottery ticket. Of course she had made Derrick stop at a 7-11 and double-checked the ticket number while he'd bought both of them Slurpees. Telling Katra she'd won would be exactly the type of joke Minnie would love to pull. This time, she hadn't.

"Oh, don't worry about that." Derrick smiled showing his even teeth. "I'm the one taking you out. I certainly wouldn't want you to have to go to a lot of expense on my account. After all, like I told you, I can handle it."

Unease touched on Katra but she forced away any such thoughts. Derrick wasn't just handsome, he was considerate. Jack the Demon might talk a tough line, but he'd come through in a big way.

"I buy my own clothes."

"I saw what was in your closet." Derrick looked concerned. "You were always taking care of your mother and sister even back in high school. I respect that, but why don't you let me help you out a little?"

Good answers. Full credit to Derrick. It was almost enough to make Katra give in. Almost, but not quite. "I'm an independent woman," Katra reminded him. If he liked her at all once Jack the demon's infatuation wore off, Katra wanted Derrick to like her for who she was. Of course her relationship with her family was her own business.

Derrick put up his hands in mock surrender. "All right, I just thought shopping together could be fun."

"If you're still interested in a couple of months, I'll let you take me to Victoria's Secret," Katra promised. "That would be fun, and there I'll let you buy." No reason not to promise a little since she wasn't delivering anything yet. Perversely, Derrick's interest had increased her caution rather than the reverse.

"I'd like that, Katra," Derrick murmured. He pulled her toward him across the soft leather of his Jaguar's front seat and nuzzled at her neck. "I've never been known for my patience. For you, I can wait."

A shiver ran down Katra's spine, although she wasn't sure whether it was Derrick's words or his kisses that set it off.

"Anyway, I can't take the day off from work," she told him. "The thing about being a teacher is that if you're not there every day, the kids get off the lesson plan."

"Would that be so terrible?" Derrick's breath was hot in her ear.

Obviously he'd never been a teacher. "Oh, yeah, terrible is the least of it. I'd have to break them of whatever bad habits they got into with their substitute, then I'd have to catch up. Trust me, it would be torture."

"Missing you will be torture for me."

"I like it when you talk romantically, but let's not get carried away," Katra urged. "This is our first date."

"But we're watching the sun come up together."

"Only because we've been talking."

"And I've enjoyed it, a lot." Derrick caught her chin and turned her face until she was looking into his warm brown eyes. "Perhaps tonight we will do more than talk. Promise me that you'll have dinner with me again."

Hum, macaroni and cheese with her mother or steak and lobster with a handsome man? "I think I could manage that. But I can't go all night without sleeping again so I won't promise more than dinner."

Derrick breathed a sigh of what sounded like relief. "Yes, even that will be enough." He paused for a moment. "I can't believe how attractive I find you."

Katra could believe it. She'd wished for it. Right now, she wished she could tell how much of Derrick's attraction came from himself, and how much came from Jack the demon's power. "Be careful what you wish for," she whispered to herself.

"Pardon me?"

"Nothing. I was just saying I'd better get going if I'm going to be at work on time."

"I can drop you off at your school if you'd like. It would give us a few more moments together."

Brother, just what she needed. Showing up at school all hot and bothered. "Just drop me by my house. I've got to change anyway."

"I think you look beautiful."

"Yeah, and so would all the other teachers. There was one teacher who came in dressed like this one day when we all knew her husband was out of town. I don't think she ever heard the end of that. Date clothes don't work at school. At least not for the teachers."

He smiled. "I'll drop you by your house. Shall I pick you up around seven tonight?"

She had a couple of tests to grade but she could manage if she didn't get into any of the discussions in the teacher break room. "Seven would be great."

Derrick started the engine and accelerated back toward Dallas. The skyline came slowly into view, glowing like the Emerald City of Oz. The Jaguar's engine was practically silent at a speed that would have had Katra's Beretta howling.

She cuddled closer to his muscular body. "I've had a wonderful time."

"Me too. Are you sure we don't have enough time for breakfast?"

"I'm sure."

She felt oddly relieved as she stepped out of his car in front of her trailer. She was more than a little out of practice at the girlfriend thing. Well, she had the rest of her life to get back in practice.

"See you tonight," Derrick called after her as she fumbled for her house key.

"Yeah."

"I can hardly wait."

She nodded. She needed to talk to Sara before she let herself get too committed. It wasn't fair to Derrick, and it wasn't fair to her either to have a boyfriend wished on her rather than one who wanted her



for herself. Once she figured out what was really going on, she could make a decision on how far to let things go.

Katra let herself in, changed into a denim skirt and cotton blouse, and grabbed the last Pop Tart from the box she'd bought only yesterday. Oh well, at least her mother and sister weren't going to starve.

On impulse she glanced out the window before shrugging on her jacket she used to protect herself from the school's over-aggressive air conditioning. Derrick sat still in his car, watching the trailer.

Weird. She definitely needed to talk to Sara.

Katra shrugged her shoulders. At least Derrick checking her out rather than other women.

She waved at him as she left the trailer and headed for her Beretta. Its engine sounded loud and angry when she started, but after Derrick's Jaguar, just about anything would.

Halfway to the school where she worked, her car sputtered to a halt, a loud backfire announcing the engine giving up the ghost.

"Great delivery on my wishes," she muttered. A faint memory stirred. She'd wished it would run more than ten miles without breaking down. Just guessing, she figured she'd gone about eleven. If Sara still had the demon, Katra figured they could study the spell book some more and come up with an appropriate punishment. She fumbled around in her purse and dug out her cell phone.

Sara ouches as she stepped from the bed. Their all-night sex marathon had uncovered muscles she hadn't used in a long time. Those and a few she'd never discovered before. "So great sex isn't just in novels," she murmured. Of course, finding your fantasy man was a demon instead of a human did make the whole experience a little strange.

"Hum?" The demon in question half sat up, stretching to the limits of his wards.

Sara gasped, then felt her face redden. "I thought you were sleeping."

"Demons don't sleep."

"Really?" For just a few minutes after their third bout of lovemaking, his face had taken on a peaceful look that made him appear angelic rather than tortured and dangerous. "Silly me. And here I was fooled by those soft snoring noises coming from your side of the bed."

"I don't have a side of the bed. I'm tied in the middle."

"Trust me, it looks good on you." Repartee. She'd never been able to achieve that with a normal guy. She hadn't been able to achieve multiple orgasm with a normal guy either. Jack had opened a world of new experiences for her.

His eyes darkened. "Maybe we'll have to switch places some time."

The idea of lying helpless while Jack worked his sexual magic on her pooled instant heat in her womb. If Jack hadn't warned her what happens when an unconstrained demon has sex, she might just have let him try her out. But he had warned her--and she'd seen the burning need in his eyes when they'd been making love. He could have hurt her. Hell, he could still hurt her. Unfortunately, physical pain just might be the least of her worries.

The phone rang in time to save her from saying, or doing, anything really stupid.

"Don't answer it," Jack urged.

She yanked back from the phone as if it was burning, then grabbed it again. "Hello."

Katra's voice sounded desperate. "Is that low-lived sneaky lying bastard still there?"

"I didn't have parents. I can't be a bastard," Jack whispered from his place on the bed.

"I'm guessing you mean Jack."

"Jack the Jackass would be right. I'm here on the side of the road with my Beretta smoking like it has a five-pack-a-day habit."

"Call the auto club." Sara didn't want to sound unsympathetic, but she had more interesting plans for her morning than rescuing a girlfriend.

"They canceled me because I used them more than four times this year. Besides, that lying S.O.B. didn't deliver on his wishes."

"She told me she didn't want to break down in the next ten miles," Jack reminded Sara. "It was at least eleven."

Sara only halfway remembered Katra's wishes. She did remember Jack telling her that Katra wouldn't be happy with them. "What's wrong with her car?" she asked Jack.

His narrowed eyes got a far-away look for a moment. "Threw a rod. That'll cost some money."

"I heard that," Katra protested from the other end of the phone line. "I don't have any money."

"I gave her what she wished for."

This had to be how demons had gotten a bad rap, Sara realized. All she wanted to do was spend another couple of hours having passionate sex with him and instead she was going to have to drive all over town to rescue her friend.

"And now you're going to make it right."

"Are you compelling me?" Jack leaned forward against the wards that still held him to the bed. His face looked hungry but a tinge of disappointment crossed his eyes.

"I'm not playing your silly demon games," Sara told him. "You're going to fix her car because it's the right thing to do."

"I can't do that, Sara."

"You aren't HAL. You can do anything."

"You can't imagine how wrong you are about that."

"I don't care. You can fix Katra's car."

"You'd better get him here in a hurry," Katra urged. "School starts in forty-five minutes."

"Where are you?"

Katra gave Sara an address about three miles from Sara's apartment.

"We'll be there in a couple of minutes," Sara promised.

She hung up the phone and turned to face Jack. "You weren't very nice to Katra."

"A demon isn't supposed to be nice."

Sara wondered if she was imagining the faint edge of guilt in Jack's voice. Then she shook her head. After last night, she would naturally be inclined to give him the benefit of the doubt. After what he'd done to Katra, he didn't deserve it.

"Until you convince me you have changed your ways, you're going to stay on the leash."

"You don't look like the kind of woman who has to keep a man chained to her bed to get sex."

She had to hand it to Jack. He had more than one way of hitting below the belt. "Don't make this into something it isn't. You wanted what we did last night as much as I did." Or else she would just curl up and give up on men altogether. "Tonight, if you don't want to have sex, I'll chain you to the couch. One way or the other, you're not getting out of here until I think you're ready."

"If you're trying to change a demon, you can count on a long wait."

"Waiting doesn't bother me." Especially not if she was with Jack.

Jack frowned. "You know you're taking some major risks here, don't you?"

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Jack watched as Sara consulted the leather-bound book she'd used to cast his wards. If she made a single mistake, Jack would be able to destroy her and achieve his freedom. He wouldn't let himself even consider any regrets that freedom would bring him. Last night might have been the highlight of the past few thousand years for him. That didn't mean anything could come of it.

"I can do this either of two ways," Sara told him. "I can cast the wards directly on you. They'll kick in if you try to hurt me or someone else."

He must have grimaced.

Sara put up a hand to hold off any reaction. "Your other choice is that I'll just extend the bonds that are holding you to the bed and warp them to me."

"I'll take the second choice." Once he destroyed her, the wards would vanish. Once he was free he'd have ample time to fantasize about what could have been different. Demons always had plenty of time to regret their mistakes, even when they'd had no choice.

He must have agreed too quickly. She looked at him suspiciously.

"Of course I'll need your promise."

"What promise?" Any demon worth his patch of Hell could find a hundred loopholes in any promise.

"You won't hurt anyone."

She would never feel that happened. "Agreed."

"And we're using my definition of hurt."

"But--"

"I'm not going to back down on this one. You don't think I'm stupid enough to fall for the old it was so quick there was no pain gag, do you?"

Jack had thought exactly that. Sara moved up another notch in his mental catalog. Not only was she sexy and endowed with powerful magical abilities, she was smarter than he'd given her credit for.

Of course he was a demon. He had more loopholes. "Agreed."

"You agreed too quickly. Tell me what gotcha's you saw." Sara glared at him. "All of them."

That wasn't playing fair at all. Still, he wouldn't get out of here by sulking. If only he could lie.

"I could just let something hurt you. I could start something, then do nothing when it hurt you. I could set up a situation where I'd have to hurt one person to save another from being hurt."

"None of those are allowed."

"It isn't fair asking me this kind of question, you know."

A tear rolled down Sara's cheek. "I don't want to, either. I really want you to just be a good person."

She wanted the one thing he knew was impossible. "Trust me, I've spent most of the past ten billion years wishing for the same thing. I'd give up if I were you."

She swiped away the tear with the back of her hand. "Well I won't give up. So the deal is this. You get to come if you agree to act properly, hurting no one, allowing on one to be hurt, and not putting anyone in situations where they might be hurt. And you agree that if you spot another loophole, whether you notice it now or only later, you'll tell me before you act on it and agree to close it. Otherwise, you get to stay right here for the rest of the day."

"Oh, I agree." It would be interesting to spend a day being a person, unable to use his powers for harm. Perhaps it would even be amusing. To think that just a few days, or maybe centuries, ago he'd been bemoaning his repetitive experiences.

"Then let's go." Sara waved her hands in exactly the right motion, and chanted a few words in perfect, accent-free Sumerian.

"How did you do that?"

"Hum? Oh, it's just this magic book from my mother. It seems to be working. When I said those words just now, all the hairs on my head stood on end."

"It's working all right." He was compelled by his promise, but the spell had put the compulsion into the bonds that held him. "I was wondering where you learned Sumerian."

"Huh?"

"What you just said. Your chant."

"Those were nonsense words from the book. I think it's the rhythm that gives it the power, not the words." Sara blushed.

He almost wished she knew what she was up to, or at least the dangers she faced by doing it. The previous night notwithstanding, yanking Jack in hadn't exactly been a stroke of luck for Sara. Sooner or later, she was bound to make a mistake. When she did, it would be over. "Luck isn't the word I would use. But the words aren't nonsense, they're Sumerian."

She shrugged, uninterested. "What do you know? Should have taken that rather than Spanish, I guess. Anyway, let's go."

He extended his wings. "I just might be a little obvious walking around."

Sara looked at him and giggled. "If you can magic your pants back together, I'll find something for you to wear."

Two minutes later, she handed him an oversized t-shirt and a Texas Rangers baseball cap whose bill just covered his horns. He could pass if nobody really looked.

"I guess I'm ready."

"Good. Katra will be spitting nails."

She led him out the door of her apartment. The invisible bands that held him to her stretched out about ten feet. In a weird sort of way, he wished they were shorter. What was it about Sara? Or was Jack running out of aether the way he'd heard some demons did?

He'd never really studied the way the human female moved before and was surprised to find his body responding to Sara again. Although she strode purposefully enough, her hips had a little wiggle that didn't seem related to her forward progress. It was a miracle that human males ever got anything done with that kind of distraction walking around.

Sara unlocked the door to her car, then pushed back the convertible top. "You don't mind the sun, do you?"

"I'm not a vampire."

A slight intake of breath. "Are there such things?"

"I've never met one." If classic vampires did exist, they would be smart enough to stay well away from demons. Evil creatures had a tendency toward mutual destruction.

"Oh. Another girlish fantasy ruined."

Jack ignored the slight discomfort he felt hearing about Sara's fantasies. No rational woman would have fantasies about a demon. At least vampires had been human once.

Time to change the subject "Where are we going?"

"First we're going to pick up Katra. Then you're going to fix her car. After that, we're heading up to Oklahoma where I'm supposed to check out a new mineral lease. I guess you can just do whatever demons do when they're bored." She shifted the gear, one slender breast outlined against the silk of her blouse. "Of course you'll have to do it without hurting anyone."

"Then I can't do what demons do when we get bored."

She pushed an errant lock of hair back from her forehead and shifted her weight in the seat. The muscles in her arms tensed, then relaxed. Her frown was half quizzical and all sexy.

The sheer sensuality of her movement almost brought Jack to completion there in the car. He wouldn't be bored as long as he was with Sara.

For maybe the hundredth time, Jack read into Sara, trying to see what made her tick. Each time he looked, he expected to see that she was manipulating him, using his physical responses to control him. Each time, he found he'd deluded himself. She was who she was, wholly natural. Sensuality clung to her like a natural perfume that affected everyone around her without her even noticing.

Yet how could anyone be so pure in motive, so sensual in delivery? Sara's every gesture spoke of sex, yet her mind showed she was completely unconscious of the impact she had on him. She walked the way she walked, moved the way she moved, because that was how she was made. In fact, she seemed unable to accept the reality that she truly was a beautiful and intriguing woman. Jack didn't need his demonic insights to realize why Sara had problems finding a man. Most men would be frightened by the intense aura of female power she projected.

Frightened? Hell, Jack was scared stiff.

"We're here," Sara called as she pulled up next to Katra's piece of junk.

"What are you still doing with that creep?" Katra demanded as soon as they got within range of her voice.

"He's going to fix your car," Sara explained.

"I never said I was going to--"

"You're not answering my question," Katra interrupted. "Sara, look at him. He's got horns under that hat and wings under that shirt. You've got to get away from him."

"Go fix Katra's car," Sara ordered Jack.

He got out of Sara's car, walked over to Katra's ancient Chevy, and popped the hood. Black smoke billowed out. Add a little sulphur and a few thousand degrees of temperature and it would have been positively homey.

"Magic didn't do in this car," Jack explained. "Old age did."

"Oh." Sara looked momentarily nonplused. "Maybe you should use the money from your lottery ticket to buy a new car, Katra. You have had this thing since high school, after all."

"I haven't cashed my ticket yet and I need to get to school. Besides, I wasted a wish on this crate and I want it fixed." She turned to Jack. "So can you fix my car or are you just some kind of demon gigolo?"

"Katra," Sara protested.

"He's still with you. Don't tell me you weren't doing the nasty."

"Well..."

"I knew it." She shook her head. "I bet he can't fix my car either. Men are so useless."

Jack pressed his hands against the hot engine, probing into the metal. "You threw a rod."

"Oh. Does that mean you can't fix it?"

"I'm not a mechanic."

"You did notice he never answers questions when he doesn't have to, didn't you, Sara?"

Sara nodded.

"Well, magic man," Katra said. "Wiggle your nose or whatever."

Before he could answer, Sara brushed her dark bangs out of her face. "No games, Jack. Are you saying you can't fix it, or just that you see a way to weasel out of doing something good?"

He gave up. "Of course I can fix it. So could a hundred thousand mechanics."

"Yeah, but they'd charge Katra a bundle and keep her car for a week. Come on, Jack. Just do it. Be nice."

Nobody had called Jack nice since the Fall. He'd have a lot to live down when he got back to Hell.

"Maybe you should, you know, zap him," Katra suggested. "It worked pretty well last night."

Sara was trying not to think about last night. It wasn't easy since her body still ached from Jack's touch. Still, seeing what he had done to Katra put things in perspective. Jack just didn't seem to have any moral compulsion at all.

"It's all right," she began.

Jack looked her way but, for once, she couldn't meet his midnight blue eyes. His hands had penetrated the hard metal of the engine block.

"What?"

"How did you do that?" Without conscious volition, one of her hands traced a path down his back, between his wings.

He pulled one hand free holding a broken pipe-like piece of metal. "You mean this?" The cast iron block puddled, then hardened into red-hot metal.

"You put your hands inside the engine." She felt as if someone had stood on her chest.

"Yeah. Because that's where the problem was." He held together the two pieces of pipe, then concentrated. The metal softened, then formed together in a unified whole.

"That's impossible."

"Why? Because I didn't wiggle my nose?"

Katra made choking noises.

"I told you I was dangerous. Imagine what that kind of power would do to a person."

"I think that's what you did to Sara last night," Katra quipped.

"Shut up, Katra," Sara suggested.

"Uh, yeah. Maybe that was over the top. So what are you going to do with that hunk of metal?"

Jack shook his head, then stared at the engine. As she watched, he slid the reforged part back through the engine block and into the cylinder.

He concentrated on Katra's sick engine as if it was the only thing in the world, making invisible adjustments with his hands deep inside the solid metal.

"Start your car now," he said.

"Are you giving me orders?" Katra fired back.

"Katra, please." Sara didn't want to imagine how life would be if she had to constantly make peace between her best friend and her favorite demon.

"All right." Katra stomped toward the car and shoved the keys into the ignition.

"Your hands," Sara gasped at Jack. If they were still in the engine when Katra started it, they could be ground to pieces.

"Don't worry about me."

The roar of Katra's aging Chevy drowned out any further comment. Jack sucked in air. The hard muscles of his forearms bunched into strong knots. Then, he nodded and slowly tugged his hands from the purring engine. "I had to reshape the pistons a little," he admitted.

Sara shook her head. One thing for sure, if Jack decided to hang around, he didn't have to worry about making a living. Any garage in the country would hire him. Katra's car hadn't sounded that good since high school.

"Call me gone," Katra called out when Jack lowered her hood. She squealed away in a cloud of burning rubber.

"We should get going, too," Sara said.

Jack turned to face her. His hands were blackened, covered with grease and oil from Katra's engine. A smudge smeared across his nose.

He followed her gaze with his eyes then smiled. "That I can fix." With a flash of white heat, the oil vanished. "Now we can go." Heat patterns rose from his shadow.

Greatly daring, she reached out a single finger and touched his hand, then jumped away as if she'd touched an oven. "You're hot."

"I had to melt the metal. It wasn't bad. Nothing like what I face most days."

She shook her head. How could anyone endure burning fire for century after century? She would have gone crazy. But, while Jack had a number of crazy ideas, overall, he seemed as sane as anyone she'd ever met.

An idea popped into her mind. "Could you see into the engine or did you have to touch whatever you were adjusting?"

"I could see."

"Is there a distance limitation? I mean, could you see into the earth for thousands of meters?"



"Maybe."

Things were looking up. A talent like that would certainly help in the petroleum engineering and prospecting business. Maybe Jack wasn't here for sex. Maybe he was here to help her get rich. "Let's go to Oklahoma."

## Chapter 5

"Are you hungry?" Sara's stomach gurgled and she realized she'd completely forgotten breakfast. "We can grab lunch before we hit the lease."

Jack gave her an uncomfortable stare. "Demons don't eat." His pause sent a chill arrow through her heart. "At least not normal food."

"Not even Mexican?" She wasn't sure which was worse: Jack's implications, or a lifetime without food. For that matter, if anyone had told her yesterday that she'd miss breakfast because of great lovemaking, she would have called them crazy.

He shook his head. "I could try if it bothers you."

"Darned right it bothers me." She'd feel like an idiot sitting there chowing down while Jack just watched. All she needed was a boyfriend who made her feel like a glutton.

"All right. I can do that."

That handled the first part of her problem. "So what do demons eat?"

"You don't want to know."

Sara felt certain of that. Still, she'd spent the night with Jack and she needed to know the basics. "You don't eat people, do you? Like in that Twilight Zone episode?"

His eyes held all of the sorrows in the world. "I guess some might eat a person if they had the chance." He took a breath. "I never have."

"Don't string me out."

"We survive on pain, suffering. That's why we do what we do."

"You mean you can't live without creating misery?" This was more serious than she'd thought--and she'd thought it was pretty serious.

Jack managed a short laugh. "We don't have to create it. That's done for us. Hell creates it naturally. Out here, you people do it for us. It runs around free, sort of like an all- you-can-eat buffet."

"So there isn't a problem." Sara pulled into a Sammy Delight.

"It isn't that easy. You know what happened with Katra?"

Sara nodded. She was sure she didn't want to hear what Jack had to say about Katra. "Yeah."

"Her wishes backfired. Well, that's how it works. Whatever we do, it changes to shit."

Sara blushed bright red just as a middle-aged man appeared, hitching his oversized overalls over an oversized belly. The man signaled for her to roll down her window.

"Whatcha want?"

"Just a second." She rolled the car's window back up and turned her attention to Jack. "Don't tell me you're going to turn last night to, uh, manure."

"You had me tied down, remember."

She remembered and blushed again. The man outside must think she was some sort of freak.

"Try to eat, then. I mean food."

Jack shrugged. "From what I've heard about these places, eating here isn't that far different from eating trouble."

Sara shot an elbow into his side. "Hey, I love this kind of food."

A quick menu scan showed no changes since she'd been to her last Sammy Delight the previous week. She rolled the window back down. "A burger and a Diet Coke."

"I think I'd like to try Oysters Rockefeller," Jack said. "Or maybe caviar. They're supposed to be good."

"You want that kind of pussy food, maybe you should go back to Dallas where you came from," their waiter growled. "We serve American food."

"Make that two burgers," Sara told him. "And a large order of cheese fries. And a regular Coke."

"I had my heart set on Oysters Rockefeller," Jack complained as their waiter headed back to the kitchen. He spoke just loudly enough to be heard and the man turned and started back.

"He's just kidding," Sara assured him.

"Do you want to tell me what that was all about?" she demanded.

"See what I mean? When you suggested eating, I just thought I'd try some of the things I've heard about. Naturally it turned out wrong."

"You didn't do that on purpose?"

Jack shrugged. "How would I know he'd be sensitive about his menu. You'd think he'd be proud of it or change it."

Sara glared at Jack and tried to assess pros and cons. Sure he was a wonderful lover, but did she really want to spend time with someone who seemed to get into trouble everywhere he went? For that matter, he'd already created problems between herself and Katra.

The man waddled back with a tray he hooked to the Miata window. His hands clenched into fists as Jack reached across Sara to take one of the burgers.

"Thanks, Mister," Sara blurted. "Keep your mouth shut," she whispered to Jack.

"You say something to me?" Large and fat seemed aching for a fight.

"I told my friend to keep his mouth shut. I'm tired of his jokes about oysters."

"You and me both, lady."

"That went well," Jack observed as their waiter headed back to the kitchen.

"Shut up and eat." It wasn't the greatest comeback, but Sara was hungry. She'd do better later.

Jack bit into his burger and made a face. "People actually eat this?"

"Yeah. It's good."

"It's got four hundred and fifty grams of saturated fat, eight hundred calories, and it was cooked three days ago and warmed up in a microwave."

All of a sudden, the burger didn't look quite so appetizing. "You're making that up."

"No, ma'am."

"Don't try to talk like a Texan. You can't fake it."

"And those, uh, potato things. They have--"

"I don't want to hear this," Sara announced, covering her ears. She never gained weight so she figured she could choke down a few extra fat grams if she wanted to.

"Right." He took another bite.

"Well?"

"On a scale of one to ten, it fell off the cliff."

"It grows on you." She took a bite of her own burger. Despite Jack's concerns, it was delicious. The cheese on the fries had congealed perfectly so she grabbed a wad of those too and stuffed them into her mouth.

"Perhaps for our next meal, we should try oysters Rockefeller," Jack suggested. "Maybe they're even worse." He did, Sara noticed, take another bite of the burger. When she offered him the fries, he shook his head with a shudder.

"There's a reason they call them Rockefeller," she observed. "They're for rich people. Poor folks like me eat burgers."

"Poor?"

"I'm sure not rich."

"Hum. But if we found some petroleum products, you could get rich and we could eat other foods."

"I happen to like this kind of food. And I'm doing this for pay, not to get rich." Unfortunately. The Texas oil industry had laughed her parents out of it for refusing to give up old-fashioned dousing and nobody had volunteered to stake her despite her science degrees. Someday she'd start her own company, but today wasn't the day.

"Still, if we find something, perhaps we can celebrate tonight with something healthier.

If Sara had her way, she'd celebrate tonight, all right. Not with oysters, though. Neither of them needed any artificial encouragement. Still, Sara couldn't hold back a giggle.

"What?"

"No oysters. Besides, they won't be able to prove out the lease for at least a year."

A cute teen-something blonde emerged from the Sammy Delight and thrust a bag at them.

"I didn't order anything else."

"Huh? Oh. It's on the house." She seemed completely enraptured with Jack. "If I can get you anything else, just let me know. I get off in a couple of hours."

"That sounds nice," Jack said.

"Forget it," Sara corrected. She dumped the tray onto the ground, cranked her ignition, shifted into reverse and accelerated out of the parking lot.

Old and fat headed out after them waving a knife.

"I think that was his daughter," she observed.

"She seemed friendly. Not like him."

"I'm sure she's real friendly. She wants you between her legs."

Jack nodded. "I saw that the second she noticed me."

"So why did you encourage her?"

Jack looked as if he couldn't fathom Sara's line of question, then his face cleared. "Oh, you were worried that I would damage her. I would make you ward me down first."

Sara bit back an angry shriek, floored the accelerator, and cranked up the volume on her stereo. Demons or humans, men were all the same.

After her late date and the car breakdown, Katra was happy to make it to her first period of classes. She could make up the prep time later.

She should have been tired after her late night, but she still hadn't come down from the sight of Jack shoving his arms into her Corsica's engine. That and the look in Sara's eyes. A look that went beyond amazement.

When the bell finally rang for her mid-morning break, she dismissed her students and headed for the staff lounge.

She hadn't been expecting wild parties during school hours, but she had thought there would be a little something going on. It wasn't every day they won the lottery. In fact, the most they'd ever won before had been twelve dollars.

"Do I get anything extra because it was my ticket?" she asked.

"What are you talking about?" Big-mouth Lena Bovade snapped the question like she'd snapped towels during P.E. back when they'd been in high school together.

"Are you kidding? Nobody happened to notice we won the lottery?" Katra looked around the lounge. Fred and Lester were arguing about some geometry proof and Tina was working with her hair. All the usual suspects. "I'm surprised nobody called in rich."

"Oh, yeah. I'm trying to decide how to spend the big bucks now," Lena griped. "I'm torn between a new bra and getting the Oprah book this month."

"Twenty million dollars," Katra sang. "With your share, you can buy everything in Victoria's Secrets and a years subscription to Oprah's books. Maybe she'll even come visit you."

"Uh-oh. Nobody told her." Lena looked around the room as if trying to find a missing suspect. "Isn't somebody going to help me with this?"

"Gotta get back to class," Fred muttered. He grabbed a pack of cigarettes from the coffee table and headed out the door.

Katra's heart started pounding. "Don't kid me. I checked the number."

Lena shook her head. "Well, we saw the amount going up and so we thought we'd increase our chances."

Katra's bad feeling turned into a sick feeling. "Talk."

"We went in with the maintenance crew."

Relief. She tried to do the arithmetic. "Not bad. Their eight, plus ten in maintenance. Eighteen. Still over a million each. Not the same as two and a half, but not bad either.

"Try five hundred in maintenance. They do it with the Union so it's across the entire Mesquite School District."

For once, Katra was almost grateful for her math block. "Twenty million divided by five hundred and eight. That doesn't sound like much."

"Uh, we took cash option."

"Oh, dear."

"And there were five winners with the same number. We each get less than five thousand."

"Well, that explains why nobody staying home celebrating."

"Yeah," Lena agreed. "At least it'll pay my air conditioner bill this summer."

It wasn't supposed to work this way. Katra tried to remember exactly what she'd asked Jack for. She sure hadn't had five thousand dollars in mind.

"I guess that means I'm driving the Corsica for another couple of years," she observed.

"If you would just tell your mother and sister to go out and get jobs of their own, you wouldn't be in this crunch all the time," Lena told her.

Katra collapsed on one of the overstuffed chairs that decorated the lounge and still smelled vaguely of cigarette smoke although the lounge had been off-limits to tobacco at least as long as she had been teaching. She knew it would be better for everyone if her mother and Mona got jobs. She also knew that there was no way in the world that she could threaten them, let alone follow through on it. And the only way Mona would ever get off her butt was if she had to. Dang.

"A cup of coffee will make you feel better," Lena suggested.

"A shot of vodka would make me start to feel better. Two might actually get me a little cheerful. Coffee will only make me feel more awake. Right now I wish I was still asleep dreaming of being rich."

Or maybe this whole thing was a nightmare. She pinched herself. "Ouch."

"I already tried that." Lena laughed. "Five grand is better than a poke in the eye, anyway."

"Yeah." So much for her wishes. At least Derrick had turned out all right. She suppressed the sudden queasy feeling. Of course Derrick was all right.

Katra ignored her own advice and took a sip of the hot sweet coffee Lena had put together for her. "Thanks."

The bell rang just before she could take a second sip. Katra looked at her watch. "Since I'm not rich, I'd better get back to class."

As she turned the corner to her classroom, her peripheral vision caught sight of something moving--something that looked like Derrick. By the time she turned her head, it was gone.

She must have Derrick on the brain, Katra decided. There was no way he would be wandering around Maude E. Smithson Elementary School.

"After last night, I can't believe you were seriously interested in that little tramp." Sara heard her voice climb a full octave between when she'd started the sentence and when she finished, but she didn't have enough self-control to stop. In fact, she didn't want that much self-control.

She jammed down on the accelerator but her Miata slowed, then coasted to a stop. "Oh, great. Now my car is broken."

"It's all right. I just stopped it."

"Why? Getting a little too hot for you? Or did you want to go back to little miss blonde?"

Jack shook his head. "I'm used to the heat. And I don't understand your big issue with Amber. I told you we could work it so she wouldn't get hurt."

"I wasn't worried about her getting hurt." Sara switched off the engine, then turned it back on. She could hear the engine running but it didn't seem to be sending any power through the transmission. "How did you destroy my car?"

"You always ask two things at once. I wonder if you really want an answer."

Jack had a point. Sara didn't want an answer. She wanted to hear him admit that he'd made a terrible mistake even looking at another woman and that he'd never do it again. She also wanted to mash down on her accelerator and see how fast she could get her car moving--preferably with Jack on the side of the road somewhere. Or maybe under the tires. Also, he had a nasty ability to avoid answering any questions at all. Like he was right then.

"All right, first questions first. Tell me what's wrong with my car."

"My stupid promise came into effect again. You were going to run that light and crash. You could have been hurt and I couldn't let that happen."

"I wouldn't have run any light."

He nodded glumly. "You were so mad you didn't even see it."

That wasn't the only signal she'd missed. Steering clear of the local bad boys was something she'd painfully learned in school. So why had she fallen for one again? And why, even after seeing Jack eye little Amber or whatever her name was, did Sara still want him?

She had to put the whole thing behind her. "Well let up on the brakes. We've got a lease to check out." When they got back to Dallas, she'd figure out how to send Jack back to Hell where he belonged.

"Are you going to answer my question?" Jack demanded.

"I forgot you had one."

"Yeah. I asked why you were so pissed."

As if he couldn't figure it out. "You can't go around scratching the itch of every oversexed teenaged girl."

Jack gave her the look she'd come to recognize as his reading her thoughts. His normally serious expression changed to a grin. "You're jealous. I forgot about the human exclusivity myth and you're jealous." He made it sound like a wonderful discovery.

"I'm not jealous." The idea was silly.

As she watched him in her rear view mirror, Sara saw a transformation cross Jack's face. He looked saddened, even concerned, to her surprise.

"Please Sara, don't lie. Not even to yourself. It's important. I think you can take it from me that it isn't a good idea."

Some day, Sara would have to put Jack on the spot and find out about this angel and demon thing. The poor thing seemed full of contradictions. He couldn't lie and it pained him when others did. Yet he flinched when anyone spoke of God. He kept his promises even when breaking them would have been easy. Yet he seemed completely unconcerned with others' feelings.

"Maybe I was a little jealous," she admitted. "A woman can't really enjoy sex without making herself believe there is something special there. A relationship."

Jack's smile faded. "I'd heard of the exclusivity myth but I never experienced it first hand. All of the scientific evidence proves that humans are not naturally monogamous."

Sara took a calming breath and counted to five. Neither helped. "You are such a typical man. Just because you can't keep your prick under control, you think everyone is like that. Think again."

Jack nodded. "Nobody has ever cared enough about me to be jealous before. It's sweet."

"I'm over it now. I'm over you now. Completely cured."

"You're not. But you should be. No matter what I do, no matter how hard I try, you'll end up hurt."

"I can take care of myself." Sara had always taken care of herself before.

"You've spelled yourself into a bigger problem than you've ever had before."

"I've known plenty of men who have to sleep with anything in a skirt. Just because you can't control yourself, what makes you think you're so special?"

Jack lowered the window and made a gesture. A fork of lightning blasted the traffic light turning it instantly green. "Little things."

Sara stared at the crooked bolt through the air sustained by nothing and supported by nothing. "Oh."

"But you're wrong about one thing."

"What's that?"

"I may not have the universe's greatest control, but I certainly don't have any need to sleep with anything in a skirt. Now that I know it bothers you, I won't."

"Really?" Sara had heard plenty of men promise that they would never go wrong again. Of course all Jack had really done was to check out the blonde bimbo. Just about any guy she knew would have done that--it's just that they would have lied about it.

"Really," he answered. "Or at least for a few thousand years."

Sara told herself she should tell him to go ahead and do what he wanted, for him not to worry about her. Only she couldn't make herself do it. Even thinking about Jack with another woman hurt more than she would have guessed possible.

She glanced at the traffic light, which had switched between red and green about six times since Jack had stalled her car but had stayed green since Jack had blasted it. Just as Jack had promised, she powered through without any problem.

They drove a few minutes in silence as Sara worked through what had just happened. "I guess that's the end of our problem, then," she finally concluded.

Jack gave her a half smile. "I don't think you grasp how big a problem this is."

Maybe it was just relief, or maybe it was the look in little Miss Amber's eyes when she'd mentally attacked Jack, but all of a sudden, Sara's libido had switched into overtime. "Why don't you whip it out and let's see whether we can take care of the, ah, problem, right here."

"Very funny." He paused for a moment. The expression that crossed his face could have been pain, but it could also have been desire. Then he shook his head and all his expression vanished. "Since I promised I would never hurt you, you put me in a bit of a paradox here."

"Speaking of here, we're at the lease. What do you think?"



Jack looked around at the desolate country. "Boring. Looks sort of like Hell only cooler."

"It's got to be a hundred and twenty."

"A lot cooler."

Sara looked at him with pity. "Oh. So that's why you aren't in a hurry to go back."

He started to nod, then stopped. It had been the reason, of course. Anything was an improvement after Hell. Now, even though he'd only spent a day with Sara, his reasons were more complex. He had managed to have sex without damaging anyone. He hadn't done any particularly great evil--although he wasn't sure Katra would agree when she got to know Derrick better--and he hadn't been hounded by Angels or other demons. Not yet.

He decided to temporize. "That's part of it."

Sara flushed. Obviously he hadn't been indirect enough. Still, she was the one who had been propositioning him only seconds before.

She pulled off the paved road and bumped for a couple of miles on a rough dirt trail then parked under a tree. "All right, we're here. Time to earn our keep. Do you see any natural gas down there?"

"It isn't that easy. I can look straight down at any point, but I only see what's directly beneath. I can't scan hundreds of acres at a time."

He matched his action to his words, peering through the soil and into the rock structure that underlay everything.

"Well, looking straight down, do you see gas?"

He stared harder, picking up the heated pressure that buckled up against the rock dome. "Yeah. Some. Maybe."

"Good." Sara grinned.

"I thought you wanted me to give you a definite answer."

Her smile broadened. "I did. But then I realized something. If you could do it all, what possible use would I be? I spent five years in college getting my degree. I sort of like the idea that I didn't throw away my time."

She seemed content with her answer, but Jack wasn't. "You're in charge. You just tell me what to do and I do it. You'll get the credit and the money regardless of whether you did anything to help."

She shook her head. "For someone who can look into a person's soul, you don't get it, do you? Do you really think I want to be some sort of parasite living off of you? When my parents went bankrupt, I promised them I'd build a petroleum business for them. I intend to do the building, not just sit back and watch the money come in from what you do."

"I guess I understand."

"All right, here's what we do. I'll look at the rock formations and set off a few test explosions. With any luck, I'll be able to locate a few prime spots. Then you can work your magic."

"Uh, can I finish my burger first?" To his surprise, he'd actually gotten used to the thing. Besides, eating

was a cheap way to add a little more substance to the illusion he created.

Sara blushed. "Uh, sure. I'm sorry I dumped the fries."

They walked to the other side of the tree and sat and Jack let his taste buds experiment with food. It was fascinating.

He looked up to see Sara staring at him.

"What?"

She giggled. "You're eating that thing like you're afraid someone will take it away from you."

"Did you come from a big family?"

She wrinkled her forehead, trying to follow his train of thought. "After my parents died, it was just me and my grandmother."

"Imagine living in a family of millions, where there are only a few bites to go around." That was a pale picture of Hell but he couldn't explain it in words. He very much feared that if she stayed with him much longer, she would have plenty of opportunity to see it herself. "It doesn't encourage leisurely meals."

"Oh." Sara frowned for a moment, then brightened. "Well I won't steal your burger. Relax and enjoy it."

Relaxing and enjoying were two things demons had a hard time doing. Jack resolved to give it a good try. When he was back in Hell, he'd have thousands of years to remember the sensations.

Sara leaned against the side of her car. A bead of sweat collected on her cheek, then rolled down to her neck where she dabbed it off with a paper napkin. She took a bite of her own burger, then closed her eyes in the sensual enjoyment of its taste.

Her thin top clung to her body like a second skin highlighting her slender curves. "I'm a complete mess," she complained.

Never before had torture been so sweet. Sara's teasing a few minutes before had already inflamed his desire. Now his arousal created a steady ache that impelled him. "I don't find you so."

"Oh? You like women who drip with sweat?"

He could hardly have avoided hearing the sarcasm. It didn't matter. "Apparently. Perhaps because I am used to, shall we say, warmer climes." He reached out and ran a hard finger up the outside of her thigh. "I wonder if you would like to continue our explorations of last night?"

"You want to do it here, in the middle of everywhere?" Sara made an expansive gesture that took in the surrounding countryside. A countryside that, with the exception of a scrawny goat, looked completely deserted.

Jack didn't understand human shame over their bodies, but he was aware of it. "Would it be easier for you if we stepped a hundred yards away from the road? We could be safer from prying eyes."

Sara's eyes rested on the bulge in his jeans. "The idea does have a certain animal appeal."

With demons, the appeal was ethereal, not animal but the appeal was stronger than he had ever felt. "Well then." Jack scooped Sara up and started toward a line of trees that hid a small, nearly dried, creek.

"Stop." Sara commanded.

What he wanted wouldn't hurt her. Far from it. He ignored her demand.

"You can't just do this," she pleaded.

He risked a look into her soul. She might be protesting, but her protest didn't go deep. Good. He could continue.

It amazed him that, even after sending a day with this woman, he wanted her--wanted her more than ever. More, even, than the previous night when he'd been so long without sex. In Hell, sex was fraught with too many perils to be even considered. With Sara, it was different, strange. It just wasn't demonic to desire a human so badly.

"Jack." The word fell somewhere between a protest and a plea that he continue.

He looked into her again to ensure he wasn't misreading the situation. A strange doubt circled in her mind, entwined with her desire. He'd have to dispel her doubts or stop. Jack didn't want to stop.

Perhaps, if Sara felt his need, his desire for her, her doubts would be alleviated. Perhaps, of course, they would be heightened. Either way, he could deal with it. He pressed his lips to hers.

She froze for an instant and he wondered if he had misjudged the situation again. Sara could change so quickly, so unpredictably, that reading her didn't always provide much guidance. Perhaps it was this undemonlike quality that he found compelling. A demon, of course, was utterly predictable. He reacted to need and advantage. To Jack, Sara was an alien but irresistible treat.

He held his position, his lips still touching hers, brushing rather than pressing for more than she wanted to give. Jack breathed deeply, waiting. The earthly plane could be a tactile overload even without the satiny touch of a woman's lips, the softness over muscle of her legs against his arm. The touch of air against his body, both lacking in Hell, accentuated the power of the moment.

For one heartbeat, then two, Sara lay still in his arms. Slowly, he broke contact moving his lips from hers. He had after all pressed too hard, misjudged the moment, broken his promise. Well, demons are used to judging wrong.

Severing their touch seemed to undo a spell. Sara came to life, glared at him with wide-pupiled eyes, then tightened her arms around his neck. She crushed her lips against his. Her tongue met his lips, pressed for an opening, then probed into his mouth.

Perhaps he hadn't misjudged so badly after all. Jack stumbled, so caught in the moment that he had

retracted his senses and hadn't even noticed the rock that blocked his path. Although he regained his balance quickly, the lurch had tugged Sara's lips from his.

"This is insane," she breathed.

He nodded. She was right. He needed to flee, to confuse the path that warding angels would trace to haul him back to the confines of Hell. Sara needed anything but a demon. Still, even if he had been free of his promise, he couldn't have left Sara now. Not when she looked at him with such desire--such trust in her eyes.

Gently he set her down on the soft sand beside a stream that had been hidden behind the row of trees.

He lost all sense of time in the kiss, the delightful torture of needing Sara so badly his wings trembled. Finally she pulled away. Her breath came fast rising and lowering her breasts under the thin silk of her blouse.

"I have to ask you something," she said.

"You know I can't lie."

"Then tell me why you are doing this."

"Because I want to. Because it will give both of us pleasure." He smiled bitterly. "A demon has few enough opportunities for pleasure, darling."

She shuddered at his endearment and he wondered where it had come from. "Tell me this is for me, not just to relieve your sexual frustrations."

He examined his thoughts and realized that he'd pushed all memories of the waitress out of his mind. His feelings for Sara were different--not unsexual, but more than that. Probably because she wanted him as much as he wanted her. "With you, I feel joy from shared pleasure," he answered carefully. "It is very strange."

Sara laughed, a sound that bubbled with the brook to gladden the spot that should have held his soul. "Is it strange? That's how I feel too."

"It's impossible, of course. I must be lying to myself somehow." The admission cost him because he knew she could pull away. Why couldn't he settle for a partial truth, the way he so often did?

"I don't believe you." She reached an arm behind his head and pulled him toward her. "Kiss me again. Make love to me before I change my mind."

He shuddered at her use of the 'L' word. Luckily he'd already set her down or he might have dropped her.

"What?"

"I can't hear that word."

"You mean L--"

He put his fingers to her lips. "It is one name for the powerful one. Please."

Sara looked concerned, then winked. "How about, sex me up?"

"Now that, I can stand."

The previous night, Sara's wards had held him, prevented him from using his powers. Now her ward only kept Jack close to her. His promise bound him more tightly than the wards had, but it gave him latitude. Latitude to lead. To take what he wanted. To take pleasure from giving it rather than passively accept what Sara chose to give him.

He ran his hands down Sara's sides burning away the silk fabric of her blouse and the denim of her jeans in a quick burst of white-hot flame. As he'd planned, the clothing was consumed before the heat could reach her. The flame left Sara, abruptly, dressed only in the thin pink bra and panty set she'd worn.

All in all, Sara made a picture any demon could appreciate. The satin fabric of her panties accentuated rather than detracting from the smooth muscles of her bottom and the narrowness of her waist. Any demon would appreciate it. Jack didn't plan to share.

"What did you do to my clothes?"

"This." He let himself blaze for the smallest fraction of an instant and his own clothing fell from him in ashes.

"We can't buy new clothes every time we have sex."

He barely contained the burning heat that started. "I can afford new clothes every few thousand years."

"Will it be that rare?" Her eyes filled with pain, with concern for him. Damn.

"Demons learn to appreciate the joys of the moment. Can we do that here?"

She sighed, then pulled him closer. "All right, but next time, ask first. That was my favorite top."

