



# My Personal Trainer is a Demon (Demons for Hire)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** Lily:

Joining VitalityFit was supposed to be my ticket to success in Sweetberry Hollow's cutthroat real estate market. Instead, I found Damian Strong—a personal trainer whose smoldering presence ignites a fire within me that I can't control. As our workouts grow hotter and our connection deeper, can I uncover his dark secret before it consumes us both?

Damian:

In Sweetberry Hollow, blending in is essential for my mission. But Lily Green's vibrant energy and irresistible charm make her impossible to ignore. As our steamy sessions blur the line between passion and peril, can I find a way to work her body and protect her heart without revealing the darkness I embody?

Can love survive a demon's secret? Find out in this short, cheeky instalove story where steamy romance meets supernatural secrets!

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**SERIES BLURB:**

Undercover demons walk among us, hiding their true nature until duty or destiny calls. Whether summoned by Satan himself or drawn to their fated mates, these supernatural heartthrobs—from professors to bounty hunters—emerge at love's perfect moment. Welcome to Bite Clubs Demons for Hire, where hell meets romance!

**Total Pages (Source):** 7

# Page 1

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Lily

The soft scent of hyacinths and fresh grass drifted through my car window as I sped down Clover Street, heart pounding and head throbbing. It was a deceptively beautiful morning in Sweetberry Hollow, where every yard looked like the cover of a gardening magazine. Flowering dogwoods lined the sidewalks, their white and pink petals fluttering in the cool spring air, and the well-maintained lawns gleamed under the bright mid-April sun.

Yet, despite the idyllic surroundings, I was a complete mess. My copper curls were frizzing wildly from the humidity, and the pounding headache behind my eyes reminded me that cheap wine and late-night TV marathons never mixed well with early morning responsibilities. As usual, I had about fifteen minutes to get my life together before facing a group of restless house-hunters.

I glanced in the rearview mirror and tried to tame my hair with one hand. It was no use—my curls were as stubborn as my Irish grandmother had always predicted. I'd give anything for some hair serum right now, I thought, ignoring the fact that I was already five minutes late for my own open house. The blinking clock on my dashboard confirmed my worst fear: 8:55 a.m., five minutes until showtime, and I had at least ten more minutes on the road.

"Of course," I muttered, scowling at my reflection. My brown eyes, ringed with dark circles, stared accusingly back at me. This was definitely not how I wanted to start a pivotal day in my career.

I worked as a real estate agent for Crestwood Real Estate, one of the more reputable

firms in Sweetberry Hollow. We specialized in matching folks to the town's historic cottages and blooming orchard properties. Spring was peak selling season. Everyone wanted a piece of the postcard-perfect atmosphere—complete with blossoming trees, pastel-painted shutters, and vines of wisteria creeping over charming porches.

When I first joined Crestwood nearly three years ago, I'd been starry-eyed and hopeful, imagining myself as a top-producing agent selling dream homes like hotcakes. Reality hadn't been quite so kind. Crestwood Real Estate was cutthroat in its own polite, small-town way, and Amelia Caldwell, my supervising agent, had a reputation for expecting nothing less than perfection.

Lately, I was falling short of her exacting standards. My leads were drying up, my closings were down, and Amelia's exasperated looks during team meetings were all but spelling out "shape up or ship out." Last week, she'd issued an ultimatum: If I didn't show a marked improvement in sales—and professional conduct—she might not be able to "justify keeping me on staff." My heart had plummeted at her words.

Despite my personal chaos, Sweetberry Hollow was coming alive with the promise of a new season. Cherry blossoms lined the main avenue leading into downtown, their pink petals blowing across the road in gentle drifts. The sweet, earthy smell of freshly turned soil and newly mulched flower beds made the entire town smell like a giant garden.

This was a time of year that normally uplifted my spirits—the big annual Spring Berry Festival was just a couple of weeks away, and the locals were already decorating the lamp posts with pastel ribbons. The festival celebrated the region's famous "Sweetberries," a unique hybrid berry that thrived in the local climate. Every bakery window was full of berry pies, tarts, and pastries. I used to love sampling them while strolling through the historic district.

But this morning, the bright sunshine and cheerful blooms only highlighted how

disheveled I was. My wrinkled blouse, the skirt that was suddenly too tight around my hips, and a mind half-clouded by a throbbing headache—nothing screamed “professional agent ready to sell your dream home” about me.

I screeched to a stop in front of the listing—a modest ranch house with a well-kept lawn. A small group of prospective buyers was already waiting on the sidewalk, checking their phones, or glancing at their watches. My stomach sank. Being late yet again wouldn’t do me any favors with these clients or with Amelia.

I grabbed my real estate brochures from the passenger seat, nearly dropping them in my haste. An empty coffee cup rattled across the floor. My heart pounded as I hopped out of the car, balancing the brochures in one hand and rummaging in my purse for the keys.

“Morning, folks! Sorry for the delay,” I called, pasting on my brightest smile. The group stared at me with varying degrees of impatience. “Let’s get inside and take a look around.”

I fumbled with the lockbox, my cheeks heating as I tried not to notice the sideways glances and muted sighs from the buyers. The door finally clicked open, and I led them into the living room. It had a large bay window overlooking the budding rose bushes in the front yard, and I tried to launch into my usual spiel about the home’s features—new appliances, energy-efficient windows, the whole nine yards.

But between the slight hangover, the pressure to perform, and the guilt roiling in my stomach along with what may have been a bad poached egg, I could barely focus on my own words. I gestured toward the kitchen, realizing with a jolt I hadn’t set out refreshments. The homeowners had requested something simple—a plate of pastries and maybe coffee. I’d completely forgotten.

If the missing refreshments weren’t enough, the universe decided to hammer the

point home by way of a bored six-year-old. One of the buyers had brought their son, a restless little boy who found more entertainment in racing around the empty living room than in listening to me prattle on about the property tax rates.

While explaining how the built-in bookshelves could be a focal point, I heard a shriek of glee followed by a tremendous crash. I whirled around just in time to see a decorative vase topple from a side table, shattering into a dozen pieces across the hardwood floor.

The boy froze, his eyes widening with fear. His mother rushed to his side, stammering apologies as the rest of the group looked on with a mixture of horror and amusement.

“Is this your vase?” she asked, blushing furiously.

“It belongs to the homeowner,” I managed, forcing a polite grimace as I bent down to collect shards. “Don’t worry, accidents happen.”

But inside, I felt a fresh wave of dread. Now I’d have to report the damage—and that would likely mean one more nail in the coffin for my professional reputation.

By the end of the showing, the mood was irreversibly dampened. A few people left early, muttering about wasted time. One couple actually seemed mildly interested, but they offered vague contact details before slipping out, obviously unimpressed by the overall fiasco. I could almost feel Amelia Caldwell’s judgment from miles away, her voice in my head telling me I’d blown it again.

Heart pounding, I waved goodbye to the last buyer and locked up, then leaned against the door with my eyes closed. The spring breeze carried the faint scent of newly mowed grass, a mocking reminder of how everything else in Sweetberry Hollow was so fresh and put-together—while I was unraveling at the seams.

My drive back through the blossoming streets felt like a walk of shame on four wheels. Homeowners were out planting flowers, chatting with neighbors, and enjoying the sunshine. I loved Sweetberry Hollow with its warm sense of community—but right now, it felt like the town was reminding me I didn't measure up.

I tried to steady my breathing. I was Lily Green, a proud Irish-American with enough gumption to handle a bit of adversity. My paternal grandmother, who immigrated from Ireland, used to say, You come from a line of strong women, Lily. A hiccup is just a reason to push harder. But apparently, my “hiccup” was quickly becoming a full-blown meltdown of my career.

As I pulled into the parking lot of the firm, I spotted Maya Lopez, my friend and one of the administrative assistants, heading into the office with a folder tucked under her arm. She shot me a sympathetic glance, probably already understanding from the look on my face that the open house had gone poorly. I sighed and turned off the ignition. I'd have to face the music eventually—Amelia would want a report, and I doubted the news I had to deliver would be welcomed.

Walking into Crestwood, I tried to straighten my skirt and smooth my hair, but the day's stress had already undone most of my efforts. The lobby was bright and airy, with a large window that showcased a bank of flowering tulips outside. The walls were adorned with photos of the firm's most successful closings: happy couples standing in front of their new homes, holding “SOLD” signs. It was a visual reminder of what I'd once hoped to achieve.

Maya crossed the lobby toward me, her short burgundy hair gleaming under the overhead lights. “How'd it go?” she asked in a hushed voice.

I scrunched up my face. “Do you really want to know?”

She winced. “That bad, huh?”

I nodded, glancing toward Amelia’s glass-walled office. Through the blinds, I could see her silhouette, probably poring over charts and performance reports. “Bad enough that if Amelia hears half of it, I might be unemployed by the end of the week.”

Maya let out a low whistle. “Well, maybe she’ll cut you some slack. It’s springtime—people are in a good mood.” She smiled, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes. We both knew Amelia wasn’t known for leniency.

“I’ll go see her in a bit,” I said, swallowing the lump in my throat. “Gotta write up the fiasco first.”

Maya just patted my shoulder, sympathy evident in her expression. “Hang in there.”

After uploading my open house notes (and bracing myself for my boss’s reaction later), I headed back to my car, determined to salvage the rest of the day somehow. The crisp scent of fresh blooms hit me again, the swirl of pink petals across the pavement reminding me that I used to love spring in Sweetberry Hollow. I used to feel renewed by this season, energized by the warmer temperatures, the bright skies, the townspeople bustling about in floral dresses. Now, all I felt was anxiety.

I slid behind the wheel and stared out the windshield, picturing the half-finished marketing postcards strewn across my desk. Maybe I just needed a better approach—a bigger push to stand out. I couldn’t keep half-assing my life if I wanted to stay at Crestwood.