"Maybe we can have you win the lottery. You can buy more."

Sara drew her eyebrows together in a quick frown. "Don't joke about this, Jack."

He nodded silently. The word sorry had been on the tip of his tongue. A demon never apologized.

"Kiss me again, please." Her whisper urged him to follow his own desires.

Yesterday she had held him in bondage, helpless to resist while she had her will with him. Today it was Jack's turn. His promise, together with the hard core of Sara's wards, would prevent him from damaging her. Beyond that narrow limit, he could do so much. He intended to do it all.

He bent his lips to Sara. With one of his wings, he traced her skin from the lacy panties up her hard stomach to her breasts. He let the temperature build up in the tip of his wing until it reached her breasts, the heat penetrating the thin weave of her bra.

Her nipples hardened to his touch.

"You like this better than when I held you down, don't you?" Sara breathed the words so softly he could never have heard them without a demon's sensitized hearing.

He shrugged. "Pleasure is pleasure. A demon takes it where he can."

"I don't believe you."

"It was only partially true, I guess. All demons prefer to be in control." Another true statement.

"Not all demons care about their mate's pleasure. You told me so yourself. And don't try to tell me you don't care." She brushed a knuckle against the back of his wing where it lay molten on her breast. "Could it be that you aren't like other demons?"

A terrible guilt washed over him. Sara wanted, so desperately, to believe the best of him. That belief could destroy her more totally than anything he could do. Yet he couldn't deny what he had admitted to himself only a moment before. Sara was different. Or at least, he was different in how he reacted to her.

"I have heard that a woman gives more pleasure to her mate if she finds pleasure in his touch. I am willing to experiment."

"Is that what demons say? Or are you just repeating something you've read?"

He shook his head. "I haven't heard a demon say that. Perhaps it is a knowledge I will take back to them when we have finished."

Sara's face twisted for an instant, the flash of emotion coming so fast he couldn't read it before it had vanished. Then she laughed. "I'm supposed to make love with you so you can brag about it to the other demons in Hell's locker room?"

That word tore through him like a white-hot spike through his heart. Humans could use words so casually, little knowing the power they held. Sara had meant have sex, yet she had used that fatal word love. Even the memory of that beautiful word hurt.

"What?" Concern crossed Sara's beautiful face.

"You said it again." He made himself smile. "Don't worry about it. It's a demon thing, you wouldn't understand."

Sara laughed again. "That is the stupidest thing I've ever heard. Kiss me so I don't have to listen to any more of it."

Jack lowered his lips to hers.

Sara's body purred in Jack's embrace. Her tongue met his, battled, lost as he thrust into her mouth, then pursued when he retreated. Last night, she had been the aggressor, taking what she wanted. Minutes ago, it had seemed that Jack had turned the tables. Now, she felt as if each could do what they wished, that neither dominated. Each sought both to give and to take pleasure in the other's arms.

She reached a hand between his legs and grasped his hard erection, stroking it and glorying at its reaction to her touch. For an instant, its heat flared, almost burning her hand.

Jack must have noticed her flinch. "Sorry," he muttered. "You humans are so fragile."

"I'm not as fragile as all that." She hadn't broken when she'd drawn him into her. She didn't plan on breaking when he entered her again. And again.

His lips traced a fiery path from her lips to her chin, the hollow of her neck, to the dip between her breasts. Then he caught one of her nipples between his teeth biting down lightly as his tongue played with its hardened point.

She squeezed more tightly on his erection, her body responding both to his touch and to what she held, her womb opening up, calling for Jack's entry, aching to be joined with him, filled with him.

She slid her free hand down his ribs, then lightly grasped his scrotum squeezing it just enough to feel its movement.

Jack gasped.

"Does it hurt to hold in your heat?" She asked.

Against her breast she felt his lips shift into a smile. He pulled away for a moment, then murmured in her ear. "It is like delaying an orgasm. There is a certain frustration, but the reward makes it worthwhile.

"You're assuming there will be a reward."

"I can read your thoughts. It makes it easy for me to please you. It also makes it silly to play these games."

She had been playing a game, Sara realized. Maybe that was why none of her previous relationships had lasted. She had been afraid to let any man see the real Sara, choosing instead to joke around. Jack could see into her, read the truths she had always hidden--even hidden from herself. He could please her because he knew her deepest secrets. Please her more because, even knowing them, he wanted her.

"You're right," she said. "But I want there to be a reward. I want both of us to be happy."

"I'm a demon. I don't deserve happiness."

"Nobody deserves it. It's a gift."

Jack pulled away just far enough so she could see his dark eyes. "Sara, I can't have happiness." He paused a moment, then continued. "I didn't even think I could have pleasure. You've shown me I was wrong about that, at least. Let me enjoy it. Don't ask for what can't be."

She swallowed hard, trying to hold back the tears. How could any being exist, century after century, without a chance for happiness?

"Don't pity me." Jack almost growled.

"No? Then let me pleasure you." She bent her lips to his arousal wanting to give him what he could take, needing to hide her tears from him.

He reached a strong finger under her chin and pulled her face back to him. "Not now."

"But--"

He pressed one hand over her lips, then lowered her to the ground. One finger touched her between her legs and the tiny panties her girlfriends had given her for her twenty-fifth birthday and she'd never dared wear before vanished in a flash of fire.

Jack's heat might not burn her skin, but it certainly burned inside of her. She tugged him onto her, pressing her hips against him, demanding that he take her.

Jack slid inside of her. Already she was accommodating his size.

Something, it felt like a tree root, dug at her back and caused her a moment of pain.

She must have winced, because Jack stopped. "Did I hurt you."

"Not you. I--"

"Oh." He tugged her against his body, thrusting himself even more deeply into her. To her surprise, though, whatever had jabbed her in the back wasn't bothering her any more. In fact, she couldn't feel anything against her back at all.

Jack gave her that beautiful smile that made him look like a real angel, then began to move within her, creating a rhythm that seemed to extend beyond his body, beyond her body, into the atmosphere that surrounded them both.

She found the rhythm in herself, matched it to his, let Jack take control.

Her body felt as if it weighed nothing. Jack's body too, seemed weightless. It covered her without pressing down on her. She looked at him in wonder, then forgot to think about anything as the sexual energy built up in her, rising like flood waters swept in by a hurricane, until she could hold it off no longer and released herself into orgasm.

Jack's face appeared radiant, yet it felt no warmer than usual when she kissed him. He had slowed down the pace for a moment, letting her enjoy her release, but when she had caught her breath, he found the rhythm where he had left it.

Again the pleasure built up within her. This time, she felt Jack's own release and let it trigger a second orgasm.

She had made love outside, in the middle of the Oklahoma prairie, and it felt softer than the daintiest feather bed she could imagine. Then she looked down and screamed.

Katra gathered her course outlines and her purse. She told herself she'd delayed leaving because she needed to finish grading her students' homework to free up her evening, but she wasn't really convinced. All day, whenever she'd stepped out of her classroom, she had caught glimpses of someone who looked like Derrick.

She cracked open the door to the teachers' lounge and peered out.

A hint of movement seen only in her peripheral vision raced her heart. But it was only a janitorial crew. What was wrong with her? Derrick had been sweet, hadn't even tried to get into her pants.

She dismissed last night's paranoid notion he might somehow have found out about her winning lottery ticket. Her share wouldn't be enough to attract a homeless person, let alone someone who had made millions in software.

Still, she tiptoed down the hall, starting at every sound.

Her Chevy sat alone in the middle of the teacher parking lot and she breathed deeply suddenly aware that she'd been holding her breath. What was wrong with her? She liked Derrick, didn't she?

As she turned out of the parking lot and onto Main Street, she caught a glimpse of midnight blue paint in her rear view mirror. Derrick's Jaguar pulled alongside.

She reluctantly lowered her window at his commanding gesture. "Hey, guy. What's up?" She tried to sound cheerful. It wasn't Derrick's fault she was paranoid.



"Hi, darling. I've been thinking about you all day. I made reservations at Joe T. Garcia's in Fort Worth."

Be honest, Katra. Was there any reason in the world not to go? She'd asked for a boyfriend and Sara's demon had delivered. Well, shouldn't she get some benefit out of her wishes? Then again, Jack had managed to ruin the other two wishes.

"Are you always this way when you go after a woman, Derrick?" She couldn't escape her fear that Derrick only wanted her because of something Jack had done.

Derrick nodded. "When I find a girl I like, I let her know about it. I'm not one to beat around the bush."

Her fear wasn't assuaged, but she felt somewhat better. "All right, Derrick. I'll see you at seven."

He gave her a little salute and zoomed off.

Katra sat still for a good minute, until someone behind her got impatient and leaned on his horn.

She waved the jerk around her and ignored his impatient gestures. She didn't want to go home to her mother and sister. She knew Sara was in Oklahoma today so she couldn't talk to her friend. Finally she decided to head for Sara's grandmother's place. The woman was a little eccentric, but she was a great listener.

Maura lived in a prairie style bungalow a few miles from Sara's apartment in a historic district in South Dallas. Her home had huge rooms, high ceilings, and always smelled of something baking. It was Katra's ideal of a perfect grandmother house although its lavender color put off more than a few who saw it for the first time.

Katra almost drove on when she saw the black Lexus in Maura's driveway.

The Reverend Bob was one of Maura's favorites, but he tended to get excited about things. Still, the alternative was home and Katra definitely wasn't ready to go there.

Maura came bounding out of her house before Katra had decided what to do next. At seventy-five, Maura still had more energy than Katra and her sister combined. "Come on in," the woman demanded. "I just pulled some peanut butter cookies out of the oven."

Peanut butter cookies were one of Katra's weaknesses--admittedly one of many weaknesses. She followed Maura in, helped herself to a cookie, then nodded at the Reverend Bob.

Reverend Bob looked like a young Johnny Cash, all in black with a near-permanent frown. "I hear you got yourself a new boyfriend," he observed.

"My mother called and bragged," Katra guessed.

Reverend Bob nodded. "Actually, I heard it from three of your neighbors first. She thinks this Derrick person is going to save the entire family. He's rich, good looking, and has all the right social connections."

Katra sank into one of Maura's Lazy Boy recliners. "My mother is like that. There's always something that will make our lives complete--of course it's never anything we can do ourselves."

"You don't seem quite so enthusiastic about this young man," Maura commented. She poured Katra a cup of tea and handed her a plate fully laden with cookies.

Katra shook her head. "I'm probably being paranoid but all day long I've had this feeling that he was

watching me."

"Sounds like love," Maura cooed.

When she put it that way, maybe that was all it was. "I'm not sure--"

"Sounds like stalking," Reverend Bob interrupted.

"I never got a close look. It might not even have been him."

"I've never known you to imagine things," Maura pointed out.

Of course Maura hadn't been over at Sara's when they'd summoned a demon. That was imagination running wild. Katra decided to keep her mouth shut, for once.

Reverend Bob stood. "May I use your computer, Maura?"

"Oh, I was hoping you would. I know they are supposed to be so easy, but I'm always afraid I'll click the wrong thing. Do you think you could show me where to find those MP-3 files you were telling me about? The Orthodox Chants."

Reverend Bob smiled. "Of course. But first let's see what we can find about this Derrick. If he's a stalker, he's probably done it before."

Katra took a sip of her tea and almost spewed it on the end table. Maura had laced it with something strong.

"You looked a little pale," Sara's grandmother told her.

The alcohol burned as it went down, but Katra did feel a little more human. "Thanks."

"Have another cookie."

The Reverend Bob clicked onto the Internet. Katra leaned over his shoulder, watching the long lists of sexual predators roll down.

"I didn't know you could just look them up." She'd always thought there was a little more privacy than that, although protecting sexual predators' privacy didn't sound brilliant.

"The Lord works in strange ways," Reverend Bob answered. "In this case, some of our Church brothers have posted the lists to secure church sites."

"Oh." Sara thought a moment. "Do you have any who claim to be demons?"

The Reverend Bob's hand froze. "Why do you ask?"

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Sara's scream brought Jack back from heights of ecstasy he'd been certain he would never reach again.

"Ohmygod," Sara shouted in his ear.

He almost lost his grip. "Don't say that word."

"What have you done?"

"What?" He was sure he had kept control, hadn't damaged her. Could he have broken her wards and his promise without even noticing?

"Look down."

He did. Relief surged through him. "Oh. I may have gotten a little carried away there."

"We're a hundred feet off the ground."

He calculated quickly. "Closer to three hundred. Say a hundred meters."

"You could have dropped me."

"Only when you said that word. Otherwise you were perfectly safe."

"But--"

"Shall we head back down?"

Sara nodded numbly. "What if someone saw us?"

Jack couldn't help laughing. "What would you do if you saw a naked demon carrying off a naked human?"

"I'd call my shrink."

"Then I'm sure we won't have anything to worry about."

Sara's eyes refused to meet his so he couldn't tell if she was angry at him, angry at herself for her reaction, or simply embarrassed at the possibility that someone could have seen her.

"If we don't have to worry, what is that?" Flashing blue and red lights tore up the highway heading for their car. "What should we do?"

"You have a right to be here, don't you? Isn't this a lease you're checking out?"

"I'm supposed to be here, but I'm supposed to have my clothes on."

"Let me worry about that."

## Chapter 7

Jack's wings beat slowly as he lowered the two of them to the ground, thankfully behind a tree that hid them from the police car's view. Unfortunately, Sara knew those thanks would be short lived. She'd be arrested for public lewdness. In the close-knit world of petroleum engineering, this would be the kiss of death. Her dreams of starting a company and regaining her family reputation had just gone down the drain.

Sara wanted to scream at Jack, tell him he hadn't lived up to his part of the bargain. She forced herself to be fair. She'd been as aggressive as he had. She'd wanted him. Just because she hadn't dreamed he'd burn off their clothes and take off like a, well like a bat out of hell, didn't absolve her from responsibility.

Fairness didn't help. She was in big trouble.

She took a deep breath and tried to relax. Not easy when she had to look at Jack. He looked completely comfortable in his nudity. Of course he should. He had a body like an angel.

"Should we at least cover ourselves with branches from this tree?" she asked.

Jack gave her a funny look. "Last time I heard about people doing that, it got them in even worse trouble. I say we brazen it out."

"Brazen it out? What the heck is that supposed to--"

A sound of slamming doors interrupted her before Sara managed to come up with more of an answer for Jack's completely inadequate response.

"Is anyone back there?" The commanding voice sounded through the squad car's loud speaker.

"We're back here officer," Jack sang out. "Just checking this oil lease." Jack grasped Sara by the arm and tugged her in the direction of the police.

"It's natural gas," she reminded him.

"Keep it simple."

"Oh. Well, don't drag me around. If I stay behind the tree and you sort of crouch, they might not really notice us.

"They'll notice us more if we act strangely."

Jack must not understand the human nudity taboo. Well, Sara did. "We've already acted strangely. Now they're going to arrest us for exposure."

Jack smiled. "A venial sin to be sure."

"Easy for you to say. You've probably committed every sin in the book."

Jack laughed harshly. "I'm the reason they wrote the book." He paused for a moment. "If we don't go out, they'll be suspicious. We don't want that."

His grip on her arm grew stronger and, moments later, he tugged her around the tree into sight of the officers.

One of the policemen leaned against the car holding a huge shotgun. The other was speaking on his radio. He looked up when Jack and Sara rounded the tree, then continued talking. Neither he, nor the other cop, seemed to find their attire out of the ordinary.

She glared at Jack, hoping that he'd somehow magically clothed them. No such luck. His nude form could have inspired a renaissance sculpture. Or maybe it really had. She'd have to ask Jack about his history. Later.

"What's going on?" she whispered. "Are we invisible?"

"No. Just act normally."

Easy for him to say. Other than when she was fifteen and she'd lost her bikini top water-skiing, she'd never found herself on public display like this. Jack, on the other hand, probably wandered around naked all the time. He certainly didn't have a visible tan line.

Sara sputtered to silence. She didn't have a clue how to act normally right then.

"Is there a problem, officer?" Jack asked.

"We had a rather strange report."

Sara felt her face redden. Jack's wings wafted a breeze of cool air across it. "Strange in what way?" she made herself ask.

The cop looked everywhere but directly at the two of them. "Have you been here all afternoon?"

"Pretty much," she answered. "I'm a petroleum geologist and was sent to investigate this lease." And I'm as naked as a jaybird. Were the cops both blind?

The other cop slammed down the radio and emerged from his car. He looked positively angry. Time for the good-cop, bad-cop routine, Sara guessed.

"This is about the stupidest thing I've ever heard of," he growled. "I think it's time for us to lock Ol' Lady Witkins in the loony bin."

"Are we in any danger, officer?" Jack asked, concern lacing his voice.

"Only if you believe in naked UFOs," the cop snarled. "Mrs. Witkins, who owns this land, was about to start blasting away at something. Probably just a crow."

Well naturally someone had seen them. Unlike the cops who seemed completely blind.

"We've got a lot to get done before we leave," Jack said. "Unless there's anything we can help you with, we'd better get back to work."

In Sara's experience, no cop likes being told what to do and this one didn't appear to be an exception.

"Yeah? Well, you aren't UFOs, but you are on Mrs. Witkin's land." The cop turned to his partner. "Think we'd better run them in."

"We have a valid mineral lease," Sara said. "It gives us access rights." She wasn't used to flying around naked but she was used to rural police trying to keep her off of the land.

"So you say. I haven't seen any paperwork."

"I've got a copy of the lease agreement in my car," Sara answered quickly before Jack could say anything. Not that she was especially well endowed, but still, she couldn't understand how the two cops could miss seeing what was in plain sight. Evidently Jack was working some magic on them. Since the magic seemed to consist of their never quite making eye contact, Sara didn't have much confidence in it. How hard would it be for them to catch something out of the corner of their eyes? The sooner the cops left, the more likely it was that she and Jack could survive the experience.

"I'd better take a look, then." The cop shambled in the direction of Sara's car, accidentally brushing against her naked back as he passed.

"Hey?" The cop looked startled.

"What's the problem?" his partner demanded.

"I though--" the first cop scratched his head. "Guess I've been too long without a woman."

"Tell me about it."

"It's in the glove compartment," Sara explained. "That's where I keep all of my documents when I travel. You know, in a convertible, things blow out otherwise." Sara knew she was babbling, but she hadn't fully recovered from her panic.

"I'd sure like a job I could take a cutie along with me," the cop with the shotgun observed to Jack before Sara got out of earshot. "Earl's all right, but man, I wish he'd cut down on those beans."

"My job has its compensations," Jack admitted. "The only problem is I spend a lot of time in really hot places."

"Me too," the cop observed. "Course that's what living in Oklahoma is all about."

"It's sort of like Oklahoma," Jack observed.

Sara bit back a snicker. Jack wasn't being very nice. Of course a nice demon just might be an oxymoron.

"All right, what was that all about?" Sara demanded as the cops finally drove out of sight.

"Hum?" Jack stared at the dirt. Something deep underground looked different.

"Did you put clothes on us magically?"

He shook his head. "I just made them look the other way."

"You mean they could have seen me naked?" Sara's blush proclaimed the innocence he found frightening and yet incredibly appealing. Part of the demon's curse is perfect memory. Jack could remember the pure sensation of innocence despite the thousands of years that had passed since he'd left that state.

"They couldn't see you naked because they couldn't quite look at you. Not at your body anyway. They meant to, they thought they had, but they couldn't."

"So what do they remember me wearing?"

He shook his head. "I have no idea. I guess if you pushed them, they'd make something up. That's why I wanted you to act normally. Lucky for us, they were both men. If they'd been women, they would probably talk it over afterwards and notice neither had seen quite the same thing. I don't think Earl and Wayne are likely to talk about much other than hunting season and buying guns."

Sara gritted her teeth. "I don't care about them. What am I going to do now. We're a hundred miles from home and I don't have anything to wear in the car."

"If you don't want to make a spectacle of yourself, I suggest we put up the top. It would be too much work to keep an entire freeway full of people from checking out a beautiful naked woman in a convertible."

"Great. I wasted an entire day, lost one of my most comfortable outfits, and have to drive home with the top up, the air conditioning broken, and a demonic space heater sitting next to me."

Jack's muscles tightened at the words wasted an entire day. Sex with Sara had seemed like anything but a waste. If she didn't feel the same way, it was probably just the reminder he needed of where he stood. A demon can be a sex toy and a space heater rather than someone a human woman will take seriously.

That was the way it should be, he sternly reminded himself. Demons and humans don't have relationships

"I'm not that sympathetic," he told her.

"Yeah, well you're used to the heat."

He shook his head. "The rules don't let us get used to it. That would be too easy."

Sara started to reply, then got a far-away look in her eyes.

"What?"

"Oh, I was just thinking about work."

"What about it?"

"I hadn't noticed before, but look at the way that hill over their bends. It could mean gas underneath."

"I meant to ask you about that."

"What do you mean?"

"It looks sort of funny down there."

"Hum," Sara stood a little straighter. "Tell me what it looks like to you."

She probed, questioning his answers, using her hands to describe the possibilities. She looked, Jack thought, like Eve in her naked innocence.

For the next sixty minutes, she ran around, oblivious to her nudity, setting up small explosive devices, feeding data into her computer, and keeping Jack running at the same pace. If he didn't have wings, he would never have been able to keep up.

Finally she snapped her computer closed. "All right, let's go."

He followed Sara into her car. "No luck?"

She shifted into gear and pulled out onto the bumpy dirt trail that had brought them to the lease. "Oh, it's gas all right. I think it's got commercial potential."

"Congratulations."

She looked at him, an excitement born of something other than pure sexual pleasure burning in her eyes. "Between me knowing what to look for and you being able to see it, we could make quite a team. I mean, maybe this is why my spell brought you. Together, we could build the business I've always dreamed about. Do the words millions of dollars mean anything to you?"

"Not a lot. Demons don't get out much."

"Well, trust me, it would mean a lot."

He shrugged. "Where I come from, money doesn't buy much."

"Hum. Well, partner, in that case, maybe you'd better stick around here."

Jack's skin raised goose-bumps at Sara's words. Not her excitement about her profession. He knew Sara well enough to know that she would throw all of herself into whatever she was doing, whether she was making l--having sex, or wildcatting natural gas. What surprised him was that she would think of the two of them as a partnership. Every demon-human relationship in history had involved one entity in control, the other a slave. Generally, of course the human started as master and ended as slave. Sara was too good to want a relationship of exploited and exploiter.

When he returned to Hell, Jack would have a lot to contemplate--in the long millennia alone.

"What do you mean, partner?" He might be reading too much into her simple word choice.

"We'll form a legal partnership. Slocum and, uh," she blushed. "I don't even know your last name. You must think I'm the cheapest woman you've ever met."

He thought she was the most generous. "I have too many names. How about Daemon? If it isn't too obvious."

"Like the movie star?"

He shrugged. He read and was aware of music, but Hell isn't big on movie screens or television. "Like Demon but pronounced different so it won't be quite as obvious."

"I don't think the name is what we need to worry about." Sara coasted to a stop where the dirt trail ended and the two lane paved highway began. She stared at him for a moment. "Do you think, I mean, I don't want you to give up anything you think is really important, but people wouldn't really understand if, well, you know."

"You want me to wear clothes when we go looking for work?"

Sara burst out laughing. "I didn't figure I'd have to warn you about clothes. I'm talking about your wings. You can cover your horns with a hat, but the wings stand out under a shirt, even folded up."

Jack thought about that. "With the right tailoring, I should be able to handle it."

"Or maybe you could just magic everyone, the way you did those cops."

He shook his head. "It takes too much energy and I can't do it if I don't know who is watching."

"I wanted to ask you about that. How come I could see you, if you were doing that thing with the cops?"

If he wasn't a demon, he would have blushed. "I wanted you to see me. And I wanted to see you."

Sara's face burned. She had hardly been able to keep her gaze away from Jack's body the entire time they'd been talking about the geologic formations under the earth. He was so beautiful she wanted to throw herself on him and demand that he satisfy her again, even though her body still sang from satisfaction at their recent lovemaking.

She gave her Miata a little more gas, pressing the speed limit despite the highway's need for road repair and the twists that kept her wheels squealing. "I'll write up the report tonight. What I'd like to do is see if they'll let us put it into a risk pool." If they got in early enough, there would be time for more.

"What does a risk pool mean?"

"We'll only get paid half as much up front, but we'll get a percentage when the well actually comes in. It's



a nice reward for calling things right. From now on, I intend to call things right a lot more often than anyone else in the business. In a few years, we'll have enough to go out on our own."

"Really? Exactly how long were you planning on keeping me around?"

A wave of guilt swept over Sara like a sudden twilight. She had forgotten that Jack was there against his will, held captive by magic bonds. Now that she knew him, could she really justify that type of treatment?

"Is there some protocol for dealing with demons? I mean, I don't want to set you free and have you eat me or something." She felt the heat rise in her cheeks again. "Maybe that was a poor word choice. I mean--"

"I know what you meant."

"Are you going to destroy me if I set you free?"

"Not now."

Talk about an ambiguous answer. "I'll bite, when exactly would you destroy me?"

"I already told you. I lose control during l--sex."

"So if I just put the bonds on you if we were, uh, making love--"

Jack's face contorted at her use of the 'L' word.

"Having sex," she corrected quickly, "then we'd be safe."

"A demon is never safe."

"You just aren't going to answer my questions, are you?"

He shook his head. "I'm not good at telling the whole truth. That isn't really it, though. You have to know that just being with me will surely destroy you. A demon isn't safe to keep."

Jack hesitated a moment and Sara thought he had finished. She opened her mouth to reply, but he held up a hand. "It isn't safe for me, either."

"Someone could destroy you?"

He shrugged. "It's been done. Angels generally just herd us back into the pit when they catch one of us escaping. Other demons are worse. They try to absorb each other's substance. Humans can be the most deadly. It takes a special person, but we're immortal, not indestructible."

Sara looked down at the speedometer and saw that they were going eighty miles an hour. She jammed the brake pedal, slowing to a safer speed. Could she let Jack go? Should she send him back to Hell after all he'd told her? She was only certain of one thing. Holding him against his will was terribly unfair. He might have been lying to her the entire time, but she didn't believe he would hurt her. If she was right, she had no moral choice other than setting him free. Yet, what would he do if she released the bonds? He could consume her in a fireball and run wild through the civilized world. But she didn't think he would. It was crazy, but she actually trusted a demon.

She pulled over to the side of the road.

"What?" He looked puzzled, as if he knew what was going on but also knew it was impossible.

"I have to do this." Her hand trembled as she traced the bonds that held Jack to her, protected her from his power. Some primal instinct at the base of her lizard brain screamed out in terror. Her sex drive cursed her for being an idiot and not insisting that he make love with her again before she set him free. Still, she untied the knots.

"Finished."

Jack stretched, looking as if he had been physically unbound. For the second time, Sara found she could see his emotions directly rather than merely reading them in his eyes and his body.

"Thank you," he said.

"It was wrong of me not to do it a long time ago."

"I told you I would destroy you. You did it to protect yourself."

"People can always come up with reasons to do what they want to do." And she had wanted to. She'd wanted to keep this perfect male close to her, available to satisfy her needs and desires at a moment's notice.

"That kind of person always finds a reason to hold on."

"I'm not a Saint, for God's sake."

Jack's eyes widened in horror and he winked from sight.

Sara sat, naked and alone on the side of the road in the middle of an Oklahoma prairie. Of course she couldn't have him forever, but she hadn't been ready for him to vanish from her life. She needed more time, more lovemaking, maybe even a few more gas finds. Still, she'd known Jack couldn't stand the 'G' word and she'd used it carelessly, hurtfully. She'd driven him away.

Emptiness engulfed Sara like a physical force, squeezing on her lungs until she felt she couldn't get enough air.

She sat still for a minute, waiting for something to happen, for Jack to return as a friend, or at the head of an army of demons to rip her to shreds. Only the shimmer of crickets chirping in a distant streambed marred the perfect silence.

Sara pulled a tissue from her purse, wiped a couple of tears away, and looked around her car. When Jack had been there, her nudity had been safe. Jack would have protected her from anyone who saw her and wanted to do something about it. Now, she was alone and felt more exposed than ever in her life. The drive back to Dallas would take an eternity.

She yanked up the floormats and made a crude poncho out of them using binder clips to attach them at her shoulder, huddling down as far as she could behind the steering wheel. It wasn't much, but it was all she could think of.

As she'd known it would be, the drive home was miserable. Her poncho slipped off every time she shifted, its hard rubber prongs dug into her skin, and she missed Jack.

Still, she managed to get in a little after dark and hightailed to her apartment.

"Feel the power in that Jaguar engine," Derrick effused. "Sixteen cylinders of pure power. Costs a fortune, but trust me, it's worth it."

Katra moved Derrick's hand off her breast for the hundredth time. She'd almost taken a taxi back from Joe T. Garcia's and now she wished she had. Derrick was following the stalker pattern to the letter. He'd finished the nice guy act and was already playing possessive. Well, Katra was her own person.

Derrick slid his hand from her breast to her upper thigh. "I missed you today, baby."

"You said that." Only about fifty times tonight. He'd miss her even more soon since Katra didn't intend to repeat this experience, ever.

"You were cute the way you walked around the school like you were some sort of queen."

Her blood froze. "You were there?"

He'd denied it when she'd asked casually. He'd lied.

"I wanted to see who you were working with. I don't like you having to work with a bunch of losers like that. God, do you remember how butch Lena Bovade used to be."

Stalkers tried to cut your connections with your friends. Check.

Derrick pushed the button on his CD changer and put on something sappy. "Did I ever tell you about my art collection?"

Only a thousand times, thought Katra. "I'm not that interested in art."

Her answer didn't phase Derrick at all. "You know, neither was I until I started collecting. I mean, some of those paintings look like a three year old got mad and splattered paint all over. Trust me, that doesn't float my boat."

Katra didn't want to know what floated his boat. "You'd better take me home now. I've got to be at school early tomorrow."

Derrick cackled. "That's where you're wrong, baby. I called in sick for you. We can spend as long as we want."

Her blood chilled. The minute she'd mentioned Jack the Demon in passing, the Reverend Bob had lost interest in Derrick. Yet this was exactly the type of behavior Bob had described. "I can't believe you did that."

"Don't worry, I'll make up any money you lose." His hand wandered higher on the inside of her thigh.

She jerked at his hand but he didn't move. Unfortunately, the man was strong. Strong and scary. "I have a job and a responsibility. And get your hand off my panties."

Derrick laughed, but he didn't sound amused. "You know, baby, anyone who took a look at that dump where you live would have to agree that you've failed at your responsibilities. So maybe you'd better take the advice of someone who has actually done something with his life."

"Yeah? Well, maybe you'd better just take me to my dump and drive away." She used both hands to force Derrick's probing fingers away from her crotch. Why hadn't she worn jeans?

"You almost sound like you're ordering me around." He softened his voice. He'd probably seen that trick

in a movie but it worked. A chill of fear ran down Katra's back.

"Look, I had a good time, but it's over." She hurried on before he could react. "Obviously a trailer park chick like me doesn't belong in your world."

"Culture is a simple matter of training," Derrick explained patiently. "I intend to train you."

He exited the freeway and headed north. Away from Katra's home. "Oh, and I told your mother not to wait up for you. Not that she would." He laughed.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Katra let him leave his hand on her breast this time while she looked around for some means of escape.

"Nothing. I just gave her a little present."

Katra thought she'd been mad before. Now rage bubbled up in her. "What did you give her?"

"Nothing special. A half gallon of vodka."

"She's trying to stop drinking." The inside door handle had been removed. She'd thought Derrick had been being a gentleman when he'd walked around to open the door for her but now she knew better.

"She can try to stop later." Derrick squeezed down harder on her breast. Why is it that men thought of breasts as squeeze-toys?

Trying to keep her movements as inconspicuous as possible, Katra depressed on the electric window switch. Nothing. Darn.

"What do you intend to train me for?" She softened her voice, put a little throat into it.

"I thought you might like the idea. Chicks like to know who's boss."

"You mean you'd spank me?" Gag her with a spoon.

"Training has its reinforcements, yes."

"Oh, my." She paused for a moment, then fanned herself with her hand. "I'm getting a little warm. Do you think you could open the sunroof?"

"It's dark."

"I like to see the stars."

"If you make a scene, you'll regret it."

"Why would I make a scene?"

The answer was fairly obvious but Derrick couldn't come up with it. He powered the sunroof open.

"Satisfied, baby?"

"Not completely satisfied, but it's a start."

He kneaded her breast even more roughly. "Oh, no. We haven't even started. Yet."

"I hadn't realized what a turn-on a forceful man could be." She couldn't believe she was saying this. Of

course she couldn't believe she was enduring this either.

"You do seem more responsive than some of the girls I've had."

There didn't seem to be an end to the disgusting things Derrick would come up with, but there had to be an end to this trip. Soon.

She unfastened her seatbelt.

"What are you doing?" Well, he had every right to be suspicious.

"It didn't seem fair that only one of us was getting all the attention." She stared at his crotch.

"Oh. You're interested in a little suck?"

It probably was a little sucker but she wouldn't have been interested if it had been a footlong. "Do you want to unzip yourself, or should I?"

"Do it. With your teeth."

That would be the day. With all she'd spent on braces, she wouldn't even do that for a guy she liked.

"Oooh. That sounds sexy."

Derrick reclined his seat a few inches, clearing a little headroom between his lap and the steering wheel. Obviously he'd been here before.

She put one hand in his lap, the other on the arm rest and shoved hard on both, leaping to her feet.

Derrick's moan changed to a shout as she increased the pressure.

Another shove and grab and she was on top of the car out through the sunroof.

Derrick accelerated, possibly reflexively because of the pain or possibly because he wanted to knock her off. It didn't matter. She rolled off the car and kept rolling. Then she got to her feet and ran.

She was going to kill that demon.

## Chapter 8

Sara flipped through the pages of her mother's spell book, then threw the thing against the wall. It wasn't fair. The one man in the universe that was both her ideal lover and her perfect business partner was a demon who'd vanished.

After a minutes reflection, she stood, walked across her living room, and picked up the book. She was going to cast a spell. Later, she'd decide whether to lock Jack back up in Hell for good, or to try and summon him another time. Both ideas held considerable appeal.

She was in the kitchen gathering spell supplies from her spice cabinet when she heard the hammering on her door.

Jack. He'd returned. All thoughts of revenge vanished as he ran to open it before he changed his mind and disappeared again.

Her visitor was about ten inches shorter than Jack, had a lot more curves, and looked like she'd been

playing demolition derby somewhere.

"Katra. What are you doing."

"Let me in, quick."

Her friend's normally sedate red hair flew out in every direction, her sexy black dress was half-torn from her chest, and blood dripped from her knees and elbows.

Katra almost pushed her aside in her hurry to come into Sara's apartment, then slammed the door behind her.

"I..." her voice broke off as Katra sobbed.

A terrifying suspicion reared in Sara's mind. She had seen Jack look at that waitress, knew of his sexual appetite. "Is Jack responsible for this?"

Katra nodded mutely.

"I can't believe it. First he wore me out and then he tries to rape my friend. I swear I'm going to yank his heart out and eat it."

"He..." another sob. "He didn't..." Katra couldn't finish.

Sara filled in for her. "He said he didn't have to create pain, that people could do it themselves. Well, I guess he was a liar after all. I didn't think he'd stoop to raping my friend."

"Did you really do him?" Katra stopped sobbing as the impact of Sara's words penetrated. "My god, how long has it been since you had a man?"

All right, so Sara wasn't the most desired commodity on the dating market. "Not as long as he said it had been for him. The rapist."

"Jack didn't do this. At least not directly."

Sara froze. "Don't try to protect him because of my feelings. Trust me, I'm over him."

"I said he was responsible, not that he did it." Katra pointed to herself. "I did most of this myself jumping out of Derrick's car."

A chill of suspicion crept over Sara. "Derrick who?"

"You remember, Derrick Benton. He was a couple of years ahead of us in school. Cute."

"Derrick Benton was a jerk. He pulled wings off of flies and ripped pages out of library books." That, to Sara, was one of the highest sins. "He also wasn't very nice to his girlfriends."

"I didn't know that." Katra looked surprised that Sara knew anything about high school that she hadn't known.

"Remember when Kate Longbow was my lab partner in physics?"

"The cheerleader twit?"

"Yeah. She was smart, though. She dated him for a while. She said he tapped her phone to find out if any other guys were calling her."

"I wish I'd known that." Katra stomped across Sara's floor and opened the refrigerator. "I'm going to open this wine."

"Pour me some too."

Katra fished out two large tumblers and filled both to the rim with Sara's cheap Zinfandel. "Derrick hasn't gotten any better. He snuck into my school to check on me and then he wouldn't take me home after dinner. I think he was planning on tying me up or something."

Sara tried not to think about what she'd done to Jack the previous evening. "Not very nice."

"Totally gross."

"But what were you doing with him and how is it Jack's fault?"

"I was with him because he was the boyfriend Jack the Demon set me up with. And when I get my hands on that man," she paused a beat, "I mean, uh, entity, I'm going to rip off important parts of him. And don't worry, I'll leave his heart for you."

"What do you mean, he set you up?"

"You remember my three wishes."

Katra rubbed her forehead. "He told me you weren't going to be happy with them."

"Thanks for letting me know."

"We were a little distracted this morning with your car, remember."

Katra nodded, at least partially mollified. "Three wishes and what have I got. A broken down car, a winning lottery ticket that isn't worth squat, and a stalker-pervert boyfriend from planet X. I'd have to say you made the right decision not to make any wishes."

Sara felt the heat rush to her cheeks.

"What? Don't tell me you did wish."

"No. Not out loud, anyway. He just happened to fulfill my wish. Or at least I thought so."

Katra rubbed her eyes wearily. "Don't tell me you fell in love with the creep. He's spooky."

"It wasn't love." It couldn't have been although it had felt as close as anything Sara could remember.

"So where is he?"

"I let him go."

Katra collapsed onto Sara's couch. "If I bleed on this, I'm sorry. I can't believe you let him go. Haven't you seen any movies? Don't you know he'll go through Dallas like some sort of brimstone tornado? I wouldn't be surprised if tomorrow's Morning News has an article about a mass famine or something."

"I think famines are always mass. Otherwise it's just someone hungry."

"Don't get picky."

Sara took a sip of her wine. Its overly-sweet flavor only reminded her of what Jack had done to the wine

they'd shared yesterday. This didn't compare. "Well, he's out of our control now. Seriously, though, have you called the police about Derrick?"

Katra laughed bitterly. "Oh, yeah. He'd already reported me. Said I assaulted him on our date when he hadn't even kissed me. The worst part is, it's mostly true. But he meant what he said and he's scary."

"You know what I think?"

"I think I'm not going to like this."

"I think we need to get Jack back. Get him to turn off Derrick and let you get on with your life."

Katra started to object but stopped before the words reached her mouth. Obviously she'd reached the end of her rope and was willing to try anything, even bringing a demon from Hell back to Dallas.

Sara told herself she was doing this for her friend, not because of the desire she still held for Jack. She wasn't convinced.

Katra nodded. "At least it worked for my car. Well, get your book out and let's do some magic."

Two hours later, they'd fortified themselves with most of the wine, had ran through the same evocation ceremony several times without luck, and were getting desperate.

Sara pulled herself out of the Lotus position she'd adopted, grabbed the silver knife and stepped into the middle of the pentagram.

Katra's blood chilled. "What are you doing? That's supposed to keep the demons away from you."

"Jack won't hurt me."

"He's hurt you already." Although, to be fair, Jack hadn't been different from a lot of guys in that respect.

"Well, I've got to do this." Sara held the knife to her wrist.

"Well hang on a second." Katra went to the bathroom and grabbed an handful of Band-Aids. "Remember when we got our First Aid Girl Scout badges?"

"I'm not planning on bleeding that much."

Katra held out the antibiotic ointment. "Just be careful. I don't trust that book."

"It's my mother's book in her own handwriting."

"No offence, but your mother didn't come to a very good end."

"It wasn't because of demons."

"Are you sure?" Katra had begun to wonder whether some of Maura's obsession for religion might have its origin in Sara's mother. Could a supposed car wreck really disguise an even more tragic ending?

"You're supposed to be helping me, not making this more difficult."

At least Sara looked nervous. She'd better be taking this seriously. "I'm trying to help," Katra said. "I wonder if getting Jack back will make things better or worse."



"He wants to do good, I know it. We have to give him the chance."

"Are you sure this is your brain speaking and not your hormones?" Nobody knew better than Katra what sort of trouble you can get into if you let your desire drive you.

"I'm sure."

Katra nodded. She wasn't convinced but, as Sara had pointed out, their options weren't especially good. She needed help with Derrick and the police hadn't even offered to come by and take a statement. "All right, I guess. But you really don't have to get gross about this. We could buy some cow's blood at the butcher."

"I've got to do it like the book says."

Sara pressed the cold metal of the silver knife against her wrist. The blade pushed down the skin but that was all. No tell-tale signs of blood.

"This is hard." Sara's face had gone white.

"My mother has needles for her diabetes. Maybe I could get one for you."

"I don't think the magic works that way. The book says a silver knife."

It didn't say the knife should be as dull as a rolling pin either. This one wasn't much better. "Maybe--"

Sweat balled on Sara's forehead as she pressed down harder. "I'll saw at it." She matched the action to her words.

The blood didn't stream from Sara's arm, instead it seemed to form scraping bubbles, almost like a rash. "God that hurt."

"Uh, yeah. Remind me to catch men the easy way from now on."

"You think you'll forget this if I don't remind you?"

Katra shook her head. "I'll never forget jumping out of the sun roof on a moving car. It'll make the top action moment in the next Stupid Katra Tricks home video."

"Get ready to light the last candle." Sara held her wrist over the flat wafer of bread she'd put on an unfired clay plate. "Now."

The candle flared to life as a single drop of blood fell, defying gravity with its slow descent to the waiting wafer. "Now."

Katra screamed.

Thousands of fast-moving gray shapes swarmed over Sara's entire body.

Little, bat-like tongues darted at her wound.

Little bat-like teeth gnawed at her arms, her neck, her legs.

Katra wavered in fear for only a moment, then stepped toward the bat swarm that covered her friend.

She bounced off the ward.

"Jack!" Sara's scream was muffled, obscured by the colony of bat-like creatures clambering for entry into her body.

Jack felt the tug as Sara tried to call him back. He wanted to respond, hadn't wanted to leave. Except when Sara had said the word, she had been answered. He had fled the approach of the angel. Fled, but he'd already waited too long and the angel had hounded him back to the pit.

Despite his desire for the mortal, despite his straining efforts, he could not break the bounds that held him tied in Hell.

He tried to drag his gaze away from the two women but could not. The human plane did not lie at any particular angle from Hell--no matter which way he looked, Sara sat surrounded by candles and dark sea-salt lines. She chanted the spell, sending faint wisps of power that created weaknesses in the normally solid wall between the planes.

Yet the weakness did not help him. Jack could not move. Dark curse-bands held him in his place in the pit. It was always the same. Each time he returned to Hell, it took years, centuries, before he could uncover the keys to the mystic locks that held him to his torture. It might take centuries more before someone called his name across the chasm and invited him back into the mortal universe. Centuries, years, even minutes would be too late for Sara.

Around him, imps flitted. A few stopped to claw at him, glorying in finding a prince so newly and firmly bound that he was helpless to resist their slashing claws. A few, and then none. Like him, like all of Hell, they were drawn by the power lines that sought separation within the fabric of the walls between universes.

Jack endured the pain from the imps' talons. Compared to the pain of Hell, these added little and he had endured greater agony for millennia.

Then Sara picked up the knife and used it on herself. This he could not endure. Across the dimensions he cried out for her to stop.

For just an instant, she seemed to hear him. Then she shook her head at Katra and continued.

The drop of blood, a precious liquid ruby, fell. Dozens, hundreds, thousands of imps waited, breathless.

The drop's leading edge touched the wafer--a bit of baked flour, but prepared for that most dangerous of rituals--and the spell's power multiplied. A tear opened between the worlds. The seam in the fabric was tiny, lasted only for an infinitesimal fraction of a moment, then closed again. During that time an uncountable host of imps swarmed through.

He strained at his bonds hoping that, by some miracle of mercy never before offered a demon, they might weaken against pure force.

Nothing.

The imps teemed over Sara like maggots on a corpse. He could do nothing.

She called out his name.

Pain.

Pain sleeted Sara's body like a summer tornado.

She screamed again, Jack's name the only thought on her mind.

A glaring white light shined through the mass of tiny swarming creatures that covered her eyes, her mouth, her nostrils, lapped at her wrist.

She felt herself falling--falling so slowly it seemed that she would fall forever. What had she done? How had this failed so badly?

She whispered Jack's name one more time as she collapsed in pain.

The creatures drove in harder, then drew back, their chittering now a mixture of greed, hunger, and fear.

"Angel, Angel, Angel."

"Return to the pit," a voice commanded. The voice was more beautiful than a Bach organ recital, peeling each syllable like a musical note. "Begone, imps, this woman does not belong to you."

The angel shone with an inner light that nearly blinded Sara, his feathered wings beating against the air. He held a golden sword that seemed to burn in a white glare like magnesium flaring.

The imps buzzed like a swarm of termites rising from her body like an army. Would they do battle with the angel? Could they swarm him as they had swarmed her, burying him in the power of their numbers like a million Lilliputians swamping the giant Gulliver?

A dozen imps flew at the towering figure of the angel and burst into flames.

The mass moved toward him, away, then toward the angel again. They wanted to fight, to wreak some small revenge for the millennia they had been outcast--Sara could see that even in her pained and bedraggled state.

Then the angel gestured and a black gap opened in Sara's living room sucking in the demon imps as if they were stars being dragged into a galactic black hole.

The angel looked down on her, frowned, then passed his hands over her body. Behind the absence of his touch, blessed relief followed.

"What took you so long?" Katra's voice broke the sudden silence.

"Huh?" Sara felt as stupid as she sounded. "Did you pray for an angel?"

"It's Jack, dummy."

"Darling idiot," he murmured, "what the devil did you think you were doing?"

"It worked," she breathed. "You're back."

"You could have killed yourself and your friend."

"Katra was safe. She was on the outside of the barrier."

As Sara watched, the Angel's glamour faded. He went from being a fearsome and dangerous angel to the fearsome and dangerous male she couldn't keep her mind off of. Glowing white robes faded to black jeans and a black leather jacket. The halo transformed itself into Jack's cute horns. The wings folded in

on themselves, almost as if they had turned inside out.

It truly was Jack. Yet a touch of the angel stayed with him. Something fierce, protective.

"I was worried you weren't going to make it," Sara said.

"I was, uh, detained."

And he'd said he couldn't lie. "If you hadn't left in the first place, you wouldn't have been."

"Your words have power. That is why you were able to call me, why you were able to create that bridge over the chasm between our planes. When you spoke the holy name, you summoned a Seraph--I fled but I couldn't escape it."

Sara shuddered at the memory. "What were they? Why did they hate me so?"

He shrugged. "They didn't hate you, they loved you for setting them free. But you summoned them and were inside of the protective wards. Of course they would attack."

He made it sound so natural. Well, Sara's world had never been one where imps or demons or Seraphs wandered around doing each other in. "Would you have done that last night when I first summoned you?"

"Maybe. Destroy the spellcaster and destroy the wards. That's basic. No demon wants to be sent back to the pit. Any demon wants to be free."

"I thought you said they were imps."

"Imps, demons. It's the same."

A horrible notion occurred to her. "You mean they were once angels? They looked like you did just then?"

An air of infinite sorrow crossed Jack's face. "Every year we fade. Once we were all mighty and beautiful. How I appeared just now is merely a shadow, a memory of what the least of them would have been. Now only the most powerful of us can take on our original form. Even so, we can hold that form for short moments, as you saw."

A tear formed in Sara's eye and she swiped it off on her sleeve. "What happens to you next?"

"Eventually we'll all fade away. We don't create power, we survive on its reflection. The princes will last the longest, suffer the longest."

"Yeah," Katra broke in. "Life sucks and all that. I've got a bone to pick with you and don't need any of your poor pathetic me act. Why did you set Derrick on me? You'd better have a plan to get rid of him or I'll start talking some of those words you are so afraid of."

Now that she'd regained him, Sara couldn't stand the notion of losing Jack so quickly. "Katra."

"Don't let your hormones rule your brain, Sara. The man is dangerous."

"Far from a man," Jack corrected.

"Not that far." Sara felt herself blush but she stuck to her guns. "You didn't have to come back but you did. You could have joined with the imps instead of risking your life and attacking them, but you didn't."

She put her hands on her hips. "I do think you owe Katra an explanation, though."

"All right." Jack pondered his next words.

For just that moment, Sara wondered if he would lie. Surely he wouldn't. He'd said he never lied. She had to believe that about him.

"I picked Derrick because he was easy. He remembered you from high school so I didn't have to make any major changes. I just reminded him, closed a connection in his brain. You wished for a boyfriend and I made him remember his interest."

"But he's a stalker. He also has some strange ideas about relationships. Ideas that seem to involve pain and bondage."

Jack shrugged. "I picked the easiest path. If you'd wanted someone decent, you should have asked."

"That isn't very nice," Sara told him before Katra could explode.

"I think I've mentioned that I'm not ever nice."

"What I think is that you owe it to me to solve the problem," Katra said. She could rip Jack's balls off and feed them to him later if he didn't deliver. In the meantime she fought for enough control to talk rationally. Besides, infatuated as Sara was, she wasn't sure she had any allies here. And she needed allies. When Derrick had reached for her, she had been afraid as truly as she'd ever been in her life. More afraid of him than she had been even when the demon imps had attacked Sara.

"I don't see that I owe you anything. You were the one who demanded three wishes. You were the one who came up with wishes that turned out to be so destructive. Then you didn't even keep your side of the bargain. You didn't let me go."

"I let you go," Sara interrupted. "And I didn't even get three wishes."

Sara had gotten a lot more than three wishes from what Katra had picked up. Still, Katra didn't want to go down that rat-hole. "You gave me squat and you knew it."

Jack shrugged. "So you didn't make very good wishes."

"They were fine wishes. You knew what I meant and you ruined all of them on purpose. You made little snaky twists to them so they didn't work out."

Jack blew out one of the candles, brushed aside the rock salt, and stepped over what had once been a ward. He sprawled himself on Sara's couch and looked for all the world like the bad-boy dreamboat Sara had fantasized about all through high school. "Snaky and twisty is what demons do."

She stared at him. "The wards didn't keep you in."

He reached behind him and plucked the one surviving feather from his leathery wings. "No. They kept you out."

Katra wanted to cry, wanted to scream, wanted to go running away from here before she went completely insane. Only the thought that Derrick might still be driving around looking for her kept her going. "Well, you could have put on your angel hat for me too. Easy or not, you've got to come up with some way of banishing Derrick from my life."

Jack rubbed one of his horns and his wings so they touched the opposite walls of Sara's living room. "It isn't that easy."

"I know you want to do the right thing, Jack," Sara urged.

Jack frowned, then slowly shook his head. "That's not it."

Katra wanted to scream. Sara wanted everything to be perfect and saw everything that way. As if she could wish a demon into being the perfect date.

"I don't care about that," Katra explained. Her voice was getting a little ragged and her temper was real close to the breaking point. "I've got a stalker chasing after me, following me around the school where I work, and threatening to lock me up and train me like a puppy. You turned him on, so you turn him off."

"You don't understand. Derrick was going to do this anyway. When I granted your wish, I didn't change anything about Derrick, I just reminded him of you. I can't un-remind him. I can't change the way he is."

"You can't do squat, is that it? Why is it I'm having such a hard time believing this." She smacked her head. "That's right, now I remember, you can pick who wins the lottery, you can reach into a car's engine with your bare hands, and you can turn into an angel at will. I guess handling a creep like Derrick is too far beneath you."

Jack stood, walked into the kitchen and poured himself a glass of water. Steam rose from the glass when he touched it and more came from his mouth. He drank deeply, then refilled the glass and returned.

"Well?"

"I could possess him and have him jump off a bridge or run his car into an abutment. That way it wouldn't look like murder."

"No killing," Sara declared.

"Don't be hasty," Katra objected. Sara hadn't been in the car when Derrick had threatened her. "The guy is a jerk."

"If you killed all the jerks in the world, who would we date?"

"There's a matter of degree. Except there really wasn't. She wouldn't lose any sleep if Derrick chose to jump from Reunion Tower, but she didn't want to be the one who pushed him.

"Only certain things are within my power," Jack reminded her. "Making Derrick forget you is impossible."

"Is that a compliment?"

Jack growled at her. "Take it any way you want."

"We'll have to think of something," Sara sounded decisive. "If three intelligent beings can't outsmart a pervert like Derrick, we're not trying very hard. In the meantime, we'll protect you, Katra. I promise."

## Chapter 9

Sara woke up with a terrible sense of wrongness. The breathing shape next to her didn't feel right, didn't

look right, didn't sound right.

For an instant she panicked, imagined Derrick had somehow penetrated her apartment. Then she remembered. Katra had refused to go home. Jack had taken the couch and she and Katra had shared her bed.

Even before she did it, she felt guilty for the nudge she gave Katra. The poor girl deserved her sleep after what she'd been through over the past couple of days.

"Huh?" Even in the best of times, Katra could be a bear in the morning.

"Time to get up."

"I think I'll call in sick today. I'm pretty sure if I told the school psychologist that I'd been seeing demons, she would tell me to take a mental health day. Or fifty." She giggled hysterically. "Except Derrick already called in sick for me."

Sara nodded. This whole thing was insane. "Speaking of crazy, let's see what Jack's cooked for breakfast."

Katra looked suspicious. "A male who makes breakfast? Are you sure you didn't sign away your soul?"

That was the question, wasn't it. "Well I'm not completely sure. Anyway, come on, I'm hungry."

She was even hungrier when Katra finally emerged from the bathroom. Despite, or maybe because of her 'wrong side of the tracks' upbringing, Katra had inherited the Texas tradition of spending hours putting on makeup and dressing just so.

Jack, considerate devil that he was, timed breakfast to coincide with Katra's emergence from the bathroom. When Sara had complained, he'd handed her a piece of dry toast and a cup of coffee.

"So what are we going to do about Derrick?" Katra had covered her scrapes and put makeup over the bruise that marred her cheek. Still, despite makeup and big hair, she looked worse for the wear.

"I've been thinking about that," Jack said.

"You can't kill him," Sara broke in. She hadn't called Jack back for him to go off on some rampage, no matter how completely the prospective victims might deserve it.

"Right. You overrode Katra and me on that."

"So what's your plan?"

He pulled bowl of fruit from the refrigerator, each morsel chopped, shaped, and arranged to create a colorful mosaic. "I'm just finishing the crepes now."

"Where's the cholesterol?" Katra complained. "I'm working on a heart attack and can't go healthy."

Jack glared at her. For an instant, Sara wondered if he was going to over-react to her friend's comment.

When he reached a hand toward Katra, Sara stepped between them. "Hey, she was just kidding."

"She wasn't kidding. She needs me to fix something." Jack's voice was low and intense.

Katra turned a sheet-white shade. "Wh-what's wrong with me?"

"This won't hurt."

Famous last words. Jack's hand penetrated Katra's chest like it had penetrated her car engine the previous day. "Got it."

"Oh my g--"

Jack pressed a hand across Sara's mouth. "Please don't say it."

She hadn't thought Jack could be afraid of anything but his eyes were filled with fear now. A drop of sweat beaded on his forehead. At least the hand was clean. She'd been halfway afraid it would have been covered with gore when he pulled it from her friend.

"What did you do?" Katra seemed more curious than panicky.

"You had a little blockage. I fixed it."

"Why?" Sara demanded.

Jack had taken his hand from Sara's mouth. Now he raised it to her cheek and stroked it lightly. "I have no idea. Funny, that's the strangest thing I ever did."

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Katra poured herself a third cup of coffee and went to sit in the living room while Sara and Jack cleaned up. It was pretty obvious they needed some smooch time and she felt a little guilty for imposing the previous night.

A few minutes of giggling assured her she'd been right. "Can I borrow your computer?" she called through the closed door to the kitchen.

A brief silence. Finally Sara answered. "Sure. Uh, I'll be out in a minute."

It took longer than a minute but not much--the computer was still booting up. Sara's belt had missed one of its loops even though Katra would have sworn it had been properly threaded earlier. Maybe the two had done more than smooch. In the kitchen, too.

All of a sudden, Katra felt old and alone in the world.

"Reverend Bob said he could find out if Derrick was a stalker," Katra said. "I thought maybe we could research him. Who knows, maybe he's wanted for some crime. Knowing that Derrick is safely in some maximum-security prison would do wonders for my sense of self-confidence."

Jack stared over her shoulder with increasing interest. "You mean if he was on one of these lists, he would be arrested."

"That's what the lists are. These are people who have jumped bail."

"So all we have to do is add him to the list. Piece of cake."

"Don't even think about it," Sara warned. "You can't just put an innocent man in prison to get him out of your hair."

"He's guilty," Katra insisted.



Tears welled up in Sara's eyes. "I know and I'm sorry, Katra. But I just can't make myself go along with doing something unethical just because he's a scum."

"Well, keep looking." Who knew? With a lot of luck, they wouldn't have to do anything except point out Derrick to the authorities.

Jack clicked through the lists, his demon eyes absorbing everything on the page in an instant, then continuing. "I fear this will take forever," he concluded after pulling up what had to be the hundredth page of perverts.

"Reverend Bob searched his lists in less than a minute."

"Perhaps you should ask this Bob to help you then." Distrust overlaid Jack's voice like syrup on pancakes, but it didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out why. Jack had to be suspicious of a minister.

"Do you think we can trust Bob?" Sara asked. She was being protective of her pet demon again. Maybe it was just as well that Katra's wish hadn't panned out. She wasn't sure she would want to be so gaga over any male.

"He's a minister, for g--for goodness sake." That had been a close call. Both Sara and Jack had flinched like they'd been socked in the stomach when that word had nearly crossed her lips.

"He is awful nice to Nana," Sara said but her face showed continued concern. "I guess it won't hurt to talk to him."

Jack shook his head firmly. "You have no idea what danger you are putting all of us in."

"You can stay here and whip us up some lunch." Katra's grin almost split her head. Talk about a role reversal, the male staying home cooking while the females go out and adventure. Things were looking up.

"But--"

"I think Katra and I together can take care of a pervert like Derrick," Sara said coming in on Katra's side for once.

It was obvious Jack wanted to disagree. It was also obvious he was plain out of luck. "Well, if we're going to be back in time for lunch, we'd better get a roll on," Katra said. "Oh, since I walked here, you get to drive."

"Jack and I were talking about going into business together," Sara said as they headed down Tyler Street. "Between us, we can identify can't-miss petroleum fields. All my dreams are coming true."

"That's nice." Katra didn't sound like she meant it--not at all.

Sara looked at her friend in dismay. Here she had gone on prattling about how wonderful her life was with her beautiful new lover while Katra had major problems.

"I'm sorry, sweetie." She patted Katra's shoulder. "We'll figure out what to do about that pervert, don't worry."

"Oh, I'm all right. It just seemed like everything was going to turn out perfect for once and instead, like always, it turned to mud. I don't mean to rain on your parade."

Sara turned into her grandmother's driveway. "I'm playing it a day at a time."

The black Lexus in front of Maura's house looked familiar but it took a second for Sara to make the connection. "Looks like Reverend Bob's here again."

"Yeah. I guess it's taking him longer to train her on the computer than he'd thought."

Sara laughed. "Better him than me. I spent three days and just about drove myself crazy. I couldn't teach her a thing. I couldn't get her to hold the mouse still when she clicked it. She thought I was teasing her."

"You've never been known for your patience," Katra reminded her. "Maybe there's a reason one of us went in for teaching and the other went in for drilling and dynamite."

Maura greeted them at the door and tried to force coffee cake on them. After eating Jack's delicious breakfast, Sara didn't even want to think about food. Katra helped herself to a slice and heaped on the rum sauce.

"Nana, even though we're always happy to see you, we really wanted to talk to Reverend Bob," Sara said. She'd taken the cup of coffee her grandmother forced on her in time to prevent a complete breakdown. Sometimes Maura could only express her love through food.

"Your date didn't go well, dear?" Maura asked Katra.

"He locked me in his car and tried to kidnap me," Katra answered. "A very bad date."

"Terrible. Back when I was a girl, people were more polite, less nasty."

When Maura had been a girl, Hitler had been slaughtering millions--which was why Maura's family had fled to America in the first place. Sara didn't think bringing that up would help the discussion any. Maura wanted to believe that the world was getting worse.

"Evil takes different faces but it is always present," Reverend Bob intoned.

He was just echoing what Sara had been thinking, but she didn't feel comforted.

"We thought if Derrick had some sort of a warrant out against him or he'd jumped bond or something, we'd notify the police," Sara explained. "Except we couldn't find any information on the Internet. Katra said you had some private databases."

"Indeed we do. The church has come a long way in correcting its former blind eye to abusive males."

"Well. Can you help us?" Katra was always impatient with long-winded talk and Reverend Bob, for all of his concern for others, had a way of talking like he thought he was being recorded for posterity.

"I didn't see anything in the records that would indicate Derrick is currently being sought by the law," Reverend Bob said. "Still, I will search more diligently now that I have heard your story. This Derrick sounds like a menace."

Maura's computer was already booted and connected to the Web. Bob took a last bite of coffee cake and walked to the computer. "We were just downloading a Bach organ recital," he explained. "You cannot believe how rich the Internet is as a source for all sorts of inspiration."

"I'd like to inspire Derrick," Katra said darkly.

"I'm afraid you already have, my dear," Bob replied.

Something in his tone made Sara take notice. She had always thought of Reverend Bob as Maura's friend, but the man was still in his thirties and wouldn't break any mirrors.

She was pretty sure he was single and straight. Maybe letting Reverend Bob and Katra work on solving the Derrick problem would solve another problem too. After all, Katra could hardly be jealous of Sara's relationship with Jack if she had one with Reverend Bob.

Reverend Bob had enough of a build that he couldn't be a pure brain, but he clicked away at the keyboard like he knew his way around mental things as well. Katra might play at being poor white trash, but she was smart. Reverend Bob could be perfect.

"You know, I've got a report to finish if I'm going to get paid this week," Sara announced. "So if you don't mind, Reverend Bob, maybe you could run Katra by her car after we're done here."

Katra looked startled. "But what about--"

Reverend Bob grinned like the infamous cat. "I'd be happy to do that for the little lady. And don't you worry about that man. I'll surely check out your vehicle before I let you drive off in it."

"I'm not going back home until he is locked up," Katra announced. "He's a danger to my family as well as to me."

"Well..." the Reverend Bob was clearly thinking about things. "I'd be happy to offer you the spare bedroom in the rectory. It would be safe enough, but I'm not sure Miss Maura would approve."

"Katra can spend the night with us, uh, I mean me," Sara volunteered. Boy, talk about putting her foot in it.

Maura hadn't been paying much attention when they'd been talking about the computer but her ears were definitely pricked up now. "Have you taken in a roommate, dear?" she demanded. "I wouldn't think you have room in that tiny apartment of yours."

Sara hated to lie to her grandmother but telling her the truth would break her heart. Nana didn't understand the modern world and didn't want to.

Sara neatly side-stepped the question. "Why don't we meet at O'Hara's later?" she suggested to Bob and Katra. "A couple of hours of bar trivia is the perfect thing to get our minds off of Derrick the Drip. Say around seven."

"I'll be happy to bring her," Reverend Bob offered. "Until we figure out how to handle Derrick, I think it would be safer if Katra didn't go anywhere alone."

"Then this had better be solved quickly," Katra announced. "If we don't have a handle on it by tomorrow night, I'm going to dust off my brass knuckles and pound his fool head off."

Sara didn't remember Katra ever having such a violent temper before, at least not so often. But the poor girl was entitled. And it was just as well that Reverend Bob saw this side of her now. If he was going to run, he'd better run now before Katra noticed he was interested.

"Hold still a few more minutes," Sara demanded. "I've almost got it."

Jack had plenty of practice at patience but he was having a hard time figuring this out. How the hell had he gotten himself roped into serving as a rack for half a mile of yarn?

"Demons don't--"

"Just because they never have doesn't mean they can't," Sara cut him off. One or the other of her hands brushed against his as she rolled one ball after another.

Somewhere in the hollow spot where his heart should be a trace of guilt refused to be comforted. Sara seemed unwilling to believe what he told her of demons--what he'd learned of himself and his fellows after thousands of years of all-too-close togetherness. He had warned her, told the truth, but it didn't feel like enough.

"Did you finish reading the report?" she asked. Sara stayed intent on her yarn. After a moment, she caught her tongue between her teeth. She looked good enough to eat. For a demon, that wasn't a completely comfortable realization.

"Yes. I corrected your depth estimates but otherwise it looked fine."

Her head jerked up and she dropped the ball of yarn. It rolled across the floor unraveling as Jack feared Sara would someday unravel. "I didn't see you use the computer."

"No. I don't understand those."

"Then how did you change it?"

He crooked his finger and the ball of yarn rolled itself back up into Sara's lap. "Moving ink on a sheet of paper isn't especially challenging."

Sara laughed, but nervously. Good. He was glad to remind her that she was dealing with something dangerous.

She took the yarn ball and glared at it. "I suppose you could just turn these skeins into yarn balls without going through the intermediate steps, couldn't you."

Jack nodded and the yarn flew from his arms joining the rapidly spinning ball in Sara's hands. "Easy."

"Good. Because it's time to go."

Ten minutes later, they stepped into O'Hara's, an Oak Lawn watering hole. The Dallas Mavericks beat up on the hapless Chicago Bulls on one screen while other monitors flashed questions about 1950s rock and roll.

"The Mavericks have certainly been playing better basketball lately," Sara said. She didn't care about professional basketball, of course. It didn't take any of Jack's power to see that. Instead, this was just conversation to pass time as her mind internalized this new, subtle evidence of his magic.

"Some wishes are easy to grant."

She shook her head firmly. "I don't believe you. The Mavericks got better because Mark Cuban bought them and poured a ton of money into the team."

Jack decided not to remind her of the way wishes work. He wasn't responsible for the basketball team's turnaround, but he had heard something through the grapevine. "The Highland Gardens," he said.

"Huh?"

"It's the answer to that question."

Sara glanced at the flashing question on the T.V., then nodded when the answers were posted. "How did you know where Janis Joplin died?"

He shrugged. "Prisoners watch the world through their cell windows. They see more than people who walk free because seeing is all they can do. Imagine what it would be like to be locked in a prison cell with windows so transparent you could see anywhere in the world. Locked there for uncounted thousands of years."

"That's terrible." Tears started to well up in Sara's eyes.

"Oh stop it. We got what we deserved."

"I don't believe that."

"Believe it." Jack stared at the screen. "The London School of Economics."

"What?"

"It's where Mick Jagger went to college."

Sara plunked herself down on the table and snagged a computer-type machine from one of the waiters. "You sit down here and start answering the questions. Katra and Nana have been teaming up on me and kicking my butt in this game for the past eight years. Tonight I've got a real partner. Revenge will be sweet."

A possessive feeling came over him. It was unwelcome but not completely surprising: selfishness is a common demon trait. "Who is your normal partner?"

"Katra's sister, Mona. Katra can't stand to play with her."

"But you do?"

Sara shrugged her shoulders, the motion sending the increasingly familiar wiggle through her body. Jack stared fascinated. He should be used to it by now, used to Sara by now. Rather than becoming accustomed, instead, he seemed more and more sensitive to her movement, her scent, her touch.

"I take it she isn't very good."

Sara laughed. "I hate to sound negative but she hasn't gotten an answer right in the two years we've been playing. When I know it, she takes so long to react that we lose points. Or she ignores me."

Jack gave an obvious glare at the electronic pad Sara clenched to her breast. "Which is why you're guarding that controller?"

"It isn't that I don't trust you," she explained.

He opened his mouth to tell her she shouldn't trust him, but realized he was wasting his time. No matter what he said, she trusted him. He might as well enjoy it while he could.

"So the object is to answer the question quickly?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Well, quickly but right. They give hints after a while but they start subtracting points."

"What happens if you get all of the answers right?"

Sara gave him a brilliant smile. "Then Katra finally has to buy a round of drinks and you get a kiss on the forehead." She dropped her voice. "And I'll give you kisses elsewhere else, afterwards."

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"You can drop me off here," Katra said when Reverend Bob pulled his car up in front of O'Hara's. "I'll ride home with Sara."

"I don't think her little car could fit three people," the Reverend Bob commented. "Maybe I'd better come in and make sure everything is all right."

"But it's a bar."

Bob leaned closer to her. "I already know that some people drink," he told her in a stage whisper.

"But you don't approve?"

He shrugged. "Alcohol ruins many lives. That doesn't make everyone who has a beer an alcoholic."

It was a reasonable position, but Katra wasn't sure she wanted to be reasonable right now. She was confused as an Aggie in a round room and didn't know what to do about it. After being so horribly wrong about Derrick, she should be running away from men like they had the plague. That was her normal approach after one of her all-too-frequent character misjudgments. Yet here she was having a hormonal reaction to the Reverend Bob. He might look a little like the young Johnny Cash, but that didn't make him heartthrob material.

"You aren't going to get all moralistic if I have a beer or three?"

Bob stared at her for a moment. "I hope I never get moralistic. Lord knows I've made plenty of mistakes in my time."

For some reason, that was comforting. Perhaps because Katra was the queen of mistakes. Like bringing Bob into contact with Jack. Putting the two of them together was going to be like matter and antimatter.

The more she thought about it, the better the idea sounded. Jack deserved anything he got for what he'd done to her.

"In that case, come-on down." Katra hopped out of Reverend Bob's black Lexus before he could come around and open the door for her, ignoring his slightly distressed look. He might want to play the gentleman, but Derrick had cured her of ever wanting to be in that position of dependence again.

A sudden concern came to her. "Are you going to tell Maura about Sara's boyfriend?"

"Do you want me to?"

"Of course not. That's something they need to work out between themselves."

"Then I won't."

Katra wasn't surprised to see Sara and Jack already bent over a wireless quiz controller punching in answers. Sara was always convinced that this month she'd pull off the ultimate upset. In the two years they'd been playing, she'd never even gotten close.

"Jack, I'd like you to meet the Reverend Bob. He's a friend of Sara's grandmother. Bob, this is Jack."

"I hope I'm not just Maura's friend," Bob insisted.

"Whatever." Too bad Jack wore a cowboy hat to cover his horns. Maybe she'd knock it off later in the evening and see what happened.

"What line of work are you in, Jack?"

Jack took a pull on his long-neck, glanced at Bob, then turned his hard gaze at Katra. She glared back, daring him to try a staredown.

"I am a petroleum dowser," Jack finally said.

And he said he couldn't lie. Katra promised herself she would probe this one.

"You mean like Sara?" Bob wanted to know.

"Not at all. Sara is a scientist. She uses her instruments and her understanding of the geologic formations to determine the probability of an oil or gas find. My talent is relatively simple. I use my senses to determine whether anything can be found in those likely spots."

"Oh?" It was obvious to Katra that the Reverend Bob did not approve of dowsing. She didn't really approve of anything about Jack, so that left them about even.

When Jack didn't elaborate on Bob's pointed oh, the Reverend plunged ahead. "So how long have you worked with Sara?"

"What is this, the Spanish Inquisition?" Sara demanded. "Get yourself a pad, Katra. Is he playing?" At Katra's nod, Sara gestured for both Bob and Katra to sit.

Katra snagged a keypad from one of the waitresses, checked to make sure Bob wasn't checking out her too-short shorts, and pushed the start button. "Bob is pretty smart. He speaks Greek, you know."

Jack gave Bob a half-glance and then said something incomprehensible.

Bob froze, his rear about an inch from his bar stool. "It's a strange accent. I've never met anyone who actually spoke early common era Greek."

From the look of absolute joy on Bob's face, Katra realized she had found the way to the poor man's heart. Any woman who would just learn Greek could take him to heaven without even losing her clothes. All in all, she'd rather cook.

Jack grinned. "There was a time when Greek seemed a worthwhile study." He paused a moment. "I think you'll find my accent to be standard for the early common era, at least for the Greek spoken in Palestine."

"Fascinating. Most of my work is with written Greek. And Aramaic, of course."

"Of course."

Something in Jack's eyes must have given Bob a clue because he stopped and wiped his forehead. "Don't tell me you speak Aramaic as well."

"Some."

"That is fantastic. Some of us get together every Thursday for a little Bible reading in the original languages. Perhaps we could interest you?"

Jack's smile disappeared. "No, I don't think so."

"If that's a bad day, maybe we could find another."

Watching Bob warm to the demon was almost sickening. First he plain ignored the unmistakable wing-bumps underneath Jack's light jacket and now he was talking to him like they were going to go hunting together or something. Not only didn't she understand men, Katra didn't want to.

"I'm pretty busy these days," Jack admitted.

"Well, I'm sure we could find a time. Who did you say you studied under?"

"If we're going to play, you'd better get your keypad," Sara interjected a little desperately.

"Yes, the game." Jack looked grateful for the interruption. "I'm afraid you'll have to carry me on the television questions."

"Don't worry," Katra told him. "Sara has seen every movie to make it on T.V." It was part of being a single female in Dallas but Jack didn't have to know that.

"They're about to start a new game," Sara announced. "It's on history. Katra always wins those."

"My minor was in history," Bob admitted. "Perhaps we should change the teams so we wouldn't have an unfair advantage."

Katra looked at Jack's face. Bob might have studied History and she'd read a lot of books, but Jack had been there. If anyone needed handicapping, it was her.

"I think Jack and Sara would rather sit together," she told Bob. "If they fall too far behind, you can always give them a hint."

Bob nodded. "I'll take the pad."

Katra handed it over reluctantly. He'd better be fast.

## Chapter 10

Sara looked up at their score and shook her head. It was impossible. In three years of play she'd topped the list at O'Hara's only once before. Katra and Sara's grandmother had managed that feat half a dozen times despite the large number of competitive players. What she'd never done, what nobody she'd ever heard of had done, was to top the list all night. The idea that they could manage this not only locally, but across all of the bars served by the SkyQuest Satellite network, seemed bizarre. Yet, with a string of dozens of questions correctly answered instantly, they had succeeded. Now, in the last series of the night, the Devil Dogs, the name Katra had come up with for them, led the national totals with only one question left.

The last question popped up. Name a television show about a college drop-in filmed in the 1960s.

"No clue," Jack admitted. He looked a little chagrined but he needn't have been. He'd answered the last thirty straight, leaving little for Sara to do but punch in the letters.



Sara punched the 'A' button for the short-lived T.V. series "Hank," which her grandmother had once described to her in considerable detail.

A small sigh went out from the crowd of onlookers which now surrounded their table. "Never heard of it," and "Oh, boy, I think they finally missed one," were the two murmurs Sara picked from the jumble.

"Uh, any ideas?" Bob asked his partner.

Katra giggled. "Are you still trying to compete? Let's just join the cheering section."

"We didn't come here to cheerlead. But how the heck am I supposed to know about some TV show that came on before we were born?"

The monitor flashed up hints, gradually eliminating the other possibilities including whichever one Bob had selected. He scrambled to change his answer while the rest of the bar's clientele gradually quieted in anticipation of the results.

Finally, the monitor revealed that "Hank" was the correct answer. The bar broke out into a sustained cheer. "It's a miracle," was one comment Sara heard.

Could that be right? Jack had offered more than his share of the answers, but she had contributed as well, filling in the gaps in Jack's knowledge, punching answers quickly before any points were subtracted. She'd been riding a sense of teamwork, but perhaps she'd fooled herself again. Perhaps it was only Jack's magic making things happen.

"No tricks," Jack whispered in her ear.

She shivered. Having a boyfriend who could read your mind had to be one of the stranger things in the world.

Sara allowed herself a sip of the red wine she'd bought and tried to relax. She believed in Jack, didn't she? So why not celebrate? This was the most fun she'd had on a date since--well, she couldn't ever remember having more fun in public.

She shouldn't have been surprised that Jack would be good at this game. He'd shown a great grasp of trivia before they'd sat down although, now that she thought about it, a demon knowing a lot about the Rolling Stones wasn't exactly a stretch. More importantly, Jack had actually existed through history, spoken the languages, and seemed to have an uncanny understanding of science.

Best of all, he'd relied on her when Sara thought she knew the answer and hadn't tried to grab the control from her.

Katra and Bob, on the other hand, had stumbled early when Bob had second-guessed Katra's answers. When Katra had come up right, Bob had gotten flustered and apologetic. Sara had to give him some credit--at least he'd admitted he was the one who'd messed up. A lot of guys would lie and bluff rather than admit they'd been outsmarted by a mere female.

Not that it mattered. Sara and Jack couldn't be stopped.

When the bar's noise finally dropped to a more comfortable roar, the bar phone could be heard ringing plaintively. The bartender went into a huddle. A few moments later he came out with a round of drinks for their table.

"I didn't order those," Sara told him.

"On the house. Or actually, the guy on the phone is paying."

"I'm driving."

"I'll make sure you get home safely," Jack volunteered.

Sara glared at him. He might be good at trivia but how much driving do they do in Hell? "You've been drinking too."

"I, uh, metabolize alcohol quickly."

"Hey, I'm just serving. You four can figure out what to do with the drinks." The bartender set the drinks on the table, vanished, then hurried back holding out the phone.

"He says he wants to talk to you."

"Who is it?"

"Am I your secretary? Ask him."

Sara picked the phone up gingerly. "Yeah?"

"Am I speaking to the captain of the Devil Dogs?"

"Yeah, this is Sara Slocum."

"Listen, this is Lou Mertz from SkyQuest Trivia. Would you mind answering a few questions?"

"That's what I've been doing all night."

"Yes, we know. And we've never seen anything like it. Could you tell me how large a team you're playing?"

"There are two of us. Me and, uh, my boyfriend."

Jack gave her a look she couldn't read. Where was her that mindreading talent when she needed it?

"Just two. Wow."

He must have put his hand over the telephone receiver because his speech was too muffled to understand for the next minute. "Have either of you ever played on television?"

"He wants to know if you've ever been on TV," she asked Jack.

Jack shook his head. "It hadn't been invented last time I visited."

That got a strange look from Bob, then the minister smiled. "I try not to watch television either," Bob volunteered. "It doesn't seem to send a very positive message about our country."

"Perhaps that's it," Jack conceded.

Sara tried to tune them out. "No," she told Lou.

"I'll tell you what, if you can answer three questions over the phone now, I'll give you a television spot."

"Oh, great," Sara told her friends. "This guy tells me he's going to put us on television. Like I'm so sure."

"No, listen." Lou was practically begging. "Nobody has ever gone through eight sets in a row with a perfect score. Besides, the bartender tells me you are an attractive couple. You'd be a natural."

"Let me guess, you just happen to have your television crew here in Oak Lawn," Sara said. This whole story sounded fishy to her.

"No, of course not. We'll pay for you to come to our studio in Manhattan," Lou told her.

"I have a job and so does Jack. We don't have time to fly around the country just to tell some daytime TV semi-celebrity what it feels like to answer a couple of questions right."

"You don't understand." Lou pleaded. "We are about to launch a new trivia show on television. We've been planning a tie-in to our satellite program and when you popped up, it seemed that our prayers were answered."

Sara gave Jack a quick look. Apparently Mertz wasn't talking loudly enough for Jack to hear the word prayer, or maybe that was one that didn't set him off. At any rate, he seemed relaxed and too sexy for words as he chatted up Bob.

"Listen, Mr. Mertz, I already told you that we work for a living. I just can't take time off and fly to Manhattan to appear in some TV show nobody has ever heard of."

More murmurs in the background as Lou went into a huddle. "I can make it worth your while."

Sara hadn't spent the past decade in oil and gas without learning to negotiate. "Bottom-line it for me."

"Free airfare, hotel reservations, dinner Saturday night after the filming, and whatever you win on the show."

He'd answered too quickly. "Not good enough. We want an appearance fee. Say five thousand."

"Five hundred."

"Each."

A little hesitation. "All right, agreed."

"And First Class Airfare."

"Of course."

Sara looked at the glass of red wine she'd been sipping. If she'd been in a bargaining mode, she could have done a lot better. It was obvious that Lou Mertz was desperate. "Let me talk to my partner."

"Not so fast."

"What?"

"I told you I needed you to answer a couple of questions. Not for me, of course. Just so I can assure my programming team that you didn't accidentally come across a list of our questions and have all of the answers prepared."

Although Jack had assured her he wasn't using magic to get the answers, Sara still felt like an imposter. "Go ahead."

The questions he asked were simple enough that she only needed Jack's input on one of them. She reluctantly provided her pager number when Lou demanded a way to contact her and hung up the phone.

"That was the game show," she told her friends. "They want us to go to New York and compete on television."

Katra slapped Jack on the shoulder. "You go, guy."

"We're not going to do it, of course."

"Why not?"

"If you think about it, you'll know."

Sara wasn't drunk, but Jack could see she was slightly impaired by the wine she'd drunk.

"Maybe you'd better drive," Sara told him as they left O'Hara's.

Jack smiled. He supposed he could figure out how to navigate her vehicle, but driving around Dallas at midnight didn't seem like the perfect time to learn.

"I was thinking we would take an alternate route."

"Oh, taxi, huh? Good idea."

It was a good idea. He signaled a taxi and bundled Bob and Katra into it. "We'll meet you at Sara's place," he promised.

"Shouldn't we ride with them?"

Of course they should. Jack was being irrational and that surprised him. There are too many risks in a demon's life to take chances. It didn't matter, he was going with the flow. He felt that he and Sara had achieved something special tonight, although he wasn't sure what. The way they'd been able to work together, almost fuse their knowledge, making everything either knew accessible to the recall of the other went beyond anything he'd experienced or even heard of in the most severe cases of demonic possession. In a mere friendship, it was impossible. Of course the concept of a demon having, or being, a friend was impossible anyway.

Jack took Sara's hand, then tugged her to him, wrapping his arms around her.

"I don't do public displays of affection," she scolded.

He stripped off his jacket and pumped his wings, enjoying the caress of wind against his skin. "Look down."

"Oh." Startled, Sara pulled herself closer to him.

"I won't drop you."

"I know. But what if someone sees us again?"

"They won't." He stroked higher in the sky, much higher than they'd gone before, but Sara didn't seem afraid. The hot and humid air of Dallas in the early summer had cooled just slightly for the evening and he

sought a higher altitude where the earth-warmed air rose and mingled with the cooler atmosphere above. The sensation of warm air, his own heat-drenched body, and Sara's softness as he held her against his chest combined into a sensory overload.

"I thought since Katra was going to be spending the night with us, we might enjoy some time alone," he told her.

"Hum. Sara's hand traced down his chest and she purred as his pectoral muscles rippled with the surge of his wings against the thinner air a thousand feet above the surface of the earth. "You do know how to show a girl a good time, don't you."

"Maybe." His lips sought out hers. It was still hard to restrain himself as desire roared through him like magma through a volcanic eruption. He was learning, though. Learning to control the desire and channel it. Had he learned enough, though, now that Sara had removed the last of her wards?

She met his lips, kissed him hard, then pulled her head away and began exploring with it, raining kisses down his cheeks, his neck, and the straining muscles of his chest.

"You're sexy when you're pumped like this," she told him.

One of his hands was fully engaged in holding her against him. Time to put the other to use.

He traced his hand down her face and she shivered against his touch although he knew that, even dampened as it was, its heat must burn rather than chill.

Sara's hands reached lower tracing the muscles of his stomach, then fumbling with his belt. For the first time, he realized intellectually that both of her hands were free. That spoke volumes of the level of trust she had invested in him.

Almost as if reading his mind, she removed both hands from his body. She gave a little wiggle, then giggled. "There now, that should make things easier."

"What?"

"Uh, let's put it this way, tomorrow somebody is going to find a pair of panties and wonder where they came from."

"Oh."

"So what are we waiting for?" Sara tugged up her skirt and wrapped her legs around him. "The whole time we were in that bar, I was wondering when we could, uh, do it next. Wondering if we couldn't just sneak off somewhere for a few minutes between games even."

He nibbled on her neck then pressed one of her sweet, small, beautiful breasts to his mouth. "Umm."

"When we made--" she caught herself, then started again. "When we had sex in Oklahoma, I didn't have a chance to look around. This is beautiful."

It was beautiful. The Dallas skyline was outlined in green and blue neon and the restored Pegasus atop the downtown Magnolia Building glowed in red splendor. Even the Trinity River, normally a stinking trickle of decaying biomass, glistened like a fairy tale.

"It's the altitude," Jack told her. "Everything looks--"

"That's ridiculous. It's you. It's us."

He wanted to argue but couldn't find the energy. It was easier to go with the flow, experience his body's pure pleasure at Sara's touch.

She fumbled with his zipper, then gave him an evil grin. "Feels like you're ready."

He wasn't the only one. Sara was wet, slick against the touch of his finger as he stroked her. She arched her back, bringing her hips closer to his. "Hurry."

He shared her sense of urgency. Sooner or later, reality would come crashing down, destroy the moments of pleasure he had found here. For the first time in a demon's eternity, he lived for the moment.

He kissed her again, then entered her, feeling Sara's tightness as her body welcomed him, squeezed him with the most intimate of embraces.

Involuntarily his wings beat harder seeking the rhythm that would join him with Sara in that dance of desire and fulfillment that formed a bond even between such disparate creatures as a woman and a demon.

Sara groaned but her aura spoke of a deep contentment. It wasn't anything he had seen in a human before, but he recognized it as powerful, dangerous, and wholly inappropriate.

"Jack?"

"Hum?" He tried to caress her with his voice as his hands caressed her body and his maleness caressed her deep inside.

"Don't think about it."

"What?"

"About why this is impossible. Can't you relax just for a little while? Can't you enjoy the moment?"

He had thought he was but he'd lied to himself--the only lie he could manage. He was afraid. It didn't make sense, of course. What had made sense lately? Sensible or not, he feared losing Sara although he knew he must.

Sara was right, though. None of his fears could prolong the time they had together. He had to seize each precious moment, capture it, and encase it in memory to serve as a shield for when he was returned to the pit.

"It isn't easy," he admitted.

He floated kisses down her neck, then nipped.

She gasped, her muscles clenching against him. "Oh, my."

But Jack was past conversation. He wrapped one of her arms around his neck, then placed both of her hands under her bottom and pulled her to him, burying himself in her until she gasped again.

Sara wiggled in his grasp. Instinctively she matched the movement of her hips to the beat of his wings pressing when he relaxed, letting him pull away when his wings surged against the thick Dallas air.

She pulled her mouth to his ear. For a moment, he thought she would whisper something dangerous. Maybe she did too, for she stopped, then caught his earlobe between her teeth and bit down gently but strongly enough for him to take notice, to make the decision to trust her.

Her tongue caressed his ear then and he buried himself again in her. The desire washed over him in waves, its undertow clawing at him as he climbed closer to completion. This moment had always been the time of danger, the fleeting seconds when he would lose control and act according to his demonic nature.

He wanted to thrust Sara away from him to protect her from what he knew would come but they were too far above the earth now.

If he released her, she would die. Yet she lay in his arms trusting him. Trusting that he would not lose control, would not harm her, would not release her to fall.

Nobody had trusted Jack. Not for a very long time. Not since that day when he'd shown irrevocably that he could never be trusted again. Not since he'd become a demon.

Sara ran her hands across his chest. She'd released her grip on his neck trusting the light pressure of his hands on her bottom to hold her in place as she bucked against him pushing herself, and Jack closer to the magic moment of release.

Jack gritted his teeth and compelled himself to control. Yet even control was not the answer because Sara's body against his urged, compelled a loss of control.

"Oh, yes." Sara's aura blazed in a yellow and blue flame as her orgasm overtook her. Her insides clutched him, holding him tighter even than before, surging with the beat of her completion.

Sara looked at him, her eyes glazed with desire, with need. She grinned then bent her head to bite hard on one of his nipples.

The hint of pain pushed him over the edge. Jack lost control of his emotions, of his fears. He felt himself balanced on a knife-edge of tension. A step one way and he would destroy himself, Sara, and everyone he could reach before the Angels arrived to herd him back to the pit. A step the other way and he would hurl himself to destruction in absolute grief that this moment must come to an end. Yet he remained balanced and, in that balance, climbed to climax.

He gasped, held Sara closer to him as if she was incredibly precious. Perhaps later, he would look back and see that he had been caught up in an irrational moment, but then he knew beyond any uncertainty that Sara was unique in his existence. That losing her, as he inevitably must, would hurt more than all of the fires of hell.

Sara's body convulsed against his as his excitement pushed her over the edge again, bringing her to a second climax.

He'd always been able to see her emotions. Now, his vision seemed even sharper as he sensed the physical and emotional surge of their release flowed between them like huge tides.

The sensation was like nothing he'd experienced before. His wings seemed to lose purchase on the air. It seemed to him that he was falling, all of his powers suddenly vanished into the wave of desire and completion that Sara represented.

Sara loosened her bite on his nipple and grinned at him. "Oh, wow."

He stroked his wings against the air more strongly. Something was wrong.

Sara's grin turned to an expression of pure terror. "We're falling."

Sara watched in silent terror as they plunged from the sky. In seconds, Dallas resolved from a distant and softened blur to the hard edges of reality. She couldn't even scream.

Jack's wings swooped with frantic intent. Before, they had seemed to seize the air effortlessly. Now, they found no purchase. All of his expended energy amounted to exactly nothing.

"What's happening?" she asked in a triumph of will against her freezing fear.

"I forgot to look where I was going," Jack admitted.

She looked more closely. Directly below them sat one of the fine brick churches that dotted so many street corners in Oak Cliff where she lived. "The church?"

"It's like a black hole sucking all of my power."

Their forward momentum had carried them to the middle of the churchyard but seemed to have petered out there with no chance of carrying them out of range before they hit the ground. "What will happen to you?" she asked.

"Don't worry about me." He twisted in the air so his body rested below her. As if Jack's hard muscle would protect her from a multi-thousand foot drop.

"I'm worried about both of us." She angled her body into the stream of air that buffeted both of them, trying to create at least a fraction of a glide rather than the pure plummet that would carry them to destruction. It wouldn't take much.

Without her having to speak, Jack sensed what she was doing and added his body and his wings to the equation. He might as well not have been there for all of the difference he made.

"Angle to the right," he urged. "Uh, my right," he corrected when she tried to follow his instructions.

She obeyed although his choice seemed perverse, carrying them directly toward a tall steeple that threatened to end their lives with piercing rather than with a crushing collision with the ground.

Jack tightened his grip around her with his right arm. "Hold on," he breathed.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and her legs around his body. If she had to die, she couldn't imagine a better place than deep in Jack's embrace.

They must have reached terminal velocity but the ground seemed to be approaching ever faster. Sara made a mental note never to consider sky-diving. This experience provided all of that kind of adventure she would ever need.

Jack reached out and grasped the steeple as they flew past, his body convulsing into hard muscle and harder bone. His grip on her tightened, knocking out her wind and leaving Sara gasping for breath.

If he'd thought he could hold, Jack was clearly mistaken. He maintained a grip on the steeple for only a fraction of a second. In that time, red sparks launched themselves from the steeple and surrounded Jack's body in a haze of attacking flames.

He dropped off, the scent of ozone filling Sara's nostrils as she gasped for a life-sustaining breath.

Jack's effort barely slowed the fall but Sara's adrenalin rush made every second stretch itself out, let her see everything, feel every brush of Jack's skin and fabric against her body.



He jerked, twisting again to present his body to the Spanish tiled church roof.

A wave of heat arose from the roof as he struck it, but the friction didn't seem to slow them at all.

Then they dropped off the roof, their descent angling toward the street.

Sara tried to gather her breath to scream but couldn't. Jack's grip held her so close that she couldn't move, couldn't struggle, couldn't even cry out at the last instant of her life.

A lifetime of regrets filled Sara's mind. Had she told her grandmother that she loved her? Had she misplaced her priorities when she'd ignored Katra's complaints rather than forcing Jack to rectify them instantly? Should she have left Jack in Hell when she'd had the chance?

The ground zoomed closer, seemingly climbing up to meet her rather than waiting for her to fall.

Again, Jack twisted himself, this time so he was on top. Was she seeing his true colors, at last? She couldn't believe he would sacrifice his body against the tile roof and then use her to break the fall, yet no other explanation met the facts.

The sidewalk grew in her eyes until Sara could see every crack in the depression-era concrete.

Then, without warning, they lifted.