That was when a billboard in the distance caught my eye. It showed a woman with a radiant smile, toned arms raised in triumph, beneath bold text that read: VitalityFit —Transform Your Body, Transform Your Life! The woman in the ad appeared confident, unstoppable, like the kind of person who had the discipline to handle

anything thrown her way.

Could working out help me feel more in control? Sure, it sounded shallow, but real estate was a business of appearances, after all—confidence, image, that unspoken sense of authority that made clients trust you. If I looked and felt better, maybe that would translate to stronger sales. Hm.

I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel, turning over the idea in my mind. I hadn't exercised regularly since college, relying on good genes and my curvy figure to coast along. But that was no longer cutting it in a world where top agents had professional headshots, personal brand videos, and an overall air of polished perfection.

Heading home, I rolled down the window for some fresh air. I lived alone in a small, tidy apartment just outside the historic district—nothing fancy, but it had a decent view of the orchard beyond. That orchard was now a riot of blossoms, bright pink and white against the rolling hills.

Kicking off my scuffed heels by the door, I sank onto my sofa with a heavy sigh. My phone pinged: a reminder about the homeowner's vase, which I needed to replace. Fantastic, I thought, rubbing my temples. Another expense on top of the financial strain of late. And it wasn't like I had a high-paying sale coming in any time soon.

I scrolled absently through messages from a few potential clients who'd attended the open house, each politely declining further viewings. My heart sank lower. What am I doing with my life?

That billboard image kept replaying in my mind. An ad for VitalityFit. It promised transformation, but would it really solve my problems? The cynical side of me snorted internally—like a few squats and a better diet will fix my chaotic career. But a tiny spark of hope remained. Sometimes, a person had to hold onto anything that



offered a glimmer of self-improvement.

I found the VitalityFit website on my phone. Their marketing was almost nauseatingly upbeat: pages full of before-and-after photos, success stories, and quotes from clients raving about newfound confidence. Under normal circumstances, I might have dismissed it as gimmicky, but desperation had a way of making a believer out of me.

Biting my lip, I navigated to the sign-up page. The membership fees made my eyes water, but they had a payment plan. My credit card details were already trembling in my mental wallet, but my pride—and my job—was on the line.

After a few indecisive minutes, I took a deep breath and clicked Sign Up . A confirmation email chimed into my inbox almost immediately, welcoming me to the “VitalityFit Family” and inviting me to schedule my first session. My stomach fluttered, equal parts fear and excitement.

That evening, I changed into pajamas and stood by my open window, looking out at the trees by the silver glow of moonlight. The spring air carried the sweet fragrance of blossoms, drifting in to mingle with the faint smell of coffee from my kitchen. My thoughts drifted to my grandmother again—how she used to talk about new beginnings, how winter gave way to spring in a rush of color and possibility.

Well, Gran, I’m about to embark on a new beginning of my own , I mused, fingers absentmindedly twisting a curl. If VitalityFit could help me gain the edge I needed—help me find the confidence to look Amelia Caldwell in the eye without flinching—then maybe I could still salvage my career. Maybe I wouldn’t have to abandon my dream of excelling at Crestwood.

I felt a sliver of relief at having a plan, however half-formed. Tomorrow, I’d call VitalityFit and set up my first session. Tomorrow, I’d deal with Amelia’s lecture,

apologize for the open house debacle, and hopefully convince her to give me another chance. Tomorrow, I'd start pulling my life back together.

I closed my eyes, inhaling deeply and letting my shoulders drop from around my ears. For the first time all day, my heart felt a little lighter. If a real estate agent can't sell herself on a new dream, who can? I thought wryly, a small smile tugging at my lips. Maybe stepping into that gym would be the fresh start I needed in more ways than one.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:40 am*

Damian

I stayed long after closing at VitalityFit, letting the final echoes of clanging weights and the hum of the air-conditioning fade into silence. On most nights, a handful of dedicated gym rats might have lingered for after-hours training, but with the springtime storms rolling in—thunder growling in the distance and lightning fracturing the sky—the place had emptied out fast. Even Marcellus Kane, the gym's owner, and my boss in more ways than one, had left hours ago for one of his nocturnal business meetings. That was all the better for me. I relished the solitude.

I stepped onto the main workout floor, the overhead fluorescent lights casting stark reflections off the gleaming row of treadmills and ellipticals. My footsteps reverberated across the rubber mats. The air smelled faintly of lemon disinfectant, mingled with the lingering tang of human sweat. I closed my eyes, inhaling deeply, letting my supernatural senses parse the cocktail of leftover emotions that clung to the equipment, to the very walls of this place.

Want, greed, desperation —they all left traces behind. Humans rarely realized how potent their feelings were, and how their insecurities could feed something beyond their comprehension. Here, each pang of envy or surge of ambition remained in the air for hours. In my centuries as a demon, I had learned to read those subtle hints as easily as a mortal might read a neon sign. A half-suppressed moan of dissatisfaction clung to the bench press where a man had grunted angrily about plateauing. The elliptical near the windows still vibrated with the anxious energy of the woman who feared she'd never reach her ideal weight.

I pried myself away from the ambient feast, forcing my mind back to discipline.

Gluttony was frowned upon in my realm—one had to harvest with care, like a gardener pruning a rosebush. Too much too fast, and the client might flee or break entirely, leaving us with no ongoing source. Marcellus had reminded me of that in the past. I wouldn't make the same mistake again.

Still, something about this small town of Sweetberry Hollow gave rise to more varied flavors of emotion than I'd encountered in my last few assignments. Perhaps it was the veneer of idyllic charm behind which lurked a constant fear of not measuring up. Small fish, small pond—yet they all desperately vied for the best house, the best body, the best local reputation. I could practically taste it all now, and the combination was delicious.

I headed down the hallway into the staff lounge, flipping on one of the softer overhead lights. The lounge doubled as my makeshift office. Most personal trainers kept their motivational posters and pictures of transformations pinned up on these walls. Mine were bare. A single table, a few chairs, a locked filing cabinet in the corner. I didn't need photos of “before and after” success stories. The success of my real mission was recorded in far darker places.

Dropping onto the chair nearest the battered wooden table, I pulled out a tablet. My daily logs filled the screen, where I meticulously documented each client's emotional progress. Sure, for appearances I tracked weight loss, muscle gain, reps completed—but my real focus was the intangible readouts. The dips into frustration, the highs of vanity, the lumps of disappointment. Over time, I'd learned to convert those intangible states into the subtle nourishment that my kind required. That was what Marcellus demanded, too. He might run VitalityFit for profit on the human side, but on the demonic side, he was the pipeline to our realm. My job was to keep it flowing.

I scrolled through the logs of three of my favorite “regulars,” the ones who had already proven particularly bountiful:

Rex McGraw: Local bodybuilder and owner of Apex Luxury Customs—a high-end car body shop catering to the wealthier residents of Sweetberry Hollow. Rex had the type of vanity that soared each time he admired his reflection in our full-length mirrors. His ambition to sculpt the perfect physique mirrored his hunger to stay on top of the local custom-car scene. He was never satisfied, always pushing for another inch on his biceps, another endorsement deal. Perfect for me.

Stirling Chanel: A social media influencer who never stopped snapping selfies—her phone was practically an extension of her hand. She harnessed filters and angles to hide every imagined flaw, but inside, anxiety and insecurity churned like ingredients in a blender. To keep her brand relevant, she constantly craved novelty—new workout trends, new hashtags, new angles. She feared the day her followers might abandon her. Her brand of anxiety was pungent, constant, and so easy to stir with a small nudge.

Pam Peterson: Recently separated mother of two, frantic to obtain a “revenge” body she believed would heal her broken self-esteem as well as her marriage. Pam wasn’t quite as flamboyant as Rex or Stirling, but her need for validation tasted sweeter than any dessert. Every time she broke a sweat on the treadmill, she whispered resentments toward her ex and self-deprecations about her aging figure. The mixture of bitterness and yearning was exquisite—though I had to be cautious, as heartbreak could sometimes push humans into the bleakness of despair rather than the slow-burn frustration we preferred.

I tapped each name to review the day’s notes. Rex had come in that morning, complaining about how he felt ‘flat’ on stage during his last bodybuilding show, resulting in coming in second place instead of claiming the trophy. I’d carefully fanned the flames of his frustration, urging him to up his routine, do more reps, push the envelope. As expected, he left the gym practically snarling about how he’d crush the competition next time. Win-win : he stayed subscribed to the advanced personal training package, and I got a steady supply of ambition verging on rage.

Stirling had posted a dozen new stories on her Instagram from the squat rack, complaining about “super toxic gym bros,” even though nobody had bothered her. She was manufacturing drama to gain sympathy likes. I knew her routine by heart—she’d stir a scandal, then swoop in with some discount code for her sponsors. All I had to do was occasionally validate her fears—“ Yes, you should watch out for haters, you’re so brave ”—and her anxiety soared in that delicious way. Another day’s worth of intangible energy for me.

Pam had texted me to cancel today’s session, claiming she felt too depressed to leave the house. I frowned at the message. That was risky. I needed my clients functional, or at least present enough to keep feeding me those negative energies. Tomorrow, I’d call her, coax her back into the routine, remind her that she was on the verge of “a breakthrough,” and it was only a matter of time and having a manifestation mindset. Humans were painfully predictable, and a tiny bit of hope could reel them right back in.

Sighing, I set the tablet aside. Even these three prime sources were beginning to feel routine, like sampling the same meal daily. I’d caught myself feeling...bored. That was dangerous for a demon who thrived on chaos. Perhaps it explained the restless spark in my gut. Everything was still going according to plan though—so why did I feel uneasy?