It shouldn't have been possible. Sara had aced Physics in both high school and college. The sudden stop should have broken her neck regardless of whether it was caused by the ground or by some external force. Instead, she was lifted into a cloud of comfort. Jack's wings again found purchase in the air.

"How--"

"Flying is not completely in tune with human physics."

She'd never get used to this mind reading thing. "What happened."

"When we got beyond the church grounds, I was able to reclaim my powers. Are you all right?"

"Of course not. I came literally within an inch of my life, have the worst form of coitus interruptus I've ever heard of, and realized how little I've accomplished with my life."

Jack winged down to the back of a vacant lot a block from her apartment. "Perhaps we should straighten our clothing. It wouldn't do to look like this when Katra and Bob arrive."

Straightening her clothing was easy enough, although it hardly hid the evidence. Her hair was a mess, she'd lost her panties at ten thousand feet, and her dress was both twisted in strange ways and charred by the fiery holocaust that had surrounded their plunge.

Worse, Jack had lost his hat and his jacket. He tucked his wings under his shirt and she finger-combed his hair over his small horns, but the evidence was painfully obvious.

"Could you give me a hand with this?" Jack's voice sounded embarrassed--something she would have been willing to bet was impossible.

She looked where he was pointing. "You need more?" This hardly seemed like the place for lovemaking, even if she had been in the mood, which she emphatically was not.

He fumbled with his open zipper. "I can't do it alone."

"It may be big but I think you can lift it."

"Please." He reached out his left hand.

Sara's heart climbed into her throat. She'd been so fixated on her own problems that she hadn't noticed what had happened to Jack.

## Chapter 11

"Well that was pretty interesting, wasn't it?"

As conversation gambits went, Reverend Bob's wasn't the greatest. Still, Katra wasn't in the mood to be fussy. He hadn't said anything at all for the first ten minutes of their taxi ride to Sara's apartment.

"Sara has always been good at media and science. Literature and history questions got her. Jack seems to have a knack for those." Go figure.

"Hum." He paused, downshifting and turning onto the Sylvan viaduct. "That Jack seemed to know just about everything."

She had hinted about Jack's secret identity before, but she felt reluctant to bring it up again. Sara would never forgive her if Katra butted into her love life just when she was finally getting a little action.

Speaking of action, Reverend Bob had been looking her over for most of the evening. Katra didn't think it would be too difficult to wangle a date out of him, but should she? After her experience with Derrick, was she ready to date anyone?

"I think Jack's been around more than he looks." Although if you looked closely and checked out the horns on his head, you might just guess he wasn't the nice boy from the suburbs that Maura wanted for her granddaughter. Evidently Rev. Bob wasn't one for looking closely. Lucky for Jack they were in Texas where nobody thought twice about a man who kept his cowboy hat on all night.

Rev. Bob hemmed and hawed for a moment clearing his throat and nodding to himself. "Has Sara known him for long?"

Hum. Maybe Bob was more interested in Sara than in Katra after all. "He came into her life rather suddenly."

Reverend Bob nodded slowly. "I'll have to check him out on the church's database. Sara has always been cautious. I'm a little suspicious about this sudden interest. If you ask me, there's something a little strange about this Jack."

Strange like he was butting in. The funny thing was, Reverend Bob had never seemed to notice Sara before. Some guys were like that, though. They didn't look at a woman until some other man had shown interest. Then again, Katra didn't pretend to understand men. As far as she could tell, they were all crazy anyway. Why else would women like Katra and Sara have to spend their evenings summoning spirits?

"Don't you think we should do something?" he continued.

Katra gave Reverend Bob a good look. He was kind of cute in a rough-hewn way with his dark hair, habitual black shirts and jeans, and well-built shoulders. Maybe Sara was supposed to end up with him. Maybe the magic had only brought Jack into the picture to get a little jealousy going and kick-start

Reverend Bob's romantic interest.

It wasn't exactly wonderful for the ego, but Katra was a big girl. She'd celebrate if Sara found someone who could make her really happy. "Sara looked really good tonight, didn't she?"

"Oh, yes. She is a very attractive woman. Do you think she's serious about Jack?"

Check. She could definitely erase one Reverend Bob from her dance card. The man obviously had it bad for Sara.

"Like I said, they've only been together for a little while. I couldn't say how serious they might be."

"I sort of got the idea he was moving in with her. I'm afraid Maura wouldn't approve."

If Reverend Bob thought Katra was going to respond to that kind of statement, he didn't know much about friends. "Hum."

He let that stand for a moment. The taxi pulled in front of Sara's apartment. Reverend Bob opened the taxi door, then turned and, for the first time since they left the bar, really looked at Katra. "The more I think about it, the more I realize that we would have been better off if I'd let you handle the control pad like you wanted."

No kidding. He might be kind of cute but he was all thumbs. Still, she'd been around long enough not to blurt out anything like that. Men had such fragile egos. "They are a little tricky."

"Not to mention your answers were usually right and mine were wrong a lot of the time. I really thought my years of college would pay off."

As if Katra didn't have a few years of college as well. Dallas might not have the world's best public school system but they didn't hire high school dropouts to be teachers, either. "Hey, we'll do better next time."

"After that drubbing, you wouldn't mind being my partner again?"

Just when Katra had been sure Bob was only interested in Sara, he came out with something like that. "I'll play with anybody who's willing to try," she said. "If you want to know the truth, I could get addicted to that game. I'd probably play bar trivia every night if I could get away with it."

"We'll have to go out and try it again, then. There wouldn't be so much pressure if it was just the two of us."

Well knock her over with a feather. Unless she'd guilted him into asking by being so enthusiastic. Still, even if it was a just a friend date, she'd be able to play her game and have something to do instead of grading papers all night. "Call me some time. I'm in the book. We'll see if we can rack up some scores."

"I'll do that." Reverend Bob fumbled for his wallet to pay the driver. "We probably beat them back. I'll come in with you, or we could get a cup of coffee somewhere while we wait."

This was the part of the date Katra hated. Should she kiss him or not? It hadn't really been a date and she still wasn't sure whether he was interested in her or in Sara so she figured she could let him make the first move. But should she invite him in for a cup of coffee? He had taken her home, after all.

She decided she didn't have to. It was Sara's apartment, not hers. She wasn't ready to have Rev. Bob making moves on her and she definitely didn't want to see him make goo-goo eyes at Sara. "You don't

have to walk me up."

"The heck I don't. You don't know whether that Derrick creep is hanging around."

Katra had managed to put Derrick out of her mind for a few moments but she didn't think he had gone away for good. "I guess I forgot about him. Thanks." The lump in her throat surprised her. He was concerned about her.

Bob knocked on Sara's door. He'd stepped up to it unerringly, clearly knowing exactly where it was. Strangely, Katra couldn't remember ever hearing Sara mention Reverend Bob coming over to her house.

He waited a few moments, then knocked again. "I thought so. They looked like they wanted to be alone for a few minutes."

"Maybe." With Jack's ability to zap things where he needed them to be, it was more likely they couldn't come to the door because they were doing the nasty. Katra couldn't tell Reverend Bob that. It would break his little heart.

"I don't suppose you have a key?"

Sara hid her key under her mat, like half the population of the world. Katra didn't think Bob was ready to learn that. "Huh-uh."

"In that case, I noticed a Seven-Eleven down the street. How about if I buy you a cup of coffee."

"Add a donut and you're on."

They were halfway down Sara's street when Katra saw a movement out of the corner of her eye. Panic settled on her like a weight on her chest making it hard to breath. Could Derrick have followed them here?

The furtive movement resolved into Sara and Jack sneaking toward Sara's apartment. To Katra's surprise, Jack seemed to be limping.

"Hey guys," she shouted, "get lost?"

"Almost," Sara answered. Her voice sounded shaky.

"I'll have to take a rain check on the donut, Bob," Katra told him, almost shoving him toward his taxi. Jack had lost his hat and Katra didn't want the Reverend Bob to look too closely. "Don't forget to give me a call some time," she added.

"Believe me, I will." He paused a beat. "Do you think Sara needs help?"

Katra looked at her friend, then shook her head. Sara's eyes had the glazed look of a woman who'd been sexed within an inch of her life. "I'll take care of her," she told him.

"Right. I'm off then."

He bent to brush his lips against her cheek, then stepped back to the waiting taxi.

Katra stood frozen for a moment. What had that kiss been about?

"What was that about?" Sara said, echoing Katra's thought.

"I have no idea. But what happened to you?" Sara looked a bit of a mess but that could be explained by wild sex in a tree somewhere. Jack, on the other hand, looked like he'd been hit by anti-aircraft fire. His jeans were torn, one of his cowboy boots had lost a heel, and his black leather jacket leaked a thin trail of smoke.

"Let's go inside. I'll tell you there." Sara led them to her door and opened it.

Sara's house looked like it had been caught by a storm and tossed. A sinking feeling swept over Sara. "What..."

"Stay here and let me check it out," Jack growled.

Sara nearly growled back. Jack was a mess. He was barely walking and that wasn't because he'd messed up his boots. One of his hands was so badly charred she could smell the sulphur. If he could put his hands into the hot steel of Katra's engine without anything more than an oil smudge, Jack had to be truly hurting.

"It's my house."

"It could be dangerous."

Now he was pulling the macho act. "If someone's still in there, what would you do, bleed on them until they begged for mercy?"

"Demons don't bleed."

"Whatever you call that red stuff."

Jack seemed weaker by the moment but he naturally insisted on pushing ahead. "I don't call it anything. It isn't happening, couldn't be happening."

Denial from the demon who said he couldn't lie. Blood's closest cousin seeped through Jack's white shirt gluing the fabric to his chest. She had to get him inside and bandaged up. This house-tossing complicated an already bad situation.

Katra reached into her purse and pulled out a small pistol. "Why don't you two shut up. I'll go in and should check things out."

Sara wouldn't have been more surprised if her grandmother became a hippy. "What are you doing with that gun?"

"I've got a madman after me. I need some protection. When he heard my story, Reverend Bob gave this to me."

"Put that thing away before you shoot all of us."

"I know how to shoot."

She might at that. In high school and college, Katra had hung out with a kicker crowd. "I don't care. Whoever did this is gone by now." Sara paused a beat. "Or whatever did it. Was this another imp attack, Jack?"

He shook his head, but uncertainly. "There is still a flaw in the fabric between dimensions but I don't think it's large enough to let even imps through." He sniffed the air cautiously. "No sign of them. Of course that

wouldn't prevent them from reaching through and causing problems. Your burglars might have been perfectly ordinary thieves influenced to come this way."

That wasn't very reassuring. She turned to Katra. "Give me the gun and I'll make sure there are no human imps. And keep Jack here with you. He wants to get himself killed."

Katra glared at Jack, then at Sara. "I'm not giving you the gun. You don't even know which end to point with." She was gritting her teeth and looked angry enough that she might just shoot Jack and Sara to shut them up. Finally she sighed. "Let's all go."

It was possibly the dumbest idea Sara had ever heard but she wasn't going to win this argument. "All right."

Jack dumped his jacket and charged ahead. From the back, he looked even more damaged than he had from the front. One of his wings hung crooked down his back. The other had lost the membrane between the struts and beat the air ineffectually as he walked.

Sara couldn't resist. Trying her most delicate touch, she brushed her fingers against the charred flesh of his wing.

It radiated heat, nearly burning her fingers at her light touch. Jack grunted the instant her hand contacted his wing. "I'm all right."

"Oh, sure. Will it heal?"

"Eventually."

She waited patiently. He hadn't given her the information she wanted and she knew he would. Finally he broke down.

"Demons recover from physical wounds quickly. If something purely physical had ripped my wings or bent my ribs, I'd be able to recover in a few seconds. A church is something else."

Jack led the way into her bedroom. Whoever had tossed her house had paid special attention to her bedroom. Her underwear lay scattered around the room with the lacy things she bought for special occasions in a pile in the middle of her bed.

She stared at them, trying not to think of what some pervert might have been doing. It was hopeless. She'd have to throw everything away and start over. There was no way she would put anything here next to her body.

Jack had closed his eyes and was turning around the room like a hound with a scent.

"What are you picking up?" she demanded.

"It was Derrick, wasn't it." Katra made it a statement rather than a question. She flipped off the safety switch on her automatic and fed a shell into the chamber.

"His scent remains but the man is gone," Jack announced.

"So we go and get him. This is sick."

Sara's knees unlocked and threatened to toss her to the ground. She felt violated, as if the man had attacked her rather than just an apartment she rented. "Why would Derrick do this to me? We hardly knew each other in high school and it's been years."

Jack closed his eyes but his glare made it obvious he was looking for something at a level beyond the visible. Finally he shook his head. "I thought he might have come here looking for Katra and lost his temper but the aura is wrong for that. He came knowing that she wasn't here. He blames us for his striking out with Katra."

"Us? He doesn't even know you exist."

"That would make sense but it may not be true. Either angels or demons could have communicated with him."

"Demons, definitely. Everyone knows how evil they are." Katra her gun around, accidentally clanging it against Sara's living room light. Glass shrapnel exploded around them.

Jack inhaled quickly, then blew hard, catching the flying glass before it could descend.

"Present company excepted," Katra continued. She blushed, switched on the safety, and put the gun back in her purse. "Uh, sorry about your light fixture."

Sara felt hysterical laughter bubbling up inside her and bit her tongue to hold it back. The last thing she needed now was to completely wig out. "I always hated that thing anyway. It came with the apartment and I was always too broke to replace it. So now I have no excuses."

Sara piled the wadded underwear, bras, and stockings into a mound on her sheet, then yanked off the sheet, forming a Santa Claus sack. "I'm going to toss this."

"Shouldn't we call the police?" Katra asked.

"I'm not going to let more men paw through my underwear. Even if they are supposedly helping."

Katra nodded grimly. "We can take care of him ourselves. Do your magic, Jack. Find the man and let's go beat the snot out of him."

He looked concerned. "I should be able to, but I can't."

"You found him with no problems when Katra made her wishes," Sara reminded him.

"I had some luck. At least it seemed like luck at the time. Right now, I seem to be fresh out." He looked battered but his eyes still glinted with determination. Jack might be an evil demon from Hell, but he wasn't a quitter.

Sara hefted her sack. "We're not doing anything until I get this trash out."

Jack intercepted her and took the impromptu sack from her arms. "You two stay here and I'll take this out." He paused and glared at Katra.

"What?"

"Do me a favor. Don't shoot me when I come back."

"Would my bullets hurt? I thought you were a big bad demon."

"Good question. Remember, though, your friend Reverend Bob gave you the gun. If just brushing against a church can do this to me, think what a weapon from the church could do."

He left the two women staring at each other.

Jack returned from the Dumpster and stalked through Sara's apartment. The aura of her one-bedroom home was badly distorted. The spells that had called him out of Hell in the first place, then the additional spells that had opened a gateway for the imps, accounted for plenty of the disturbance. Derrick's malevolence added to the grinding wrongness.

There was more, of course. Through the strong emotions of their time on Sara's bed and the power he'd exerted banishing the imps, he felt a malevolent hatred. Yet there did not seem to be a single focus. No one strand he could grasp and follow to the source.

"You look like you're turning into a zombie," Katra told him. "Shape up."

"I thought you wanted me to find Derrick for you."

She gave him an evil grin. "Yeah. Do that and then help me decide whether I should put the bullet through his heart or his balls. I'm leaning toward his balls because his heart may be too small to find. I've about given up on his brain. It's probably bulletproof."

"If you want him dead, let me do it. I can squeeze out his life as easily as I fixed your car. And in much the same way."

Sara sat down suddenly and put her hands over her face. "That's sick."

She read distress but he couldn't imagine why. "If Katra shot him, she would be in trouble with the law. My way would leave no evidence."

"That's just it. Katra was kidding. She wasn't really going to shoot him. I don't think you're joking at all."

Of course he wasn't joking. He didn't think Katra was either. Her anger was too genuine.

Katra must have been reading him. "I'm not joking right now. I suspect by the time we find him, though, I'll have cooled down."

He needed to stop projecting his emotions so freely. It was one thing to let Sara see into him in the heat of passion. It was something else, something dangerous, to let just anyone see. The oldest rule in Hell is never show your weakness.

"At any rate, I can't find him. I could pull up a few million imps and send them scouring the streets of Dallas but that would be dangerous for all of us."

Sara shuddered. "No imps."

"I thought you might feel that way." He had no idea why he couldn't sense Derrick. The man had radiated a hateful aura when he'd trashed Sara's apartment. Even mixed with the other scents, the trail of that aura should have been easy to follow. Yet the trace died less than a mile from Sara's home. Almost as if Derrick knew a demon would be homing in on him and had deliberately gone to ground.

"So where are we going to spend the night?" he asked.

"Not here?" Katra looked confused. "Sara has more sheets. We can fix things up in no time."

Jack inhaled the acrid aura from the room. It was too much like home to be comfortable. "We should give it time for the hatred to fade."



"Let's go to the Alamo Courts," Sara suggested. "I always wanted to check out a motel that charges by the hour."

"It's just like any motel but tackier," Katra said.

Sara grabbed Katra by the chin. "Gotcha. Fess up."

Katra blushed. "It was nothing."

"Come on, who was it?"

Katra wiped her hands on her jeans. "Just one time, Steve Davis and I went there."

"Your old principal?"

Katra nodded glumly.

"But he's married."

"We got drunk and made a mistake. So sue me."

The Alamo sounded like a place of human suffering and distress. That sort of power was exactly what Jack needed to heal himself. "Sounds terrific. When do we leave?"

Twenty minutes later, the women were ready. Sara locked her door. Before they left, Jack traced a rune on the door. For as long as the spell lasted, Katra's apartment would be invisible to casual thieves. Only someone wanting to enter very badly would be able to do so. Anyone stubborn enough to break through the spell would send alarms through the aether that a television preacher could follow. It was unfortunate he hadn't thought to do that before the damage was done.

"What makes you so interested in the Alamo Courts?" Sara asked Jack.

"You know the story of the Alamo, of course. Where a small group of men were cut off, besieged, and overrun."

"This is nothing like that."

He shook his head. "I hope you're right. Something in the aether is telling me that Derrick is only the feint behind which our real threat hides."

## Chapter 12

"I really don't see that anything has changed." The supercilious banker looked down his nose at Sara. "Although you do have some experience in prospecting and positive references, you have never managed a drilling crew."

His attitude indicated he didn't think that was likely to be happening any time soon, either.

"Drilling crews respect results, Mr. Barlett," she said. "I've delivered results all my career."

Barlett paged through the papers in front of him. "That isn't the evidence I have here. According to this, your previous employers fired you for getting metaphysical on the job. Something about a dowser."

"How I deliver my results really is my business," she reminded him. She was still reeling from the suddenness of her job loss coming as it did on top of the violation of her home.

"That's where you're wrong, Ms. Slocum." Barlett straightened his tie and crossed one tassel-tied loafer over the other. "If we were to lend you money, how you use it would be very much our business."

Sara felt her shoulders slump despite her attempt to project confidence. "We have found a significant field in Northern Oklahoma. We have secured options on the mineral rights at a price fair both to our investors and to the owners. You have my personal guarantee, as well as the assurance of my partner, that the drilling will go smoothly. We're supposed to be having an energy crisis. Why don't you cut us some slack and we'll see what we can do about solving it?"

Barlett gave her a tight-lipped smile. "I'm a banker. I'll leave problem solving to politicians and psychologists, thank you very much. Now, unless you have something else to offer, or any additional collateral beyond the sadly aging Miata, I'm afraid our appointment is over."

Obviously Jack had been right when he'd told her to blow off this one. She'd only ignored his advice because they were at the end of their rope. Her grandmother had banked here for decades and Sara had thought that might be enough to at least get a hearing.

"I have my mother's engagement ring." It was weak, Sara knew, but it was all she could put on the table. They needed this loan.

Barlett shuddered theatrically. "Then see a pawn shop by all means. Jewelry is never a good investment."

With his concave chest and protruding eyes, Sara suspected he spoke from personal experience. No diamond would be big enough to interest many women in this Cretan.

"I appreciate your time, then." The words stuck in her throat but she forced them out. Whatever else, she was a Texas woman. She'd retain some vestiges of manners even if it killed her. Barlett had to be a Yankee.

"Oh, Ms. Slocum." Barlett held up a hand like a policeman directing traffic.

"Yes?"

"I don't see a social security number for your partner. You aren't involved with an illegal immigrant here, are you? Your grandmother would be very concerned."

Her blood froze in her veins. She hoped she wasn't sputtering as obviously as she seemed to be. Finally she pulled together enough composure to answer. "Since you aren't lending me money, I suggest you mind your own business."

"Your grandmother is concerned about you, you know. Why don't you give up this foolishness and look for a more feminine job."

Yeah, and give up everything she'd ever lived for. Sara didn't think her grandmother would share her concern with a snake like this, but once again Southern manners got in the way of a strong comeback. "I won't take any more of your time."

"Oh. There was one more thing."

The words one more thing never mean anything good. Sara walked to the door before turning to listen. "Go ahead."

"When she called me yesterday, Maura mentioned you were still single. I was wondering if you had plans for tonight?"

She quelled the shudder at the thought. "Are you saying you'll lend me the money if I date you?"

Barlett actually laughed. "Oh, no. This loan idea wouldn't pass muster if you slept with the entire board." He paused a beat, then winked. "I might be able to come up with a couple of hundred out of my pocket, though. I assume you can be convincing."

"You can stick those hundreds up your butt." She turned and stomped out. Even southern manners have their limit.

Jack saw her as she left the bank. She'd held her tears back until she reached the main lobby but was boo-hooing pretty seriously by the time she reached her Miata.

"Through my magical powers I detect the meeting did not go well," Jack offered.

"You're not being very funny."

"I don't get much practice in my home neighborhood."

Despite herself, Sara lips turned up. "When you talk about Hell, you make it sound like just another tough hood."

"Live anywhere for a few thousand years and it starts to feel like home."

She shook her head. "Anyway, you were right. Nobody is going to lend us money. After he shot me down, the jerk had the nerve to ask me out on a date." She couldn't bring herself to tell Jack what Barlett had insinuated.

"So you got your date. Great."

There were times when Jack drove her absolutely crazy. He could switch from an arrogant male to brow-beaten demon in less time than it took her to sneeze. "I'm involved with someone right now," she reminded him. "Besides, the day someone like Barlett starts looking good is the day I decide I'm through with men forever."

"He insulted you. Did he find flaws in your business plan?" Jack's body relaxed but Sara wasn't fooled. His eyes showed a protective rage. With Jack, she wasn't sure looks couldn't kill.

She stepped into the car and motioned Jack to join her.

He bent over and picked something up.

"What did you find?"

Jack sat in the car beside her and held out his hand. A shiny penny rested on his palm.

"Hang onto it, it's the most we've gotten in what, ten banks we've visited."

"Twelve. You should have let me come in with you."

"That's the funny thing." She shifted into gear and left the bank's parking lot. "Every single one of them asked about you. They wanted to know if you were legal. It's almost like someone is tipping them off."

Jack stared at the penny in his hand then squeezed his fist around it. A wave of heat radiated from him like a second sun shining, then vanished. When he opened his hand, the penny was gone, vaporized.

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Initially, Jack had put their problems down to bad luck. Twelve bankers in a row all asking the same questions went beyond coincidence. Someone, or something, had decided to involve itself in Jack's stay in the human plane. The feel wasn't very angelic, yet demons favor direct action, at least against their fellow demons. If it was neither angel or demon, all that was left was human. Could some human have discovered who he was?

"I can get you the money," he told her. Now that he'd had the chance to look into computers, he could easily divert a bank's funds into an account set up under Sara's name.

"I won't steal." Sara was getting back her normal confidence and it showed in her voice.

"You won't have to."

"It wouldn't be right to start a business with stolen money."

He shrugged. "I could print some." Manipulating appearance was second nature.

"That's dishonest too."

"We've got to do something. I can feel them closing in on us, squeezing us like I squeezed that penny."

Sara laughed. "Oh, Jack. You spent too long hanging around with other demons. Here on Earth, we have a saying. 'Shit happens.' It doesn't mean there's some vast conspiracy out to get us."

He considered that for all of a fraction of a second. "Ever since your apartment was ransacked, we've been plowing through a cloud. It isn't just the loan. Nothing has gone right."

"Hey, the sex has been good."

There was that. He was learning to gain more control over his emotions during sex. The reduction in tension helped Sara enjoy the physical side of their relationship and it had helped him even more. For the first time in eternity, he could relax, enjoy the sensation of a woman stretched around him without the fear that he might tear her to shreds in a moment of passion.

"I'm serious, Sara. We've got to do something."

She'd driven as they talked and now she pulled up in front of her apartment. For the first time in a week, they were here to stay rather than just spending a part of the day cleaning.

Jack reached out with tendrils of insight. For now, at least, there was nothing.

"All clear."

Sara let out a breath. "If they trash it again, I'm going to give up and move back in with my grandmother."

"You want to put her in danger?"

Sara shook her fist at him. "Hey, play fair."

"A demon, play fair?"

She shook her head but didn't argue with him. Even her innocence could only carry her so far.

The message light flashed on the answering machine as they entered Sara's apartment. Her finger shook slightly as she pressed the button to play it back.

"Maybe it's the banker telling us he's changed his mind," Jack suggested.

"Just as long as it isn't Derrick."

"Sara? It's Lou Mertz. Call me." Lou's disembodied voice rattled off a number.

Sara shrugged her shoulders. "Who the heck is Lou Mertz?"

"He's the man you talked to after we played that game at the bar," Jack reminded her. Perfect memory was one of the many curses all demons possessed. They weren't allowed to forget anything, ever.

"Oh my gosh. I forgot all about that."

Sara picked up the phone and cradled it against her chest. "We really need the money but it would be too dangerous for you."

Jack frowned. "I can take care of myself."

"He was talking about big prize money. If we won, we could start our business without having to mess with the banks."

"So do it."

Her face crinkled into a frown. "We could take Katra with us. Getting away from Dallas for a couple of days would be good for her."

Jack nodded. "Absolutely."

"But you'd be on national television. Somebody would see what you are."

Jack gestured toward the new cowboy hat he'd tossed into the corner of her living room. "I'd wear my hat and that loose-fitting jacket we bought. You and Katra could wear cowboy boots so we looked like Texans and so I wouldn't stand out as much. How much danger could there be?"

Sara nodded. "If you're willing to take the chance, so am I." She dialed the number.

Ten minutes later, Sara's expression glowed. "Here you were just saying how rotten our luck has gotten. Well get ready. We're going to go up there and win enough money to finance our first hole."

"What happens if we don't win?"

"Then all we get is a free weekend in New York and a few thousand in cash. But we're going to win. Remember how hot we were two weeks ago."

A weekend in New York--hell, a weekend anywhere with Sara--beat just about anything Jack could think of.

"Don't get too confident," he reminded her. "I've stunk at that millionaire game you've been making me watch."

Jack felt Sara bristle at his words. "I usually know the answers when you don't. We're a team, you don't have to do everything yourself."

"Right, team." A demon is naturally a loner and, even with Sara, it was hard for him to build a level of trust. Still, they were a stunningly compatible team. Sara might lack his skill with ancient Sumerian but she crushed him on modern television.

"Since I don't have to worry about requesting vacation from my job, we won't have any problems catching an early flight to New York."

"Early as in when?"

Sara glanced at her wall calendar but the gesture was perfunctory. She'd clearly made up her mind. "Mertz said there's a flight at nine Friday morning."

"I could fly you." His wings had largely healed from their brush with the church and he longed for a time to spread them, to seize the winds with them as he had done after the first creation.

She smiled, her hazel eyes glowing with excitement. "I thought you were recovering and I'd love to go for a flight with you some time."

"But?"

"But that's too far. Besides, I'm not ready for you to fly Nana and Katra too."

He could carry the extra weight but he didn't think Maura would be up to the adventure.

"I guess we'd better take the airliner."

Sara heard the caution in his voice. "I know Maura can be a bit of a trial, but she means well and she's sweet."

"There's a saying about what paves the road to Hell."

Sara brushed back a tendril of blonde hair, then twisted it around her finger. "I've been meaning to ask you about that. Is it true?"

It was hard for Jack to talk about that original mistake, hard for him even to think about it. Still, he owed Sara that much, at least. "At the time, I thought my intentions were honorable. In retrospect, I wonder if pride didn't tinge my thinking."

"Well that hasn't changed."

"Tell me about it." For better or worse, worse being far more likely, pride was the one thing he still retained from that awful defeat.

"We don't have to take Katra and my grandmother if you don't want to," Sara told him. "Or if there's anyone you'd like to take. We get two guests so we could take one each."

"I'm fine with that." He paused for a moment. "Maybe you could encourage Maura to talk about something other than her church." Persuading Maura not to talk at all was way beyond the possible.

Sara laughed. "And here you always go bragging on how you're used to standing the pain."

Katra finished her last cup of coffee and looked at the time. Six o'clock. Time to go. While living in fear of Derrick might be destroying her confidence, the extra hours she was spending in the faculty lounge had made her the best prepared teacher in Maude E. Smithson Elementary School.

She unfastened the deadbolt, opened the door, and peered down the hall. Nobody.

Leaving her books in a cupboard, she sprinted through the multipurpose room and onto the parking lot. A black Lexus was the only vehicle still there.

She flung the door open and jumped into the back seat just as Derrick's Jaguar rounded the corner. "Let's get out of here."

"Can't the police do anything about him?" Maura asked from the passenger seat of Reverend Bob's car. Sara's grandmother and Reverend Bob had insisted on helping protect Katra. Once Bob had showed her the evidence of how many stalkers harm or even kill their victims, Katra had stopped arguing.

Katra sighed. "He's claiming I'm harassing him because he dumped me so they can't do anything. Of course if he actually killed me they'd probably arrest him then."

Oddly, she never spotted him when Jack was around.

"Don't even think about that," Bob advised from behind the steering wheel. "He'll tire of the game. Then you can go back to having a normal life."

Katra's normal life was working more hours than any of the other teachers so she didn't have to go home to her trailer and see her mother and sister, but she knew what Bob was talking about. "How about I treat you both to dinner tonight as my thanks for all you two have done for me."

"Oh, dear. I've tried your cooking." Maura sounded seriously concerned.

"I meant we'd go out to a restaurant. There's a new California Pizza Kitchen in the West End."

"Maybe you two should go. You can just drop me off, Bob."

Maura must have given up on matching Bob with Sara so now she was pushing him Katra's way.

"Come on, Maura. You've both saved my rear," Katra argued. "It won't hurt you to get out of the house for one night. Besides, they're supposed to have healthy pizza there."

"I'll be eating out in restaurants this entire weekend, when we go to New York," Maura answered. Katra could tell she was weakening.

Katra took a deep breath and made the ultimate sacrifice. "Besides, I've been dying to hear about what your garden club is planting this year. Those roses you gave me are still blooming and I thought I'd plant something new this spring."

"Oh, all right," Maura agreed. "You're right, you know. I don't get out of the house often enough. I need to keep up on what you young people are doing. You can tell me what you think about this young man Sara is seeing."

Katra felt a migraine coming on. Exactly how was she supposed to tell Maura and a minister that Sara's young man was actually a demon? The only answer was, she couldn't. But if she couldn't tell them that, what could she say?

"I don't really know him that well, but you know he's smart."

Maura peered at her for a moment and Katra got the feeling she got when Jack looked into her, as if all of her secrets were there on the table for anyone to see.

"Oh, let's not talk about him now," Maura finally said. "It'll be easier after we have some food and maybe a couple of glasses of wine."

Katra's headache got worse. After a couple of glasses of wine, she might just tell them what he'd looked like after he'd lost that fight with the church.

Fortunately, the California Pizza Kitchen was hopping. Between Maura worrying about which pizza was best for her diet and Reverend Bob accidentally tripping a waitress, Katra managed to divert the conversation to Reverend Bob's work. Once he got started, he took over.

Two hours later, she knew more about the Reverend's fast-growing congregation of troubled men than she had ever wanted, had a slight buzz from the red wine Maura forced on her, and didn't have a trace of the headache she'd been so worried about. Reverend Bob knew how to tell a story and had the knack of making himself the butt of as many jokes as anyone else.

"I'm feeling a little tired," Maura told them as they dispatched the last of the second carafe of wine. "Why don't I catch a taxi and the two of you can take your time."

"It's getting pretty late for me too," Katra said.

"It's only eight," Maura pointed out. "Just go out and have a little fun."

"Yeah, Katra. Why not?" Reverend Bob urged.

After all Bob had done for her, Katra couldn't argue. While he didn't ring her chimes, Bob wasn't hard on the eyes either.

"How about a stop at Starbuck's," Bob suggested.

Starbucks' Caffe Caramel happened to be Katra's only admitted weakness. She shot Maura a look and Maura refused to meet her eyes. She was matchmaking after all.

Still, what possible harm could it do to have a cup of coffee with a minister? "That sounds great." She turned to Maura. "Are you sure you'll be all right? We could take you home and go to the Starbucks near our house."

"The one in the grocery store?" Maura looked indignant. "Don't be silly. I'll be fine."

It took another five minutes before Katra could persuade them she was serious about paying the bill. After that, they finally emerged into the bright Dallas evening. Although it was after eight, the sun looked as if it would shine for hours more. For the first time since Jack had come into her life, Katra relaxed. Surely things were going to be all right.

Maura climbed into a waiting taxi and Katra smelled a plot. "What are the odds that there just happened to be a cab here?" she demanded.

"I called from the washroom," Maura giggled. "I knew you'd try to back out if I gave you the time."

She was right, of course, but Katra hated being so transparent. She tried to think of a snappy comeback, but Maura slammed the taxi door and the driver floored it before Katra could do more than gape with her mouth open.



"I've been hoping we could spend some time together," Bob told her.

Uh-oh.

He led her to his car and held open the door for her, closing it when she had settled herself into the soft leather.

A navy Jaguar nosed out of the parking lot, disappearing from sight just as Bob opened his own door.

Katra fought back the wave of panic. Dallas was a big city. There had to be hundreds of people with Jaguars. She was paranoid to think Derrick was behind the wheel of every single one she saw.

"Turn right onto Preston," she told Bob. "And floor it."

Bob followed her directions although he certainly didn't floor it. He didn't demand an explanation until they stopped for a traffic light. "Do you want to tell me what's going on?"

"Look up there. Do you see the Jaguar?"

"Yeah."

"I think that's Derrick."

The Jaguar pulled a quick 'u' turn and zoomed by. Derrick glared at her through the window of his car.

"Follow him," Katra demanded.

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Sara ran her finger down Jack's naked stomach. His muscles tightened against her light touch. He might claim to be vastly removed from human but Jack was ticklish. She found it endearing. She also found contact with his body incredibly arousing. "Any interest in going to bed?"

Jack looked up from the heavy arabic tome he was reading. "That sounds nice." He paused only a moment. "By the way, your friend Katra appears to be in trouble."

Sara looked at him. He seemed completely calm, sitting with a slender finger between the pages of his book. Almost as if he was making casual conversation rather than discussing a real danger. "What sort of trouble?" she demanded.

"Our old friend Derrick. He popped back on my radar screen."

"Radar?" Now she was getting really confused. Still, she had enough presence of mind to stand up and head for the door. Much as it pained her to admit it, sex, even mind-blowing demon sex, could wait if her friend was in danger.

"Not real radar, of course. I used that as an analogy. In humans, you would call it some sort of psychic premonition but, of course, you don't have highly evolved senses."

"I can't believe you're just standing there talking about it. Come on, let's go." She grabbed her car keys from the hook near the door and headed outside.

"Do you want to put on some clothes?"

"Oh. Damn. Just a second."

She pulled on a pair of cut-offs and a running top. "What are you waiting for?"

Jack hung his book in mid-air and stepped after her. "Should we fly?"

"Can we?" His wounds had largely healed but his wings still had a charred edge to them.

"Maybe a little slower than before." He seemed chagrined to admit the weakness but he did it. From what he had told her of Hell, admitting any weakness to anyone amounted to a quick ticket to increases in torture.

"Maybe you could just zap us there."

"We would need bodies to emerge into. I can't just create that much matter from nothing."

That sounded completely disgusting. "All right, let's take my car. Where is she?"

"In Oak Lawn." He followed her lead into her Miata. "I think she's heading for East Dallas."

Sara threw the car into gear and peeled rubber down her street managing to bottom out on three of the road humps Dallas littered the pavement with to prevent exactly the type of driving she was doing.

"Do you want to tell me what you meant about needing a body?" She didn't want to think what she might have done with her spells but she had to know. Obviously she was messing with power that had potentially severe consequences.

Jack shrugged. "Nothing comes from nothing. I can no more create new matter than I can reverse time."

"When I called you up the first time, did you have to find some human body to occupy?"

Jack glanced down at his hard muscled body and flexed his wings. "Over the centuries, you manage to gather a little matter here and there. Depending on how much you gather, you can manifest yourself more or less physically."

"So the imps--"

"Imps are too weak to hold onto much mass. There aren't any banks where you can make a safe deposit."

"So if you went back, could you come again?"

"Not for a long time. I didn't think I'd have enough to come back the second time."

Sara shook her head and focused on driving. She crossed over the Trinity River. "What now?"

"Stay on Interstate 35 and exit at Martin Luther King."

Sara glanced outside. The sun was nearing the horizon and she didn't like the idea of being out in this neighborhood after dark. Even with Jack to back her up, she felt vulnerable.

"Turn right again."

Sara gritted her teeth. Katra was in trouble and Sara was worrying about her own safety. She had to get her priorities in better order.

She headed into the Fair Park area. Reverend Bob's Lexus and a Jaguar that could only be Derrick's stood out among the aging pickup trucks and Chevies. "I guess we're here."

"Be careful," Jack urged. "This could be dangerous."

## Chapter 13

Derrick's psychic scent stank, gagged, tore at Jack's energy like the church had torn at his body. So why was he so hard to track? It didn't seem possible.

They'd followed Katra's trace, moving through the Fair Park night life. Derrick had moved fast despite the burden of two captives and he'd had a good lead to start. Now, however, Jack and Sara were closing the gap.

"Are you sure she's all right?" Sara's concern for her friend poured out like a torrent, threatening to wash away all other psychic tracks.

"She hasn't been physically harmed," Jack answered. He wished he could tell Sara not to worry. It was advice he couldn't follow himself, however. How had Derrick transformed himself from an ordinary damned pervert to a powerful elemental force? Just weeks before, he had been nothing--someone Jack could manipulate even from within the bonds that had held him. Now, he wondered if he had the strength to confront the man.

"Are we getting closer?"

He sighed, then took Sara in his arms and launched himself into flight. Here on the crowded streets of Dallas's Deep Ellum district, even his restricted flight could speed them up.

Sara sighed, then pressed herself against him, her body molding itself to his own in a gesture as intimate as when they made love.

A sharp-eyed woman spotted them, glared, then made the Catholic sign of the cross.

The wind instantly vanished from beneath Jack's wings and he plunged back to earth. It was a short fall but, even so, Sara gasped for breath at its force.

"What happened?"

"Someone was looking."

"I thought your magic would keep them from noticing us." Sara's voice didn't hold any condemnation but he felt it strongly.

Jack tugged on her arm steering her well away from that hostile soul. "Some people are hard to deceive. Others are perpetually on the lookout."

Sara wrinkled her forehead. "Why would they bother? I thought hardly any demons made it up from Hell."

He shook his head. "Hardly any. That doesn't keep people from looking. Come on." He stepped into a dark doorway.

A huge man wearing a brief pair of shorts and nothing else confronted them. Tattoos decorated him so richly that he looked fully clothed. "Ten dollars. Each."

Jack gestured at the man's close-set eyes then brushed his hands against the counter. "Keep the change."

"Hey, thanks."

"What did you do?" It took every bit of his enhanced hearing to understand her words over the band's roar.

"I showed him what he wanted to see."

"You ripped him off."

This was, he realized, the reason Sara should be bound for heaven--would be bound for heaven if he hadn't come into her life and risked everything.

"We can pay him back later. Katra is close."

Sara's lips trembled. "Where is she?"

He gestured toward a closed door. A large sign on it indicated that whatever was on the other side was off limits to anyone not employed by the club. "In there, I think." He hated the uncertainty but even now he didn't have a perfect fix on Derrick.

"I'll go first." Sara tried to bull past him.

"The Hell you will. That maniac is armed."

Before Sara could impulsively get them all in trouble, Jack grasped the doorknob and twisted.

The lock resisted and he poured power into it until the mechanism melted into place. He thrust the smoldering door open wondering why a bar would use a locked steel door to separate two interior rooms.

Derrick laughed as Jack stepped through the door. The stalker's handsome face contorted into something Jack would have been completely at home with in Hell but which he hated to see here in the Human plane. He held Katra against him with one arm wrapped around her throat. With his other hand, he pointed a gun at Reverend Bob.

"So look who's here," Derrick gloated.

"Do we know you?" Ignoring Jack's gestures, Sara pushed herself into the storage room where Derrick waited.

"You don't remember me from High School, little Miss Priss Sara? I remember you. And I've been watching you. Watching the way you kept Katra away from me." He tightened his grip on Katra's neck until her face turned a pale shade of purple.

"Let them go," Jack ordered. "Surely you don't think we would just walk in here without calling the police. You don't have a permit to carry concealed, so if you don't want to explain the gun and those bruises on Katra's neck, you'd better just get away while you can."

Derrick giggled. "You're lying."

"I never lie." Not quite.

Derrick twitched the gun, then shrugged. "I don't know how you followed me here but I'm going underground after this and I'm taking Katra with me. You can have the priest."

"Minister," Bob protested. "I'm a minister, not a priest."

"You don't want to go with the nice people?" Derrick loosened his grip on Katra's neck enough to let her breathe although he kept her yanked back and off balance. She wouldn't be much help even if Jack managed a signal to her.

"I'll go."

It was up to Jack. He didn't dare let Derrick leave with Katra.

He took one step closer to Derrick, holding his hands by his side but away from his body. If he did it right, it would appear to be a peaceful gesture.

"Back up, pervert." Derrick was too paranoid to let anything seem peaceful.

Jack stopped. He was only one step away from Derrick now but that one step would give the man plenty of time to shoot Reverend Bob.

"I said back up." Derrick shifted the gun's sight until Jack could look up the ugly black hole of the barrel.

Against a normal opponent, it would have been the right choice. Against a demon, it was a mistake. Jack blurred into motion, grasping the gun at the same time he wrenched Derrick's arm from Katra's neck.

Derrick's eyes showed that Jack had caught him completely by surprise. Not for long enough, however. He fired three times before Jack could wrestle the automatic away from him. Each shot plunged into Jack's body.

Katra grabbed Derrick's arm and tried to knock off his aim but she knew she was too late. Jack's body jerked with the impact of heavy bullets plunging into it, yet he came on.

Derrick's breath, suddenly sour with fear, washed over her as he struggled to tighten his grip around her neck.

She kicked back, scraping her heel down his knee and shin and reached her sculptured nails toward his eyes.

Then, suddenly, a Jack's muscled grip wrenched Derrick's arm snapped away from her throat. Derrick he stumbled across the room.

Jack snarled barely able to hold himself upright. His skin had darkened, his bat wings stretched from wall to wall. Thin trails of smoke emerged from the three gaping bullet holes that marred his hairless and muscled chest.

Derrick whimpered clutching his broken arm to himself. His breath came in gasps as he fought for his balance, then crumpled to the floor. "Why don't you just leave me alone?" was his plaintive and ironic plea.

"As if you left me alone," Katra shouted. She'd spent the past half hour in a panic, certain Derrick was going to kill her, almost hoping he would if the alternative was to live as his slave.

"I wasn't talking to you." His eyes still gleamed with desire and danger.

"Yet you will leave her alone, won't you." Jack's horns seemed to protrude more than usual as he bent over his victim. "I will be angry if I hear of you even living in the same city as Katra ever again."

Comparing Derrick's anger to Jack's was comparing her garden hose to the Trinity River. "I don't see it's any of your business."

"You know, I don't give a damn what you see." Jack stepped closer to the fallen man.

Jack's teeth clenched with each step he took. Each movement of his arm seemed to expand the bullet holes.

Derrick seemed only to notice the threat. "You broke my arm. I'll sue you."

"Do you really want to bring in the law?"

"I don't understand," Reverend Bob broke in. "You're both injured. We've got to get you medical care."

"Yeah, you're a wonderful man of God," Derrick sneered. "Look at this guy. He's got wings and horns and you're worried about me."

Jack further paled at Derrick's casual use of God. He spoke through gritted teeth. "Who's gone crazy now?"

He had to be using his last reserves of strength to keep Reverend Bob's sight muddled. "We've got to get out of here," Katra urged.

Sirens echoed through the Dallas streets as the police finally responded to the sound of shooting in Fair Park.

"Good idea," Jack said. He scooped up Derrick's automatic, checked the safety, and pushed it to Katra. "Shoot Derrick if he moves."

Katra took the gun and pointed it. "Move sucker. Please."

For once, Derrick kept his mouth shut and his hands still. Darn.

"Jack, what's the matter?" Sara wavered in the door, obviously torn between following the male she loved and staying to protect her friend.

"I can't keep up the disguise any longer and I definitely let them take me to the hospital," Jack gasped too softly for the Reverend Bob to overhear. Whatever energy had kept him going with three huge bullet holes in him had vanished when Derrick had uttered the 'G' word. Jack stumbled as he headed out the door.

"I'll just shoot him and we can all leave," Katra suggested. Would it really be a sin to rid the world of pond-scum like Derrick?

"You can't do that," Reverend Bob protested. His eyes had bugged from his head when Jack had fled the room.

"The hell I can't," Katra answered. "He kidnaped both of us and shot Jack. If shooting him isn't self defense, what is?"

"Doing it when it's happening," Sara reminded her friend.

"I'm going to get you too," Derrick promised Sara. "I think I'll package you up neatly and use you as a footrest."

Sara's hand whipped out like a scorpion's stinger, striking Derrick's cheek. "Trust me, little man, you wouldn't want to try."

"You'd better get rid of the gun," Rev. Bob suggested. The police sirens continued to undulate but now Katra could hear the sounds of police radio as well.

Bob was right, of course. Much though she might regret it later, she couldn't quite bring herself to shoot Derrick. The one thing her father had taught her before he'd abandoned his wife and two daughters is not to take a gun if you aren't prepared to lose it.

"Hold him down," she instructed Bob. With a broken arm, Derrick shouldn't be too serious a threat.