A soft ping alerted me to a new email. I picked up my tablet again. This message was from the VitalityFit membership system. The subject line read: New Client Sign-Up: Lily Green .

I opened it. Lily Green, 29, real estate agent. The short personal note field read: “ I need this more than anything. Determined to succeed .” I stared at the words, re-reading them twice. A subtle thrill ran through me. Her emotional profile was flagged as “ High Engagement Potential ,” a label assigned by the software’s guesswork about her readiness to commit. But I trusted my own senses more. I could practically

smell her desperation and drive. Perfect .

I zoomed in on her notes for more. She was precariously close to failing in her career, living under the shadow of near-failure, and chasing self-confidence with the fervor of someone who believed it would fix every aspect of her life. That combination of longing, fear, and ambition could yield a feast beyond the usual “I want bigger arms” or “I want more followers.” Lily needed me in a way few others did. I found the corners of my mouth curving upward.

“Interesting,” I muttered into the empty lounge. My voice echoed off the white walls. Another client, yes—but from these lines alone, I sensed a spark that might be different. There was a warmth to her words, an undercurrent of humor that suggested she wasn’t purely self-centered. She could be...complicated.

Focus, Damian , I reminded myself. She was another potential asset, not a puzzle to solve. Don’t forget your purpose. But that same restlessness that had haunted me for months now ticked at the base of my skull. Lily Green could stave off that boredom, at least temporarily.

I tapped out a quick note to follow up on her scheduling. The system showed her first appointment was set for the day after tomorrow, at nine in the morning. Perfect timing—my early sessions with Rex would be done by then, leaving me free to devote my full attention to Lily. I felt an unexpected flicker of eagerness. Typically, I’d approach new clients with calm detachment, but Lily’s profile, combined with my own stir-crazy boredom, made me want to skip the next 36 hours altogether.

The rational part of me chuckled darkly at the irony: a demon impatient to meet a mortal. Usually, mortals were the ones anxiously awaiting a savior or solution to their troubles, not the other way around. Shaking my head, I powered down the tablet, deciding I’d gleaned enough for the night.

Before heading home, I liked to do one last pass around VitalityFit. The building was large and modern, with floor-to-ceiling windows in the front that displayed row after row of shiny equipment. The back half contained smaller studios for classes like spin, yoga, and Pilates—although the most fruitful spiritual journeys took place in my domain of personal training, not in any yoga session.

Tonight, low thunder rattled the glass, accompanied by fleeting flashes of lightning. I strode through the main training area, verifying each station was in order. My reflection haunted me in the mirrors: tall, broad-chested, black hair just brushing my collar, a neatly kept full beard and short handlebar mustache that set me apart from the typical “clean-cut trainer” image. It was a brand of sorts—a carefully curated aesthetic that humans either found charming or intimidating. Either way, it worked in my favor.

Stopping at a corner lined with heavy bags for boxing, I drummed my knuckles against one of them. My mind roamed, lingering on the demonic realm’s demands. The ancient contract that bound me to this life flickered in my memories. Sometimes, I recalled the moment I’d agreed to become a collector of human emotions. The details were hazy—demonic deals often were—but the outcome was as clear as the lightning outside: I was shackled to this existence, compelled to gather enough intangible energy to feed the realm’s insatiable hunger.

In big cities, I’d gleaned from thousands of frenetic souls, mostly absorbing their adrenaline, vanity, or paranoia. Sweetberry Hollow, though smaller, offered a different flavor. People cared fiercely about their reputations and appearances, priding themselves on small-town values while competing in a subtle but relentless game of keeping up with neighbors. This environment was a gold mine for a demon like me. Yet... boredom had set in lately, a sense that I was going through the motions. Perhaps I’d grown too adept at my job, too numb to the routine.

Until now. Until Lily’s name landed in my inbox, prodding that dormant spark of



curiosity. I realized that for the first time in months, I felt an edge of excitement about a new client. It was a sign that I needed to be careful. The cardinal rule was never to get involved beyond extracting the necessary emotions. I'd seen others fall prey to fascination or pity for humans, leading to disastrous ends.

I let out a soft breath, pressing my palms against the heavy bag. My eyes drifted shut, and I called up a faint flicker of demonic power. In the gloom, if someone had been watching, they might have seen my pupils flare with an eerie glow. My biceps tensed, and I delivered a single slow punch to the bag. It swung back violently, the chain rattling. The motion felt too easy, too light—an extension of my inhuman strength. Usually, I kept that hidden, delivering only gentle demonstrations to inspire awe in my clients. But here, alone, I allowed a glimpse of my true nature.

The bag slammed back against my knuckles with a dull thud, swinging wildly. The surge of power left me tingling, but it was fleeting. I forced my body to relax. The flicker in my eyes subsided, returning them to a deep, dark brown that humans would find merely intense. That was enough of a reminder: I was a predator among unsuspecting prey, and I had to keep it that way.

Early the next morning, I arrived at VitalityFit before sunrise. Rain had given way to a calm, misty dawn, painting the sidewalks silver with morning dew. A few birds chirped in the budding dogwoods that lined the parking lot, nature's optimistic chorus to greet the day.

As usual, I spent the first hour reviewing the day's schedule, sipping black coffee that did nothing for me physically—demons didn't need sustenance in the human sense—but it allowed me to blend in. By six a.m., Rex McGraw burst through the doors, his duffel bag slung over one hulking shoulder. He made a beeline toward the free weights with the swagger of a man used to admiration.

"Morning, champ," I said, meeting him by the bench press rack.

“Coach,” Rex grunted. He dropped the bag, rolled his massive shoulders, and eyed the barbell as if it insulted his mother. “I’ve been thinking about what you said last time—about pushing my chest routine further. Let’s do it.”

I hid my smirk. Rex was as predictable as ever. “You mentioned wanting to add more size. That’ll take heavier lifts. You ready?”

His nostrils flared. “I was born ready, man.” He slapped a 45-pound plate on each side, then another set, going for a daunting weight that made the bar bend slightly. His arrogance crackled in the air like static electricity, feeding me even as I guided him through the exercise. Each time he grunted, straining to complete a rep, I tasted that blend of vanity and underlying fear—fear that he wouldn’t remain on top, that someone bigger, stronger, wealthier might usurp him. Yum. I coaxed him on, offering just enough encouragement to keep him hungry, never satisfied.

Thirty minutes later, Rex was drenched in sweat, chest heaving, but eyes gleaming with triumph. I clapped him on the back. “Good work. Keep your diet and supplement plan on track, and you’ll see gains.”

He exhaled hard, a grin splitting his rugged face. “Hell yeah. Gonna order some new gear for my next competition, too—maybe a custom posing trunk with the Apex Luxury Customs logo. Gotta show off the brand, right?”

“Absolutely,” I said, fighting the urge to roll my eyes. He was so enamored with himself that no more prodding was necessary. “Same time tomorrow?”

“I’ll be here,” he said, grabbing his bag and walking off. As he passed a mirror, I saw him pause, flex his arms. Typical. My chest warmed with the energy he left behind. Humans were truly the gift that kept on giving.

Next was Stirling Chanel, prancing in a little after seven, her neon pink leggings

screaming for attention as much as her phone's ring light. "Dami-aaan," she sang, offering a half-wave while filming herself. She turned the camera for a wide shot of me, presumably for her followers.

I feigned a polite smile, keeping my voice smooth. "Morning, doll. Ready for leg day?"

She wrinkled her nose. "I guess. My glutes need some serious shaping or so says half my comments. My last reel only got forty thousand views." She said it like it was a personal tragedy.

Forty thousand. She'd likely be upset if she knew how many centuries I'd spent collecting emotions from mortals, each century witnessing entire civilizations rise and fall. Her whining about a dip in social media engagement was laughable—yet useful. "Let's focus on the movements that target your glutes then," I said. "And maybe we'll get some good progress shots to share later."

Her eyes lit with that influencer gleam. "Yes! Perfect. Let's do it." The phone's camera was still rolling, capturing a half-dozen vanity angles. Anxiety pulsed from her in waves, like an open faucet: she worried about losing followers, about the next big influencer overshadowing her, about fine lines around her eyes. Every nudge I gave—"You sure you don't want to push a bit harder, for that extra tone?"—replenished that anxiety with a fresh gush of self-doubt.

We ran through squats, lunges, and hip thrusts. Between sets, she filmed updates, breathlessly telling her audience how she was "in it to win it" or "leveling up." If they only knew the real demon in the room. I masked a laugh, finishing up by recommending a couple more exercises she could do at home. She beamed, hugging her phone to her chest.

"You're the best, Damian," she said, stepping closer in a conspiratorial whisper,

phone momentarily off. “Don’t forget to share that video from earlier. I need to tag you. Collaboration, you know?”

“Sure.” I gave a polite nod. We parted ways, and she floated off, already posting stories about her “celebrity workout.” Even from across the gym, I could sense the roiling swirl of her emotions. Insecurities about her next filler appointment, her curated feed, her next sponsorship. I’d done my job. She left VitalityFit with her heart racing from both the workout and the panic that she might not be good enough. Business as usual.

Pam Peterson was a no-show. I spent ten minutes in the lounge, texting her gentle reminders. She claimed a headache and “family issues.” I recognized the signs: her separation was probably weighing on her more than usual. With a deft touch, I typed: Pam, you’ve come so far already—take a moment and remember your goals. You got this. I’m always here for you. Hope, a glimmer, to reel her back in tomorrow. Couldn’t let her sink too deep.

The clock in the lounge read 11:30 a.m. I showered off quickly in the staff restroom, changing into a fresh black T-shirt and track pants. I was done for the morning, technically, but as I walked past the front desk, I felt a faint twist of that restlessness again. I caught my reflection in the tinted windows near the entrance. I looked the part—tall, athletic, somewhat mysterious. The person I’d carefully crafted for centuries. But inside, I felt an odd emptiness creeping in. Lily wouldn’t arrive until tomorrow. Somehow, that single fact spurred an irritation at the slow pace of time.

I shook off the feeling, heading to my office behind the gym’s main floor. The overhead lights buzzed softly, casting a sterile glow on the spartan room. Marcellus had left a note taped to my desk: Check in with me about the monthly emotional harvest update. Right. Another reminder of my true purpose. I curled my lip. I knew I was well above the month’s quota, but that wouldn’t stop him from dissecting every figure, every potential shortcoming.

Sitting down, I keyed in the data from my morning sessions. Rex: buoyant arrogance with an undercurrent of fear. Stirling: near-constant vanity, boosted by fleeting moments of self-loathing. Pam: absent but recently trending toward heartbreak. Summaries of their emotional arcs. All in a day's work. Then I pulled up Lily's profile once more, reviewing it again like it was a new recipe I wanted to try.

Lily Green. Real estate agent. Possibly lacking the over-the-top narcissism of some other clients. Instead, she presented a blend of stress, ambition, and the longing to transform. A perfect trifecta—if handled carefully, it could be explosive. The data was standard. Yet my reaction to it was not. I wanted to meet her sooner. I wanted to see if the intangible “spark” I sensed was real or just a figment of my bored imagination. My mouth watered.

Shutting the tablet, I stood to stretch before heading back out to the gym to meet my first afternoon client. Walking through the building, I made sure to don my standard expression of calm confidence. The staff smiled at me—some with subdued admiration, others with casual camaraderie. None had the slightest idea I was a demon, centuries old, feeding on the human psyche. My facade was bulletproof. Even so, I rehearsed it sometimes, ensuring the right posture, the right tone.

Just as I was about to leave for the night, Marcellus strolled through the main entrance. He wore tailored slacks and a crisp button-down shirt, looking more like a Fortune 500 CEO than a gym owner. Our eyes met, and his lips curved in a sharklike grin. “Ah, Damian. Just the creature from hell I wanted to see.”

I inclined my head. “Coming in to check on the new membership numbers?”

“Among other things.” He stepped closer, lowering his voice so no staff could overhear. “I trust you’ve noticed our monthly harvest is slightly below last quarter’s peak. The realm expects better.”

I suppressed a surge of annoyance. “We’re on track. We had a high last quarter because of holiday anxieties. That’s natural.”

“Perhaps. Still, I’d hate for us to stagnate.” His eyes glimmered, and for a moment, the mask slipped, revealing the ancient malice behind his human guise. “We have new sign-ups, correct?”

I offered a thin smile. “Yes. Lily Green, among others. She shows promise.”

Marcellus’s gaze sharpened. “I glanced at her file. Fragile, lacks confidence, pressed for time. Good conditions, if handled properly.”

“I know what I’m doing,” I said, failing to hide a hint of bite in my tone. “You’ll get your numbers.”

He studied me for a moment before placing a hand on my shoulder in a mock-fatherly gesture. “Relax, Strong. Just remember the plan. Keep them striving for perfection. A secure, self-satisfied client does us no good.” He gave my shoulder a squeeze, then withdrew. “I’ll be in my office if you need me.”

I watched him walk away, a wolf in businessman’s clothing. My teeth clenched. I’d grown used to his oversight, but sometimes I resented the reminder that I was leashed to demonic obligations. My sense of free will was an illusion, nearly as constructed as my persona. And now I’d be under even more scrutiny if Lily’s arrival didn’t yield fresh energy for the realm.

Stepping out onto the sidewalk, I glanced up at the swirling sky. It felt like the hush before a downpour, a charged anticipation hovering in the damp air. Something was coming. Either way, Lily’s first session couldn’t arrive soon enough.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:40 am*

Lily

All night, thunder rattled my windows and rain splattered the panes in a steady downpour, as if spring had decided to wash Sweetberry Hollow clean in one dramatic gesture. By morning, the sky was a patchwork of lingering storm clouds and tentative sunbeams, the air still cool and damp. The power of the storm had faded, but I could smell the earthy scent of wet grass and fresh puddles when I stepped onto my front porch.

I stood there for a moment, absorbing the scene—raindrops trickling off the eaves, a faint breeze carrying the promise of more showers. Today, I had my first personal training session at VitalityFit. It felt like a pivotal morning, Mother Nature's fickleness mirroring my own emotional mix of hope and anxiety.

After the fiasco at my last open house I'd realized something had to change—and quick. Amelia was close to losing her patience with me. If I didn't boost my performance, I'd be out of a job. Sure, maybe getting fit wouldn't solve everything, but the surge of self-confidence might tip the scales in my favor for better rapport with potential buyers.

So, I tugged on my black leggings, then pulled on a loose T-shirt to hide my curves and wrestled my hair into a messy bun. Dashing outside, I was careful not to slip on my rain-slicked steps and hopped into my car. The sky above was a patchy gray, but a single bright shaft of sunlight pierced through, making the pavement gleam. I took it as a sign: maybe this stormy morning could lead to a clearer path, and I crossed my fingers over the steering wheel.

Twenty minutes later, I parked outside VitalityFit. My stomach churned as I approached the sleek doors. On some level, I was terrified of looking like a total amateur in front of gym regulars.

Inside, the lobby gleamed with the same pristine perfection, the faint scent of cleaning solvents mingling with traces of fresh sweat. A receptionist behind a curved desk offered me a friendly smile. “Morning! Welcome to VitalityFit. Are you Lily Green?”

I nodded. “That’s me. I have an appointment with Damian Strong?”

“Perfect. He’ll be ready soon,” she said, gesturing toward a small waiting area. “Feel free to help yourself to water.”

I settled into a cushioned chair, clasping my hands in my lap to hide their subtle tremor. I told myself this was just a workout—no big deal—but my heartbeat thumped against my ribcage like I was about to face a panel of judges. I grabbed a paper cup and filled it with chilled water, sipping while scanning the gym. Rows of treadmills lined one side; on the other, weight machines gleamed under bright lights. A few people moved purposefully among them, earphones in, oblivious to my arrival.

After a few minutes, footsteps approached. I glanced up and froze. A tall man with broad shoulders and dark hair paused near the desk. He wore a fitted black T-shirt that hugged every huge muscle across his rock-hard chest and arms. Even from a distance, I felt an undercurrent of energy radiating off him. When our eyes met, I realized my mouth had gone dry.

This must be Damian Strong.

He approached with a measured, confident stride. Up close, I noticed his dark, intense eyes under neatly groomed brows, and a full beard framing a sharp jawline. The



handlebar mustache gave him a slightly roguish edge, which, coupled with his height, made him seem larger than life. My heart slammed against my chest.

“Lily Green?” he asked, voice low and steady.

I swallowed. “Yes. That’s me.” My words came out softer than I intended.

His gaze was direct, and I licked my lips nervously.

“Damian Strong. Ready to get started?”

The warmth of his handshake made my nerves tingle. It felt oddly intimate for a greeting between trainer and client, but I brushed the thought aside. “Sure,” I managed, forcing a shaky smile. “Lead the way.”

Damian escorted me past the cardio machines, heading toward the free weight area. My cheeks already felt hot, though the air conditioning was at full blast. I tried to focus on the polished floors, the hum of treadmills, anything but the unsettling awareness that my new trainer was... well, insanely attractive in a way I’d never quite encountered.

He stopped near a mirrored wall, turning to face me. “Let’s start with some baseline assessments. You mentioned you want more confidence—especially for your real estate job.”

I nodded, still catching my breath. “Yeah. I’m... not doing well with sales. I figure if I get in shape and project confidence, it might help.”

“Makes sense,” he said, nodding. “Physical fitness can boost self-assurance. Let’s see what you’re working with first.”

Damian guided me through basic stretches. He explained each move calmly, and I appreciated his easy demeanor. I'd half-expected a drill sergeant barking orders, but his approach was gentle—yet precise. Warm-ups led to squats, then lunges, until my thighs burned.

“Keep your core tight,” Damian reminded me. He stepped behind me, resting a hand on my lower back to guide my posture. A jolt of warmth shot through me at the contact. “Good. That’ll protect your spine.”

“O-okay,” I stammered, feeling beads of sweat forming over my brow.

We moved on to modified push-ups. My arms wobbled, but his soft encouragement—“Just a few more”—kept me from collapsing. By the time I'd finished the set, sweat trickled down my temples. “That was... intense,” I gasped, arms trembling.

He handed me a towel. “It’ll get easier, I promise. You did well for a first session.”

His praise sent a small thrill through me, but I also felt a pang of self-consciousness. I was so aware of every wobble, every shake. Yet he seemed completely focused on my form, not judging how my leggings clung to my curves like a chocolate shell over vanilla soft serve. It was... surprisingly reassuring.

We ended with some light core work, and I collapsed onto a mat, panting. My entire body felt like jelly. “I can’t believe how out of shape I am,” I muttered.

“You’re starting,” Damian said, offering a hand to help me sit up. “That’s the important part.” His gaze flickered toward the window, where the light had shifted to a muted gray—storm clouds rolling back in. “We’ll keep things simple at first.”

My heart was still thudding when I noticed the overhead lights flicker. At first, I

assumed it was just the weather messing with the power. But I caught a glimpse of Damian in the mirror, and for half a second—maybe less—I thought I saw a faint glow in his dark eyes, like a spark of amber. The hair on my arms stood up.

I blinked, and the glow was gone. My brain quickly offered a rational explanation: the building's lights must have reflected strangely in his pupils, giving them the odd transitory effect. Still, a shiver crawled across my skin. Something about the moment felt... off.

He turned to me, brow furrowed. "You okay?"

"Yeah," I said hastily, forcing a laugh. "Just seeing spots from the workout. I'll be fine."