She unchambered the live shell and dropped out the magazine before kicking the weapon toward Derrick. "Pick it up, big boy. Maybe you should try to shoot it out with the police."

Derrick glanced at the weapon, then shot his good fist into Bob's stomach, twisted away, and hurried out a back door slamming it behind him.

"I'm sorry," Reverend Bob said, gasping for air. "I didn't think he'd be so strong."

Sara hammered on the door Derrick had used to exit. "Locked."

"Put your hands in the air and walk out of that room," an overly amplified and Texas twanged voice shouted into the storage room.

Sara moaned. "Now we're really screwed."

"Walk out slowly, then keep walking," Jack murmured into Sara's ear. His hot breath sent tingles to parts of her body she'd never noticed until Jack came into her life.

"I thought you were gone."

"I, uh, bought a hat and jacket."

All you could say for them was that they covered the worst evidence of his demonic nature. What said a lot more was that he had come back. With Derrick gone, there wasn't really anything for Jack to do, but he'd still come back. Sara could only figure that he'd come back for her. Jack's tough-guy demon act was starting to show its seams.

"So how are we going to get out of here?" she asked.

His face was so pale, it looked almost skull-like. "Follow Derrick?"

"Where is he?"

If anything, Jack's face grew paler. "I don't know. He's vanished again."

"This is your last chance." The bullhorn-amplified voice could have been a trumpet of doom.

"Can't you do the invisibility trick again?" Sara asked. "We could just walk past them." Wherever they walked, they needed to do it in a hurry. Jack looked like he was leaking demon essence more quickly every second.

"I'll go out and set them straight," Reverend Bob volunteered.

Katra opened her mouth in amazement, then shut it with a snap. She must not have expected any type of bravery from Bob. Sara wondered how Derrick had managed to capture both of them and end up with Reverend Bob's gun. They could talk about that later, though.

Reverend Bob straightened his clerical shirt and opened the door. "Just a lovers' spat," he announced to the police.

"Lovers' spat," Katra repeated. "How am I supposed to press charges against Derrick now?"

"Have to get me out of here," Jack murmured. He slumped against Sara.

"Lovers or not, you've got to come out of there," the police announced over the bullhorn. "We have you surrounded."

"If they had us surrounded, they would have caught Derrick," Katra said. She grasped the door that Derrick had exited and yanked.

"Want to give me a hand here, Sara?"

She was torn between caring for the injured Jack and helping her friend but tried to think logically like Jack. If the police found him, they'd take away his hat and jacket, see his horns, and he'd be in serious trouble. She joined Katra at the door.

They rushed it together, bending every bone in Sara's shoulder and, from Katra's gasps, in Katra's shoulder too but the door finally burst open.

"We're coming in," the police voice announced.

"And we're going out," Sara told Katra. "Grab Jack's legs and I'll take his arms."

If Jack had been a human, they could never have carried him. Now, however, he weighed so little.

"Get him to my car," Sara urged.

They slipped through the refrigerated back room of the bar, walking past dozens of kegs of beer and cases of cheap gin.

"What if Derrick is hiding in here?" Katra asked.

"Do you really think we could be in worse trouble?"

Katra didn't look completely satisfied by that answer and Sara couldn't really blame her. With what Derrick had done for her, maybe a night in jail would sound like an escape.

"Come on," Sara urged. "We've got to take the chance."

They reached another door and stepped into an alley behind the bar. A police cruiser sat at the end of the alley, its lights flashing, and Katra rushed back into the storage room, grabbed a bottle of gin, and poured it over Jack's head.

"I had two babes like you, I wouldn't get drunk," a youthful cop observed as they stumbled past trying to look like they were taking their overly indulged friend home.

"Guess you'll never know," Katra responded.



He took a step toward them but stopped when his radio sounded.

Katra and Sara ran past him, heading for Sara's car. To Sara, Jack felt lighter every moment they waited.

Ten minutes later, Sara turned off of Martin Luther King Blvd and onto I-35 heading west toward home. Katra had uncharacteristically remained silent, crunched with Jack on her lap.

"How did you find me?" Katra asked, finally breaking the silence.

"Jack sensed that you were in trouble," Sara explained. "Trust me, I had other things on my mind."

"I appreciate the sacrifice. I don't think the Reverend Bob was going to be rescuing me tonight."

Sara didn't think so either. "Still, he doesn't seem like a bad guy."

"Oh, hell," Katra sighed, "I never demanded a hero type like Jack to take care of me. All I've ever asked for was a decent guy with a regular job."

"Who maybe thinks you're the sexiest babe in the Universe," Sara added.

Katra fluffed her red hair. "Well yeah, why not?"

"It looked like Bob did. Why do you think he told the story about a lovers' tiff?"

Katra shook her head. "I guess he thought it was better than getting us shot at."

"Since they don't know who we are, at least you won't lose any credibility when you report Derrick."

Katra's short laugh didn't sound amused. "Report what? Reverend Bob is my only witness and you know his story."

Jack's head lolled against Sara and she almost sideswiped an eighteen wheeler.

"Check on him, would you?"

Katra nodded, then pressed her finger to the side of Jack's throat.

Silence.

"What?"

"I don't feel a pulse."

## Chapter 14

Katra pressed her lips to Jack's and exhaled while Sara beat on his chest. They'd set him on Sara's bed and had been working on him ever since they'd gotten him home. Nothing seemed to make any difference.

"Hit him harder," Katra gasped.

"I'm hitting him as hard as I can. And I'm not sure that's what you're supposed to do when somebody gets shot in the chest."

"You're supposed to take them to the hospital," Katra reminded her friend. "I don't think Jack would be welcome there. They'd probably ship him off to wherever they have those aliens."

Sara shook her head and pounded on Jack's chest again.

Katra waited until Sara had finished beating the poor guy and breathed into his mouth again.

Nothing.

Tears were running down Sara's cheeks. Katra swiped suspiciously at her own eyes. Sure enough, they were about to overflow.

"Oh, God, what are we going to do?" Sara sounded like she was about to lose it.

Jack winced. He remembered warm lips breathing energy into him but little else. Had someone said that word?

"He's alive." Awe was intermixed with the feminine words.

"Demons don't live." Even to him, his voice sounded weak.

"Hush, darling."

More than anything else could have, Sara's words brought back the memories of the past days. "What happened?"

"Derrick shot you."

"We thought you were dead," Katra added.

He struggled to open his eyes. "Being shot shouldn't hurt me." Except something had.

"Guns hurt all right," Katra answered practically.

"My physical body is completely under my control. A couple of holes shouldn't make any difference."

"Be quiet and let us work," Sara said. "One of the bullets is still inside you and I've got to get it out. Can you hold still or do we need to get you something for the pain?"

He laughed--a very bad idea. The sudden contraction of his chest multiplied the agony. "There's still a bullet inside of me. You've got to get it out."

He could feel the bullet now, as cold now as it had been hot when it ripped into his created flesh. The steel-clad projectile pulsated with destructive purpose.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. It's making me sick."

"Right. Wait right there." Sara rushed into her kitchen, returning a few moments later with a steaming bowl of water, a sharp paring knife that still glowed from where she'd heated it on her stove burner, and a thin pair of tongs.

"Hold down his hands," Sara ordered Katra. "This is going to hurt him a lot."

Jack felt his arms being grasped. "You owe me one big time," Katra told him.

"Yeah. I'll--"

The cold torture of iron piercing his body grew stronger as Sara probed. He caught his breath. "Uh, a little to the right," he advised.

"I'm following the path of the bullet."

"Well then it moved. It's a little to the right of where you're digging."

Sara followed his directions and her probe ticked on the bullet. "That's it all right."

"How'd you know where it was?" Katra demanded, suspicion running strong in her voice. "There's no way you could see that."

"Are you suggesting I'd do something as crazy as getting shot just to trick you?"

Katra folded her arms across her substantial chest letting go of his hands as she did. "You said it, not me."

Jack shook his head. "Remember, I'm not human. I created this body, know everything about it. I can feel where the shot is lodged as easily as you could tell where a chilled cup lay on your body."

"Got it," Sara announced. She held up the tongs, the bullet still grasped in the teeth, then dumped it into a bowl. "Let's get you sewed up."

"Ha, I kept you distracted," Katra told him.

He gave her a pained glare. "It isn't fair picking on the wounded guy."

Sara stuck a needle in his chest and Jack winced involuntarily. "That isn't necessary."

"I don't know." Sara brushed her hand against his chest lightly tracing the craters Derrick's gun had created. "If you're supposed to be healing all by yourself, you're not doing a very good job."

He focused his energies on mending the tears the shells had left behind. The response was pathetically small. It was almost as if something held back his usually perfect control over every gram of his flesh.

"Odd. I guess I was weaker than I'd thought from our run-in with the church."

"At least you're not still bleeding," Katra commented. "Or smoking or whatever you'd call it."

"I don't have matter to waste," Jack told her. He paused a moment trying to remember what had happened when he and Sara had arrived at that Deep Ellum night club. "That must have been the Reverend Bob's gun that shot me. I seem to have a thing for churches lately."

Katra nodded. "Derrick grabbed it from Bob's glove compartment."

"If those two started working together, we'd be in real trouble," Jack said. The combination of Derrick's deadliness and Reverend Bob's holy weaponry was dangerous enough when it was an accident. This was exactly how so many demons got killed by humans.

"Not much chance of that," Katra answered.

"I'll have to lay low for a while to let myself heal," Jack admitted. "Between the church and Reverend

Bob's bullets, I am one hurting demon."

Three days later, Sara was more nervous than ever. Someone as sick as Derrick had to have a record, some police force somewhere must be just waiting for a chance to arrest him and send him up the river. Yet Bob had been unable to find any ongoing investigation tracking him. Worse, Jack insisted that Derrick had vanished from his demonically enhanced senses.

With Katra and Jack both sharing her one bedroom apartment, Sara's life was in shambles and she was fast running out of money.

Thinking of money made her think of the mail. Unfortunately, the news was every bit as bad as she'd suspected. A whole stack of new bills stared at her when she unlocked her mailbox. She flipped through them quickly, then carried them inside. She had made minimum payments before and could do it again if she had to. But why was the bank sending her anything?

She threw the bills on the kitchen table and opened the letter from the bank.

It was worse than she'd imagined. The firm where she used to work had reversed its last payment and she was bouncing checks all over the place.

"Let me do something," Jack urged. He was still weak, but at least he was getting up now.

"Like what? Counterfeit some money?"

"I could write a book."

Sara laughed. "Do you have any idea how long it takes to get money from a publisher? Besides, I'm not sure the world is ready to hear about one day in the live of a demon."

"I'm open to suggestions."

Sara was too. Her firm's retraction of their payment could be the last straw. Jack might not be human but he ate like a man, only more so as he tried to regain what he'd lost when Derrick had shot him. Here he'd been reluctant to eat a hamburger that first day.

The good news was, all that food seemed to be helping him. He had started feeling more solid. By the time they went to New York, he'd be looking super-human again.

Fortunately, Jack claimed he liked everything Sara cooked. Unfortunately, he was the only one who did. Katra was an even worse cook. Sara decided that now that Jack was back on his feet, he could at least take over the cooking duties. Of the three of them, he was the only one who could make toast without turning it into charcoal briquettes.

Until then, she bought take-out a lot, which cost even more.

Grocery bills, air conditioning bills--she'd needed a lot more air conditioning since Jack had joined her in the bedroom-- gas bills for her job hunting, they had all but wiped out her savings.

"Maybe we should play that trivia contest after all. A million dollars in prizes would solve a lot of problems," Jack said.

She looked up from the kitchen table. "They'd take one look at your horns and boot us off, if they didn't call the police first."

"I'd wear a hat."

She sighed. "I want to earn my money, not have it handed to me. Can't you understand that. That's probably why I didn't take wishes when Katra got hers."

Jack looked perplexed. "If we know the answers, we do earn it. If we don't, we lose."

She mashed her pen into one of the bills. "I knew you wouldn't understand. Besides, I have plenty of money. This isn't a problem."

Jack lurched to his feet, swaying slightly as he walked toward her. Even injured, his movement seemed more graceful than she would have thought possible. His beautiful face twisted into a lopsided grin that barely showed a hint of the pain that never left him. For an irrational moment she wondered if living in the human plane might be lessening the torment.

"Even if I didn't have demon senses, I would know that was a lie. You haven't done anything but move bills from one pile to another." He paused, raising one eyebrow. "That and biting through your pen. Here."

He brushed his hand against her mouth.

She shivered. Jack's touch affected her like no man ever had, whether they were in bed or just hanging around. Wiping a bit of ink off her face was hardly erotic, yet the surge of desire that washed over her was real and practically irresistible.

Jack held his hand in front of her, his fingers covered with sticky blue ink. Great. She'd been thinking sexy thoughts about him and he was probably grossed out.

"I'll wash my face."

"I got it all." He made a gesture and the ink flamed up into nothingness.

It was impossible that he could have wiped every molecule of ink from her, yet she had no doubt that he had done so. "Thank you. I must have looked disgusting."

"You looked worried but beautiful."

Enough of that mushy stuff. She couldn't spend all day every day making love with him. "You don't look so bad yourself. What have you been up to while I was in here moving bills between piles?"

"I fixed your car."

She froze, an surprising, unwelcome sense of claustrophobia surged over her. Her car was her pride and joy. Back when she'd still been working full time, she'd once gotten a big bonus and piled the entire bonus, along with most of her savings, into buying the Miata. It was her baby. Jack should have asked before he'd messed with it.

"You looked busy." As always, Jack could read her thoughts before she voiced them.

Jack's words gave her the pause she needed to catch her breath. "I'm not busy any more. I'm mad. You had no right to mess with my car without asking me."

"So this team thing only goes so far. Is that what you're saying?"

"We're business partners. That's got nothing to do with anything."

Jack's face clouded and his bat-wings stood out rigidly from his broad shoulders. "Business. But I thought" he paused and something alive left his eyes. "Never mind what I thought. A business relationship is something any demon can understand."

Definitely time to backtrack. "I didn't mean for it to come out like that," Sara said. "I only meant that it's polite to ask permission before you go messing with someone's things."

"Of course. I understand perfectly."

He didn't understand at all. Sara looked at the stack of unpaid bills, at her demon-lover's impassive face, and burst into tears.

Jack watched her for a moment unable to move. Should he comfort her? His rash assumptions had caused this problem. In fact, if he thought about it honestly, he was the cause of all of her problems. Without him, her friend Katra wouldn't be in trouble. Without him, Sara would still have a job. He'd put her at risk from both imps and humans and now he had made her cry. It didn't paint a pretty picture.

"Perhaps I should go," he offered not even sure how he wanted her to respond.

Sara grabbed a tissue, blew her nose, and nodded. "Maybe you should."

"I can undo the repairs I did to your car." A feeble attempt to make things right and he knew it when he said it.

"I thought you said you were going."

He went.

Low overcast clouds obscured the normally bright colors of the human plane as Jack flew over the southern side of Dallas. Below him, humans went about their business unconcerned with anything beyond their daily urges. Suffering, greed, love, all of the human emotions flew to him and he absorbed them, gaining strength as he went. A few surges of pure energy mixed with the normal muted pulses of humanity. Angels mostly, along with a few humans who transcended their lot through good or, more often, evil.

Without conscious volition, he flew closer to the storefront church where Reverend Bob preached his message. He dared not get too close, of course. Even from a distance, he could feel the power of that sanctified structure disrupting the energies that held him in flight.

The church was as impenetrable to his sight as it was impervious to his entry. Of all the places for a demon to gravitate, this should be the last.

The doors opened and a small crowd burst out, their voices full of energy. Bob must be a better preacher than he was a fighter, Jack decided.

He almost turned away before he heard a familiar voice. Katra and Maura emerged from the church's glass doors followed by Reverend Bob who locked the doors behind him.

"I've never heard the story of Job told in such a clear way." Maura clutched a small leather Bible in her hand. "I always thought it was strange that God did all those things to him."

The Word tore at Jack's substance with far more strength than being near the church had. Fortunately, no avenging angel appeared to drag him away from his involuntary eavesdropping.

"It's an allegory," Bob told her. "Job reflects the sacrifice that the holy one made."

"Of course. I see that now. A prophesy, almost."

"Exactly."

"Hey, it's Jack." Katra didn't seem quite as fascinated by Bob's thoughts on Biblical reconstruction as did Maura. It was odd, though. Jack would have guessed Bob to be one of those who took every word of the Bible, in whatever English translation met their preferences, as literal truth rather than symbolic reality.

"What's up, Katra? Hi Maura and Reverend Bob."

"You don't look too good," Katra told him. "Eat something that disagreed with you?"

He hadn't come looking for a shoulder to cry on and didn't intend to take one even if it was offered.

"No."

"Great. We were just going to lunch. Why don't you join us?"

The Reverend Bob looked distinctly uncomfortable with that idea. Apparently he'd had plans to spend some time with Katra alone. Well, if he was uncomfortable with the idea of spending an hour with Jack, Jack was equally reluctant to spend time with him. Holy words tripped off his tongue as if they were meaningless chit-chat.

"I'd better--"

"Come on, Jack," Katra urged. "I've been wanting to go to this new Mexican place off of Jefferson for weeks now but..." her voice trailed off.

"But you're afraid to go anywhere by yourself," Jack concluded for her. "You'll have Bob and Maura to keep you company."

"And you," Katra concluded. "I haven't gotten the chance to spend any time with you away from Sara. So now's my moment."

Katra was cute in a curvy, wild, red-headed way. He should have been attracted to her. Somehow, though, he had lost the omnipresent sexual desire that had surrounded him through his centuries of captivity. Or rather, all of that energy now seemed focused on Sara. Of course, no matter how hard Katra pressed, he didn't think she was making the move on him. Apparently she was looking for a chaperone to keep Reverend Bob off the case.

"I'm not really dressed--"

"Don't be ridiculous. This is Dallas, not New York. Guys never dress up here."

"But--"

"I just remembered that I promised to visit Mrs. Wilkens," Reverend Bob broke in. "She's in Presbyterian Hospital for an angioplasty."

"I'll just go along with you then," Maura told him. "Bernice is one of our regular bridge players at the Rec Center."

"But--"

"I guess it's just you and me then." Katra didn't look especially disappointed. "Did you drive?"

"No. I fl--, didn't," he concluded weakly.

"Why don't you come with me. I wanted you to take a look at my Chevy anyway."

He clamped down his teeth. It was poetic justice that the woman he wanted tossed him out when he worked on her car and the woman he didn't want actually wanted him to look at hers. Being a demon meant getting used to poetic justice. He'd realized that millennia before.

Katra led the way to her Beretta, fired the engine, and stepped out. "Do you hear that rattle?"

"Yeah."

"Can you fix it."

"I--"

"Sorry, I meant will you fix it. I don't need any more of your literal question-answering. Fix it now, I mean. Not twenty years from now."

"Pop the hood and let me take a look." Not that he couldn't see the problem. The automatic transmission was going out. Fixing it through the car's sheet metal and multitone paint would take more energy than he had to spare right now, though.

Katra fiddled with a lever, eventually prying open the hood.

"Do you ever change the oil?" he asked her.

"Sometimes. Why?"

"It's a little low. In fact, the seal looks a little loose."

He reached under her car, thinning his form. When he touched the oil release valve, his hand jerked away.

"Burn yourself?"

"Only in a way." There was a strong touch of Derrick on that oil valve. Another hint of the man's aura clung to the automatic transmission fluid valve.

"I don't suppose you asked Derrick to work on your car?"

"Of course not."

"Well he's been doing it anyway. Setting you up to break down somewhere. Maybe he's planning on swooping in for the rescue."

"I would rather die."

"He might be okay with that too."

After Jack had fixed her car, Katra dragged him to the new restaurant. He'd just made it to his feet today and now he was flying around Dallas like he had nothing better to do. She knew she was butting into Sara's business, but that was what friends were for.



Fortunately, the new restaurant had a lunch special that didn't break the bank. They ordered, sipped on ice water, and got a huge basket of chips with dip.

Katra bit down on her tortilla chip savoring the mix of hot salsa and cool black bean dip. She'd lost her grudge against Jack when he'd taken those bullets for her, but even large quantities of top-notch Mexican and Central American cooking weren't making her feel any better.

"Just one thing to make this perfect," she said. She waved at the bartender.

The man brought her a frozen Margarita and she took a big swallow. This wasn't going to be easy.

"I'm wondering about your intentions."

Jack looked up from his chips. "Truly?"

"Of course truly."

He glared at her for a moment. "I have no designs on you."

"I'm sure that's a relief, but that's not what I'm asking about."

"Then I have no idea what this conversation is about."

"I'm talking about my best friend, you idiot. You're messing with her emotions. She hasn't been this taken with a guy since she was a freshman and fell for the captain of the football team."

"What happened then?"

Katra didn't answer until the waitress brought their food, a huge iced tea for Jack, and a second Margarita for her.

"What happened? Well, the guy was a senior. Looking back, I don't know if he even knew we existed. I think we tee-peed his house every Friday through football season."

Jack nodded. "Sara tossed me out. It's for the best, of course. A demon shouldn't have intentions. It isn't practical."

"What? What did you do?" She should have known he'd screw up given half a chance. Jack was a baffling mixture of bravery, intelligence, and uncanny ability to read a person's mind and still do the wrong thing.

"I gave her a tune-up. Her air conditioning belt was worn and the spark plugs needed to be replaced. Unfortunately, I did it without asking her permission. It made her realize how intertwined our lives have become. I think it frightened her."

Katra could understand that. Sara had moved out on her own when she'd turned sixteen and took a job at the Sonic to pay for her apartment. In all of the years since, Katra couldn't think of a single time Sara had let one of her boyfriends even spend the night. "She values her privacy. You've got to give her a little space."

"As I said, she tossed me out. Now she has all of her space."

Poor Sara. Katra wanted to drop everything and comfort her friend, but she wasn't ready quite yet. First, she needed to learn whether to tell Sara to get a grip and get her man back, or whether she should just tell Sara how much better off she was without the loser.

"How do you feel about being tossed out?"

"Demons don't have feelings."

"That's complete crap."

"Of course it isn't..." he broke off. "But...." Another pause. Finally he gave her a rueful grin. "Perhaps I was mistaken. I do have feelings." He took a sip of his iced tea. A pretty waitress ran to fill it, giving Jack a look all dimples and promise. Damn, this guy was good.

"So you have feelings. What are they?" Katra had never been much good at waiting.

"It's probably for the best. I've got to get away from here."

"Are you sure you're really a demon and not just a man? Every guy I've ever known was ready to run whenever things got a little complicated."

Jack bristled. Underneath his thin jacket, she could see his wings reflexively flexing, as if to aid an attack. "You know that isn't fair. Sara tossed me out, not the other way around."

"Yeah, right. After you cost Sara her job, nearly got me killed, and went messing with her car without permission. A girl's got to have some pride."

He seemed to consider that over another hard swallow of his iced tea. The poor demon seemed to be addicted to the stuff. From the occasional whiffs of steam she saw, Katra wondered if that was all that kept Jack from catching on fire.

"I can't just sit around worshiping her, you know." Jack burst from his chair and stomped across the restaurant helping himself to yet another glass of sweetened tea. "Not being able to sit around worshiping someone was what got me in trouble in the first place."

"So don't."

His eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

Katra threw what was left of her taco on her plate and stood. "Do something with yourself. Develop some healthy interests. Get a job."

"But--"

"But nothing. Come on."

For the first time Katra could remember, Jack followed her rather than insisting on taking the lead. "So where are we going?"

She got into her Beretta and fumbled for the passenger side door. Fumbled but fell short. Once again, being gifted by nature with a body that barely topped out at five-foot-two interfered with getting anything done. That and the big stack of books that littered the passenger seat.

Jack made a small wavy motion with his finger and the lock popped up. "I take it that was an invitation to get in."

"Shut up and help me move these books to the back seat."

If he'd used his magic again, Katra thought she might have to mace him. Fortunately for Jack, he took

one look at her face, nodded companionably, and started piling books from front to back, using his hands.

"Are you going to answer my question?"

"Sometimes you aren't very bright, are you?"

He glared at her, his eyes blue-hot embers of burning diamond. "Aren't I?"

"I'm a teacher, you idiot. I have access to the most complete counseling system in Texas. We're going to get you tested, GED'ed, put you in the program. The Social Security Card will take some work, but I've got an idea for that too."

"But I won't be here long enough."

"You know, I've spent the past ten years with kids who say the same thing. Give it a try. Or are you afraid?"

"I'm not afraid of anything."

Wasn't he just perfectly male. Once she'd gotten him tamed, Sara was definitely going to have a keeper.

## Chapter 15

Sara took another sip of her coffee which, somehow, had managed to go cold, and glared at the newspaper. There had to be some sort of work for her here in Dallas. Unfortunately, so far, all of the petroleum engineering and prospecting jobs she'd come up with had been in Houston. (Well, there had been one in Saudi Arabia but she'd have to be married to accept that one and that was what had gotten her into this trouble in the first place.)

She bent to circle an ad even though Girl Friday was low on her list of job descriptions.

The phone rang and she tossed the paper halfway across her living room. It had to be Jack.

"Sara. Are you all right?" The words were right but the voice was all wrong.

"Hi, Nana." It took that long before guilt grabbed her. "Oh, my gosh, I'm so sorry. I forgot all about Sunday dinner."

"You're entitled to miss dinner at least once every couple of years." Sara heard Maura's smile as the older woman spoke, but the smile had to be fading when she dropped the bombshell. "I was surprised when Katra brought Jack. I thought she was sweet on Reverend Bob. The poor man seemed quite hurt."

Sara's heart felt like it had been stabbed by a white-hot knife. "What?" She took a breath and forced herself to a semblance of calm. "I mean, I thought she was interested in Bob too."

"Well, she and that Jack were conspiring through the entire meal. Poor Bob hardly got a word in."

Sara picked her words carefully. "So, uh, Katra and Bob didn't go out together afterwards."

"Heavens, no. Jack practically dragged Katra back to her car." Her grandmother's voice took on a more imperious tone. "It's funny but somehow I got the idea that the two of you were serious. No great loss,

though. Do you know that he doesn't even have his own car?"

"Nana--"

"You let me finish, now, hear? I've got myself on a roll and I intend to enjoy it. I don't think that man has a job either. With his looks and built, he's probably one of those what you call'em gigolos."

"Nana!"

"When you lost your job, he dumped you and went off with Katra. Course when he finds out how much she has left after her mother and her sister take advantage of her, I'm afraid he'll be moving on again. Let me tell you--"

"That is enough, Nana. Jack is not going to date someone for the money. I just wish they had found the courage to come and talk to me about it. I'm not happy they're sneaking behind my back."

"I'm not happy they're sticking their nasty noses into my dining room," Maura fired back. "That's why I told Katra she needn't come around on Sundays any more."

All of Sara's anger drained from her. Katra looked forward to Sunday dinners at Maura's as one of her rare escapes from her family. "I'm sure there's a rational explanation for all of this," she told Maura.

"That's what Reverend Bob talked about in his sermon, Sara. How being rational all the time is the way to the devil. If you would just come to church more often, none of this would be happening."

Maura might just be right about that, Sara thought.

"I'll talk to Katra," Sara told her grandmother.

"That'll make one of us."

"Oh, Nana." Her grandmother spent a great deal of time at church but she paid more attention to the thou shalt not than she did to the as we forgive others.

"Oh, Truth of the Bible is on the tube. Gotta go."

Sara sat for a good thirty seconds listening to the dial tone and trying to decide what to do. She'd tossed Jack out on his ear--a complete overreaction to what he'd done. In fact, the Miata drove better than it ever had before and hardly seemed to need any gas at all. Since she'd dumped him, she didn't have much grounds for complaining if he decided to pursue another woman. She could hardly blame Katra for picking him up on the rebound. Screw the logic, though. She was pissed and hurt.

She picked up the phone and dialed her best friend's number wondering if this was the last time she would do so.

"Hello."

"It's Sara."

"Oh, hi Sara. How's the job hunt?"

"Not doing as well as your boyfriend hunt, that's for sure."

The silence on the other end of the line was deafening.

"I said--"

"I heard you," Katra interrupted. "You know, I always thought you were the rational one. Maybe you'd better go back to thinking for a while. You're not doing too well at these emotional responses."

For the second time in ten minutes, Sara listened to the sound of a dial tone. Katra had hung up on her.

Except what was Katra doing home in the middle of the day. Katra, at least, still had a job.

Sara stomped into her bedroom, dug out a crop-waisted tank top and a short skirt that showed off her legs, smeared on her reddest lipstick, and headed for the door. She had a perfect right to have an emotional response and she intended to tell Katra just that. If Jack happened to get caught in the crossfire, well that was his lookout.

"This has got to be the funniest thing I've ever heard of." Katra was holding one of the papers Jack had spent the past twenty-four hours filling out. As if answering questions on whether he would rather eat alone in a restaurant or call room service would expose any secrets.

"I'm pretty sure all of my answers were correct," he said when he recognized the test form she was holding.

"Yep. Every single one."

"So what's the problem?" Every time he thought he understood humans, he realized he had missed something important. Now Katra was mad because he'd answered the questions correctly.

"The problem is you finished that test in five minutes. It's supposed to take three hours and nobody gets them all correct."

"But--"

"But nothing." Katra threw his test printout on the table. "Here's the really funny thing." She handed him a carefully drawn spiderweb stretched between a number of letters.

"I take it this is some sort of career guidance."

"If you want to call it that."

"What is it saying? That I should repair cars?"

"It says you want to be a philosophy professor."

A wave of longing so strong Jack could hardly recognize the emotions swept over him. To teach the young, to work in a community of scholars seeking knowledge, to have a place where he was welcome, belonged. For him, this was the impossible dream. These weeks with Sara had whetted his appetite for more. The fantasy that a demon could have a positive relationship with a woman opened the door to more impossibilities. According to Greek mythology the greatest curse from Pandora's box was hope. Jack had opened that box. Now he would pay the price.

He hardened his expression. "I'm sorry. What did you say my career guidance said?"

"It said you want to be a philosophy professor. What a joke." Katra started to snicker but things went downhill quickly. By the time her door exploded open and Sara stomped in, Katra was rolling on the floor gasping for air and with tears running down her cheeks.

"I can't believe you two." Despite an overly bright lip coloring, Sara looked magnificent. Her face was in high color, her hands, balled into fists, stuck into her hips, and her long elegant legs looked like they were about to launch into a Tae Bo kickboxing exhibition.

Katra made an honest effort to control her laughter but fell far short. "Eth--uh, eth--the test says you should teach eth--" Her words trailed into more giggles and an occasional hiccup.

"Hi Sara. We've been--"

"I'm not blind. What I don't understand is why you had to rub Maura's nose in it."

Jack could almost feel the situation slipping from his control--a not unfamiliar sensation for demons. "I think Sara is under the impression that we have created a sexual alliance."

"Brilliant observation, Sherlock. And I don't hear you denying it."

Katra reached for a tissue and blew her nose. She was still hiccuping from her laughter. "I told you Maura would call within five minutes."

Jack reached into a pocket, pulled out a quarter, and set it on the coffee table. "Perhaps I've overestimated the human race once more."

"No editorial comment. You lost fair and square." Katra took the quarter and put it in her jeans pocket. "I want to keep this one so I can gloat about beating this supposed genius."

Katra's attack of the hiccups seemed to be frustrating Sara more than ever. Any demon in the world would walk away now, let Katra's denials fall on Sara's deaf ears and relish the suffering. Jack couldn't.

"Katra is helping me," he told Sara. "We don't have good guidance counselors where I come from."

"What?" Sara had expected denial, lies, excuses. She certainly hadn't expected such a left-field explanation. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I was driving you crazy, getting on your nerves."

It didn't say much for Sara as a human or a lover, but she couldn't deny the accusation. "But we could have worked things out if you'd just stuck with me." She put her hand in front of her mouth. She wasn't going to beg, to plea for Jack to return.

"Katra told me that many of your adolescents have a similar problem. They have the skills to strike out on their own but they don't know how to apply themselves. So they run around causing trouble and generally being obnoxious monsters."

"Well that's something Katra would know about." Sara folded her hands behind her back and leaned against the wall. Sometimes it took Jack a while to weave around whatever he wanted to say. At least he never lied. Of course he hadn't denied having sex with Katra either. Given the way he'd looked at that slut in the Sammy Delight, Jack didn't seem the one to resist temptation. Dressed up, Katra could be a pretty tempting dish.

"So she told me about guidance counselors. They have tests they give the kids and then they help them match their skills with their interests. Katra just discovered my hidden interest in becoming a college philosophy instructor."

Sara's head rang as loudly as when Maura had wacked her upside of it the time she and Katra had decided to hitchhike to the Muppets concert when they'd been six. "Why would you want to be a philosophy instructor?"

"Not just philosophy. Ethics," Katra put in. She was still giggling but the hiccups had subsided to an occasional hic.

"I spent a great deal of the past several thousand years thinking about ethical issues."

Sara hadn't meant to offend Jack, but obviously she had. "I guess that makes sense. But I think you need to have a Ph.D. to teach college." Sara had done well enough in college but the idea of staying around for years more to get even more degrees almost nauseated her. Why spend your life hemmed in in a classroom when the outdoors was waiting?

"We've been working on that," Katra explained. "As it turns out, Jack is very intelligent."

"Well duh." Did Katra really think Sara would be attracted to some idiot just because he had a body to die for an a sexual stamina that would do an eighteen year-old proud. We--ll? Don't go there, she advised herself.

"I mean off the charts smart."

"Oh. Like a high I.Q."

"Sort of."

"How can you have a sort of high I.Q. Either it is or it isn't."

"If you can't find an I.Q. test that makes you miss a single problem, then you can't really measure it. He's just off the charts."

"They were silly questions," the object of their discussion put in. "I am intrigued by the idea of teaching in one of your Universities, however. Of course it is quite impossible."

Sara might be pissed but she was still a loyal friend. "Of course it isn't impossible. We'll win that trivia game in New York and that will give you the money to pay for your tuition." How she'd pay for her own expenses, that was another question.

"Money is only one of the problems," Jack argued.

"By the way, we didn't have sex," Katra put in. "I thought you would trust me at least a little."

Guilt and relief battled for primacy. She had come in loaded for bear only to find Jack working on his career goals. "But--"

"But nothing, girl. You've got this love thing so bad you don't know what you're doing."

Sara plopped down in one of Katra's dining room chairs and put her face in her hands.

"I forgive you," Katra told her.

"It isn't that." She snuck a look at Jack who was sitting on the couch looking off into space.

"What, then?" Katra poured her a cup of coffee then sat down next to Sara.

"I thought Jack and I were going to be partners. You know, prospect together, make a few bucks. You know, shared interests."

"So now you're worrying that your whole relationship is based on the fact that you can't keep your hands off that hunk of male demon."

Sara nodded miserably, took a sip of Katra's bitter coffee, then blew her nose. "Great sex isn't enough to build a relationship on. Especially since the two of us come from different backgrounds."

"Different backgrounds--that's the understatement of the year," Katra said. "I'm not so sure about the first part of what you said. I wouldn't mind basing a long term relationship on great sex. The longer the better."

"You've got a dirty mind." Despite herself, though, Sara giggled.

"Cause I haven't got any lately."

That put things in perspective. While Sara was obsessing over how to fit the real Jack into her dreams of a partnership with a man, Katra was running from a maniac and hadn't had sex in months. It made Sara feel petty. "I'm sorry."

"Hey, I wasn't asking for you to fill in." Katra started giggling again.

"If I understand correctly, college professors have quite a bit of time when they aren't teaching." Jack had obviously overheard Sara's concerns. "I would be able to help you with your prospecting whenever I wasn't in class."

"I don't want help." What she wanted was someone who wanted to be her partner, not someone who felt obligated to tag reluctantly along. "Besides, you don't even have a high school degree. It'll take forever before you land a college job."

"You going anywhere, girlfriend?" Katra demanded.

Again, Sara was rocked on her heels. She didn't think of herself as selfish, but that's the way she'd been acting with Jack. She'd overreacted when he'd worked on her car, gotten jealous out of her brain when she thought he was having sex with Katra, gotten snitty when she'd learned Jack didn't share her dream about becoming a geophysical engineering consultant, and then gotten petty when she'd thought about what it would be like to support a man for ten years or more while he worked his way through a degree program. It wasn't as if she was used to some life of comfort she'd have to give up. She might go a little crazy working as a clerical somewhere, but even that would be better than losing Jack.

Jack looked as depressed as she felt. "Don't worry about it, Sara. It's just a dream, not something that could ever come true."

She might give up on herself but she hadn't given up on Jack. "That's the most negative thing I've heard anybody say. If it's what you want, you've got to go for it."

"I have to keep moving. If I settle down in one place, they'll catch me faster."

All of a sudden the idea of student Jack, sitting in her bed surrounded by books sounded a lot more interesting. Pushing a few books off the bed and climbing into the bed herself would be a lot better than sleeping alone every night.

"Maybe the angels are going to leave you alone. It isn't like you're hurting anyone."



Jack gave a rueful smile. "If they catch me, they'll hunt me. They don't stop to ask what you've been up to."

Katra watched her two friends circle around each other like clumsy grunion uncertain how to handle the mating ritual. "You guys are being ridiculous. You know that, don't you?"

"But--" Sara and Jack both started at the same moment.

"First of all, you fight about stupid things. How are you going to feel about your Miata if Jack gets chased away by an angel?"

Sara hung her head. "Uh, I'm just a little sensitive about--"

"Yeah, I know how that is." She turned to Jack. "And you, you say you've got to keep moving. Well maybe there's another answer. Maybe there's some way you could disguise yourself and disappear from the angels' radar scope."

Jack cocked his head. "I would say that's impossible but it's obvious that you know something and are just dying to get it out."

"I know it isn't impossible. Because Derrick has done it to you. If a loser like Derrick can do it, why shouldn't you?"

"But we don't know how Derrick manages to disappear," Sara argued. "Besides, Jack is a demon, not an angel."

Katra shook her head. "Same basic powers. Right, Jack?"

"Angels can draw on powers from above. That sustains them and--"

"Cut to the chase." Katra interrupted Jack just when he looked ready to launch into one of his philosophy lectures.

"Bottom line, yes. We have similar powers."

"So we need to do two things. First, we need to get you some money so you don't have to live like I did when I was in college. Second, we need to find Derrick and figure out how he's getting under your radar scope."

"Money isn't that important," Sara said. "I'm sure I could find some way to support us."

"Let me guess, you've picked up on that secretary fantasy of yours again."

"What fantasy?" Jack might not be human but he had all the male reflexes.

"Not that kind of fantasy, moron." Calling someone with an I.Q. in the three hundred plus range a moron was oddly satisfying.

"But--"

"Whenever Sara gets depressed about her job, she starts thinking she could become a secretary and get really miserable."

"Administration is a valuable job," Sara corrected.

Katra rolled her eyes. "For some people. You go nuts if you spend too much time inside. Huh-uh. You need some real money so Jack can go to school and you can build your business."

"You're talking about that trivia show."

"Of course. There's no reason in the world why you couldn't win the whole thing and come home set."

"But--"

"Oh, give it a rest, honey. We're going to New York."

## Chapter 16

The taxi driver pulled into the Mayfair Hotel in midtown Manhattan and dropped off Sara, Jack, Katra, and Maura. Jack and the driver exchanged a few words in Farsi, and Jack winced when the driver told him to go with Allah.

"You have a new best friend," Katra said. She loaded two of her suitcases on Jack and carried another two herself. From the way she packed, you would have thought she was the one who was going on T.V.

Sara looked at her own light bag. They planned one day of sightseeing and another in the studio. How many clothes could you possibly need for such a short stay?

"I've always wanted to see the Tavern on the Green," Maura effused. "And Central Park. Do you think it's safe?"

Sara shot Jack a glance. With the trouble they'd had in Dallas, New York might be a picnic, or a nightmare.

"Like everywhere, there are some dangerous people there," Jack told Maura. "I'm sure that we'll be all right if we stay together and go during daylight."

"Well let's check in now and catch the subway," Maura said. She and Jack had chatted about the old country all the way to New York and she'd apparently forgotten that she wasn't speaking to Katra and Jack. "Oh, I want to climb the Empire State building and the Statue of Liberty."

"I think they make tourists take elevators," Katra said.

"We could--"

"Don't go there." Sara interrupted Jack before he could suggest something stupid like flying up the side. As far as Maura was concerned, Jack was just a nice man. Sara didn't even want to think about how she would react when she found out her daughter was dating a demon.

"I just--"

"We'll talk about it in the room."

The rooming situation had taken a couple of knock-down fights. Maura had been shocked at the idea that Sara and Jack planned on sharing a room. She had only relented when Sara had threatened to bring Katra's mother instead.

The Mayfair Hotel certainly appeared clean, but it wasn't the luxury lodging the SkyQuest Trivia Show

had promised. Still, Sara didn't expect the Plaza. By the time they got back to the hotel, they'd fall asleep so quickly they wouldn't notice the slightly bedraggled exterior or the aging interior.

Although Sara had requested a king sized bed, the hotel clerk announced they'd selected two twin beds.

"That'll be fine," Maura announced. Exactly as if she was going to be sleeping there.

"No it won't," Sara said. "We've got a big contest tomorrow and neither of us is going to be able to sleep well if we have to bundle up on the same twin bed."

"But--"

"Obviously it is your mistake, not ours," the hotel clerk announced. "All we have right now is twin beds so I guess you'll have to live with it."

Sara had heard about New York rudeness but the clerk still caught her by surprise. "You aren't even going to try to accommodate us?"

The clerk shrugged. "You screwed up. Why should I care?"

Anger bubbled up in her. She'd been cooped up in a crowded airplane for hours, then spent another hour listening to her grandmother talking about church and watching Jack writhe in pain every time Maura mentioned the Bible. Now this hotel flunky was treating her like she had some sort of infectious tropical disease.

"You can just take--"

"Easy." Jack brushed his hand against her arm and Sara felt the anger drain from her as if he had pulled a plug.

"If twin beds are all the hotel has, I'm sure that will be fine," he said.

"What?" She didn't want to sleep alone. She hadn't admitted it, even to Katra, but the idea of being on T.V. terrified her.

"Let me take care of this."

"I'm glad someone is reasonable around here." The clerk gave Sara a smarmy grin.

"I pride myself on being reasonable," Jack said. He walked around the counter and joined the clerk behind it.

"Hey, you can't come back here."

"But I am back here. Since I am, let's look together at and make sure there truly are no other rooms available."

"Well you know what? For you, there are no rooms at all. Get the Hell out of my hotel."

Jack's smile was pure evil. "This may hurt a little." He rested an arm across the clerk's shoulder and both men disappeared.

"Where did they go?" Maura demanded.

"Oh, look. Here's a guide to the historical sights of Manhattan," Katra announced.

"Really, let me see that," Maura responded on cue.

There was a slight pop and the two males reappeared. Jack was still grinning but the clerk was goggle-eyed. "Of course I didn't look to see if there might be any suites available."

"I thought you might not have."

The clerk banged away at the keyboard keeping his eyes carefully averted from Jack. He breathed a huge sigh. "Looks like I'm in luck. I mean, you're in luck. Our best suite is available."

"At no extra charge, of course," Jack insisted.

"No, no. It's on the house, I insist. And I'll send up a complementary bottle of champagne."

"I assume you'll upgrade Katra and Maura as well."

"Of course." The poor guy was practically fawning all over Jack.

Sara stepped closer to the counter to sign the hotel register before the poor clerk could do any more sniveling. As she closed the distance between herself and the two men, she caught the distinct odor of brimstone.

There were times when Jack was a handy male to have around.

New York had bled more misery, more suffering, more emotion than any city twice its age should have endured. The swirl of perpetual anger that permeated its towering structures would keep Jack energized and hidden for years. Indeed, as he accompanied the three women into the subway, Jack was almost certain he saw a pair of imps scurrying into a crack in the concrete.

Perhaps he should simply stay here after the contest, allow Sara to return to the life she loved while he found refuge in the accumulated agony of centuries of this great city.

"You look pale," Sara commented. "Are you all right?"

"I was thinking that New York would be the perfect city to hide in. Even if an angel was looking for me, they would have a hard time spotting me in the flume of emotion."

Sara put her hand on his arm squeezing his biceps. "You can't run from your fears."

He could give it a damn good try.

Katra saved him from having to come up with a more complete answer to Sara's obviously trite sentiment. "Maybe that's how Derrick is hiding from you."

"I have no earthly idea what you three are talking about," Maura said. "We're here to tour the city, not to fantasize about spies and terrorists."

Jack nodded. A subway shuddered to a stop and its doors squealed open. Maura and Katra pushed into the car before he could say anything.

There were about twenty people scattered through the car, each apparently cocooned in their own world, separating themselves from others behind the walls of their newspapers, their intense

self-conversations, and their Walkman-style audio systems. These walls of separation would further help Jack if he chose to hide in New York. No one would ask who he was, what he was doing, or where he was going.

A scruffy looking male with a shaven head except for a fringe of two-toned blond hair approached. "Got any change?"

Jack looked into the man but saw only a craving for his addiction, not real hunger. "Nothing I can spare."

"I didn't ask whether it was spare. Give it to me."

Three other young males joined the first. "Tourists, aren't ya?" one of them demanded. "We'll just give you a quick lesson on living in the big city."

"We aren't looking for trouble."

"Nobody's ever looking for trouble," complained one of the newcomers. "That's why we have to come looking for you." He reached a groping hand toward Sara.

Jack but couldn't stand by while Sara was in danger.

He moved quickly, intercepted the groper's arm before it reached Sara's breast, then patted down the first assailant removing an oversized switchblade from his pocket. Without pausing, he twisted, sending Sara's assailant stumbling away and turned to the second man.

It was over in a matter of seconds. Jack held two small automatics, a heavy iron ball bearing, the switchblade, and a fish cleaning knife while the four attackers regrouped, checked themselves, then forced open the door into the next car and vanished into the New York underworld.

"What happened?" Maura demanded.

"They thought better of attacking us," Jack answered carefully skirting complete untruth.

"That's nonsense. I've seen NYPD Blues. Hoods like that don't just walk away. Besides, you did something."

"Nana, Jack was just protecting us."

"I don't have a problem with him, Sara. But nobody can move that fast. His hands were a blur."

"It is pretty dark in here," Katra said. At that moment the train hit a rough spot and the lights flashed out.