He gave me a curious look but let it pass. "Be sure to hydrate. Muscle cramps are no fun."

I drank from my water bottle and focused on the patter of rain starting again outside, the steady hush of the gym's air system, anything to ground me.

Soon after, we moved toward a low-impact cardio section to finish up. Between the elliptical machines, I spotted a tall, manicured woman waving at Damian. She wore bright pink leggings and a full face of makeup, filming everything on her phone. She tossed him a dramatic wink.

Damian raised a hand politely. "Hey, Stirling," he said in a neutral tone. Her gaze flicked to me, momentarily assessing, before returning to her own reflection in her phone camera. She started doing squats, keeping the phone poised for a perfect angle.

I stifled a giggle at the sight. The influencer life was far from my own real estate hustle. Yet there was a pang of envy, too—I'd never had that kind of camera-ready

confidence even at my sorority formal. I sighed, facing Damian again. “People here seem pretty devoted,” I joked.

A faint smile touched his lips. “You’d be surprised at what drives them. But yes, a lot of dedication flows through these walls.”

Something in his tone suggested he saw a lot more than just workout routines, making me curious to know more. But I shrugged it off as overthinking.

By the time we finished cooling down, my breath came easier, but my muscles felt stiffening tension. Damian ran through a list of potential schedule times. “Ideally, we’ll do two sessions a week to start,” he said. “Then you’ll do at-home exercises on your off days.”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “I can handle that—I hope. It’s now or never, right?”

His gaze lingered on me, thoughtful. “Exactly. You have the drive; channel it into consistency.”

I swallowed, unsure how to respond to that calm confidence. Instead, I forced a grin. “Thanks. Honestly... I appreciate you not making me feel worse about how out-of-shape I am.”

He tilted his head. “I’m here to help, not judge. Give it time, Lily.”

For an instant, I forgot how to breathe again. The timbre in his voice, the intensity in his eyes as he looked at me—could this be more than just a trainer-client interaction? But I chalked it up to nerves. My body was still coursing with endorphins, right? I mean, the guy couldn’t possibly be interested in me—could he?

We headed toward the locker area, passing huge windows that revealed a steady fall

of rain. Outside, thick gray clouds were gathering, foreshadowing more storms to come. The overhead lights flickered again, making me glance quickly at Damian. He seemed unperturbed, guiding me to the door of the women's locker room.

"There you go," he said quietly. "Change, recover, and treat yourself to a nourishing meal with plenty of protein."

"Will do," I breathed. My pulse skittered at his nearness. "Thanks again."

He offered a slight, almost private smile. "See you soon, Lily."

I ducked into the locker room, nearing tripping over my own feet. In the mirror, my face looked flushed, curls frizzing from the humidity. I didn't even recognize my own reflection—who was this woman so flustered by a single workout session with a handsome trainer?

Get a grip , I scolded myself, splashing cold water on my cheeks. This is just adrenaline . Sure, he was easy on the eyes, but I needed to focus on improving my fitness, not daydreaming about a man so sexy his eyes might have glowed for half a heartbeat.

Dressed in fresh clothes, I emerged into the lobby to see the receptionist wave me over. "Have a great day, Lily! Damian's put you down for Tuesday afternoon?"

"Yes," I said, voice hitching. "Looking forward to it."

Rain smacked the glass entrance as I stepped outside, the sky now tinted a moody gray-green. A gust of wind whipped at my shirt, and I realized I'd left my umbrella in the car. Ducking my head, I splashed across the lot, fumbling with my keys.

Just as I reached my sedan, I noticed a figure standing beneath a dripping awning

near the side of the building. He was lean, wearing a casual jacket and jeans, and he nodded at me when our eyes met.

“You’re the new one, right?” he asked in a friendly tone. He looked about early forties, with sharp features and watchful eyes.

For a second, I tensed. “Sorry?”

He stepped forward slightly, still staying under the awning to avoid the downpour. “Name’s Harrison Slagle. I do some PI work on the side—paranormal stuff too, if you believe in that.” He shrugged. “I’ve been checking out VitalityFit. Heard interesting rumors about this place.”

A half-laugh escaped me. “Paranormal? You’re joking.”

He met my gaze squarely. “No joke. Sometimes the strangest things hide in plain sight.”

Unsettled, I forced a polite nod. “Well, I haven’t seen anything strange, other than influencer selfies and fancy equipment with AI that’s probably smarter than I am.”

“Maybe,” he said. “But keep your eyes open. And let me know if you notice anything... unusual.”

I stared as he passed me his business card, unsure how to respond. Finally, I mumbled, “I’ll keep that in mind,” and hurried to my car, water pooling around my ankles. Before I closed the door, I glanced back to see Harrison still watching, expression unreadable.

Exhaling shakily, I started the engine. The encounter left my skin crawling, but a niggles of doubt gnawed at me, and I wondered what it was that Harrison had heard

about the fitness studio.

Thunder rumbled again, and the windshield wipers thumped rhythmically as I drove. My legs were already aching from the squats, and my arms felt like lead from those push-ups. Yet underneath the physical exhaustion, a tiny ember of pride glowed. I had done it—shown up, pushed my limits, and survived. My real estate woes hadn't vanished, but maybe this new routine would ignite the change I so desperately needed.

That night, after showering and tackling some client follow-up emails, I collapsed onto my bed, every muscle throbbing. The storm winds rattled the windows. Rain hammered the roof with renewed force. Lightning occasionally flashed, illuminating my small bedroom in stark white. I found myself replaying the morning's events, focusing on the moment Damian's hand touched my lower back, the kindness in his voice, the strangeness of that fleeting glow.

My cheeks warmed at the memory. I'd never responded so viscerally to a man's presence—especially not someone I'd just met. My mind kept offering rational explanations: I was simply starved for positive reinforcement, my heart rate hadn't gotten up that high since who-knows-when, and he was exceptionally good-looking. But something tugged deeper, an undercurrent I couldn't define.

I told myself to ignore the bizarre snippet of conversation with Harrison. People saw conspiracies everywhere. Besides, even if there was something unusual about VitalityFit, it wasn't my business. I just needed to get in shape, meet my sales quotas, and keep my job.

I fell into a restless sleep as the storm raged on outside, dreaming of a man with eyes that gleamed like embers. In the dream, he stood under the pounding rain, beckoning me closer. I felt the thunder reverberate in my bones, mixing fear and an almost insatiable curiosity in equal measure. A flash of lightening jolted me awake, heart

racing and a whisper of heat curling in my belly.

It's just a dream , I told myself, pressing a hand to my chest. Fluffing my pillow, I lay back down, but further sleep eluded me.



## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:40 am*

Damian

I had no trouble siphoning energy from most of my clients at VitalityFit. Insecurities, vanity, bruised egos—the usual human frailties made for a steady, predictable feast. Yet since Lily Green walked into my orbit, my well-honed routine felt... incomplete. Every minute I spent with other clients only underscored how potent Lily's emotional energy had been.

I still remembered every breathy moan of exertion as she pushed through those final squats, the tremor in her lusciously thick thighs as she tried to maintain balance, the quick flush on her cheeks when she caught me watching her. I played it off as a typical training session, but the truth was more complicated: Lily's ambition, laced with a dash of self-doubt and a flicker of raw courage, gave her energy a layered complexity I rarely experienced. It tasted spicier and sweeter all at once, making me hunger for more.

That desire was exactly what I needed to avoid. Demons thrived on the chaos of human emotions, but the essence of our power came from detachment. We manipulated mortals since it was so easy to stoke the fires of their baser emotions—fear, greed, envy—but we never truly cared for them. What I felt for Lily wasn't mere fascination with her uniqueness; it was a deeper, more unsettling pull that I sensed could threaten the boundaries I'd perfected over centuries. Lily, unlike the others, didn't trend toward narcissism. That alone was rare. Rather, her aura was imbued with an extra bandwidth of white light, meaning that her energy vibrations were higher and stronger for compassion, encouragement, and making lemonade from lemons. She wouldn't be as easy to tempt to the dark side. I wasn't used to being matched in strength on the spiritual plane, and I found the challenge both

frustrating and enticing.

Hoping that burying myself in other clients' sessions might dull the edge of my fixation, I threw myself into the day's schedule. First up was Pam Peterson, finally having caved to my subtle pressure tactics to book another session with me and keep her appointment. She arrived tense, shoulders tight, her eyes betraying a swirl of stress. My demon perked up at the sight.

"Let's start with some light cardio," I told her, guiding her toward the elliptical machines. "Then we'll move to core exercises."

As she began pedaling, I gently coaxed out admissions about her worries. Each sigh, each resentful mention of her ex, gave me a steady drip of negative energy. I drank it in, a standard part of my demonic function. She never suspected a thing—no mortal ever did. In the mirror, I saw her posture relax slightly, as though unburdened. Her negativity flowed into me, fueling my supernatural essence, leaving her feeling superficially lighter.

Normally, I'd have relished this calm, methodical harvest. But today, it felt hollow. Even as Pam recounted her anxieties, my mind flashed back to Lily's bright, determined eyes. Frustration sparked in my chest—damn it, I had a job to do, obligations to my realm, and Lily was an unnecessary complication. If I let her become more than a client, I risked far more than losing a source of energy. I risked exposing secrets that had been tightly guarded for centuries.

I forced my attention back to Pam, offering polished smiles and encouraging words to keep her going. She finished, exhaling a relieved breath. "I'm glad I came in," she said softly, wiping her forehead. "This helps clear my head."

"That's the goal," I replied, guiding her toward the mats for some final stretches. "Stay consistent, and you'll reap both physical and mental benefits."

She thanked me, scheduled her next appointment at the front desk, and departed. I scribbled a note in my electronic log: Harvest moderate. Low risk. It was enough for the moment.

Next, I led Rex McGraw—the bodybuilding enthusiast and owner of Apex Luxury Customs—through a grueling chest-and-back routine. Rex practically vibrated with self-importance, bragging incessantly about an upcoming competition and how he planned to outshine everyone on stage. His vanity poured off him in waves, fueling me with bursts of arrogance and simmering aggression. Easy feeding, as always.

Between sets, he flexed in the mirror, eyeing himself. “Guess who’s about to corner the market?” he boasted. “I just got a call yesterday from Hollywood about a potential reality show!”

I offered a knowing smirk, adding a little flattery to stoke his ego. “If anyone has the drive to grab that golden ring, it’s you, bro.”

He grinned, nodding appreciatively. His self-confidence burned bright, a near-perfect emotional fix for me—but still, it felt curiously unsatisfying. Rex’s brand of ambition was shallow, a single note of puffed-up pride. Even as I stood next to him, I found myself tuning out his next round of bragging, longing instead for the memory of Lily’s nuanced emotional tapestry. And the way her curves kicked up my pulse in a way no treadmill ever could.

“Damian?” Rex prompted, snapping me out of my musings.

“Right,” I said, feigning focus. “Let’s move to your cable rows. Keep your shoulders down, back straight.”

He followed my instructions, too lost in the mirror’s reflection to notice my slight distraction. I silently chastised myself: a demon with centuries of practice in

emotional manipulation shouldn't be daydreaming about a mortal. Yet something about Lily's energy clung to me, refusing to be overshadowed by standard feedings like Rex's.

Finally free of appointments, I retreated to a small staff lounge at the back of VitalityFit. The lounge was little more than a plain room with a few chairs, a table, and a locker for personal belongings. I needed a moment to clear my head, but even there, I found no respite. Lily's face occupied my thoughts, along with the memory of how her body tensed when I corrected her form, the breathy little exhales she made when pushing through a set.

She'd texted me the night before—a quick message thanking me for the session, mentioning how sore she felt yet oddly proud. I'd replied with mild encouragement, advising her to stretch and stay hydrated. Her appreciative response had sparked a rush of warmth in my chest. It was the most mundane conversation, but inside I yearned for more.

I stood by the wall, trying to bury the notion of wanting her on a personal level. Part of me questioned whether I was simply addicted to the high of her emotional resonance, like some people trended towards sugar or alcohol addiction. Another part worried it ran deeper, that I craved her as a person rather than just a feed source.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. For a split second, I hoped it was Lily. Instead, the screen displayed a new text from Marcellus: We'll need your monthly numbers soon. Any issues with new clients?

I typed a curt reply: No issues. Lily Green shows promise. Others are stable.

Marcellus responded almost immediately: Keep an eye on her. We expect higher yields from cases like hers.

I deleted the conversation and exhaled slowly. I'd never admitted to Marcellus that Lily was affecting me. If he suspected I was losing my usual edge, I'd be in hot water. No demon was indispensable, and I knew how quickly Marcellus would replace me if I turned incompetent or—worse—became compromised by human attachments.

Leaving the lounge, I headed down a corridor that opened into the main gym space. At that moment, Harrison Slagle stepped into my path. I recognized him instantly: the private investigator with a suspicious glint in his eye. He hadn't officially signed up for a membership, but he lingered around VitalityFit under various pretexts—"scoping out local businesses," he claimed. At first, I'd assumed he was investigating one of our clients—possibly having been retained by a spouse or significant other to find out if they were having an affair. However, enough time had passed that now I suspected that his real purpose for hanging around may run deeper.

"Mr. Slagle," I greeted, forcing a polite smile. "Looking to join us today?"

He smirked, glancing around. "Still evaluating. A friend of mine dropped by recently—told me I should come in."

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. "We aim to provide premium service."

He studied my expression, clearly unconvinced. "I keep hearing how trainers here can spark almost miraculous transformations. People's careers turn around, their attitudes shift drastically. All thanks to the 'motivation' provided by VitalityFit."

The subtext in his words was hard to miss. I schooled my features into cool indifference. "We believe in a holistic approach."

"And you, specifically." Harrison looked me over. "Everyone says you're the top trainer—push clients to their limits, but in just the right way."

His probing tone set my teeth on edge. If Lily had mentioned me to him, that would be a complication. The last thing I needed was her confiding in an investigator whose range of subject matter may be problematic. “I do my job,” I said simply.

“Ever work with a real estate agent named Lily Green?” he asked.

My pulse kicked, but I forced a calm expression. “She’s one of many new clients. Why?”

He shrugged, scanning my face as if searching for cracks. “Just heard she’s been unusually motivated. Must be some training if she’s seeing changes so fast.”

“Early success can be a powerful motivator,” I replied, keeping my tone even. “She’s invested. That’s all it takes.”

Harrison nodded, gaze lingering. “Must be nice to watch people transform. Well, I won’t keep you. But maybe we’ll chat again soon.”

Before I could respond, he walked off, heading toward the exit. I watched him go, unease prickling at the base of my neck. If he kept sniffing around Lily, she might start asking questions, and I feared my pull for her might make me vulnerable, weakening my ability to resist answering her questions truthfully. I couldn’t allow that.

In the aftermath of Harrison’s departure, I drifted through the gym in a haze of agitation. Rationally, I knew what had to be done: keep Lily close, ensure she remained reliant on me for her progress, and if necessary, divert her from contacting Harrison about anything odd. Any sign of supernatural involvement had to be downplayed or hidden.

Yet a deeper part of me bristled at the idea of deceiving her. The notion that I might

sabotage her trust for the sake of my realm felt like betrayal, though I had no right to moralize. I was a demon, after all. Deceit was part of the job description, the reason I was here. But Lily's sincerity made me resent my role in a way that felt dangerously close to guilt—an emotion I wasn't supposed to possess.

I forced myself to focus on the daily tasks—checking the free weight racks for disarray, stopping to correct a client's shoulder alignment during overhead presses—but everything felt mechanical. My mind kept returning to Lily, her parted lips and uncertain smiles, the warmth in her voice whenever we spoke. The unsettling fact that there was something about her that made me want to see her smile for its own sake, not because I planned to exploit her next wave of self-criticism.

As I locked up my office, my phone vibrated, signaling in incoming text: Lily . A hesitant kind of excitement flickered through me as I opened the message: Hey, hope I'm not interrupting. Just wanted to say my arms are killing me—but in a weirdly good way. Wanted to ask if you have any suggestions for quick relief? Or should I just tough it out?

A slow smile crept across my lips. Even something as mundane as her complaining about sore arms brightened my mood in a way that wasn't exactly rational.

I typed back, fighting the urge to grin: Gentle stretching is good, but a light massage can work wonders too—if you don't mind someone's hands on you. It'd help ease that soreness.

My thumb hovered over “send,” a flicker of adrenaline reminding me I was flirting with a mortal who sparked a dangerous interest in me. Normally, any mention of extra “services” would be a technique to harvest more emotional intensity. With Lily, it felt more real—like I was indulging myself rather than just manipulating her.

She replied seconds later: Hands on me, huh? I guess that depends on whose hands...

A slow warmth spread through my chest. This was reckless, but my demon side thrived on high-stakes situations. I allowed a bit of innuendo to slip into my next text: If you can handle mine, I can probably squeeze you in. Literally. Although my rates do go up for post-workout rubdowns.

Her next message popped up almost immediately: I'm sure I can manage your "rates" if the results are worth it. Is there a guarantee?

I laughed under my breath. A demon should maintain cool detachment, but Lily's wit and the sultry hint in her words made my pulse pound. I typed: I guarantee I'm the right guy for the job. You just keep showing up ready to work—your arms won't be the only thing feeling good.

I sent it before I could overthink. Part of me worried I was crossing a line that Marcellus would never approve of—getting personally involved with a client, blurring that trainer-client dynamic. Yet, being who I was, I threw caution to the wind anyway.

Tucking my phone into my pocket, I slung my bag over my shoulder and left VitalityFit for the night. A final text buzzed as the doors swung behind me and I reached for the device:

Deal. I'll bring extra water—and we'll see if those magic hands of yours live up to the hype.

A low thrill curled through me. Here I was, a demon tasked with harvesting mortal insecurities, openly flirting with a woman who threatened to undo my carefully cultivated detachment. If I wasn't careful, I'd lose control of the situation—or worse, lose myself in whatever Lily awakened within me.

For now, I'd ride the line between duty and desire, convincing myself I had



everything under control. But as I walked away, the echo of her teasing words—and the promise I'd just made—proved that control was the last thing on my mind.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:40 am*

Lily

My life had taken a dramatic turn these past couple of weeks. The workouts at VitalityFit, my sessions with Damian—all of it had boosted my confidence in ways I never imagined. My boss at Crestwood Real Estate actually patted me on the back for closing a few key deals. Instead of worrying every minute about losing my job, I was starting to believe in my own competence. I wasn't waking up in cold sweats anymore. Instead, I woke with a tingle of excitement, a sense of possibility. My grandmother was right—which deep down I'd always known—new beginnings were everywhere if you just opened your eyes.

Apparently, this shift hadn't gone unnoticed. Maya ambushed me at the office break room, arms folded and a playful smirk on her face. "Okay, spill, Ms. Sunshine. What's your secret? You've been practically glowing since you started these training sessions. I want in."

I blinked. "You? At VitalityFit?"

Maya shrugged. "Why not? I'm tired of being the one behind the desk, watching you breeze in with a new burst of energy. You're making me look lazy." She sighed dramatically, then grinned. "Seriously, though—if this fitness thing works for you, maybe it'll work for me too."

For a second, my heart skipped. My "secret," of course, was more than just standard exercise. I'd developed an insane crush on my demonically gorgeous trainer. Though I'd never say that out loud, the thought alone sent a flush to my cheeks.