"I know what I saw," Maura insisted. "And I think the three of you are hiding something."

"Jack has some martial arts training," Sara improvised. "That's probably what you saw."

Maura shook her head firmly. "You aren't going to tell me, but I will find out." She wagged a finger under Jack's nose. "If you're causing trouble for Sara, I'll cause trouble for you, and don't you forget it."

"Trust me, I won't," Jack promised.

"Isn't this our stop?" Maura stood, brushed off the back of her skirt, and headed for the door.

"Why don't you let Jack go first," Sara urged.

"Am I the only person who watches T.V. around here?" Maura demanded. "Looking lost and pathetic is

the worst thing we can do. If you want to get ahead in New York, you carry an umbrella with a sharp point and you look straight ahead." She followed her own advise letting Jack, Sara, and Katra scramble after her.

The Empire State Building, their first stop, shined with the pride of a bursting America ready to assume her place in the world and certain that place would be that of a shining example. The bones of the building spoke to Jack of the workers' determination, their drive, their pride in their work. It contrasted strongly with the more cynical World Trade Center towers.

The Statue of Liberty, out on Liberty Island, proved an even more moving experience. At least it did for Jack. Icy fingers walked down his back as he read the inscription on the statue's enormous base. The huge sculpture had been designed as a message of hope to the world and, for the most part, had done its job. Yet for Jack, for any demon, hope is the one emotion that must be denied. Abandon all hope, ye who enter here was the traditional inscription on the gates of Hell.

He must have stood for five minutes, silent, staring at the golden torch, the flowing robes, and the shining crown that topped the figure before he snapped back to reality.

The women too had reacted to the statue, although each in her own way.

"Did you see those children?" Katra demanded. "Wouldn't it be great to take field trips around here. You're just miles away from some of the most historic sites in the country."

"When I came across during the war, our whole ship was full of children," Maura remembered. "We were all screaming and seasick but then someone saw the statue. The whole boat got quiet, I'll tell you."

"Did you ever see your parents again?" Sara asked. "You've never talk about what happened when you were young."

"Hitler was marching over the world and the English were able to save a few of the children, that's all."

"So the Germans killed my great grandparents?"

Maura shrugged. "Nazis, Fascists, Ustashe? Could have been any of them. They crush those who stand up like that lady, for freedom." She brandished her umbrella. "Now, do we climb these steps or what?"

Maura and Katra plunged ahead, Katra keeping close on the heels of a school outing. Jack hung back with Sara.

"So your Grandmother saw her childhood and Katra saw the schoolchildren. What did you see when you saw the statue?"

At her grandmother's words, Sara had lost her usual smile. It came back at Jack's question. "You're going to think this is silly."

"Maybe." Except Sara was rarely silly.

"I was wondering about how it was constructed, about how stable it is, about the engineering talent that made it possible."

He had to smile himself. "I don't think it's silly."

"Yeah, like I'm more interested in sheets of metal than I am in children."

"Is that really true?"

Sara considered, looking up at the huge statue, then down at the streams of young children entering and departing from the base, their voices raised in high-pitched chatter and laughter. "Maybe not completely."

"Perhaps we should go in and see how your statue is held together, then."

Even with their flight and hotel paid for by the producers of the Bar Trivia show, Sara felt the money running through her fingers. The Tavern on the Green served excellent food but the bill shocked Sara, especially as all of them had been fairly conservative in their orders. A day of tourism had also cost them more than she could afford. The five hundred the show had guaranteed wouldn't even cover their expenses, let alone help out with anything else.

At least the suite was luxurious. They had to step down two steps into the sitting room and even had a conservatory with a shiny white baby grand piano. Sure enough, the desk clerk had delivered the champagne he'd promised.

Sara watched as Jack stripped off his shirt and headed for the oversized bathroom. His muscles hardened as he tugged off the shirt even though she knew he was carefully controlling his power. The almost faded scars left behind by Derrick's bullets reminded her of that afternoon's subway encounter. "Are you going to take a shower?"

Jack shrugged. "Actually, I thought I might take a bath."

"Can I watch?"

"Hum. Will you wash my back?"

Sara couldn't help laughing. "You drive a hard bargain." As if running her hands over Jack's muscled back would be anything but pure pleasure.

Jack stripped off his khaki slacks and hung them in the closet, then quickly stripped off his black boxers. More money she'd spent although Jack promised he'd pay her back.

"I warn you, it might not be safe," he told her.

"Do you think the boogie man will get me?" She giggled.

"Maybe."

He ran the water--cold only--until the huge tub was nearly full.

"It'll run over the top," she told him.

"You think Craig will come up and complain?"

"Who?"

"You know, Craig, the hotel clerk."

She hadn't even noticed the man's name, only his look of abject horror when they had returned from dinner and appeared to be heading toward the front desk. "I don't think Craig would bother you if you set the entire hotel on fire."

"Tempting." His smoldering stare made her quite certain she was talking about another kind of fire

entirely.

"That isn't what I meant."

"Hum. I hope you get meaning that fairly soon."

As his foot touched the water, a thick cloud of steam exploded up filling the room with an almost impenetrable gloom.

"What the heck?"

"It's been muggy. I haven't been able to cool off."

The steam continued to rise as he slowly lowered his beautiful body into the water. To Sara's surprise, the water level had actually fallen to the point where Jack could turn on the faucet and add more.

"I'm not sure I dare wash your back." Her voice was a hoarse whisper.

"I warned you that I might be too hot for you."

"Is it safe?"

He waved a hand and the steam dispelled. "Do you trust me?"

"Of course I trust you."

He shook his head as if in distress. "Well, then it's safe to wash my back. You'll have to take your chances if you want to go further."

"That'll do."

She grabbed a washcloth, ostentatiously lathered it with soap, then stepped behind Jack.

Once she was out of his sight, it took her only a moment to strip off her cotton dress, panties and bra, and step behind him into the huge tub.

The water was uncomfortably hot but not enough to harm her. She pressed the washcloth against Jack's back, scrubbing down the hard lean shape of it, then rubbing the cloth into the tendons that held his wings to his body.

"That's heav--very nice," he told her.

Had he almost said heaven? It barely seemed possible given the pain any sort of reference caused him. Still, Sara couldn't think what else he might have said.

"Uh-huh." The wings were soft, velvety to the touch. Sara rinsed off the washcloth, then ran it down the wings, first right, then left.

Although he had cooled his body to avoid harming her, the edges of the wings still radiated enough heat to leave a line of steam behind them.

"They're very strong," she murmured the words into his ear, letting her warm breath caress him as she spoke.

He spread them slightly, stretching the webbing between joints.



God, he was sexy.

One of Sara's boyfriends in college had accused her of being a cold prude. Jack had cured that, at least. She wanted him, his touch and love, with a longing that almost hurt.

She urged him forward, then sank into the water behind him bringing her legs around his waist.

"Hey, I thought you were going to wash my back."

"Oh, I am." She reached for the soap again, this time lathering herself rather than the wash cloth. When she had finished, she pressed her body against his back, brushing her breasts across his shoulder blades and wings, her flat belly to the small of his back.

"Uh, this bath was supposed to be cooling me down." Jack might be complaining but he didn't sound very convincing.

"Take another one later."

"But--"

She cut off his protests by reaching a soapy hand for the center of his heat.

"Hey, that's not dirty."

"I'll make it cleaner."

He was instantly hard against her stroking fingers. The excited maleness sent an echoing response to her own loins.

It had always taken her forever to respond to a man before Jack had come into her life. Could it be that the magic had sent him to her only to teach her how to enjoy sexual coupling?

She pushed the idea firmly from her mind. Whatever this was, however long it lasted, it was more, far more, than a purely physical response.

"Oh, my."

She must have squeezed harder than she'd meant in response to her thoughts. "Did I hurt you?"

"Hurt? No."

"I think it's time for me to wash your chest, then."

"I can wash my own chest."

"Not the way I can."

She rinsed herself quickly, then relathered her body. "Close your eyes."

"You know I can see you even with my eyes closed."

She caught herself in mid-step. She hadn't thought about that. Despite Jack's obvious desire for her, she still felt uncomfortable about her too-tall, too-slender body.

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Jack felt Sara freeze through his closed eyes. How could she have held on to those ridiculous notions that she was inadequate just because she didn't spill out every which way she moved. "I like what I see."

"Really?" She was begging for reassurance but hating herself for needing it.

Jack's hand brushed against Sara's thigh shortcutting his thought process. "Why don't you let me prove exactly how sexy you are." He reached for her, balanced her as she stepped over his recumbent body.

He slid back in the bathtub, carefully extending his wings to let them dry.

Sara lowered her soapy body against his, her small but perfectly shaped breasts pressing against his chest, her belly against his stomach.

"You are going to make sure I'm clean all over," he urged.

"Huh-un." Sara couldn't quite suppress her giggle. "I'm going to make you dirty all over." She lowered herself further, opening herself to him, taking all of him into her sweet warmth.

"How about I open my eyes now?" He could see without them but what he saw was emotions, heat, and mass. Being able to observe Sara's face and, at the same time, see the emotions that motivated the expressions, had proved an experience more moving than he could have imagined.

"I'll ask before I work on your car again," he promised.

"This may not be the best time to talk about that."

As usual, Sara was right. Instead of talking, he leaned back in the water, cool to him, warm to Sara, and enjoyed the buoyancy the water gave both their bodies. Sara's soap-slippery body extended their lovemaking, created the illusion that her entire body was a part of the sexual experience, that all of her was opening to him, accepting him, inviting him in.

Mesmerized, he followed Sara's invitation. As his erection slid deeper into her, he loosened his tight control over his spirit, letting it extend itself to touch, caress, join with Sara's soul.

For a dizzying moment, he experienced a vertigo greater than any since that great fall when he and the others had been thrown into the abyss. To his extended senses, the sparks that marked the joining of his essence with Sara were bright fireworks, arching across the vast distances that kept demon and human forever separate, bringing the two of them together in ways that humans could never experience and demons dared never attempt.

"Oh my--"

He pressed his lips to Sara's lips, part of him recoiling as his spirit picked up the words she was going to say and part of him able to accept anything at all, so long as he could relish this moment a little longer.

She met his lips, her tongue pressed them apart, sought his own tongue, caressed it, then withdrew with an invitation to follow.

Sara shifted her weight, impossibly finding a way to plunge him even more deeply within her, then slid her body up against his only to plunge it once again over his upthrust member.

Jack found the soap, lathered his hands, then rubbed them over Sara adding even more lubrication to her chest where it pressed against his own.

"We'll have to get a tub like this." Sara's voice was hoarse with desire.

A demon must never plan for the future, never anticipate any pleasure. Yet he could not find it in himself to correct her. If only there was some way he could go on with Sara, spend years with her making love, sharing thoughts and dreams.

"You're a million miles away, lover. You'd better not be fantasizing about some girl-demon."

He kissed then nibbled at the curve between neck and shoulder. "Oh, I'm here all right."

He slid a soapy finger between them finding the sensitive nub of her desire and ran his other hand down her backside, pressing against her firm rounded bottom.

"No fair, this is my seduction." Sara's protest didn't have much steam.

"Not if you don't keep it."

Sara smiled. "Want to play rough, do you?"

"Uh--"

"Too late." She tightened her grip on him from the inside.

"Hey, that almost hurts."

"Don't be a wimp. Besides, almost doesn't count."

It definitely didn't. The sensation of her muscles gripping him was excruciatingly arousing.

Sara splashed a handful of water against his wings, laughing when the droplets exploded into steam. "I think I could get used to you, you handsome devil."

"I'm not sure I could ever get used to you." He paused for only a beat. "But I'd lo--like to try." What was wrong with him. He'd almost used that word.

He caressed her folds and that button of desire, keeping time with Sara as she began to move faster and faster against him.

"Don't make me come too soon," she whispered.

Jack looked into her again, observed the swirling colors of passion and desire, then gentled his pressure until the colors of desire matched those of passion.

Again, Sara's aura softened at the edges, inviting him in. Again, he was helpless against the invitation.

Sara groaned, the colors of her desire flaring hot and white.

It was too much.

Despite his promises, despite his intentions, despite his fears, Jack lost control.

The orgasm swept over him like a tornado ripping through Kansas. He plunged himself even more deeply into her, pressed his spirit all the way to the boundaries of her soul.

He'd warned her that he couldn't handle sex but neither of them had remembered, taking their earlier successes as proof that his problem was under control.

Sara screamed.

## Chapter 17

Sara's body shuddered. It wasn't just a reaction to her orgasm, something even more powerful had taken place. "What happened?"

Jack stood slowly, his iron-hard erection still jutting from his body. It seemed to Sara that he actually glowed, as if his body was a sheet over a lamp and the light was shining around the edges.

He did not look like a man who had just enjoyed completely mind-boggling sex. Instead, he looked angry, ready to fight the world.

"I warned you." His words were almost indistinguishable in the growl.

"Warned me of what?"

"I told you I couldn't control myself if I had sex."

She couldn't help giggling. "You aren't supposed to control yourself. It's about letting go, silly."

He shook his head grimly.

She looked down at her body. When he'd told her about losing control, she'd gotten a definite image of dismembered humans. She seemed to be all in one piece.

Except there was something different. When they'd made love before, she'd had a sense of contentedness and fulfillment that started in her womb and spread from there. Now, the center seemed to be in her mind. Worse, she was standing next to the tub and she had no earthly idea how she'd gotten there.

"Tell me what happened."

"I invaded your soul."

Icy panic reared. "What the hell does that mean?"

"It means I possessed you, I my spirit entered your soul."

Sara felt dizzy. She turned to run but the motion made her dizziness worse. She barely made it to the toilet before nausea overcame her.

Jack stepped closer but didn't completely close the distance. "I didn't mean to do it."

She found a towel, wiped off her face, then wrapped it around her. "You don't really think that makes any difference, do you?"

"I'm trying to explain--"

"You're trying to explain why it's a bad idea for a human woman to do it with a demon. Well, I guess I finally get it." Anger and betrayal warred for prime positioning in her mind.

"If you were to ward me again, I would be safe. Because we hadn't had sex in a while, my urges were less controllable."

"Trust me, we aren't going to take another chance."

He extended his wings, his deep blue eyes glaring. At that moment, he looked less human and more diabolical than she'd ever seen him. He also looked damned sexy but she suppressed that thought. She had to learn her lessons and this was a big one.

"You knew I had this problem."

"Right. It's my fault. I was stupid. What else do you want me to say?"

"I'll go and change." He stepped past her careful not to touch her with his extended wingspan.

"Good idea."

Once he'd left, she threw up again, washed out her mouth, then took a long cold shower to wash away the sensation of Jack on her body, in her body, in her mind.

It didn't work at all.

The suite had fancy terrycloth bathrobes and she wrapped one around her before she left the bathroom. As she touched the door, the phone rang.

"Sara, it's me, Katra."

She reached back and grabbed her watch from the bathroom counter. What had happened to the hours?  
"Katra, are you crazy? It's two in the morning."

"I heard the T.V. though the wall between our suites so I knew you weren't asleep."

"Well, you should be. Tomorrow is a big day."

"It isn't for me. I'm just the audience."

"Well, then I should be sleeping."

"Maybe you should, but you're not. I'm coming over."

Two minutes later, Katra sat down on the side of the tub. "What happened?"

Sara tried to think of a graceful way of telling her friend, then just blurted it out. "Jack possessed me."

Katra didn't look as shocked as Sara anticipated. "Really?"

"You think I'd lie about something like that. There's a gap in my memory. One second I was in the bathtub, the next, I was out and a couple of hours had vanished."

"Want to tell me what the two of you were doing in the bathtub?"

"You know what we were doing."

Katra nodded patiently, as she thought Sara were just a little slow. "Hasn't that ever happened to you before?"

Sara wasn't sure she was tracking. "Of course not. If Jack had possessed me before, he would have been out of here on his tail."

Katra's eyes widened. "Does he really have a tail. Now that raises all sorts of interesting ideas."

It did, but Sara repressed them as hard as she could. "He doesn't have a tail."

"Pity. But I was talking about these crazy little gaps in your memory. Haven't you ever experienced them?"

"I don't believe in amnesia. It's a plot device for cheap novels."

"It's not amnesia, exactly. You know we joke about how a man only have enough blood for his brain or his dick but not both. Well, even women can have that problem. If your orgasm is intense enough, you can lose control, lose awareness."

She'd been betrayed by her lover and now her best friend was condescending to her. "Don't talk to me like I'm a baby. Jack told me he possessed me."

"And I'm sure you asked him exactly what that meant."

"I know what it means. You thought I overreacted when Jack messed with my car. Well, now he's been messing with my brain. I suppose you think I'm still overreacting."

Katra shifted her weight between her feet, obviously hunting for an answer that would keep Sara from jumping down her throat. "I have no idea whether you're overreacting or not." She yawned. "I'm sorry but I'm getting really sleepy so I'm going back to my room now."

"All right."

Katra opened the hallway door then stopped. "There's one thing that's funny about this, though."

"I could use a laugh. Tell me."

Katra gave an exasperated sigh. "Not that kind of funny. But if Jack possessed you, how come I'm talking to you? How come he gave you up? I heard you had to get an exorcist to get rid of a demon. Well, we left the Reverend Bob back in Dallas."

Sara felt a headache coming on. Her life was falling apart. She'd lost her job, had a fight with her best girlfriend, been possessed by her boyfriend, and was now going to mess up on her chance to make some serious money in bar trivia because she had a migraine headache that wouldn't stop.

"I have no idea. I don't have a lot of experience with demons but somehow I can't think that watching a bunch of second-rate horror movies makes you that much of an expert either."

Katra shook her head. "If you keep acting like this, maybe you'll convince me that you're possessed after all. You're supposed to be the one who's so logical. Well, logic it out." She closed the door behind her leaving Sara in the dimly lit hotel room, alone except for a demon sleeping on the couch.

New York's mass of human suffering could sustain and hide a host of demonic visitors. Probably because of the trauma of the previous evening, Jack found it difficult to draw on even a small fraction of the energy that swirled around him like crows around a carcass.

After Katra had left, Sara had headed for the bedroom, returned with a blanket and pillow which she'd thrown at him, and then disappeared again.

Not that Jack blamed her. Possession is a demon's shortcut. A way of avoiding the centuries required to convert energy into enough physical mass to make the transition to the human plane. It was also the most complete violation of trust Jack could imagine.

He turned on the television and watched the flickering pictures tell the story of suffering across the world. It didn't matter. There was no energy there for him to draw upon, no matter how many hours of it he endured.

Sara emerged from the bedroom at seven, already dressed but with her hair still in curlers. "Let's go."

If he'd been in doubt about how Sara felt about him, the curlers ended it.

"I'm ready."

"You don't have to shower?"

He'd taken a bath the previous night but didn't think this was the time to remind her of that. "No."

"Were you planning on wearing those jeans?"

He looked down at his clothes. "What's wrong with them?"

"You're going on TV. Everyone in this part of the world already thinks Texans are a bunch of hicks, and we don't need you to spread that impression."

He shrugged. "They go with the cowboy hat."

"Yeah? Well, I think they make us Texans look like hicks."

He wasn't going to win this argument so he gave it up. "Do you have a suggestion?"

Sara seemed slightly mollified by his question. "I brought you something." She stepped back into the bedroom and returned with two boxes which she extended toward him.

Whatever it was, it was a gift she'd bought for him earlier, before he had betrayed her. He knew how short Sara's money situation was. For her to be buying presents was not fiscally wise.

He couldn't win. Refusing her gift would be a slap in the face. Accepting it would compound his betrayal. He reached for the boxes. "Thank you."

"You get dressed and I'll finish my makeup." Sara turned and vanished back into the bedroom.

Jack opened the boxes and removed the starched white shirt, tie, and charcoal-gray suit.

He was wrestling with the tie when Sara emerged, without curlers and looking beautiful. "You aren't ready yet?"

"I'm having trouble with the tie. Last time I was in the human plane, they hadn't been invented. In Dallas, it never came up."

"Oh, I'll do it." She reached for him, tugging the tie into place, her soft fingers brushing against his skin and against the cool crispness of his shirt.

"Thank you," he told her.

Sara shook herself. "You didn't do it again, did you?"

"Possess you? Of course not."

"Then what just happened?"

What had happened was that Sara's brain was treating him like the demon he was, but her body was still relating to him as a male, just as his was reacting to her. He decided it would be better to keep his mouth shut.

She glared at him for a long moment, then realized one hand was still resting on his cheek. "Oh."

"Perhaps we had better check on Katra and your grandmother."

"I called. They should be ready."

Katra and Maura weren't ready. Katra trotted out every dress she owned, fortunately not that large a number or they would have been really late for the show, before finally deciding on a low-cut number that showed her figure to perfect effect. She'd have the cameramen drooling if nothing else. Maura had gone with an Old World look, rosary beads hanging from her shapeless black dress. Both wore cowboy hats to match Jack's.

"What is that about?" Sara demanded.

"Jack's got to wear his hat," Katra explained. "So we figured we'd do the whole Texas thing."

"But I don't--"

"I bought you a hat before we left," Maura said. "You'll look darling."

Sara looked at the three of them, and nodded. "All right."

From then on, it was pure rush.

Sara rushed Katra along, complimented her grandmother on the beautiful hat, sent Jack down for coffee from the hotel lobby, and managed to get the entire party downstairs in half an hour.

Jack had to admire Sara's motivational and organizational skills--from afar. She barely spoke to him at all and then in simple commands like "get coffee, now."

The hotel clerk had helped Jack carry up the coffee. Now, he stood sweating behind the counter. "Please don't worry about the checkout time. You can check out any time you like."

"But you can never leave," Sara concluded.

Jack thought the look of confusion on Maura's face probably matched his own.

"It's an old song," Katra said with a giggle. "Sara was always the expert."

The clerk paled, turned bright red, then took the best course and put on a hesitant smile. "Good luck on your show. Break a leg."

The network had sent a car and driver. The three women sat in the back, chatting and giggling, while Jack sat next to the driver.

"Enjoy it while you can, losers," the driver muttered speaking in Russian.

"Pardon?" Jack answered in the same language.



"I'm sorry. I was speaking to myself."

"But I'm interested in what you have to say." Besides, no one in the back seat seemed interested in sharing any thoughts with him.

"That's the gossip going around the studio. They've brought in a team of professors from New York City University who've been playing bar trivia for years. Your team is supposed to look like a bunch of rubes."

"How are we doing?"

"With all those cowboy hats, you'll fit perfectly. They may want you to wear a kerchief, though. Trust me, they'll fix you up good in wardrobe."

"Get along little doggie." Jack switched back to English for that expression.

"Everyone says that one night you scored perfectly was a fluke. The professors have won hundreds of times over the past years and your bartender said you play all the time but you're normally losers."

Jack didn't mention that he'd only played once. "Is there a betting pool?"

"There would be, except nobody wants to bet against the professors."

"Want some advice?"

"You saying you think you have a chance?"

"I'd say if you find a hundred dollars with our name on it, you could go home with a bit more."

"You don't seriously expect me to bet my money based on your word, do you?"

Jack resisted the temptation to rip the poor man's heart out. "That is your choice, of course."

"Not just losers, idiots too," the driver muttered to himself.

"Just drive us there."

"Hey, nobody asked you. I wasn't even talking in English, for God's sake."

The familiar electrical jerk struck Jack leaving him gasping for breath. Fortunately for him, any angels wandering nearby must have been distracted by the millions of other calls for divine intervention, curses, even the occasional blessing.

"What were you and the driver talking about?" Katra asked him as they headed for the studio.

"He told me that our competition is a bunch of ringers from the local university. They're supposed to win and we're supposed to be the chumps. The cowboy hats were brilliant. They'll probably play us for Texas hicks."

"Think it'll work out that way?"

"It's their contest. They're smart enough to rig it to come out however they want."

Katra looked confused. "It's all a matter of knowing the stuff. I would think the smartest people would win."

He gave her an evil grin. "Then we'd lose."

Katra threw a punch at his shoulder. "You know what I meant. And even if you are a demon, you are a person too. Just not a human person."

He was saved from having to comment when the program directors descended on them.

"The jean skirt and cowboy hat are fabulous. Let's just get you cowboy boots to go with it and you'll be ready, Sara."

"I'm Katra. Sara's friend."

"Oh." A brief pause. "Well, we're going to have to get you into the picture. You're a classic."

"Told you," Jack murmured into Katra's ear.

"If you win, it'll backfire."

The producers showed the three women to a makeup area. She looked at Jack, then smiled. "I don't think we need any makeup for you."

Even without his empathic skills, Jack would have been able to see the motivation here. Television lights are hot. Without makeup, a man would sweat. He'd look like he just stepped off the ranch.

Jack merely nodded. It would take more than a few television lights to bother him, and he didn't think they'd let him keep his hat on in makeup anyway. Explaining his horns to a makeup artist didn't sound like fun.

The minute they'd handed Katra and Maura little Texas flags, Sara knew that Jack had been telling the truth. This wasn't just a bar trivia television show. It was east against the west, north against south, and everyone in the country against Texas.

Well, ever since the Alamo, Texans had proven they wouldn't step away from a fight, and Sara didn't plan to step away from this one. She grimaced at the analogy, though. There were fights that it would be better to walk away from.

"I'll wear cowboy boots too," she said. She unbuttoned another button on her blouse. She didn't have much to show but if she was going to be stuck playing the Texas role, she intended to do it proud.

Katra gave her a nod. "You go, girl."

"I think the fake six shooters are a little over the top," Maura commented.

"They're ridiculous," Sara agreed. "So you think I should leave them."

"Wear-em," Katra urged. "Anything worth doing is worth doing to excess."

Sara strapped them on.

"Five minutes," the makeup artist said.

"Come on." Sara led her friend and grandmother out of the makeup room scattering the small crew that seemed intent on turning them into even more complete caricatures of the big-haired, loud-mouthed, super-hick Texas women east-coasters seemed to think populated the Texas prairies. "Let's kick some Yankee butt."

"You aren't getting paranoid, are you?" Jack looked as cool as dry ice under the glaring studio lights.

"Of course I'm not getting paranoid. They put us in a dump of a hotel, paint us up to look like we should be bit players in The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas, send a team of ringers from their local college in to beat us, and my boyfriend possessed me. What possible reason for paranoia would I have?"

"I think--"

She cut him off. "In this case, they really are out to get me."

Jack's smile barely reached his lips. "I have a strategy."

"Does it involve sending some of your pet imps to scurry around and destroy some of these New Yorkers? If so, I like it. I said 'hey' to one of the women doing my makeup and she just sniffed like I was a bad odor."

"It doesn't exactly involve the imps."

"Talk to me about the 'exactly.'"

"It would be easy to distract them. That would let us give our answers first."

"What sort of distraction do you have in mind?" Maybe she could persuade Katra to unbutton another button on her blouse. That and her friend's short skirt could distract any male within miles.

"I was thinking maybe a few whiffs of brimstone and maybe a minor heart attack." He looked completely serious.

"Oh, Jack." Sara didn't know whether to laugh or cry. He was doing this for her but his complete lack of moral sense just pointed to the vast gulf between them. "I think we had better just rely on beating them fair and square. Besides, a little distraction wouldn't help. We have plenty of time to guess the right answer."

"While you were in the dressing room getting made up, I was talking to one of the production assistants. The television rules are a different today than in a normal game."

Sara narrowed her eyes. "Different in what way?"

"If you're not fast, you lose points."

"So we'd better get the answers quickly."

"And have quick reactions too." Jack's eyes gleamed. "That's one of the areas where distraction could come in real handy."

"No cheating." She thought about the rule change and it didn't make sense. As a small team, she and Jack would have an advantage over a group that had to discuss everything. "Did your little friend tell you why they're changing the rules? Everyone watching the show probably plays trivia in bars."

"Things have to move faster on T.V. In bars, they want people to stay and drink. On T.V. they want to make sure they don't flip to another channel. At least that's what Tiffany tells me."

A gorgeous, if heavily bleached blonde smiled at Jack giving him a prom queen wave. "Is your team ready to go? The Beavers are here. We'll be on as soon as the commercial break is over."

"That reminds me, the Devil did invent commercial breaks, didn't he?" She'd admit it, Sara was in a snippy mood.

Jack shook his head. "It was the indoor plumbing lobby. Timing is everything."

"You're so funny." She intended the words to be sarcastic, but Sara couldn't help noticing that she had smiled more in the little time she'd had to share with Jack than she had in years.

Sara had to keep reminding herself that Jack was a demon, not the sexy man he appeared to be. In his suit and tie, he could have passed for a rich business executive, except few executives had the build that Jack displayed.

Tiffany prodded them to their seats barely giving Sara time to whisper to Katra that if she wanted to hike up her skirt once or twice while the New York City University team was looking her direction, that wouldn't really be cheating.

The M.C. bounded onto the set. His spray-on tan and glue-on hair probably looked great over the tube but Sara couldn't help comparing this supposed television heart-throb to the real thing sitting next to her.

Jack radiated animal sex appeal and confident personality, which Sara didn't think was very fair since he was neither an animal nor a person, but there she had it. He joined in the host's banter, joking about their day in New York and their lives in Texas.

"So, is it true that a lot of you Texans have a bumper sticker that says drive fast and freeze a Yankee?" the M.C. asked.

"I'm going to let my partner answer that one, George," Jack answered. "She is the oil and gas engineer, after all."

Sara opened her mouth and for a painful five seconds, nothing came out. No man, and few women, would just back off and give up on his fifteen minutes of fame. Yet, as Jack said, this was something she did know something about. He'd also put her completely on the spot.

She finally caught her breath. "A large part of the Texas economy is centered on exploring for and developing energy resources, George." She took a deep breath, then plunged ahead. "What Jack and I intend to do with our million dollar winnings is to fully fund our oil and gas exploration business."

The M.C. took half a step back. Apparently he'd been expecting something a little more hick from the woman in the cowboy hat. Well, tough. Sara put up with enough crap from the males in her work without having to put up with more from an obnoxious television personality.

"Right. Well let's see how the team from New York City University is shaping up."

Two of their opponents, a young woman from Afghanistan and a middle-aged man from the Bronx, were music professors. Jack had lost track with music sometime between Bach and Brahms with only the occasional interlude for the Rolling Stones.

"Be ready for questions about music," he whispered to Sara while George the M.C. was trying to discover some personality amongst the NYCU professors.

"I saw that too. They researched us and then tried to stack the deck against us."

Paranoia felt very comfortable to Jack.

"Right," George announced. "Well, you all know the rules and you all know we're playing for some serious money, so let's get started."

The first question was an easy one. What year did the Mongols seize Kiev? Jack's hand was pressing the correct button before the phosphorus in the display screen had been fully excited. 1240 was the obvious answer and none of the other choices were close enough to allow argument about whether calendar changes might result in a different date.

"If you know it, push the button," Sara urged.

"I did."

She sighed, then pressed the button herself. The light on their stand lit up, but the score showed that they had lost two hundred points by the delay.

"Why don't you let me handle this?" Sara yanked the control unit toward her side of the desk.

Cheers and jeers from the studio audience greeted the obvious conflict within the team from Texas.

"There's a problem with it," he explained.

"Yeah sure. A problem named Jack."

He extended his senses through the circuitry that linked their control unit to the computer that controlled questions and answers. A delay circuit had been inserted, ensuring that they would never be able to achieve full credit. The producers were hedging their bets.

Jack glared at the M.C. who was slapping hands with the NYCU team now in the lead nine hundred to six hundred. Sara was right, though. Neither cheating nor punishing these others would lead to a good solution. He wanted Sara to win, to get her money and pursue her happiness. Then, of course, he would move on. If Katra was right about his career needs, maybe he'd come back to New York and get a job at the New York City University, protected from avenging angels by the aura of millions of angry New Yorkers.

He took a small part of his energy and fused the delay circuit into a lump of copper and silicon. "Fixed it."

Sara gave him a sour look. "Whatever."

"You know I don't lie."

Her face contorted. "I'm sorry. I let them push me into panic mode. It's probably just what they wanted."

Sara knew the next question, the name of the first Beatles drummer and smacked the button instantly. Both teams received full credit for knowing that Colin Hanton had preceded Tommy Moore, Norman Chapman, Pete Best and, of course, Ringo Starr as Beatles drummer.

Jack and Sara managed to keep the pace with the larger NYCU team, each of which, Jack saw, had been given their own control. If multiple answers were received, the system was automatically set up to accept the correct one.

"We can't win," he whispered to Sara during a commercial break.

"We've got to. I'm out of money."

"Maybe if I gave them all a little indigestion."

Sara shook her head. "They didn't do anything."

"They've got to know they're cheating."

"Still."

By the final question, they were still down by three hundred points. While neither side was going to get their million, whoever won would score better than half a million dollars. The losers would get their free flight home.

The final question flashed on the screen and Katra slipped off her chair, falling on her butt and somehow managing to land with her legs up in the air and her Texas flag-decorated thong underwear exposed to the world.

Jack's hand lashed out at the control unit, the female professor glared at the monitor, and the male professors goggled over Katra's thong as their clock ticked away the points.

"Well, I'll be a son of a bi--uh, I mean, howdy partner, we have a winner," the M.C. announced. "Unfortunately, the Texas team won't be able to return, but they'll take half a million Yankee dollars back to the Lone Star State.

"We're getting robbed," Sara told him.

"If we get out of here alive, we'll be ahead of the game." The woman professor was heading toward Katra with an expression that would make any man guard his private parts. "I think we'd better grab the check and head for the airport."

## Chapter 18

Katra brushed off her butt, straightened her skirt, and grabbed Maura's hand. "Let's get out of here."

"But we're on television. They'll probably want to interview the family members."

"They want to kill us."

"Why?"

"Because I cheated."

"But you weren't playing."

Katra laughed. "Oh, yes I was. Come on, let's go."

She tugged Maura toward the studio exit.

A black-haired witch of a woman descended on her, her umbrella raised like a club. "I saw what you did. If you think you can get away with that kind of disgraceful behavior, you're wrong."

"I think our exit is over here." Katra ignored the irate loser.

"It's sluts like you who give all women a bad name," the professor continued. "Well I'm going to fix that."

Katra tugged on Maura again, but the older woman didn't budge. "I think you owe Katra an apology," Maura said. "I want to hear it now, on national T.V."

"You want an apology and I want my million dollars. Guess which one of us is going to get what we want?" The woman swung the umbrella at Maura's head.

Katra reached for it. Instead of hitting Maura, it smacked into her wrist with a solid thunk. The thing had to weigh five pounds.

Katra reeled back, her wrist a solid ache of pain. "Ow."

The woman stepped forward pressing her advantage. "Your turn now, old witch."

"All right, that does it." Maura reached into her handbag, pulled out an aerosol can, and sprayed the woman in the face.

"Argh. She dropped to the floor, tears streaming from her eyes. "You can't do that in New York. Concealed weapons are illegal. I've got you now."

"Maybe I should kick her when she's down?" Maura suggested.

"We'd better go and rescue Sara and Jack. Keep that hairspray handy. You never know when someone else will be having a bad hair day."

"I would have used my mace, but you wouldn't let me bring it on the airplane."

"Trust me," Katra told her, "it's better this way."

Tiffany the makeup girl rushed over to Jack just as Katra and Maura reached him and Sara.

"You were wonderful," she gushed. "If you're in New York again, give me a call." She thrust a slip of paper in his direction.

He shook his head. "I don't think so."

"But--well, I know. I'll just take this to remember you by." She snatched his hat.

For an instant, Jack's bare head was exposed on national television, horns and all.

His hand blurred as he reclaimed his hat and set it on his head. "We'd better move along."

"Think they'll stop the check?" Sara asked Katra as they followed Jack toward an exit.

Katra shook her head. "It was too public. There's nothing in the rules about results being nullified if an audience member just happened to slip."

"When I suggested you distract them, I was thinking about a little thigh, not the whole bird."

Katra nodded. "When they cheated, I figured we needed something a little extra."

Sara looked puzzled. "Jack thought they were cheating too."

"I saw Jack smack the button on the first question. A couple of seconds later I saw a puff of white smoke go up right where all those electricians are standing. It was pretty obvious."

An angry audience member, this one a man who looked like he lifted weights and wanted to prove it,

stepped into Jack's zone and shoved at his chest. "You think you're pretty smart, don't you?"

"I don't think about it." Jack's voice was icy calm.

"Yeah? After I get done with you, you won't think you're so smart any more."

"Oh, good. Then I guess we're finished?" Jack stepped around his antagonist keeping his body, Katra noticed, between the heckler and the women.

"Hey. I said I'm not done with you yet."

Jack removed his jacket and extended his wings ripping through the back of his shirt. The man took a step toward him, got a confused look on his face, and stopped. "Hey."

"It was nice to talk to you," Sara said. She gave him one of those innocent smiles that only Sara could pull off. If Katra tried a smile like that, she'd probably get arrested.

The heckler slowly unclasped his fists. "What happened?"

"The bathroom is through that door," Katra told him.

"Oh, thanks." He wandered off with a dazed look.

"What the heck did you do to him?" Sara demanded.

"My wings are created by a power grid--similar to the electrical impulses that control the synapses within the brain. Get too close and" he clicked his fingers, "zap, no memory."

"How come it never happened to me?" She paused. "Or did it? You could use this to just erase things from my brain and I'd never know what happened."

The beefiest of the assistant producers, accompanied by two security guards and the female professor had started walking toward them and Katra decided it was time to cut the bickering. "Maybe you two can have this out back in Texas."

"If we could stop on the way, I need to pick up some more hair spray," Maura added.

"Let's go." Jack pointed toward a fire escape door held ajar by an old shoe. Being an ex-smoker, Katra recognized it instantly. It would be where the smoking members of the crew hung out.

"Hurry," she added. Only once, when she'd been in college and taken a wild spring break vacation, had she ended up spending the night in jail. That one time had been plenty.

The sunlight nearly blinded Katra as she stepped onto a rickety steel fire escape. She led them down with Jack bringing up the rear, doubtless casting some sort of magic to keep all of them invisible.

They'd just hit the sidewalk when a taxi rolled up. Jack addressed him in Spanish so fast, Katra couldn't keep up, and they piled into the cab, Jack sitting in front.

"LaGuardia," Jack told the driver. "Hurry. I'll have Craig at the hotel forward our luggage."

Sara stared out the airplane window watching as huge clouds banked up the sun's energy and waited for the moment to unleash it on an unexpected world. Ever since Jack had appeared on the scene, she'd been caught up in exactly that type of storm. Her job, Katra's problems with Derrick, the trivia game and



the fight afterwards, being possessed by a demon, they weren't the type of things that happened to Sara Slocum.

"These clouds will dissipate by around seven this evening," Jack told her. He was sitting across the aisle next to Maura. Katra had the aisle seat on Sara's side.

How could he be so goddamn sure all the time? He wasn't God. Annoyance flared up in her although she knew she wasn't just annoyed about his weather comments. "Did I ask about them?"

"You looked concerned."

She had concerns all right but the weather was somewhere below the top fifty. Jack, on the other hand, headed the list.

"We need to talk."

Jack looked about as comfortable with those words as any male she'd ever known. Probably, she realized, because we need to talk is girl-code for you're in trouble, Mister.

"Hum. I think the flight attendants would be concerned if I created a privacy zone here. It just might black out the pilot's instruments."

He was right, as usual, damn him. Shouting with her lover across her best friend and in front of one hundred and fifty bored passengers didn't seem like the smartest choice. "We'll talk when we get home."

Katra nudged her, then bent toward her ear. "Or you could sneak back to the bathroom and join the mile-high club, then talk later."

Despite everything, Sara couldn't help giggling. "I can't believe you said that. Do you ever think of anything besides sex?"

"Uh, I can't remember. How about you?"

Sara wondered if that could be the problem. Had she gotten so fixated on her physical desire that she'd lost track of everything that was important?

"You're right. I need to get back in control of my life."

Katra shook her head. "That wasn't what I said. Now that you and Jack won that contest, you've got enough money that you can build your business, Jack can pursue his dreams, and the two of you can sneak away for romantic trips to the French Riviera or wherever jet setters go."

The plane began its long descent into DFW airport.

LaGuardia had been full of New Yorkers whose civic pride had been offended by having their team lose to a couple of yokels from Texas. Sara didn't expect that type of negative reaction when they landed in DFW. For that matter, she didn't expect any reaction. They weren't the Dallas Cowboys, for goodness sake, and a televised bar trivia game hardly amounted to something of national importance.

The jet's loudspeaker crackled. "This is the captain. We've been advised that there is a large crowd gathered at the terminal gate area. Apparently we have some celebrities on board. Please use a little extra caution in leaving the plane."

"Do you think he means us?" she asked Katra.

Katra shrugged. "Maybe it's me. My mother always told me I would get in trouble if I wore that kind of panties."

"Your mother wears crotchless underwear."

Katra laughed. "That's what I mean. Too conservative."

The plane fought through a set of low hanging clouds that appeared ready to burst into rain at any moment, and bumped to a rough landing.

"I thought you told me the clouds were going to dissipate," she said to Jack.

He nodded, serene in his confidence. "They will."

"Yeah, sure."

"If I could suggest that Katra and Maura go on ahead, I don't like what I see in the auras in the crowd waiting for us."

"They are waiting for us, then?"

"So it seems. I'm not picking everything up. It's as if the auras are muffled."

"Probably because we've got an aluminum plane and a couple of masonry walls between us and them," Sara told him. "Besides, if it might be dangerous, I won't send Maura and Katra into it on their own."

"We can take care of ourselves." Maura slapped her purse significantly. "I can't believe that airport shop wanted ten dollars for this can of hair spray but if I need it, it'll be worth it. The day I back down to anybody is the day I join Sara's dear grandfather."

Since her grandfather had worked as a roustabout and then one of Texas's truly legendary and crazy wildcatters, Maura rarely heard him referred to as anything like dear. He certainly hadn't had much time for Maura's religion nor for his daughter. Sara remembered him only as a powerful man who told stories of the old days of oil exploration, then swatted her bottom and told her to mind her grandmother.

Sara realized she'd learned more from his tall tales than she had from his discipline. She still wasn't much good at minding her grandmother.

They were the last to emerge from the plane.

When the pilot had made his announcement, Sara had envisioned a dozen or so Bar Trivia fans angry, perhaps, because Sara and Jack had been selected on the basis of one night's success. Her worst nightmares wouldn't have prepared her for reality.

Close to a thousand angry faces met her as she emerged. They were chanting something although it was difficult to interpret the words. Security guards had stretched out barrier tape and were speaking into bullhorns urging the crowd to disperse.

Half a second later, someone in the crowd screamed "there they are."

The ugly chant trailed off, but Sara's relief was short-lived. It was replaced by a low, feral growling.

Maura reached into her purse and brandished her hair spray. "Nobody had better get close to us."

A couple of Texas flags waved toward the back of the crowd but Sara couldn't tell whether they were

supporters or part of the protest.

"Please disperse," the security guard with the bullhorn ordered. "We have notified the police. Anyone not leaving the gate area at once will be subject to arrest."

If anything, the roar got louder.

Instinctively, Sara sidled closer to Jack. "What's going on?"

"Going on television was a mistake. Look at the signs."

Sara couldn't imagine how she had missed them for as long as she had. Psalms 106:37--They sacrifice your sons and daughters to demons, one read. Exodus 22:18--Do not suffer a witch to live, read another.

"When I saw the horns on television, everything fell into place." A new bullhorn had joined the old. This one came complete with a familiar voice. The Reverend Bob.

"Repent, if you can," Bob repeated at full amplification.

"I don't think Maura's hair spray is going to keep all of them away," Katra said.

"Reverend Bob, is that you?" Maura strode toward Bob, now standing on one of the seats in the waiting area.

"Let the older one through. She is one of us."

The crowd created a passage and Maura stepped toward Bob, then closed it when Katra tried to dart after her.

"I can do little." Jack's voice seemed forced and his face was pale, as it had been when Derrick had shot him.

"Can you make us invisible?"

"No. They are too focused on us."

"So if we had a distraction?"

That got a small grin. "I don't believe that Katra will be able to pull off the Texas panty trick again."

"We saw your tricks on television," one of the protesters shouted. "Why don't you go back to New York with your sin and harlotry."

"There seems to be a certain amount of antipathy between your states," Jack observed. He removed his jacket freeing his wings.

"Can you zap them like you did that creep in New York?" Sara asked.

"One or two, only. Contact with them would drain me before I could do much."

"All right, it's up to me." Sara marched up to a guard leaving Jack and Katra to fend for themselves. "Are you just going to stand there and let them tear us to pieces?"

"We've phoned the police. Perhaps if you went back into the plane."

"Oh, great. Let them take us hostage in a plane." She bit her tongue before she asked if there was an intelligence test required to become a security guard. She wanted his help, not another enemy.

A couple of the younger protesters got closer to Jack and Katra. One flung a Coke can in Jack's direction.

Jack raised a hand and the Coke can, along with the spray of soda that emerged as it flew, slowed, veered, and missed both himself and Katra.

Sara, too far away to do anything, knew it was a mistake. Despite their chants, despite their signs, few among the crowd would really believe that Jack was a demon. Demons are fantasies out of books and grandmothers' tales, or perhaps symbolic expressions of human failings. What they weren't was tall handsome men who wore business suits and cowboy boots. But Jack had broken the spell.

The silence lasted a full five second, broken only by the clatter as the Coke can landed and dumped its contents all over the carpet.

"They're going to charge," Sara whispered to the guard.

"How did he do that thing with the Coke?"

"He's trained in the martial arts." It wasn't completely a lie.

"I don't think so. I think that minister was right all along."

More soda cans started to fly and several protesters stripped the signs off the hardened wood of their placards. "Let's get him."

She faced the guard. "Stop them."

He couldn't have been over twenty-five and was as terrified as she was. "They'll kill me too."

So much for doing your job when the going gets tough.

"Be careful of the women." The Reverend Bob's amplifier-enhanced voice overpowered the roar of the crowd. "They may have weapons."

So much for the idea that he'd be merciful. The quote about killing witches should have been a sign.

Bob spoke again, but this time his voice was drowned out in feedback. He adjusted one of the knobs on the megaphone, then brought it to his mouth again. "I tell you, the last days are at hand," he began.

Reverend Bob's microphone gave Sara an idea. She spun to the guard, grasped the bullhorn he'd been using to ineffectively control the crowd, and yanked it away from him.

While the security guard looked at her with an open-mouthed stare, she turned the bullhorn's power to maximum, and tossed it over the crowd to where Maura was being held next to Bob.

Bob continued to speak but his words were drowned out by the shrill squeal of feedbacks as the two powerful microphones echoed one another building into a scream that threatened to deafen everyone in the room.

Rather than rush Jack, the mob backed off holding their ears.

"Now," Sara mouthed. She took off at a run hoping that Katra and Jack would manage to follow

Katra followed her friend, pinballing from one angry protester to another. Misspent teenage years hanging out at rock concerts, followed by more years listening to screaming children must have reduced her sensitivity to noise.

A space opened before her and she lunged for it. With any luck, she could outpace the mostly overweight crowd that had greeted the plane.

A firm grasp on her elbow dispelled any overly optimistic hopes and spun her around just as the terminal was plunged into absolute silence.

A tall man with a buzz-cut, thirty extra pounds around his waist, breath that could only be created by combining a determined lack of oral hygiene and a habit of dipping snuff, and a greasy t-shirt that read Home Schooling: No More Socialist Teachers, held her elbow in a death grip.

"Got one," he shouted.

"I don't think so." She brought a knee into his groin and followed it by a left backfist to his nose. The teachers union would be proud.

With snuff-man distracted by the difficulty of bringing his hands to two affected areas at once, Katra took off again.

The momentary delay had been too long, though. Now that Sara's distraction with the speakers had worn off, Bob shouted out directions, organizing his troops. A handful had a better angle on the door and headed Katra off there.

"Call the police, she shouted to Sara who ducked out in front of this second wave.

Katra backed away from the crowd hoping to find the security guards who had been holding them back.

A warm hand on her back stopped her.

"Jack?"

"No, darling. Better." Derrick wrapped an arm around her neck, avoided her attempt to slam a heel into his instep, and twisted one of her arms.

"Let me go."

"And let you handle me like you handled poor Wayne? I don't think so."

"I'll take her from here." The Reverend Bob held out a hand.

"You get the man. I've got what I want."

"Oh, don't worry, you'll get her back."

"I'd better." Derrick translated decision to action, shoving Katra into Bob's grasp.

Katra rebounded from Bob's chest. She wouldn't have guessed it would be so hard, so well developed. She also didn't remember his eyes being that shade of sapphire blue. "Jack?"

"You'll speak when spoken too, woman," the Reverend Bob blustered. The twitch of one eye could have been a wink.

"That's the way to treat them," Derrick said.

"Oh, Derrick?" Reverend Bob's voice was insistent.

Derrick loosened his grip, but only slightly, and turned to deal with the interruption. "Yeah, boss?"

Jack's wing blurred. It seemed to brush against the side of Derrick's neck and the man plunged against the wall and collapsed to the floor. "We need some help over here," he announced in Bob's voice.

"Come on," he told Katra.

"What about the real Bob?"

"I'd like to try that on him but he's too well protected." He urged her toward the knot of angry-looking men guarding the door.

"The police have cleaned up the fake accident we used to block the freeway," he told them, still using Bob's voice. "Let's head out of here."

"Who the heck are you?" one of them demanded.

"That's Reverend Bob, you idiot," another answered.

"No it isn't. It's the demon. Over here, they're getting away."

Jack's fist blurred into one face, propelling his victim into the man who had seen through his costume. His wings buzzed, hiding himself and Katra behind a protective shield. Two men threw themselves at the shield and rebounded, then a third simply put out a hand and Jack fell back with a suppressed gasp of agony.

"If you guys spent more time reading the Bible than those Nazi tracts, you'd know how to handle a demon." Reverend Bob held Maura behind him. She was still clutching her can of hair spray but looked uncertain about which side to attack.

"I don't want to hurt you, Katra," Reverend Bob said. "But you've been making a terrible mistake. That man you're with is a demon. When I found Derrick, I saw the demon's mark on him. With what you said, I put two and two together." He paused, then pitched his voice higher to carry over the crowd. "Do you have any idea what would happen if he escaped from Sara's wards?"

"He isn't warded. Sara set him free."

Reverend Bob shuddered. "Impossible. Dallas would be in flames."

"But it isn't, is it. Maybe you're wrong about this whole thing. Did that ever occur to you?"

His brown eyes looked sad. "I wish that could be, but it can't. Evil doesn't change." He looked around. "Get Derrick over here to control his woman."

"What?" Then she remembered Derrick's words. Bob had promised her to Derrick.

"Spare the rod, spoil the child. That's what the Bible says. Women too, of course."

"You idiot. That was John Skelton, not the Bible."

Reverend Bob showed a momentary confusion, then his face cleared. "The devil can quote scripture.

That was in the Bible too."

Derrick was rubbing his head and wobbling, but he responded to his master's call. "Yeah, boss."

"Try not to let her get away this time."

"I was too easy on her. Trust me, it won't happen again."

"See it doesn't. I've got a demon to take care of." Reverend Bob straightened his clerical collar, grasped his leather-bound Bible, and stared at Jack. "I conjure you to be gone in the name of--"

Jack vanished.

"Where'd he go, boss?" Wayne was back on his feet. She'd have to hit him harder next time she got the chance. Assuming she did get the chance.

Reverend Bob narrowed his eyes. "He's right here. Come on, Maura."

Maura followed him docilely.

"How about we go out to your car and get you a hummer," Katra suggested to Derrick. "We can join back up with the rest of them in a bit." The idea gagged her but she couldn't do anything as long as she was surrounded.

"You trying something funny?"

"That's the bitch that kicked me in the nuts," Wayne told him. He lit a cigarette, ignoring the No Smoking signs posted everywhere around the terminal.

"She's a bitch all right." Derrick considered. "Want to hold her while I slap her?"

"Oh, yeah."

There was only a fraction of a second when Derrick loosened his grasp before Wayne tightened down but Katra used it. She wrenched an arm free, grabbed Maura's hair spray, and blasted Wayne in the face.

The hair spray flamed as it touched the glowing cigarette and Wayne dropped her other arm.

Katra ran for the door, now almost deserted. She kept a steady jet of flaming hair spray in front of her.

The instant she broke through the door, she was swept into the air.

"I'm getting a little tired of men just grabbing me all the time," she told Jack. Still, she nestled closer into his chest. His strong wingstrokes moved them over the DFW traffic faster than a car would have. Below, she could see a mangled mess of pickup trucks that blocked the north entrance to the airport, a mass of flashing red and blue lights illuminating the prairie surrounding the freeway.

"You were doing all right."

"Yeah, sure." A terrible thought crossed her mind. "Where's Sara? Don't tell me they got her."

"She got out of the terminal but I think she's still in danger."

Katra was used to Jack sounding depressed. An eternity in Hell would probably do that to anyone. This tone was worse, it was defeated.

"What does that mean?"

"For one thing, they have Maura. Sara would do anything to prevent them from harming her grandmother."

"But Maura is on their side."

He shook his head, then floated lower over a yellow taxi stopped in the traffic jam. "That doesn't matter. They'll use her anyway."

Even through the taxi's metal skin, Katra could hear Sara berating the driver. "Let me out of here. I know you speak English. I've got to get the police."

"The driver is one of them," Jack said.

"So blast him."

"I can't." He paused, then landed, setting Katra down next to the cab. "Of course I can do this."

## Chapter 19

Jack slipped his hand through the atomic bonds that held the steel walls of the taxi together. Copper or bronze would have been easy but, of course, nobody thought about a demon's convenience when they designed the modern automobile. Go figure.

He grasped a flaw in the steel's structure and ripped.

"Get Sara and both of you get behind me," he told Katra as he tore the door off its hinges and threw it onto the concrete freeway.

"Right."

He spread his wings looking for an opening in the driver's protection. Nothing.

"He caught me when I came out," Sara shouted. She emerged from the car just as the driver pulled a heavy gun.

"And now I've caught all of you," the driver observed. "I don't know how you got past Bob, but you've run out of runway."

"Put the weapon away." Jack pushed his powers of compulsion into his voice.

"Sure. Once you get in the vehicle and strap in."

"The women are under my protection."

"Protected by a demon? That's a good one," the driver sneered. "Have you possessed them, or are they just lost souls?"

"They are my friends."



"Another good one." The driver guffawed with real appreciation. "I never heard of a demon with a sense of humor."

He managed to get control of his laughter and deliberately cocked the automatic, feeding a shell into the chamber. "As far as I know, there ain't no law against shooting a demon in Texas."

"You're making a mistake," Jack argued.

"Am I? Oh. You mean wasting my time talking to you instead of just doing it." As he said the work it he fired and kept firing.

Jack blurred time.

Even in fast time, the bullets sped toward him like torpedoes racing toward a doomed merchant ship.

Jack threw a wing in front of the first bullet. The heavy steel-coated package sent agony through his body. Like Derrick's gun which had so nearly destroyed him, this weapon had been made a part of the church. Defending himself and protecting the women wouldn't be easy.

He translated a small portion of his earth-dimension matter into pure heat energy, first melting, then vaporizing the bullet as it roared down his wing.

Then again, as the second, bullet, third bullet, fourth bullet cracked through the air.

The fourth bullet smashed through his shielding wings vaporizing only inches from his unprotected flesh.

A fifth bullet emerged from the weapon and Jack slowed time even further. His battered wings had done their job but could do no more. He tugged them behind him hoping they could provide at least a minimum of protection for the two women.

Sara, he saw, had picked up a piece of iron rebarr, probably dropped from a construction truck and was moving toward the driver with a determined look in her face.

With infinite slowness, the driver turned his automatic and pointed it toward Sara. It wasn't a fair race. The gun's sight had to travel a far shorter distance than did Sara. Jack might have been able to protect Sara, but the fifth bullet was already heading for him. With Katra directly behind him he would have to choose to save one woman and lose the other.

Jack was familiar with difficult choices, but this was one of the worst. Either way, he would lose Sara. Rather than choose between two bad options, he created a third. Taking advantage of the time blur, he stepped into the last bullet sent in his direction, simultaneously closing the gap between himself and Sara.

At the last possible moment, he turned his head and clamped his teeth down at the flying bullet. At that very instant, the driver fired again, this time at Sara.

The bullet in his mouth hurt like a son of a bitch, ripping at the physical stuff of his earthly plane body, but his teeth held.

Carefully, Jack removed the iron bar from Sara's grip, batted the bullet targeting Sara from the air, and then knocked away the driver's gun.

He reverted to normal time and spat out the bullet he'd caught.

"What do you say we high-tail it out of here," he suggested.

Sara pulled herself from a groggy sleep trying to figure out what had awakened her. When the clock radio alarm had gone off at an obscene hour of the morning, she'd yanked out the plug and thrown the thing against the wall, so that couldn't be the cause of the disturbance.

A knock on her apartment door sounded again.

She pulled a robe over the faded t-shirt she'd slept in and padded to the door. "Who is it?"

"Sara, it's the Reverend Bob."

Her lungs strained for air and her heart pounded. "I'm going to call 9-1-1."

"I know things got carried away last night, but we want to help you."

She hooked the door chain. In the movies, cops and criminals regularly kicked through the chains, but Bob wasn't exactly a tough guy. Not like Jack.

"Please, Sara."

"I warned you, I'm calling the police now."

"Sara, it's just me and Bob. Can't we come in and talk." Her grandmother's voice froze her in place.

"If this is a trick, I swear I'll never forgive you, Nana."

"Go ahead and call Kutra," Bob suggested. "That way, if anything does happen to you, the police will know exactly who is to blame."

Given Bob's willingness to obstruct justice the previous evening, Sara wasn't very comforted. Still, she couldn't just leave her grandmother out on the stoop.

She retreated to her bedroom, called Kutra and left a message on her machine, then secured her can of pepper spray. The baseball bat might be overkill. More to the point, Bob was likely to wrestle it from her before she could stop him. She left it under the bed.

"Is there anyone else out there with you, Nana?" she demanded.

"All those other brothers and sisters went home," Maura told her.

If those were Maura's brothers and sisters, did that make them her aunts and uncles? The thought was too horrible to stand.

Sara's hand shook as she reached for her chain and she ruthlessly suppressed the errant motion. Even if she could persuade herself to call them, the police would laugh their heads off if she told them that her grandmother and her minister were going to assault her. She was going to have to face them sooner or later.

On the third try she got the chain unhooked, then opened the door.

Maura swarmed into her apartment. "I was so worried about you, Sara. That demon looked like he was going to swallow all of our souls."

"Demons have no power over those with faith," Bob stated.

Sara ignored both of them and looked out into the hall to make sure no one lurked nearby. Only when

she was convinced that Bob and Maura had come alone did she shut the door and turn to face them.

"Please sit down on the couch." That would give her a moment to decide whether she had to use the pepper spray.

"I'll make some coffee," Maura said.

"No." She shook her head emphatically. "I didn't invite him here. I'm going to listen to what he says because you asked me, then he's going to leave."

Bob thumped down on her couch, then shifted his weight quickly. Maybe she should have warned him about the springs.

"You, too, Nana. Sit."

"But--"

"Just do it."

"We've been worried about you," Bob announced.

"Oh, yeah. You looked worried last night when you tried to kill me."

He looked completely mystified. "Kill you? Why would we do that?"

"I suppose you're going to tell me that those signs about killing witches weren't aimed at me."

He gave a rueful smile. "A few members of the flock do get carried away but that doesn't mean they want to harm you. Our only goal is to help you."

Maura had been hovering halfway between the living room and the kitchen. Now she came and sat beside Bob. "I can't believe that you have been playing with the occult. After what happened to your parents." The tear sliding down her cheek looked genuine. After the events of the past couple of days, though, Sara wasn't ready to trust anyone.

"My parents died in a car wreck. You should remember that."

"But what caused the car to crash? It wasn't like Peter to drive that fast. They hadn't been drinking and it was broad daylight, but the witnesses said he was going over a hundred miles an hour and his face looked like he was being chased by a monster."

"Or a demon," Bob added.

Sara's stomach knotted. "Thousands of people die in accidents every year," she protested. "That doesn't mean that evil spirits are running around chasing after them."

"There was also a church van driving by. The driver saw flying gray figures tearing at the car. After the accident, they found inexplicable scrapes on the car's roof."

"I never heard about a church van before."

"I was in it," Bob said quietly. "I was just a teenager then, but that sight changed my life forever. Later, after I got out of seminary, I moved to Dallas and looked up your grandmother. I wanted to find out what had caused those devils to terrorize your parents. I swore I'd dedicate my life to fighting demons."

He took out a handkerchief and blew his nose. His tears too appeared genuine.

"Well--"

He held up a hand to forestall her counterattack. "I already apologized for what happened last night. You have to understand that the most determined of that group has had demonic experience. Some have been possessed. Others have lost loved ones to the demons' attack."

"Jack isn't like that."

"Darling, you admit he's a demon, don't you?" Maura put in. "I knew he was a strange one, but those horns prove it. Demons are pure evil. If he puts on a pretty front, it is only to confuse you. He wants your soul."

Jack had told her that some demons had faded to imps, and that somehow, over the centuries, they were able to accumulate physical substance. Could human souls fuel their survival? Jack was larger and more powerful than the imps. Could this merely mean that he had harvested more souls? Surely not.

"I don't believe you."

Bob nodded. "Forgiveness is a beautiful virtue. But forgiveness is for humans. Demons are angels of God turned in rebellion against him. They are pure evil. You cannot, dare not, love a demon, forgive a demon, or spare a demon." His voice rose to a crescendo as he spoke.

Sara knew there was something wrong with what he was telling her but she couldn't figure out what it could be. "I'm not agreeing with anything you say, but what do you want me to do?"

Bob stood, then knelt by her chair and took her hand in his, barely missing a shot of pepper spray in the eyes. "You have played with powers beyond your comprehension, Sara. The Hiroshima bomb pales compared to what a single demon could do. If he is able to gate across others of his kind, this may be the final step that rushes Judgment Day."

Her skin crawled under his touch. "I'd feel more comfortable if you sat down and took your hands off me."

"Our comfort, yours or mine, matter little compared to what you have done." Still, Reverend Bob stood and started back to the couch.

He stopped suddenly, seized the stub of a black candle that had rolled under her couch, and held it aloft like a football player holding up the ball after a touchdown. He spun and faced her again. "You were the one who brought him forth. You are the one who must return him to the pits of Hell."

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Jack stood up from the uncomfortable school desk, checked to make sure his name was on the test sheet, and headed for the sleepy-eyed proctor.

"Giving up?" The test proctor glared at Jack.

"I've completed the test."

"Very funny. We only started this section five minutes ago."

"I'm a speed reader."

The proctor shrugged his shoulders. "Hell, I wouldn't want to go to graduate school either. Good luck."

Jack shrugged his shoulders and left. He was certain he'd scored perfectly on the math and English portions of the Graduate Record Exam, and that he'd also been accurate on questions relating to the history of philosophy. The essay, probing his own philosophical beliefs, had been more challenging.

He looked around, made sure no one was watching, then took off.

His wings had healed slowly from the bullets that had torn into them. This earthly paradise couldn't come close to the continual tortures of hell, but it could be pretty miserable in its own way. Now, though, his wings managed to bear his weight although he would have been hard-pressed to lift both himself and Sara as he once had.

Damn. He didn't mean to think about her. He'd lost her when he'd possessed her. Worse, he could no longer even sense her presence. She'd vanished from his internal radar scope just as Derrick had. Unlike Derrick, though, Sara left a void in what substituted for a demon's soul.

"Back so soon?" Katra looked up from her newspaper and coffee.

"There wasn't much to it."

She laughed. "That isn't the way I remember it. They must have been laughing at me in New Jersey where they grade those things. I think I set the record for the worst score on math, ever."

That startled him. "Are you joking?"

She shook her head. "I think I would have done better if I'd just randomly picked my answers."

"But you're intelligent. You should be able to do math."

"Yeah, and we live in a liberated world, right? Back in junior high school, my mother made sure I got signed up for the business math program. Algebra and Trigonometry were too hard for girls. At least for girls from our side of the track."

He poured himself a cup of coffee and sat down next to her. "Does it bother you a lot?"

Katra looked at her hands for a moment. "Well, it would mean some serious extra bucks if I could get my master's degree."

"So you just want it for money?" There were easier ways to make money than spending years in a classroom.

"Sure." She met his eyes for a moment, then looked away. "All right, I think it would be cool, too. My mother always said I was stupid and I'd like to show her. And maybe show myself too. So sue me."

He looked into Katra, seeing the memories, the blocks, the limitations she'd put on herself.

"Would you like me to fix it?"

"What, going to spend some of your money to buy me one of those diplomas from the ads at the back of Cosmopolitan? I don't think that would do the job."

"I could free your block about math."

"Get out of here." Did a faint trace of hope linger on the words?

"You're not stupid, just afraid."

"Yeah? Talk about the pot calling the kettle."

That surprised him. "You think I'm afraid?"

"When was the last time you talked to Sara?"

"When was the last time you talked to her? She's been hiding."

"And you've looked so hard." Katra twirled a lock of hair around her finger. "Did you mean it when you said you could unblock my math?"

Jack nodded. "Fix a car, fix a bone, fix a brain. It's sort of the same."

She shuddered. "You know, I'm not sure I want your hands inside my brain."

"That's why I asked." That, and maybe because he'd learned a lesson from Sara and wouldn't just go sticking himself into other people's business quite so much any more. "It wouldn't be my hands, though. It would be worse."

"If you're propositioning me, this is a really weird way to do it. And I'm not going to do it with my best friend's boyfriend."

"I'm not propositioning you, and I'm not Sara's boyfriend."

She ignored his protest. "So tell me what you have to do, then."

"Did Sara tell you I'd possessed her?"

"Uh-huh." Katra wrinkled her nose. "I've never seen her so pissed."

"I'd have to possess you too. For just long enough to free the block."

"Then you'd get out?"

"Of course."

Sara's knuckles whitened as she listened to the bug Reverend Bob had planted at Katra's house.

Jack had tried to possess her and now he was tricking Katra into agreeing to a possession. Bob and Maura were right.

"Let's do it," she said.

Bob opened the door to the church van and the nine hefty and smelly church men got out and headed up Katra's sidewalk.

"For God's sake, hurry," she screamed after them. "Save Katra."

Maura grasped her hand and squeezed. "Don't worry, darling. Bob will take care of things."

She shook off her grandmother's grasp and got out of Bob's car. Although Bob had hoped that he could handle the exorcism himself, he had admitted that he might need Sara's help since she was the one who had called him to the human plane.

Bob had bribed Katra's mother and sister with a weekend trip to Shreveport in exchange for their permission to bug their home and a key to the front door. He led the men in, his hand held in the air for silence.

One of the men carried a large wooden stake and mallet. He'd probably been watching too many Buffy shows.

Sara tried to keep her mouth shut, but failed. "Put that thing away. Somebody could get hurt."

He glared at her, then jabbed his stake in Katra's direction. "Maybe you should have thought of that before you summoned the demon."

Katra rolled on the floor, her breath coming in short gasps, sweat streaming from every pore. Jack was nowhere to be seen.

"Where is he?" she demanded.

"He's taken her over, entered into her," Bob replied.

He opened his Bible.

"I think she's having an epileptic fit." Sara felt her voice rising but now was not the time to act calm. "We need a doctor, not the Bible."

"The Bible is eternal." Reverend Bob paged through, stopped, then stabbed the page with a finger. "Here we go."

Katra's head pounded against the floor and her eyes rolled back until only the whites showed. She screamed.

Sara knelt by her friend, holding her head still. "You're going to be all right, Katra." She hoped.

"Vile spirit, I command you to free this woman from your unwelcome hold," Bob intoned. He began reading from Revelations.

Katra wrenched her head in Sara's arms. For an instant, her eyes rolled back to normal--except they weren't normal. They were darker and glowed with an inner light that Sara recognized too well. "Jack."

Katra licked her lips. "We're busy right now."

Except the voice wasn't right, either. It was Jack's voice, stepped up a couple of octaves to Katra's normal pitch.

Reverend Bob stopped in mid-chant. "I was right. That is the demon."

"What happened to Jack?" Sara wasn't sure whether she was asking Rev. Bob or the bizarre Katra/Jack hybrid she held in her arms.

"He's inside Katra," Rev. Bob answered. "That's what they do. They go inside of people, control them, then drain them until there's nothing left but the demon."

Katra's body shuddered again and Sara felt an echo in her own soul. She had been so close to this fate herself. Instead of doing anything, she'd allowed Jack to betray her friend.

"Fight it, Katra. You have help now."

"It hurts so bad." This time, the voice was pure Katra although a Katra that Sara hardly recognized. Sweat plastered her thin t-shirt to her curvy figure, something that more than one of Reverend Bob's minions snickered about.

"Maybe you should use holy water, boss," one of Bob's assistants suggested. "I seen that in the movies once. Pour it all over that t-shirt."

"Frank, did it ever occur to you that we're Protestants?" Bob shot back. "We don't believe in holy water."

"I'm not talking about what we believe, just what the demons believe. And a little more wet on that t-shirt wouldn't hurt none."

"Just grab her, will you?"

Sara felt hard hands grasping her shoulders pulling her away from her friend--or what had once been her friend.

"Not her, idiot," Bob said. "The one on the floor. Keep her from hurting herself."

"Oh. Yeah. My pleasure, boss." Frank dropped Sara and bent over Katra.

Rev. Bob might be a religious man, but his assistants were a mixed bag. Rather than restraining Katra's thrashing head, Frank went straight for her breasts.

When his hands neared their target, Katra froze.

"No." Jack's voice was commanding.

"Have to keep you from hurting yourself," Frank murmured as he closed the gap.

Just as contact was inevitable, a searing flash of light akin to a lightning bolt strobed the air. Frank spun away from Katra, his hands smoking.

"Keep them away, Sara." It sounded like Katra's voice, but was it? Or was it simply Jack, trying once again to manipulate her into doing what he wanted?

"We're trying to help you," Sara said. She took Katra's head in her arms again. "I'll hold her," she told Bob. "You can keep your creeps away."

"Frank, go guard the door," Reverend Bob told him.

"What happened?" Frank sounded as confused as he usually looked.

"Just do what I tell you." Reverend Bob flipped through his Bible. "We've got to get Katra free of that thing."

"I only need another minute." Jack's voice. "Keep him away, Sara. Make him stop."

Another minute before he destroyed her friend. Did he seriously expect that she would help him with that?

"He's afraid of angels and of the name God," she told Reverend Bob. "Please, drive him out before he kills Katra."



"I'm doing what I can." Bob looked frightened. "I've trained for this all my life, but I truly haven't had any experience with this kind of thing before."

"It's too late to call in a professional. Just do it."

"Stop it, Sara." Katra's voice.

"I'm trying to stop him," she whispered. She found a tissue and wiped off Katra's face.

For all the good it did, she might as well have tried to stop the Trinity River. Katra burned with demonic heat.

"It hurts so bad."

"Bob is going to fix it."

As if on cue, Bob began chanting again. This time, the words didn't even sound like English although Sara recognized some.

"Jehovah, Yahweh, Alpha, Omega."

Katra/Jack winced at each word in Reverend Bob's chant.

Reverend Bob trailed off. "I never really learned any of the angel's names."

"Why isn't it working?" Time was definitely not on her side.

"I can't do it." Bob closed his Bible and sat on Katra's couch. "It's up to you."

"Me?" Sara objected. "I don't know anything about demonic possession."

"I warned you this could happen. You brought him here. You know his true name, which I don't. When you call on the names of power, he has to listen."

"But--"

Reverend Bob surged back to his feet. "If you value your friend, you'll cast out this evil demon before he consumes her utterly."

"Don't listen to him." Katra's voice. "He's not hurting me."

"Trust me." Jack's voice.

Anger surged up in her. Trust him? Trusting him had gotten her into all of these trouble. Trusting him had made her love him.

"Come out of there, Jack."

"Almost done."

"Now."

"This is going to hurt." She didn't sense that Jack was talking to her. From Katra's scream, she was right.

Katra sobbed for breath, then screamed again, a piercing high-pitched wail of agony and despair. "It's too much."

It was too much. Sara felt herself snap. No more Ms. Nice Girl. No more giving the demon the benefit of the doubt. She drew on every scrap of childhood memory. "In the name of the creator, I conjure you out. In the name of the preserver, I order you to leave my friend. In the name of the great destroyer of evil, I demand that you return to the pit."

Katra opened her mouth to answer but no words came. Her stomach convulsed, but her eyes were once again the deep blue of her friend rather than the glowing sapphire of the demon she'd loved.

Katra glared at her. "I'm going to be sick."

"I'll come with you."

Katra shook her head. "Right now I don't want to see you."

## Chapter 20

"Katra, it's Sara. I know you're there so pick up the phone. We've got to talk."

Katra glared at her answering machine. It was summer vacation and she didn't have to talk to anyone. Especially not Sara.

"Are you going to answer that?" Mona walked into Katra's bedroom without knocking and headed for her closet.

"No."

"She's your best friend."

"Like you're such an expert on friendship."

Her sister flipped through Katra's wardrobe with practiced ease, casually dumping half the clothes onto the floor. "Where's your leather miniskirt?"

"You don't want to wear that. It makes you look fat."

"Oh, excuse me. Why don't you just take everything out on me. I'm just your sister, after all. What is it, a lovers' tiff between you two?" Mona rolled her eyes suggestively. "Or did you make a move on that hunk of hers."

Normally, Katra would have punched her sister and felt sorry later. For once, she held herself back.

"You know what? You're right. I am taking it out on you. I'm sorry."

Mona looked suspicious. "Go ahead, where's the zinger?"

"Borrow whatever you want. The leather skirt is in my bottom drawer. Wear a girdle and it won't look so bad. I've got to go see Sara."

"You mean I can borrow anything?" Mona's eyes opened with greed.

Katra knew she'd flipped out but none of this seemed to matter. "Except my underwear."

"Like I'd wear that. Gross."

"I'll see you later, then."

"Uh, want me to drop you off?" Mona had something in mind.

"It's not a problem. I'll drive."

"I was sort of planning to borrow your car." Mona yanked on the leather skirt and then selected a form fitting blouse with a zipper up the front, pulled it over her head, then unzipped until she was almost falling out.

"I don't suppose you want any more fashion tips?"

"From you." Mona paused for a fractional second. "No."

"All right, let's go."

Katra was already pulling out the driveway before she realized this was the first time she'd left her house since Sara and Reverend Bob had broken in. She'd spent the first couple of days lying on her bed, too weak to stand, too tired to even eat. Then she'd managed to wander out to the living room and watch soap operas with her mother. It hadn't led to much conversation since her mother was completely entranced by the tube, but Katra hadn't felt like conversation anyway.

Only in the last two days had Katra really come to her senses--to the realization that something was seriously wrong.

"Can I ask where you're going after you drop me off?" She tried to make the question sound casual.

"I've got a date. You remember what those are, don't you? Where the guy actually pays for things."

"A date with whom?"

"That's none of your business." Mona looked out the passenger window, studiously avoiding meeting Katra's gaze.

The light turned green and Katra gave the Corsica some gas. "I'm worried about you."

"Yeah? Maybe you should worry about yourself."

Maybe she should. "I'll take the bus home. You can have the car as long as you want."

"Thanks." Mona forced out the word.

Katra pulled into Sara's parking lot, unfastened her seat belt, and stepped out.

"Be careful."

Mona laughed. "Look who's talking. You're the one who led an attack on a bunch of Christians at the airport. You're lucky they didn't arrest you."

Katra gritted her teeth. The Dallas newspapers had twisted events to the point where Reverend Bob had called the police to tell them that he forgave his attackers and didn't want any prosecution. Naturally the police had ignored Katra's accusations that the church group had instigated the violence. Since neither Maura nor Sara had backed her up, the police had simply written her off as a crackpot.

"I fight back," Katra said. "I recommend trying it sometime."

"And I recommend doing whatever it takes to get the guy."

Katra shook her head. "Don't wreck the car."

"You know, it's really been driving well lately. What did you do to it?"

"When I broke down..." she trailed off. "Trust me, you don't want to know."

"Want me to wait and make sure Sara answers?"

Her sister, considerate? The world was definitely taking some strange turns. "I'll be fine. Promise you'll be careful."

Mona shifted into reverse and pulled away without answering, without promising.

Damn. Shaking her head, Katra headed up the stairs to Sara's apartment and knocked on the door.

"Who's there?" Sara's voice sounded suspicious.

"It's Katra."

"Oh." The deadbolt was new and Sara rattled with it for a good twenty seconds before finally opening the door.

Because she spent so much of her life outside, Sara generally looked golden and healthy. Now, she seemed a faded version of herself.

"You look like something the dog dragged home. What happened to you?" Katra asked.

"No happy reunions, hugs and kisses, and telling me you're sorry you've been ignoring me?" Sara's attempt at a smile fell way short.

"You deserved worse. I can't believe you broke into my house with that creature."

"Jack was already in there with you."

"I'm talking about the Reverend Bob."

"Oh." Sara's chin wobbled. She gestured to her living room, let Katra sprawl on the sofa, and pulled up a straight-backed chair. "I've been really worried about you."

Time to lighten up. "It was just a demonic possession. Nothing serious."

"Oh, hell. I've been worrying about everything. About whether you're all right and why you wouldn't answer my phone or come to the door when I came over. About Jack. Even after everything he did, I feel terrible about sending him back to Hell. About the Reverend Bob and how he feels like he failed you. About whether I should spend the money we won on my business or just chuck the whole thing. You can't imagine how much I wanted to be a partner with Jack."

"That's a lot to worry about."

Sara nodded mutely.

"Need something else?"

Sara shook her head in firm negation but couldn't stop herself from inquiring. "Is it Jack?"

"No, it's Derrick."

"I thought you took care of him." For a split second, a real smile lit Sara's face.

"I think Mona is going out with him."

Sara looked puzzled. "But he's fixated on you."

"Either he's transferred his lust, or he's looking for a more indirect way to get back at me. Either way, I'm worried about Mona."

"Ohmygod, we've got to do something."

"Tell me about it. The man is the biggest pervert I've ever met." She let herself smile too. "And believe me, I've met some perverts over the years."

Katra looked great, as if she'd discovered something that opened up a road to inner peace. It hardly seemed fair.

During the two weeks during which Katra had ignored her calls and denied her visits, Sara had let herself dwell on all sorts of terrible possibilities. Could Jack have twisted her body, ravaged her face, given her terrible diseases as punishment for being so forcefully wrestled from his hold? Might the pain of possession have left permanent scars? She never would have guessed that Katra would look better than ever.

Sara relaxed a little. She had made some terrible mistakes. Trusting a demon had to be high on any list of truly dumb things to do. But at least she'd learned. She'd done the right thing when Reverend Bob had approached her. She'd acted in time to save Katra. She'd helped exorcize Jack before it was too late.

The Reverend Bob had been a trooper during the two weeks since they'd thrown Jack out of Sara. He had stopped by her apartment almost every evening, bringing her a bite to eat and word that Katra wasn't seeing him either. If Sara hadn't known better, she might have thought he was making a play for her. Of course that was impossible. I mean, really, would a man of the cloth have anything to do with a woman who had opened a gateway to Hell and endangered the entire planet?

She corralled her mind. Katra needed help. "Didn't you tell her what a complete creep Derrick is?"

"Well duh. Can you remember Mona ever listening to anything I had to say?"

Sara thought about it but came up empty. "No."

"In this case, everything I told her made her even more interested. She's into kinky sex. You know, getting tied up and all of that sick stuff."

Sara tried not to blush. She'd never forget that first night with Jack. The sense of control, of power over another could be an aphrodisiac. The other way had been great too. Being powerless but trusting, forced to enjoy sex with a man she loved. What could be better? Except Sara had been crazy to trust Jack. "I hear there are a lot of women who like that kind of thing."

"Really? I like to hold my own ankles above my ears, not have them tied there."

Sara couldn't help giggling at the mental picture. "Maybe it depends on who's doing the tying."

"Well it wouldn't be Derrick, either way. Of course, for Mona, the big deal is that he's rich. Money

makes up for a lot of bad habits. Not to mention she thinks she's stealing him from me."

"I can see why Mona might go for him, but what makes you think they're actually together?"

Katra shifted her weight from leg to leg. "I was suspicious so I, uh, picked up the phone when she was on it. I recognized his voice."

Sara nodded. This was serious. "First coffee, then we'll plan."

"I'd kill for a cup."

Sara went into the kitchen for a couple of mugs and sprinkled in some creamer. When she returned to the living room, Katra climbed off the sofa and was sitting on the floor. Things were coming back to normal.

Except for Jack, of course. Sara shook her head to herself. What kind of a woman thinks things are normal when a demon is around? A sick one, obviously. Yet, despite everything, she missed him, his off-the-wall insights into humanity, his humor, and his ability to see beneath the surface.

She handed Katra a mug and joined her on the carpet. "Okay, let's plan. What are we going to do about Derrick?"

"Hell, I don't know. If we had Jack back, we could just go find him."

Sara's blood froze at the name. Why couldn't she put her demon out of her mind once and for all? Out of her mind and her heart. "Jack could never find him, remember?"

"That's because--"

A lightbulb went off. "Because they were in cahoots. Of course. Jack used Derrick to make us trust him more."

Katra shook her head. "You're talking like an idiot. You're conflicted because you're in love with someone you don't trust."

Sara couldn't hold back the bitter laugh. "Trust him. I tried that, once. If you'd seen what you looked like when he possessed you, you wouldn't be talking that way. It was terrible." Just remembering Katra writhing in pain and hearing Jack's voice came from Katra's mouth sickened Sara.

"It was not terrible. Or rather, it was terrible but I needed it."

"Who's into pain and kinky now."

"It wasn't fun. But I had to relive some of my experiences and re-do them. It turns out my math phobia had some deep causes. Jack dug down in me and unburied them. And guess what? It worked."

Since Katra was notorious for not being able to get the tip right from a ten dollar lunch, Sara had her doubts. "Whatever."

"I'm serious. I asked him to help me and he did."

"If we hadn't gotten there when we did, he would have consumed you."

"Like he did you, huh?"

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"If Jack had wanted to destroy either of us, he had plenty of chances. I think he deserves the benefit of the doubt."

For just an instant, Sara's confidence fled. Could she have made a terrible mistake?

She suppressed her errant thoughts. She'd seen Katra writhing on the floor. That had been real, physical agony. She had painfully learned how casually Jack took her personal space. More recently, she'd spent hours with Reverend Bob learning about demonic possession and the evils that inevitably followed.

Sending Jack back to Hell might have been the hardest thing she'd ever done, but it was also the only moral choice she'd had available. Earth did not need unbridled, consciousness power wandering around.

"Not only did Jack possess you, he sicced Derrick on you."

Katra shook her head. "I asked for it and you know it."

Horror nearly blinded Sara. "What?"

"Jack didn't know us, didn't owe us anything. We were holding him captive and torturing him in that cage. I asked him for wishes and he agreed. It wasn't his fault the easiest way to grant my wishes put me in danger."

"Yes, but..." Sara's voice trailed off. She wasn't going to persuade Katra of anything and was too tired to keep arguing. She took a sip of coffee and waited for the caffeine surge.

Katra sipped at her own coffee and said nothing.

"None of this is getting us anywhere," Sara finally admitted. "We've got to do something about your sister and Jack is long gone."

Katra's grin looked as cruel as anything she'd expect to see on a demon from Hell. "I was right all along. We've got to track Derrick down, string him up, and make him sing soprano."

"I don't suppose Mona told you where he hangs out?"

Katra winked. "Think about it, Sherlock. There's only one place he can be."

"Wasn't he staying in a hotel?"

"Jack would have found him there."

It all came down to Jack. How was she going to get him out of her system and get on with her life if she kept hearing his name? "All right, I'm stupid. Where is he?"

"You're not stupid, you just don't want to see."

"Tell me before I do something violent."

"He's in Bob's church. That's why Jack couldn't see him."

Sara's blood felt like it had turned to ice in her veins. "That's ridiculous."

"Remember he called Bob 'boss.'"

"But--"

"Jack couldn't sense much about anyone from that church group, remember? That's the one thing that could cloak Jack's senses."

"But that would mean that Bob was involved."

"Give the lady a lollipop."

Jack's spirit twisted through the ethereal zone between the human plane and Hell.

Sara's spells should have sent him straight back. Reverend Bob's curses should have had angels after him like hounds after a fox. Yet instead, his spirit survived here in this halfway land between worlds.

A vast emptiness stretched out as far as his senses could probe, but it was a constructive emptiness. His will could shape it.

Acting on whim, he created a shelter, the four walls of a small cottage he'd once seen in England, complete with thatched roof.

The swirling nothingness responded, shaping itself at his command.

He stepped inside, building form from the protoplasmic substance left over from creation.

Effortlessly he constructed cool baths, filled libraries with the greatest thoughts of humans and angels.

He could work here. He could write, create thoughts so important that the walls of heaven themselves would open to accept them, if never him.

He gestured again and a perfect simulation of Sara approached. "How may I serve my master?"

He glared at the simulation for a moment, then waved a hand banishing it. Hell itself was better than a pale and empty reflection of heaven. A purely physical embodiment of Sara that lacked her essence was worse than nothing.

He pulled a book at random from the shelf, then stepped into a cool bath, his apparent clothing melting from him as he touched the real water.

Because he had built the tub, the water continually circulated, cooling itself against the cold emptiness outside, then returning to refresh him further.

For the first time in thousands of years, the fires burning inside Jack's body and soul met their match in an infinite supply of cold.

He opened the book he'd grasped. It was a collection of works by Nietzsche, writing on becoming more than man. An amusing irony that Nietzsche's philosophy had apparently disproved so much that Jack knew to be true.

He suppressed the pang of regret over his dreams from the human plane. He could never teach philosophy to young human students, but he could do something.

He thrust himself from the tub. His internal flames burst forth again, but he was willing to pay that price. Could he carve a hole, a path, between his new universe and the human plane? If he could, he could share his thoughts with humans. He could teach, much as Plato still taught humans, by his words on paper. He could still achieve all of his dreams. All except one.



Searching for weakness in the wall between universes wasn't difficult. Finding the right weakness, where his new home butted against the human plane, was nearly impossible. Flames burned within him as he worked, converting his physical mass to energy in order to pursue his goal.

Finally, he found the right flaw.

Burning the last of his matter, he forced a fist through the weakness.

It would do.

He could now see between the worlds, even pass objects, like the books he intended to write, between worlds. If, by doing so, he had destroyed his chances of ever physically returning to the human plane, what of that? Escape from the eternal fires of Hell and the ability to pursue his dreams were precious gifts no other demon had ever received. He was a fool to want more.

He returned to his new home, created a device to turn his thoughts to words on something close enough to paper to pass, and climbed back into the tub.

The water boiled away, but he brought in new water until the pain was under control.

He could write now.

And there was some truth, even in the misguided words that Nietzsche had scrawled. He could begin there.

The words formed themselves on the page as he organized his thoughts.

He reached into his memory, and across the planes to connect with what he'd learned from Sara. By incorporating his recent understanding of humanity with the eternal truths of Hell into his works, he could develop new truths. Like humanity's founders, Jack had certainly paid the price for knowledge--and would continue to pay it forever.

For a dizzying moment, Sara felt Jack in her head. Even from the pit, he could still reach her.

Then his presence faded. She had imagined it, of course.

She straightened her car from its swerve and drove past the church again. They'd waited until evening hoping Mona would be okay but afraid to move earlier. "If your sister was here, your car would be here," Sara whispered although they were still in her car.

"Maybe Derrick made her dump the car."

"Then where is his car?"

"He wouldn't be driving anything noticeable."

Katra had the answers to everything. Sara wanted to argue, but she couldn't help her conviction that Katra was right. What had Derrick been doing with the Reverend Bob at the airport?

"There he goes." The two women ducked lower into Sara's Miata as the Reverend Bob walked past. He was deep in conversation with a cellular phone and probably wouldn't have noticed if they'd undressed and danced naked in front of him, but Sara still felt uncomfortable. She seemed doomed to trust men with deeply fatal flaws. Jack, of course, had been the most obvious mistake, but Reverend Bob had been another. She'd trusted him when, it appeared, he'd been hiding Derrick.

"Have you thought about why he had a gun?" Katra asked out of the blue.

"Bob? Lots of people have guns. This is Texas, after all."

"Yeah, but he's a minister. Remember 'turn the other cheek?'"

"St. Peter had a sword. I guess there are just all kinds of preachers."

"Well, there's something wrong with the kind that carries guns and then lets them be taken away."

"You're not saying he wanted Derrick to kill us?"

Katra looked confused. "I don't know what I'm saying. I guess just that Reverend Bob isn't exactly what he pretends to be. Didn't I tell you how Derrick captured us? Bob lost him, stopped to ask for directions, and Derrick just got into the car. It was way too easy."

As they watched, the church secretary left the church, locking the door behind her.

"I guess that's it, then."

"Uh, do you know how to pick a lock?"

Sara shook her head. "I'll bet Jack could do it."

"We'll have to figure out something." Katra picked up a large rock. "Be a shame to break the windows, though."

Sara glanced at the high narrow windows. Heavy iron bars made the storefront look more like a prison than a church. "I don't think that would help."

"I was just kidding." She pulled a small packet from her purse.

"What's that?"

"Lock picks."

Sara had known Katra for twenty-five years and this was the first time she'd heard that Katra could pick locks. "Where did they come from?"

Katra grinned. "I confiscated them from one of my students a couple of years ago. If I'd turned them into administration, the police would have gotten involved. So I brought them home. Serendipity, I guess."

"Do you know how to use them?"

Katra stepped up to the church door. "Let me know if anyone is coming."

"Sure."

Sweat trickled down Sara's forehead and a droplet collected at the tip of her nose. How had she let Katra rope her into this?

"What if Derrick has a gun?" she asked.

"Got it." Katra opened the door and stepped into the church office.

Sara followed, banging her shin on a chair in the dark. She flipped on her flashlight.

"Not yet," Katra whispered.

Sara flipped it off. It was Katra's sister they were after so Katra could call the shots. Still, it seemed unlikely that someone who didn't notice them breaking in would notice the flashlight.

Katra fumbled for the windows, then finally found what she was looking for and yanked.

Sara's eyes had just adjusted to the limited light coming through the windows. As Katra pulled the shade, the two women were plunged into complete darkness.

"If we turn on the lights, anybody out there would still be able to see the glow on the shade," Sara said.

"I know, but--" Katra was interrupted by a loud snap as the shade rolled itself up. "Uh, I thought those things were supposed to stay where you put them."

"Shh." Sara crouched behind one of the office desks. "Get down in case someone comes to check."

Thirty seconds later, Sara took a deep breath. "False alarm." She shifted her weight and put her head above the desk.

At that moment, the interior door swung open. "Who's there?"

## Chapter 21

Katra wracked her brain trying to remember where she'd heard that male voice. It had to be one of the men who'd met them at the airport.

She plunged behind the desk. Unfortunately, her hand failed to relinquish its grip on the shade pull. The shade clattered to the ground behind her.

"We're dead." Sara's whisper sounded like a shout. Katra didn't dare answer.

"What is it?" That had to be Derrick's voice.

"I heard something in Reverend Bob's office. I thought he was out."

"Yeah, he's going to visit that Whore of Babylon who called up the demon." Derrick snickered nastily. "I'll bet she can teach him a few things. Know what I mean, Bert?"

Footsteps indicated that Bert had entered the office and was stepping toward the desk.

Katra crowded further into the kneehole under the desk and tried not to breathe. Her nose started to itch instantly, giving her an overpowering urge to sneeze.

She pinched her nose and looked out. Heavy leather work boots blocked her view.

Bert barked a short laugh. "Looks like Reverend Bob's shade fell down again." His feet moved toward the window. "Hey, you can see into the women's dorm from here."

"Probably why ol' Bob uses his shade so much." Derrick's voice was closer now.

"That's no way to talk about the boss. He saved your bacon when that demon was looking for you."

"That's what he says. You don't really believe in that sort of hocus pocus, do you?"

Bert's legs trembled and his shudder was clear in his voice. "If you were there when we did that exorcism, you'd believe all right."

Derrick's feet joined Bert's by the window. "That new woman Bob recruited is quite a looker. Wonder if I could get her to join me and Mona for a little three-way action."

At that moment, if Katra had had a gun, Derrick would have been a dead man. Fortunately for Derrick, she had come unprepared. She was realistic enough to know her chances would be against two strong men.