“Sure,” I said lightly, trying not to reveal the flutter in my stomach. “I can help you schedule a consultation. Maybe you’ll find your own Damian.”

Maya wagged a finger. “Don’t you hog all the hot guys. Actually, I’d prefer a female trainer anyway—someone who gets that I’m not looking to star on an infomercial.”

I laughed. “Deal. Let’s do it, then. I’ll meet you at the gym after work.”

Late afternoon saw us both rushing from the office to VitalityFit. Maya clutched her workout bag, tossing me pointed looks every few minutes. I suspected she wanted more juicy details about what was going on between me and my trainer, but she held off—for now.

The lobby was abuzz with the usual after-work crowd, but I spotted a desk worker guiding Maya toward intake forms. My stomach flipped at the prospect of seeing Damian—especially knowing we’d scheduled a “massage” after my session. That word alone made my pulse jump. We’d been flirting shamelessly about it over text, and the day had finally arrived.

Maya waved me over. “Hey, Lily—meet my new trainer!” She nodded toward a tall, athletic woman with braided hair and a confident smile.

“I’m Tasha,” the woman said, shaking my hand. “You must be Lily. Heard you’ve been getting results with Damian.”

I tried not to blush. “Yeah, something like that. Good luck with Maya—she can be a handful.”

Maya elbowed me. “Says the woman who’s practically glowing. Watch out, Tasha—once she sets her mind to something, she’s all in. Oh, and Lily,” she added in a lower tone, “I want details later.”

Before I could respond, a familiar presence swept up behind me, sending heat through my chest. Damian rested a light hand on my shoulder, and I turned to introduce him.

“Damian, this is my friend and our office manager extraordinaire at Crestwood, Maya Lopez,” I said, unable to keep the smile from my voice. “Maya, here’s the legendary trainer I mentioned.”

Damian’s gaze flicked warmly over Maya before returning to me. “Nice to meet you,” he said politely, offering her a firm handshake.

“Likewise,” Maya replied, arching a teasing brow at me before addressing him. “She’s been talking up these workouts—guess I’ll see what all the fuss is about.”

We shared a quick laugh, then Tasha led Maya off to the free weight area. As if on cue, Damian turned his full attention my way, that slow, knowing grin sending a pleasant shiver along my spine.

“All set?” he asked quietly, his voice low.

I nodded, trying not to imagine how this evening would end, even though I’d been doing just that practically every night since blocking out my calendar. “Definitely.”

Heart pounding, I followed him across the gym floor, visions of what might happen later dancing in my head. The session that followed felt supercharged with anticipation. Damian’s touch lingered a little more than usual when he adjusted my form. The brush of his fingers along my waist and the pressure of his palm between my shoulder blades sent sparks through my body. My mind kept straying to the many fantasies I’d spun late at night—the same ones that compelled me to take care of business the second I got home. I tried to concentrate on the exercises, but I knew the real reason my face was flushed.

From across the gym, Maya shot me a conspiratorial grin as she stretched her arms overhead, as if to say, I know something's up. I gave her a small wave and then turned my full attention back to Damian. The look in his eyes suggested he was equally restless, and I sensed we were both counting the minutes until closing time.

By the time the overhead lights began to dim and the last clients filed out, my heart was in my throat. I caught a glimpse of Maya departing the weight room with Tasha. She gave me one last playful wink before disappearing in the direction of the women's locker room. Within minutes, the entire building seemed hushed—except for the accelerated thump of my pulse.

Damian approached, gaze flicking over my face, then down my body. “Ready?” he asked softly.

His voice held a possessive note I hadn't heard before, and it sent warmth racing through my core. I swallowed. “More than ready.”

He led me down a quiet hallway toward a private room I'd never seen before. It was smaller than the main training rooms, lit by a soft, muted glow. At its center stood a padded massage table, fresh linens folded neatly on top. My skin prickled with nerves and excitement. Yes.

Damian shut the door behind us, turning the lock with a subtle click that sent a rush of electricity through me. “You can get comfortable,” he said, voice low. “I'll grab the oil.”

I nodded, letting out a shaky breath. When he stepped out, I began shedding my clothes—every stitch. My bra and panties landed on a nearby chair. Heat rose in my cheeks as I crawled under the crisp sheets face down, naked as the day I was born. This was actually happening. Oh God, please let it be happening.

The sound of approaching footsteps followed by a soft knock on the door alerted me to his return.

“All set?” he called, opening the door anyway.

“Yes,” I squeaked.

“Let me take care of you, Lily,” he said, voice low, before sliding the sheet down, baring my back and buttocks to the cool air and drizzling oil along my spine.

At first, his touch was purely therapeutic—skilled hands pressing into my muscles, coaxing away tension. I sighed, letting the stress melt from my body. But each glide of his palms left a trail of heat in its wake, my senses buzzing. The friction built with every stroke.

I let out a soft moan. “Damian,” I breathed.

His responding chuckle vibrated against my ear. “Feel good?”

I nodded, unable to form real words. The man kneading my muscles was no ordinary masseur; he was my personal trainer, someone who knew my body's capabilities and limits, who pushed me to achieve them during every grueling session.

"Relax," he murmured, his voice a deep timbre that vibrated through my frame, sending ripples of something far more dangerous than mere relaxation coursing through my veins. His touch lingered, awakening every nerve ending in my skin.

His fingers dipped lower, pressing into the small of my back before sliding over the curve of my hips. He feathered his touch across my thighs, each stroke deliberate and full of a promise that made my breath stutter. My hips involuntarily lifted toward his hands, seeking more of that intoxicating pressure. The only sound in the room was

my shallow, uneven breaths, echoing the erratic thrumming of my heart.

The scent of the oil he used—a heady mix of sandalwood and lavender—filled the air, mingling with the deeper musk of our bodies. It was an aphrodisiac, lulling me into a haze of desire, where only his touch, his presence mattered.

"Is this okay?" he asked, his breath hot against the nape of my neck, and even that simple question seemed laden with a sensual weight.

"More than okay," I managed to gasp out, as his hands ventured closer to the edge of the sheet, teasing the boundary between professional and decidedly not.

With a boldness spurred by the aching need within me, I shifted, allowing the fabric to slip enough to reveal the full crest of my buttocks. Damina's hands stilled momentarily, and then, as if accepting an unspoken invitation, they resumed their exploration, now freed from any pretense of professionalism.

Every glide of his palms sent shivers of anticipation down my spine, pooling a liquid fire low in my belly. Tension coiled tighter within me, wound up by his expert touch until I was nothing but a quivering mass of need beneath him.

"Please," I breathed out, unable to form any other words, my plea clear in the hitch of my hips and the desperate arch of my back.

He didn't need any further encouragement. The veil of restraint shattered, and his hands claimed me with a possessiveness that matched the wild drumming of my pulse. He smoothed over my skin, spreading the oil like an artist priming his canvas, before delving into the molten core of my desire.

"God, yes," I cried out as he found the center of my pleasure, coaxing a rhythm from my body as I spiraled, and the world narrowed to the point of sweet, unbearable

friction that promised release from the exquisite torment he inflicted.

"Let go," he urged, and it was all the permission I needed to shatter into a thousand brilliant pieces, my climax washing over me in waves that left me gasping, spent, and utterly his. The sensation was overwhelming, yet I craved more—more of him, more of this consuming blaze he set alight within me.

"More, please," I whispered, my voice barely a thread of sound amid the charged silence of the room.

His breath ghosted over the delicate skin of my neck, sending tingles cascading down my spine before his mouth found my shoulder in a soft bite that melted into a kiss, sending sparks skittering down my spine.

Like a silent command, I turned under his guiding hands, letting the sheet slip entirely from my body. His gaze slid over my exposed form, and for a moment, I reveled in the pure admiration reflecting in his dark eyes—like I was something precious he'd waited to claim.

I reached for him, pulling him into a desperate kiss that told him without words how badly I wanted him. Our tongues tangled in a feverish exchange, his taste flooding my senses.

He murmured something unintelligible against my lips, and I tugged his shirt over his head, revealing the muscled torso I'd admired countless times, though never quite like this—up close, personal, and charged with carnal intent.

Heart hammering, I reached lower, pushing at his pants. A thrill of anticipation roared through me when I freed him from the last scrap of fabric. The sight of his erection made my belly tighten, a wave of longing rolling through me so strong it nearly stole my breath.



Our gazes locked. His eyes brimmed with an otherworldly intensity that both frightened and enthralled me, as if he were more than just a man—some fiercely sensual creature who'd slipped into human guise to seduce and ensnare me. And I wanted it just as much as he did.

Damian hovered above me, and in that moment, the world seemed to hold its breath. Every nerve in my body sang for him. His strong hands slid beneath my thighs, positioning me precisely where he wanted me, and I let out a shaky moan when the tip of his cock brushed against my slick heat.

“You’re so beautiful,” he breathed, voice rough with desire. His lips crashed onto mine again, devouring my gasp as he pressed forward, sinking into me with a slow, deliberate thrust. The stretch burned in the most exquisite way, my body clenching around him, welcoming the invasion with unbridled hunger.

A gasp broke from me at the overwhelming sensation of being filled so perfectly. The room shrank— we were flesh to flesh, heartbeat to heartbeat. Every roll of his hips sent a bolt of pleasure through me, a mounting tension that echoed the frantic pounding of my pulse.

I clutched at his rock-hard shoulders, nails biting into his skin, urging him deeper, faster. Our bodies moved in a primal rhythm, the slick sound of our joining mingling with our ragged breathing. Each thrust built an aching pressure low in my belly, a need that clamored for release.

“Oh, God,” I groaned, arching my back as he angled his hips to graze a spot inside me that caused fireworks to burst behind my eyelids. Ecstasy coiled within me, ready to snap. My moans grew louder, unashamed, and raw.