"You're a sick man," Bert told him, echoing Katra's thoughts. "You know I've got to report that kind of talk to Reverend Bob."

"How about you report this too, then." Derrick's words were followed immediately by the crunching sound of a fist against flesh.

Bert's head clipped the desk on his way down and he came to rest with his face only inches from Katra's crouching body.

"That woman." Pain made Bert's words hard to understand but Katra knew exactly what he was saying. Would Derrick?

She covered Bert's mouth with her hand.

"I'll take any woman I want." So Derrick had understood Bert's words but, evidently, not his meaning.

"Nughha." Bert struggled against Katra's restraining grip, then bit her.

She fought back her response, then failed. "Ouch. Damn it." Her long suppressed sneeze followed.

"Sounds like the Reverend Bob has one of his little angels down there." Derrick was gloating now. "Sounds like I get my threesome even sooner than I'd thought."

Bert's body ripped from Katra's grip as Derrick dragged him away from the desk. "Let's have a look at what we have down here."

Katra glanced around looking for a weapon and came up empty. What had she been thinking?

Derrick's face peered at her, his pupils wide from the dim light.

"What a nice surprise. It's the demon woman." He snicked out a switchblade knife. "Come on, darlin'. I've got a special treat for you."

Katra grasped the back of the drawer and shoved it into Derrick's face.

He reeled back, one hand unsuccessfully trying to prevent his nose from bleeding all over Rev. Bob's carpet. The other, unfortunately, still held the knife.

Katra took advantage of the distraction by crawling out from under the desk. She grasped a Lucite trophy from Rev. Bob's desk and managed to block Derrick's wide swing with his knife.

"You'd better come with me, Katra, before you get in serious trouble."

She jabbed at him again with the Lucite trophy. This time, forewarned, he easily avoided her wild swing.

"Derrick? Are you in there?" Mona stepped into Reverend Bob's office.

"Mona, call the police," Katra shouted.

"What are you doing here?"

"I told you she would be jealous of you," Derrick said.

"You're bleeding." Mona turned toward Katra. "You hurt him."

"Not as bad as he was going to hurt me, or you," Katra said. "Come on, Mona. I'm your sister. Trust me on this."

"Trust you on men? In your dreams."

Derrick took advantage of her momentary distraction to twist the trophy from Katra's hand and brought the knife to her throat. "Why don't we all step into my bed chamber?" he asked.

Katra forced a moment of bravado. "Great. That's where Jack will look first when he gets here."

"I shot him. He's dead." Derrick sounded almost panicky.

"He's a demon. You can't kill him."

"I can." Derrick was too dumb to be afraid. "Mona, why don't you run and get my whips ready? We'll have a little party for Katra."

"I can do anything she can do." Mona put her hands on her hips and puffed out her ample chest.

Derrick had found exactly the right approach to anger Katra's sister.

"Then you can take this for her." He reached out and slapped Mona across the face. "You'll do what I tell you."

Slapping Mona distracted him just enough for Derrick's knife to waver from Katra's throat. She used that momentary opportunity to grab his arm with both hands and twist away.

"Finally." Sara brought a pottery replica of the nativity down on Derrick's head. He collapsed to the ground with a thud like a wet mop.

"I should have know you would be here somewhere," Mona said. "Did you kill him?"

Katra knelt down and felt Derrick's pulse. "He's still alive."

"I'll tie him up," Mona said. "I've learned some new knots over the past week." She efficiently stripped off Derrick's belt and used it to hogtie him.

"You sure you know whose side you're on?" Katra asked.

"Which side hit me?"

"Good answer." Katra stooped to pick up Derrick's knife.

"Where did the other one go?" Sara brushed the remains of Reverend Bob's nativity scene from her hands and looked around the wreck of an office.

"Bert? He should be over by the desk." Katra gestured toward where she'd been hiding. No Bert.

"I think we're in trouble." Mona stepped to the office door, closed it, then snapped the lock.

A thought popped into Sara's mind so quickly she wondered if Jack might still be connected to her somehow. "I'll bet the Reverend Bob lied to us about Derrick's criminal record. Let's drag him out the way we came, call the police and tell them he assaulted us, and turn him in. He'd be the one in trouble and we won't even have to lie."

Mona shook her head grimly. "He'd get fifty of the Reverend Bob's followers to testify against you. Still, getting out of here is a good idea." The door shook as something heavy smashed into it. Probably one of the Reverend Bob's followers' heads.

Sara grabbed one of Derrick's arms and Katra grabbed the other. Together they strained to drag him out the exterior door where they'd entered.

Mona peeked out that door, then slammed it. "Uh oh."

"What?"

"It's the Reverend Bob with some of his pet police."

"Oh, yeah, we're in trouble all right," Katra said. "There's only one thing to do."

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Sara peeked out the barred window. At least eight patrol cars sat in the storefront church's parking lot, their flashers blinking and their radios creating a cacophony of sound. "What? Surrender and hope for the best?" It was all Sara could think to do.

"Castrate Derrick before he rapes anyone else," Katra shot back. "We'll toss them his balls so they know we mean business."

Mona nodded her agreement. "Rope him, geld him, and brand him. That's the only way to treat that kind of creature."

Sara had forgotten about the year Mona had spent in the rodeo circuit. She'd probably learned some of her rope tricks there too.

"I really don't think castration is the answer we're looking for," she said with as much calmness as she could muster. "There's got to be some way we can get out of here."

Reverend Bob's phone rang.

Mona started for it, then stopped. "Should we answer that?"

Sara considered ignoring it, then nodded. "The police already know we're in here. Maybe we'll have some good luck for a change."

"Okay." Mona picked up the phone. "Hello."

A brief pause. "No, my sister and her friend were just visiting me at the compound. I don't know what Bert told you but he had a fight with Derrick." Another pause. "Well, maybe he's trying to cover it up so he won't get in trouble."

She put her hand over the microphone. "They don't believe me."

"Tell them that Derrick attacked you and Katra," Sara suggested.

Mona started to explain exactly that when the sound of a helicopter drowned her out.

"Drop your weapons and come out with your hands up," the magnified voice urged.

Mona hung up the phone, then stared down at the now-conscious and struggling Derrick.

"I'm going to love seeing you three in court," Derrick gloated. "Assault, kidnaping, threatened bodily harm. I wouldn't be surprised if they didn't throw the book at the lot of you. Ten to twenty for sure."

Sara caught Katra while she was still in the middle of a windup to kick the bejeezus out of him. "He's just trying to get us to mark him or something."

"Let's give him what he wants then," Katra said. "We're in trouble anyway. We might as well do something to make it worthwhile."

"Katra, you've got to think of something." Mona's voice caught and a tear rolled down her cheek. "I don't want to go to jail."

"You're right. I think it's time to put your romantic problems behind you," Katra said, apropos of nothing that Sara could figure out.

"Are you talking to me or her?" Mona gestured in Sara's direction.

Katra glared at Sara. "Come on, Sara. We need his help. And don't pretend like you don't know who I'm talking about."

Sara shivered. A part of her wanted to call on Jack, to rest in his arms again as they flew over Dallas even if it meant surrendering her soul. It was tempting, but she didn't have to give in to the temptation. "You don't understand. He's more dangerous than that mob of idiots out there."

"Keep that demon away from me," Derrick wailed, his confidence of a few minutes ago forgotten. "I'll kill all of you if you bring him in here."

Katra put her hands on her hips and glared at Sara. "The reason we need him is that he is more dangerous than the lot of them. He has to be."

"But--"

Katra kicked at Derrick's hand as it reached for a chair. "Finish tying him up, Mona. Sara is calling in the big guns."

"If everyone learns that we've been doing magic--"

"Get real," Katra interrupted. "It's too late to worry about the little things. Where do you think my teaching job is going to be once the Reverend Bob spins this story?" She plunged ahead, answering her own question. "I'll be out on my butt. Of course you'll never have a chance to start your exploration business. And Mona won't be able to do anything even she's started to get her head straight."

"I resemble that remark."

Katra and Mona broke up together and Sara felt the beginning of a smile. Despite everything else that

had been going on, the beginning of a reconciliation between the sisters was good news.

She forced the incipient grin from her face. "He possessed you, Katra. If I called him back, I'd be betraying you and myself."

"I already told you, he helped me. Not just with my math skills, either. He let me look at my whole life in a new way."

"But--"

"I asked him in. I suspect you did too, although you didn't know what you were asking." Katra's face took on a far-away look. "I can understand why it scares you, Sara. I mean, to me, he was just a demon. But when he came into me, it wasn't just him in me, it was me in him. I could see his feelings, his fears. And trust me, there are things he's afraid of although you wouldn't guess it from the way he acts. With a guy I loved, that sort of possession compared to sex would be a nuclear bomb compared with a hand grenade. 'Course you got both."

The helicopter swung back. "Surrender now and it will go easier on you."

As the chopper climbed away, Sara heard the deadly sound of shotgun shells being chambered.

An uneasy feeling had invaded Jack's workplace making it hard for him to think. He pattered with his book, flipped through those human texts he hadn't taken time to assimilate when he'd been in Hell, and occasionally checked on Sara. How could she put herself into that kind of danger?

"Jack." Sara's voice called to him through the hole he'd created between dimensions.

Sara's thoughts were too filled with anger, fear, and a sense of betrayal for him to bear, yet he continually returned to them like an addict unable to resist a fix that he knows is destroying him.

"Jack, we need you."

He tried to ignore her, to return to his book. Impossible. The shadow of Sara's voice which penetrated through the flaw in the dimensional wall washed away all of his ability to reason.

He scowled at his precious library, then strode to the gap between the worlds.

"Jack, we need your help. Please, before it's too late."

He pressed his hands against the gap but too little of his matter remained for him to widen it further. He was trapped in this in-between world, unable to help. Able only to hear the suffering of the woman he loved.

Why had it seemed like heaven to him before?

"Jack, they're going to hurt us."

He had to answer, yet the only way he could answer was through the link he'd created directly in Sara's mind. The link he had created during that brief moment when her defenses had been down and he'd allowed his spirit to merge with her soul.

I can't come to you. The denial lasered between universes.

"I know I betrayed you, but I really need your help."



Even if I dared, I couldn't come. I've lost too much of my matter to exist in your plane. Even if he made it through the barrier, the soul winds would soon sweep his spirit back to hell.

"You came before."

I had centuries to accumulate the matter I used to create my body. Now that is gone.

"We have a lot of matter here."

I can't absorb just anything. Not so quickly anyway.

"What could you absorb?"

He thought about that. If an angel happened along, it could share ethereal matter. No angel would agree to help a demon. If Sara attracted enough imps, he could absorb their mass/energy. Except in his current weakened state, they would absorb him rather than the reverse.

The only thing I can think of would be real human matter. I'd need quite a bit, like what you'd get from a human sacrifice. It was the time-honored way of bringing a demon across the walls of hell. For most demons, it had the added advantage of allowing them to add to their mass rather than deplete it as Jack had done to his own. It was also exactly the wrong thing to suggest to Sara and he knew it. Still, he chose to tell Sara the truth.

The bond between them had grown to the point where he felt Sara's shudder and hear her words.

"He says lighting a few candles aren't going to do it this time. He wants a human sacrifice." Sara's disgust and horror overrode his protest that he'd just been answering her question.

"Derrick won't be much of a loss," Katra said. "Would he absorb him completely so there wouldn't be any evidence?"

"Katra."

Derrick's moan echoed through Sara's mind and on to Jack. "Keep that demon away from me."

"That would serve ol' Derrick right," Mona agreed. "That two-timing scum deserves to die."

Maybe I can help without being there, Jack offered. Tell me your condition.

Sara started to talk but then simply concentrated on what she'd done, how the women had gotten to where they were.

With every step, Jack felt despair closing on him. He couldn't affect that many minds through the walls between the dimensions. If he was to accomplish anything, he needed to be there.

Pray, he suggested.

"He wants us to pray," Sara echoed.

"For all the good that will do me," Mona answered. "I pray every night that I'll wake up fifty pounds lighter and I never do."

Sara's thoughts froze, then blurred faster than Jack could follow. "Does all the mass have to come from one person?"

Jack considered. It shouldn't matter. No.

"Do they all have to be in the same place?"

Close enough to touch.

How much do you need? Absolute minimum.

It wasn't a question with an easy answer. Five pounds would be enough if he had to pop in, answer a question, then return to Hell. Two hundred pounds would make him perfectly happy. Somewhere in between he'd be weakened, but strong enough to withstand the spirit winds, to survive.

Maybe one hundred and twenty.

"We've got to come up with a hundred and twenty spare pounds between us," Sara said. "Mona, can you really spare fifty pounds?"

"Only if I wanted hips like yours. Like I wouldn't kill for them."

"Can I decide where they come from?" Katra wanted to know.

"Can she?"

It was an absolutely insane idea. Always before, he'd been able to harvest the dying remnants of a whole animal. Still, there was no law that said it couldn't work. Maybe it would. I think so.

"Cool. He says you can give up whatever you want."

"I should have finished that gallon of ice cream before I left," Mona groaned.

"You did." Katra's voice turned thoughtful. "I can give up ten from my hips, five from my waist, and five from my thighs."

"I can't believe I'm getting demonic liposuction." Mona actually giggled. "Who would have thought human sacrifice would be so easy."

"Derrick looks like he could stand to lose about fifty pounds so that would do it," Katra concluded.

"Make sure he takes Derrick's nuts as part of the deal."

"No." Derrick's denial was practically a scream.

"Don't listen to him," Katra urged. "Nobody would believe him if he went around saying a demon had cut off his nuts."

It must be voluntary. They were so close.

"I could give up twenty." Sara's voice sounded uncertain and Jack knew why. Sara's body had been slimly perfect when he'd been with her. Since then, she'd lost ten pounds. She was already at the point of being too thin.

No.

"I guess I could give up my boobs." Katra sounded doubtful. Too doubtful. Her doubts would destroy the spell.

"This is your final warning." The helicopter had quieted but the police bullhorn sounded like it was directly outside the door.

"Look behind the Reverend Bob's portrait," Mona suggested.

Sara looked confused, so Katra followed her sister's suggestion. Mona had gotten into trouble more times than Katra could count and had managed to survive. Right now, that sounded like a pretty good record to Katra.

Rev. Bob had a painted portrait of himself, dressed in scarlet robes and walking with a bunch of sheep hanging over his desk. If Katra had ever seen it, she would have banished Reverend Bob from her list of acquaintances long before.

She yanked the portrait from the wall and exposed a crate sunk into a recess. "What's in here?" she asked.

"Let's get them out." Mona was practically gloating. "We'll teach those guys not to mess with us."

Mona gave Katra a hand tugging the heavy box from the wall. They flung it open and exposed a small arsenal of rifles and one grenade launcher.

"You are definitely going to get us killed," Sara said. "Put those away before the police see them."

"Looks like Rev. Bob is getting ready for the millennium," Mona observed.

Katra yanked out one of the rifles, made sure the clip was in place, then fired a round through the ceiling.

Outside, shouting reached a sudden climax, followed by a dead silence.

The phone rang.

Katra picked it up. "Reverend Bob's militia. How may I direct your call?"

"Wha--"

"Who is this?" A different voice filled the phone.

"We think we've been set up. We'd like you to send in Minnie O'Hara to negotiate with us and assure our safety if we surrender."

"That's ridiculous. We could never expose a civilian to this kind of risk."

Katra fired another shot, this time through the Reverend Bob's portrait. "We will release Derrick Benton, also known as Derrick the Dongless, once Minnie O'Hara has been delivered to us."

She pointed the gun at Derrick's crotch. "Does that sound fair, scumbag?"

"Do it. Please do it," Derrick screamed loudly enough to be heard without the phone. "We can shoot them later."

"Call me when you have Mrs. O'Hara waiting." Katra hung up the phone.

"I can't believe you're bringing mom into this," Mona breathed. "She'll kill you."

"We needed another sixty pounds," Katra said. "Lord knows she can spare them."

## Chapter 22

Jack burst through the wall between the worlds, landing on a crouch on the floor. A fusillade of bullets followed from outside.

Seconds later, an electronic voice pierced the bullet-ridden building. "We have lost patience. We're coming in."

The spirit winds tore at him but Jack grasped the tenuous lifeline that connected him with Sara and held on.

Her strength added to his, surprising him with its power.

"I think he's here."

I am.

He lacked the substance even to speak.

"Tell him what you want him to take." Sara sounded confident, in control. "Don't hurt anyone, Jack."

Anyone but a demon or an angel would have found it impossible to listen to the female babble that followed. Katra went into meticulous detail on how she would prefer her body to be reshaped, Mona described general areas, and Minnie simply declared that she could stand to lose seventy pounds, the quicker the better.

Jack clasped his wisps of wings around Sara for support, holding on against the gales threatening to blow him straight back to Hell, then reached into each of the women, accepting what they were willing to give, absorbing their matter into himself, and transforming it to muscle, bone, tissue. Since he had been inside of both Katra and Sara, he had a far better idea of how the human body works and saw plenty of room for improvement on his earlier design. The basic exterior, he left completely alone, except thinner and tighter.

"Oh, my gosh. Look at me." Mona stood and yanked up her suddenly sagging dress. "I could be one of those sexy chick singers who prance around with their belly buttons showing."

Jack launched himself at her, his new wings grasping at the air. "Get down."

"I don't go for the three-way stuff," Mona lectured him as he drove her to the ground.

One of the bullets in the salvo that followed tore through Jack's newly created chest. He healed it absently. That bullet hadn't been part of Reverend Bob's arsenal.

For twenty seconds, the smashing sound of bullets hammering through glass and into masonry blocks made conversation impossible. He reached out and touched Sara's mind and wished he hadn't. She feared him almost as much as she feared the gunmen outside.

"This is our final warning," the electronically enhanced voice announced.

"Some warning," Katra griped.

"So what are we going to do?" Sara asked practically.

She looked pale and thin. No wonder the other women had refused to let her give him any of her matter.

She was wasting away. Because of him. He would put these problems to rest, then leave her life forever before he did even more damage to her than he already had.

"We walk out," he said.

"We'll get killed for sure." Minnie's high-pitched shriek would have set every dog in the neighborhood barking if they hadn't already been doing that in response to the police sirens.

"I'll distract them," Mona offered. She started to unzip her shirt.

He held out a hand. "Please, we don't have very long."

"Can you make us invisible?" Sara asked.

He shook his head. "Not completely. But I can help us blend in."

He led the women into the interior of Reverend Bob's compound, his booted feet crunching down on shards of glass and fragments of brick and concrete.

"Maybe later you can give me some of my weight back, right in my boobs," Mona suggested just as they reached an exterior door.

"Shhh," Sara hissed.

He nodded. "Walk like you're supposed to be here."

Minnie grinned. "Like we're the cleaning crew."

"We'd be better if we were the police," Katra suggested.

"Perfect." He adjusted his illusion and waited.

Moments later, the gunfire ripped through Bob's office again. "Now." He opened the door.

As he'd suspected, everyone outside was looking to see the effect of their shooting. He and the women were able to get quite close to the police line before a Sergeant stepped out.

"What the Hell are you doing out here?"

Jack adjusted the illusion slightly and tried to remember the words to that movie Katra had made him watch. "These aren't the 'droids you're looking for. Move along."

"Get the Hell back in your line. Do you want to get shot?"

"Right." He kept walking, using his senses to ensure that the women were following. Mona was checking out the cops and it took a little mental prodding to keep her moving forward, but he managed that task. It would be another mark against him in Sara's score pad, however. More proof that demons could not help using their powers to control others.

Sara collapsed in her sofa and turned on the television. All normal programming had been interrupted to tell the terrible story about several homeless people who had invaded the sanctuary of the Rev. Bob's mission, taken one of his congregation hostage, and then died in the police shootout. Their names didn't appear on the news at all.

"That isn't what happened. They can't just forget about us. Derrick will have told them exactly who we are. And two of those cops drove all the way out to Minnie's house to pick her up."

"They don't want to believe that anyone could just walk away from there."

"But--"

"Derrick is insisting that the three of you were summoning a demon and planning to sacrifice him. Would you listen to that? Besides, they've pulled up Derrick's record and a known criminal like him has little credibility. Nobody else saw anything."

"They saw me." Minnie poured herself a glass of iced tea and looked longingly at the box of cookies on Sara's shelf. "Uh, can you do that weight loss thing again if I need you to?"

Jack's lips turned up but it wasn't much of a smile. "I don't think I'll be around long."

"Oh." Her hands snapped down to her sides. "I guess I can go without."

Sorrow rolled over Sara at Jack's statement. What would she do without him? Still, it had to be the only choice.

"When are you leaving?"

He sat beside her, close enough for her to feel the heat radiating from him but too far to touch. "There are still a few things I need to clean up."

"Where will you go?"

Any hint of his smile vanished. "I have a spot between the worlds. I think I can go back there. It's better than Hell."

Would he stay if she asked? She wished she could, but it wasn't that easy. She would never forget her horror at seeing Katra writhing on the ground in her terrible battle against possession.

"It sounds nice."

"It is um, peaceful." Jack was a master at lying while telling the truth. Peaceful didn't mean nice.

The television flashed to a shot of firemen carrying out the victims of the shootout at Rev. Bob's commune. All of their heads were covered but blood had soaked through some of the coverings.

"Who were they?" she demanded. "Did you kill a bunch of homeless people to distract attention from us?"

He shook his head but said nothing.

Panic settled on her like a suffocating pillow. "Who. Who died so that we could just walk away and not have the police knocking on our door?"

"It was them or us," Mona argued. "Come on, Sara. Jack saved us. Try to cut him a little slack."

"That's insane. You can't just go around killing people."

"Nobody died," Jack said.

"Liar. I see them."

"The police will never be able to identify them."

"That doesn't mean they weren't people."

"They're props. Sculptures if you will. I reshaped some of the chairs and cushions in Rev. Bob's office."

"Oh." She deflated like a punctured balloon. Then her doubts returned. "Are you telling the truth?"

"I always tell the truth." His demon eyes glared at her, shifting from sapphire blue to glowing red. "If I was willing to lie, I could come up with something better. Is that what you want? Do you want me to lie just to make your world a little easier to understand?"

She reeled back against his attack. "No. I don't want--"

His gaze deepened, looking through her rather than at her. "I know what you don't want." He stood. "I just wish I knew what you do want."

"You saved all of our lives," Sara said. "I'm very grateful that you came when you did."

"Don't call me again." He stalked to the door and vanished.

Sara put down her head and sobbed.

Katra jogged down Jefferson, picking up a couple of cups of coffee and a biscotti at the local Starbucks, then continued to Sara's house.

"What?" Sara's voice sounded as ruffled as she had been in the week since Jack had walked out of all of their lives.

"It's Katra."

"I'm not in the mood to talk."

"I didn't ask."

Katra leaned against the door frame waiting.

"I mean it, Katra. I need to be alone."

"You don't need to be alone. What you need is to get laid, but that isn't happening so I brought you coffee instead."

"I appreciate it but--"

"I'm not going away, Sara."

The door opened and Sara peered out. "This isn't a good day for me."

"Had any of those lately?"

"That wasn't very nice."

She pushed past Sara, turned off the T.V. and pulled the coffees and biscotti out of the bag. "French Vanilla coffee."

"Ohmygod, I mean, wow."

"You can use the 'G' word now. You got rid of Jack but good"

Sara broke into tears.

Katra took a sip of her coffee, then walked around the living room yanking up Sara's Venetian blinds and letting the sunlight shine into her darkened apartment.

Dust bunnies scooted across the floor as Katra walked so she went into the kitchen, found a minivac, and swept them up.

"So, what are you going to do?" she demanded when she'd done what she could to make the place a little more like a home and a little less like a morgue.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm talking about Jack."

"He's gone."

"Well, duh. It's been three weeks."

"So there's nothing to do."

"Let me get this straight. You are willing to risk your soul going through your mother's old spell book to find a boyfriend you don't even know exists, but you won't do anything to bring him back after you fall in love with him? Am I the only one having a hard time making sense of this?"

"I'm not in love with him. He's a demon who sucks up souls."

"Maybe if you stopped lying to yourself, this would be easier."

Sara nodded. "All right. I am in love with him. Are you happy now?"

Katra took another sip of her coffee and thrust the biscotti at Sara. "Eat. You look like you're about to collapse. Then we'll figure out how to get him back."

Sara waved her hand toward her bookcase.

Katra followed Sara's gesture and saw a whole new shelf of books all having to do with loving the wrong man, some still wrapped in cellophane.

"He's even worse than the men those women had problems with. First of all, he's a demon. Second, he doesn't have any morals. Third, he doesn't know how to respect boundaries. I mean, it's bad enough that he would mess with my car without asking me, but messing with my brain and my best friend, and--."

Katra wasn't able to hold her outburst in. "He wasn't messing with me. He was helping me. And I asked him to."

"Well, I didn't." Sara folded her arms across her overly slender chest.

"Eat your damned biscotti before I cram it down your throat."

Sara nodded, dipped the dry cookie into her coffee, and took a bite.



"Thanks for the food."

"Some food. When was the last time you ate?"

Sara shrugged. "I haven't been hungry."

"Starving yourself is a real sensible approach to sadness."

Sara started to shrug her shoulders again, then giggled. "Well, it might be better than pigging out which was my other alternative."

"Come on. Let's go pig and let me talk some sense into you." Katra grabbed her friend and practically dragged her out of her apartment. "Pizza is calling to me."

"Ten zillion fat grams."

"Don't worry about it. If you just do what you have to, neither of us will ever have to worry about fat again. Demon liposuction to the rescue."

Sara nibbled on her third piece of pizza while Katra loaded her plate with Bavarian cream dessert pizza.

"I can't eat all of that."

"You eat. I'll talk."

"I don't want to hear what you have to say."

"Tough. I bought your lunch, you have to listen to me."

"I'll pay you back your three ninety-nine."

Katra laughed. "Too late. Anyway, I've been thinking about your plan to get Jack back."

"I don't have a plan."

"That's a problem but I knew that. So I asked Mona for help."

"What does Mona know about demons?"

"Would you just eat and let me talk?"

Surprised by her friend's serious tone, Sara nodded, then stuck one of the Bavarian cream deserts into her mouth. It was good and she was hungry. Had she eaten at all since Jack had left?

"Mona doesn't know squat about demons, but she knows a lot about scheming and getting her man. Now that she weighs a hundred and thirty pounds instead of a hundred and eighty, she's having a lot better luck keeping them, too."

"But--"

"Don't talk with your mouth full. And keep it full. Part of her plan is that you've got to look good. I mean, if you look like a scarecrow, how big a hurry is he going to be in to get back to you?"

Since Jack wasn't coming back, Sara didn't see the point of this conversation, but obviously it was important to Katra. She nodded and took another bite of the dessert.

"Since I'm on summer vacation and since you've got nothing to do but spend money, I thought we'd work out together. After this pizza orgy, we'll start to eat healthy too. Except you eat about five hundred more calories than I do. We've got to give you some muscle."

"Guys don't like muscle on girls."

"Jack does."

Sara looked at her suspiciously. "How do you know that?"

"I shared his brain for about an hour, that's how. I know a lot about what makes that boyfriend of yours tick and we're going to fight dirty and take advantage of it."

"Oh. But I'm afraid." She put her hand over her mouth. That hadn't been what she wanted to say. Surely she wasn't afraid. She was just smart enough to know that a demon isn't healthy for women no matter how bad they might want him.

"I can't get into your brain the way Jack got into mine, but you're a lot more motivated than I was. We're going to cure you."

"There's nothing wrong with me."

"When we asked for your perfect mate, you came up with a demon. What do you suppose that meant?"

"I guess it meant that I'm supposed to stay single."

"It meant that, right then, you weren't ready for a man. Remember how evil he was?"

Sara remembered Jack's face when he'd checked out that waitress at the burger joint. "Yeah."

"Well, both of you needed to change. So far, he's changed and become someone else. Now it's your turn."

Sara felt a headache coming on. "Why don't we just stick to the exercise program?"

"Because that's not what it's about. Jack and you were growing together, then you panicked. I know how that feels. I panicked too, when I felt Jack in my brain. That's why I screamed my head off."

"You weren't in pain?"

Katra nodded grimly. "Oh, yeah. I picked up a fraction of what Jack lived with every day in Hell. Trust me, you'd rather pound your fingers with a hammer."

Sara sipped the Coke Katra had forced on her. She hadn't had anything but diet for so long, it tasted funny, but sinful. She couldn't go along with Katra, but she was interested in the scheme. "So what's the big plan? Besides working out."

"Mona has some ideas about clothes too. We'll get you looking hot. But we're also going to work on this fear thing."

"I'm not afraid."

"Don't lie. You're afraid of being abandoned because your parents abandoned you when you were a baby. You're afraid of sharing because you never had anything of your own when you were growing up. By the way, can I have a sip of your Coke?"

Sara narrowed her eyes. "You've got your own."

"See what I mean."

Sara nodded glumly into her drink. "All right, I'm a mess. Maybe Jack is better off without me."

Katra shook her head definitively. "Remember those imps? Without you, Jack is going to dry up and become one of them. The only way to save him is to get him to fall back in love with you."

Sara flinched at the idea. Those imps had been so horrible, so hungry. "He said he had his own universe now. He said he'd be happy there."

"The only person Jack can lie to is himself," Katra reminded her.

Sara couldn't deny the temptation, at least not to herself. What would it be like to wake up next to Jack every morning? They could fly over Dallas every night, seen only by a few crazies who might just create legends of the Dallas demon.

"I'll get old and he'll still be young and beautiful," she complained.

"So? Do you think Jack cares about that?"

Jack thought she was beautiful, Sara knew that. She'd seen herself through his eyes, if only for a moment. To him, she was something more than just female flesh. It was her soul he found so compelling, not her body. "You're right."

"So stop making up objections and let's figure out how to get him back."

"I need to be alone." Sara fled into the rest room and closed the door locking her best friend on the other side of the wall.

"That isn't what you need," Katra shouted through the thin door.

But what did Sara need? She'd thought she needed money and she'd gotten that. She thought she needed some good sex and she'd certainly gotten that. She'd never thought she needed a demon, but she'd gotten that too, for a little while. Of all of those, what was important?

"Get your head straight, then do your magic and bring him back," Katra called.

Katra would trust him, did trust him. But Katra hadn't seen how she looked when Jack had taken over her body.

Sara unlatched the bathroom door. "I have an idea. Let's go camping."

Katra's mouth dropped open. "Don't you remember? Girl Scouts. I was the one who failed tent-building because I spent too long putting on my makeup."

"Bring Mona and you guys can do your makeup together."

Katra glared at her like she was wondering if she needed to call the men with the white coats, then nodded. "All right, you're on."

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Katra glanced at her gas gauge and tried to remember the last time she'd bought gas. Before Jack had

worked on her car, the Corsica hadn't managed much more than ten miles a gallon, and that was on a downhill coast. Now, two hours from Dallas, the needle hadn't shifted from 'F'.

"Jack won't be any closer out here," she reminded her friend.

"I know."

"So how come you guys never told me Sara was dating a demon?" Mona demanded. "That is so cool."

Once, the three of them had been inseparable, hanging out together, hitting the malls, and roller skating for hours while they checked out the boys. Then Mona had rebelled, making a point to go all the way with any boy either Katra or Sara showed any interest in. Now the old Mona seemed back.

Or maybe she'd been wanting to come back for a long time and Katra simply hadn't been able to let her. When Jack had straightened her up, he'd done a lot more than help her with her math. Her car, demon liposuction and head-shrinking in one way-cute package. Jack had turned into the ultimate Mr. Fix-it. Now they needed to make Sara understand.

"It isn't cool," Sara argued. "How is it that neither of you understand this? He's a tortured demon. He doesn't have any morals at all. He'd just as soon kill someone as look at them. He can take over your body and rip your heart out without even breaking a sweat."

"Or he can gently remove fifty pounds of flab without leaving a stretch mark," Mona countered. "I wonder if I should have asked him to make my boobs even bigger."

"Mona." Sara's protest matched Katra's exactly in pitch and volume.

"I'd be happy to eat all the ice cream it would take to give him the raw material to work with," Mona continued as if oblivious to their protest.

Katra turned her car into the camp grounds at Possum Kingdom Lake. Their pre-teen scouting camps had been near here and even Katra's negative memories were tempered by the recollection of how beautiful and wild the countryside was in that part of Texas where the green prairies of the east met the arid desert of the west.

"How about we stay in a motel," Mona suggested. "I'll pay my share."

Mona hadn't offered to pay her share since the day they'd gone to the movies and she'd suckered Jimmy from her eighth grade homeroom into paying for her ticket.

"I need to see the sky," Sara answered.

Sara had been eating and taking care of herself, Katra noticed, but she still seemed to carry around a big hole where her heart used to be.

"Then we'll camp under the sky." Katra tried to be cheerful about the idea but she wasn't. No matter how much fix-up Jack had done for her, she and her sister were still city girls.

Sara pointed and Katra navigated her car into a secluded part of the park set up for hikers rather than the more usual trailer campers.

"Are there bears?" Mona demanded.

"Killer armadillos," Katra answered.

Sara said nothing.

Two hours later, Katra felt a little better about things. They'd managed a charcoal fire, cooked some steaks, and now watched the stars come out.

A streak crossed the sky plunging to the earth.

"Make a wish," Mona cried closing her eyes. "Shooting star."

Katra kept her eyes open, looking at her friend. Would she make a wish?

A tear, silver in the crescent moon's reflection, trickled down Sara's cheek.

"I think somewhere in the Bible, there's a line about Lucifer being thrown from the heavens," Sara whispered, her voice so soft Katra could hardly hear it. "If people had been alive then, do you think it would have looked like that?"

Another meteor fired its blazing path to destruction consumed by Earth's atmosphere.

Katra stood, walked over, and wordlessly hugged her friend.

They crawled into their sleeping bags soon after that. Katra was exhausted from the drive, from her concern for Sara, and from eating more red meat than she'd eaten in years.

A huge crash awakened her.

Katra struggled with the confining bag trying to remember where in the world she could be.

A flash of light gave her the answer to that question but posed another question completely. Where was her car?

The thunder followed less than a second after the lightning, and the skies of Texas opened up.

"Huh?" Sara sounded as groggy as Katra felt.

Katra fumbled for the zipper in her sleeping bag but couldn't get her hands from inside the tight mummy shape.

Sara, who had refused to sleep in anything so confining, stepped over and tugged the sticky zipper down.

"Where's my car?"

"Mona couldn't sleep. I told her you wouldn't mind if she borrowed it for a while."

Oddly, she didn't. Except that meant they had nowhere to hide from the driving rain.

The thunder crashed again and something hard and sharp drove itself into Katra's foot. She glanced down in time to see a quickly melting, but golf-ball sized hail stone rolling away.

"I think we're in trouble."

"Big surprise."

Ignoring their Girl Scout training, they huddled under a live oak tree, partially protected from the hail by its spreading branches and risking the lightning.

"It's beautiful," Sara breathed as another bolt of lightning split the sky.

Huge thunder boomed, their edges glistening from the moon's pale light, rolled in from the south. To the north, stars still shined.

"Dangerous," Katra argued.

Sara glared at her. "Are you going to make me say you told me so?"

Hope blazed as bright as any lightning bolt. "You're going to do it."

"I know I'm crazy, but I can't live without him. Let's see if we can get him back."

## Chapter 23

Jack reached through the membrane between worlds and deposited his manuscript into a mailbox just within his reach. Even with his demonic skills, near-infinite patience learned by spending an eternity in Hell, and no need to sleep, completing his philosophy dissertation had taken him weeks. Now he could merely wait for a response from his faculty advisor, a man who thought Jack was an off-campus graduate student but had no idea just how far off-campus Jack actually resided.

He tried to pull back into his private world, but something held him, dragging him into the earth plane.

He fought the pull. For him, there was nothing but pain left in the human plane.

A few months before, he would simply have sent out a tendril of power to destroy whoever was compelling him, leaving him free to roam the Human plane on his own. To his surprise, he could not do so. His brief experience in Sara's mind had created within him new limitations, new weaknesses.

His grip on his home dimension slipped and he hurled through the human plane, crossing the thousands of miles between his remote mailbox and the deserts of Texas.

He recognized the voices compelling them. Those women were doing it again.

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Sara lit the last candle, her voice hoarse from days of chanting. "It isn't working."

"Keep trying. I felt something," Katra said. Her friend had lent her strength through this entire ordeal.

"I don't feel--"

The lights surged, then dropped into darkness and the air conditioner moaned to a stop.

A strong odor of brimstone permeated the air.

"If you called the wrong demon, we're in big trouble," Mona said. "You did say you knew what you were doing."

"Who dares disturb the rest of Beljackseroph." The male voice was angry, powerful, and most definitely Jack.

"Is that your real name?" Katra asked.

"You humans have caused more than enough trouble for me. I ordered you to leave me alone, to stop your petty requests."

"Maybe you guys should go," Sara suggested. "I think this is something that Jack and I need to have out in private."

"Good idea." Katra actually giggled when she left. "Good thing you decided to wear that outfit."

Sara blushed in the darkness. The cool but diaphanous dress Katra had persuaded her to buy now seemed just a little too forward.

"Remind him I want just one more cup size," Mona said as she followed her sister out the front door to Sara's apartment. "Oh, and ask if he has any friends."

"Get out."

Mona closed the door firmly.

"I asked you a question," Jack growled.

"There aren't any wards. You can come over here and have a seat," Sara told him.

Her eyes adjusted and she could now make out Jack's looming shape.

He looked like he had just gotten out of the shower. His hair was tousled, his jeans still unbuttoned, and no shirt marred the beautiful shape of his broad chest and hard stomach.

"I could use a glass of water."

"I'll get you one." She walked to the kitchen and poured him a large glass, then got one for herself.

"I know you're angry," Sara told him as she passed him the glass. "I treated you badly, didn't trust you even when Katra explained what you had done."

"So you decided to destroy me by dragging me back to this plane again, after I had told you about my paradise."

She nodded. "I had to."

He waved a hand and the lights returned, glowing more softly than their electrical circuitry normally allowed. "I don't understand."

"I love you, Jack. I want to spend the rest of my life with you, have your babies if that's what you want."

"I can't stay here."

He had explained that enough times that she could hardly have missed the point.

"Then I'll come with you."

Jack stared at her and she knew he was doing it again, looking into her with those strange demon powers he had. "You need the open spaces. I don't have any. It isn't going to work."

She shook her head. "You're not going to get away that easily after all I've done to get you back. Fix me, the way you fixed Katra. Go into my brain and straighten things out so I won't be afraid of the enclosed spaces any more."

He took a large swallow from the glass of water that she'd given him, then stepped toward her. "Is that what you want?"

"What I want is to live with you. Everything else is negotiable."

He reached out for her, his hand searingly hot on the naked skin of her arm. "I can't fix you."

"Why?"

"Because you aren't broken. Because your love for the outside is genuine love, not a fear. Because if I ripped that part of you away, I would destroy you."

She nodded slowly, ignoring the tears that welled in her eyes. This was worse than she'd feared but at least he wasn't rejecting her outright.

An errant thought came to her. "You know, you used the word love."

Jack looked thoughtful. "I--hum. I would have thought that impossible."

Not that it mattered. Sara took a deep breath and plunged in way over her head. "So what if you can't cure me? I'll be with you and that's what's important."

Sorrow and want filled his eyes, but he shook his head. "It is too much to ask."

Anger flared up in her. "Nobody asked you. Unless you tell me, honestly, that you don't want me, I'm going to spend the rest of my life with you. I think the operative question is, your place or mine. My place doesn't work so we're going to yours."

He reached out, stroked her arm gently. It had been so long, too long, and the simple sensation of his warm hand brushing against her skin created a sensation so sensual and erotic she nearly collapsed into a boneless heap.

Instead, she leaned against him. "I'm not proud, Jack. I'll beg."

He steadied her, holding her close. "No. I will stay here."

"But you can't. You already said that the angels will hunt you down. That you'll--"

He shook his head forcefully. "I was wrong. The great weakness of any demon is our ability to fool ourselves. That, of course, is what got us into trouble in the first place. I was fooling myself that I had found a universe separate from Hell. Without you, heaven itself would be torture."

Hope welled in her breast. "What are you saying?"

"I love you, Sara. Every one of uncounted billions of demons knows that a demon cannot love, but still I love you. My little dimension would destroy you, change you into something you are not. So we'll stay here."

"But Earth will destroy you. So we're back to square one."

He took her chin in his hand, tilted her face so she looked him in his sapphire demon eyes. "There is a difference. My dimension would destroy your soul. Here, I risk only my earthly body. I'm prepared to take that chance."

Her legs had no strength. She wanted to give in but their problems remained. "But Jack--"



He swung her up in his strong arms, carried her out onto the porch of her apartment, and gazed at the sky. "It is a beautiful world. Perhaps, together, we can make it more beautiful still."

A half filled moon gleamed down on them despite the glaring light of the sun. "I wished for this, Jack. But I'm afraid."

He laughed, then bent his lips toward hers. "We will have time to fear," he murmured. "But also time to love."

How had he imagined he could survive without Sara? It was impossible.

Jack had initiated the kiss, but Sara threw her arms around him, pressed him closer to herself and deepened the kiss, her tongue caressing his lips, seeking his own tongue.

Desire flamed darkly in her aura, but he let himself see the brighter flame of real love as well. It was undeniably there.

"Oh, Jack."

"Of course we will have to make some changes."

Sara stiffened. "Changes?"

"I was thinking a house rather than an apartment. Enough room for an office for each of us, a library, and--"

Sara looked doubtful, disappointed. "I guess we could afford that with the money we made."

He shook his head. "That money is for your business. I'll buy the house with my salary."

"What?"

"It won't be much at first, but I've gotten a lectureship at University of North Texas."

"Can we afford a nursery?" Her voice told him that the question didn't matter, that she was his no matter how he answered. He knew better.

"Would you take a chance on a half demon baby?"

Sara shook her head firmly. "Absolutely not. I'd only take a chance on our baby."

Love welled within him. Despite everything he'd done, she no longer saw him as a demon, to be used and scorned. To her, he was simply her love. To him, that was so much more than the highest titles in the princely hierarchy of Hell.

"Conception might be difficult. It shouldn't be impossible."

"In that case, perhaps we should get started."

"Huh?"

Sara's grin was mischievous. "This conception thing. I want your baby. If we have to make love a lot to get there, so much the better."

He took one step toward her bedroom, then stopped. "There is one other thing."

Sara grinned. "Can it wait until after we make love?"

"No."

Her smile faded. "Tell me."

"I know how hard it is for you to share, but I want it all. I want you to be my wife, to m-marry me."

"Can you?"

If he'd been human, he would be sweating. As it was, he had to beat his wings to keep his internal temperature from boiling over on Sara. He was greedy to want so much, demanding to insist on it. Yet he needed to know if she shared the commitment. "Can I what?"

"Can you go through a marriage ceremony. Won't you burn up or something if you go into a church?"

"An outdoor weddings, then. Under the sky."

Sara's face broke into a smile that lit his universe. "That would be wonderful, Jack. But if you don't take me now, I think I'll burn up before we get there.

Jack knew the feeling. He let his wings bear him off the ground and into the sky.

"Watch out for churches," Sara murmured as her hand sought its prey.

THE END

Epilogue

Jack bent over to look at the perfect being before him. Jennifer giggled, then stuck a pudgy fist in his direction grasping his forefinger with all her might.

"She's so beautiful," he murmured. He was still overwhelmed by the experience.

"She should be. She's your daughter," Sara said.

"Our daughter." He shook Jennifer's little rattle, amazed he, a demon, could have been involved in new life, in new creation.

He continued to hold the rattle but shifted his free hand to his wife, tracing her motherhood-softened curves.

"Hey, don't get used to these." Sara was trying to sound stern but her giggle kept her from achieving her goal. "Once I finish nursing, they'll be shrinking right back up. And don't tell me you could fix me up like you fixed up Mona."

"Then I'd better enjoy it while I can. How would you feel about a flight?"

Sara giggled again. "It's too soon after having Jennifer. I'm still a little sore."

"Can't we fly without making love?" He was still amazed in his ability to use that word without pain, without punishment.

"I don't know. Neither of us has tried very hard."

Before he could answer that, the doorbell sounded. Almost instantly, their home, a sprawling bungalow just blocks from the University of North Texas, was invaded by female voices. Maura, Katra, and Mona all descended on them like locusts only bringing more food rather than taking it.

"Give me that baby," Katra demanded. "You two go away for a while and let Aunt Katra and Aunt Mona give her some sugar."

He'd noticed before that perfectly rational people, if that isn't a contradiction in terms, could get completely irrational over babies. Now that he had one of his own, he had begun to understand.

"Looks like you get your wish," Sara told him. "Let's go for a flight."

"You be careful," Maura warned. She hadn't changed her feelings on religion or demons but to her, Jack was now family and family trumped even the church.

"We will."

Jack swept Sara into his arms, shrugged his jacket, and spread his wings.

"There is this lease I've been wanting to look at," Sara told him. "Maybe we could fly out west about a hundred miles."

"And maybe we couldn't. You're on maternity leave, remember."

"It's my company. I can't take leave."

"I think the line is that it's your company and you can do what you want."

He forestalled any arguments by launching himself into the air, his wings clawing for height.

"Hey, what's this?" Sara demanded.

"Just a normal takeoff."

"No, you've got a gray hair."

Poor Sara had never given up on her search for some attribute of humanity about him, some reason for her to believe that he wasn't what he had always known himself to be, a perpetually damned demon.

"Impossible."

"No, I mean it. Land over there."

Over there turned out to be a crystal-clear pond. Jack disturbed a pair of swans as he landed, but they soon glided back, joining him as he sought what Sara claimed to have found.

"There. I told you."

Impossible or not, she was right.

"A demon is unchangeable," he reminded her. "This must be a mistake."

"It's no mistake," Sara argued. "Don't you see, I gave you my heart and my friends gave you part of their bodies to make you. You melded your spirit with my soul."

"So--"

"So you're a person now. You've earned your right to stay here on what you call the human plane."

He spread his wings and used his demon senses to look into Sara's soul. "But look at me. Isn't this proof enough that I'm what I've always been."

"Hey. Nobody said you had to be an ordinary man, Jack the Demon of my love." Sara closed the distance between them, her lips seeking his. One of her hands reached for his horns, caressing their length while the other traced the zipper of his jeans. "Definitely not average. Now do you think you could be real careful..."