He growled my name, his tempo increasing. The friction, the heat, the pure euphoria of it all consumed my thoughts. My climax hovered just out of reach, taunting me

until a final, powerful thrust launched me over the edge. I shattered, a rush of pleasure exploding through my center, wracking my body with wave after wave of bliss that left me trembling and breathless.

He followed moments later, a low groan rumbling from his chest as he found his own release. Warmth flooded me, his body shuddering against mine, heartbeats thundering in tandem.

For a long moment, neither of us spoke, lost in the echo of our shared ecstasy. I clung to him, my breath still ragged, my body boneless from pleasure. Eventually, he eased out of me, collapsing at my side. We lay there in a tangle of limbs and cooling sweat, the oil on our skin still fragrant with sandalwood and lavender, now mingling with the musk of our sex.

I turned my head, meeting his gaze. Something in his eyes made my stomach flutter—a flicker of tenderness, yes, but also a deep, primal power. I couldn't make sense of it; I only knew I wanted him...again and again.

He brushed a thumb across my parted lips, a small, reverent smile curving his mouth. "You okay?" he asked softly.

My chest still heaved, lungs searching for oxygen in the heavy air. "More than okay," I whispered, voice hoarse.

A laugh broke from him—low and warm, laced with satisfaction. He pressed a kiss to my forehead, then slid his hand to cradle the nape of my neck. For a moment, I considered pressing him for answers—demanding to know who (or what) he truly was. But all the words got lost in the glow of aftershocks rippling through me.

I exhaled, letting my head loll back. I've just given myself to a man who feels almost inhuman, I thought, and I'm not afraid. If anything, I was exhilarated, breathless, and

utterly consumed by him.

We lay there, hearts slowing to a steady beat, and I knew one truth with absolute certainty: I was in way over my head, but I had no intention of detaching myself from this man. He might be a beast in disguise, like some sort of paranormal hero straight out of my favorite romance novels, but at that moment, reality and fantasy blurred into one perfect moment of bliss.

A tingle of caution warned me that normal life wasn't this intense, that no ordinary human should radiate such raw magnetism. Yet I found myself clinging to him all the same, willing to risk everything if it meant having him. Because maybe the impossible really could be true if I was only willing to believe.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:40 am*

Damian

I stepped out of the shower, water droplets racing down my arms like they were fleeing the scene of a crime. Grabbing a fresh towel from the cabinet by the locker-room sink, I tried to steady my breathing. My heart thundered, and not just from the post-workout high or the steamy shower—but from the emotional hurricane Lily had unleashed inside me.

Tonight had obliterated every boundary I'd so carefully constructed over centuries. Instead of merely feeding on Lily's delicious cocktail of emotions—the way any respectable demon should—I'd gone and done the unthinkable. I'd felt something. Not just lust, not mere hunger, but tenderness. Care. Protectiveness.

Love.

Ugh. Even thinking the word made my stomach do a humiliating little flip. Demons don't do love. We're ancient collectors of human emotions, duty-bound to manipulate, gather, and feed. Love, in my world, was about as real as unicorns farting rainbows.

And yet.

The tenderness that washed over me while holding Lily in my arms, the inexplicable comfort of simply lying beside her afterward—it had awakened something I hadn't experienced in centuries of dark existence. Something dangerously close to...happiness.

I tugged on clean black sweats, forcing my uneven breath into submission. Pull

yourself together, idiot. You can't afford to be reckless. The mental pep talk fell embarrassingly flat. Lily had stirred a longing in me that defied every demonic handbook: a craving for honesty, for a future, for something stable and real—things no self-respecting demon had any business wanting.

Brushing water droplets from my chest, I caught my reflection in the locker room mirrors. My eyes glowed faintly—that telltale flicker of demonic energy I usually masked as effortlessly as humans hide their morning breath. Lately, it had been harder to control, like trying to stuff a wolverine into a sock. My powers had been fluctuating ever since Lily crashed into my life with her intoxicating blend of vulnerability and strength. But after tonight's... activities, the shift was undeniable.

Because this wasn't about stoking the flames of her insecurities anymore. It wasn't about cultivating her ambition until it bloomed into the kind of deliciously negative energy that demons like me typically feast upon. She'd touched me in ways no mortal had before—and not just physically, though there had been plenty of that too.

My chest tightened at the memory of her body against mine—warm, responsive, gloriously alive. I'd never let a human get this close, never wanted to. Demons don't do vulnerability. But Lily...she'd disarmed me completely, made me question a mission I'd carried out for centuries without a second thought.

Slipping into my training shoes, I raked fingers through my still-damp hair. Lily had left a few minutes ago—deliciously exhausted and wearing the kind of satisfied smile that would make angels blush. My mind replayed our encounter with embarrassing clarity: her flushed cheeks, the softness of her gasps, the way she'd whispered my name like it was a prayer instead of the label of a creature who'd spent millennia manipulating humans with evil intentions.

It had felt so real. And it left me feeling something as foreign to demon-kind as photosynthesis: hope . A sense of possibility I'd never dared consider before.

My realm wouldn't exactly throw a parade for this development. Marcellus had never explicitly banned getting physically involved with humans. Sex was just another tool in our arsenal, after all. But forming genuine emotional attachments? That was strictly forbidden. We existed to harvest humans' emotional energies, not to write them poetry or remember their birthdays.

If Marcellus discovered I not only had feelings for Lily but also had no intention of continuing to feed on her negative emotions, the consequences would make the Spanish Inquisition look like a day at the spa.

I exhaled slowly, watching my breath fog the mirror slightly. Would betraying my realm for her be worth it? I'd asked myself that question approximately eight thousand times in the last few days, but now it felt less hypothetical and more like a life-or-death matter. Which it technically was. Something inside me had cracked open, like a piece of my demonic essence fracturing under the weight of Lily's warmth.

My chest constricted again with that rush of unfamiliar emotion, and suddenly the overhead lights flickered. A low hum rattled through the building, making me jerk in alarm. The intensity of my energy must have surged beyond my control—something that rarely happened unless I was mid-battle or dangerously off-balance.

"Stay calm," I muttered to myself, feeling ridiculous. "Just a power flare." I closed my eyes, attempting to steady the swirl of confusing feelings. The overhead lights settled momentarily, but a sharp crack yanked my attention toward the far wall. A nearby mirror developed a fissure running diagonally across its surface.

My stomach dropped. I didn't even touch it. My powers had never been this unstable, not in centuries of existence. I'd known my control was slipping since Lily entered my life, but this was different. If I couldn't keep my demonic strength in check, I risked revealing myself in ways no amount of charm or misdirection could explain

away.

Suddenly, a soft gasp echoed from the hallway.

I froze, every muscle tensing. Turning slowly, I spotted a figure standing at the entrance to the weight room. Slivers of residual light bathed her face, highlighting wide, startled eyes. Maya. Lily's friend and assistant. The woman who'd come in for a training session with Tasha tonight. She stared at me, then at the cracked mirror, connecting dots I desperately needed to remain disconnected.

Panic surged through me. If Maya had witnessed me accidentally shatter glass without touching it, what else might she suspect? That I wasn't just Lily's suspiciously attractive trainer? That demons walk among humans, infiltrating their gyms and dating their friends?

"Maya," I said, keeping my voice low and measured, like I was talking to a spooked animal. "What are you still doing here? The gym closed thirty minutes ago." I'd locked the door after Lily left. Hadn't I?

She fidgeted, obviously frightened but attempting to hide it. "I—I left my phone. Realized halfway to my car." Her voice trembled slightly. "The front door was open."

I cursed inwardly. My attention had been so thoroughly consumed by Lily that I'd forgotten basic security protocols.

I forced my expression into something approximating normal human concern, stepping forward carefully. "You...you shouldn't be here right now."

Her gaze flicked between me and the freshly cracked mirror, then down to the floor where her phone lay. She swallowed hard. "Yeah," she murmured. "I just...saw a light flicker. And that mirror...it—"

I scrambled for an explanation, but my mind was embarrassingly blank. Lying felt pointless anyway; the damage was done.

She bent swiftly, snatching up her phone from the floor as if it might protect her. "Guess I found it," she said weakly. Without another word, she spun on her heel and hurried out before I could protest or insist she stay.

"Maya—" I started, but she was already gone, footsteps echoing down the corridor. A heartbeat later, the front door opened and closed, leaving a hush that felt suffocating.

Damn it . I pressed a hand to my temple. Of all the times to slip up. Maya might pretend ignorance, but from the wide-eyed look she wore, she'd absolutely seen the mirror crack under the force of my power. And once she told Lily...

I swallowed, fear gnawing at me with razor-sharp teeth. Lily would demand an explanation. Could I keep lying to her—especially after what we'd shared? The taste of her lips still lingered on mine, the echo of her pleasure still reverberating through my body.

"No ," I whispered under my breath. Lying was no longer an option. Lily deserved to know the truth, no matter how impossible it might sound. The thought of losing her—seeing revulsion in those eyes that had looked at me with such trust—twisted my gut, but the alternative felt worse: continuing to deceive her while claiming I cared.

I locked up properly this time, then killed the overhead lights. The place transformed into a maze of shadows, the faint glow of exit signs casting eerie red light over the rows of equipment. My footsteps echoed ominously as I made a final circuit, ensuring all was secure.

As I double-checked the back doors, my mind spun with the potential fallout of



revealing myself to Lily. My realm would never permit this transgression. Demons like me existed to manipulate humans for our own gain, to feed on their misery and fear. If Marcellus discovered my plans, I'd be lucky to escape with mere banishment to the lowest circles of hell.

Yet beneath the anxiety, I felt strangely... peaceful? The endless cycle of seduction, feeding, and discarding had worn on me for longer than I cared to admit. Now, a new path beckoned, illuminated by Lily's white light, though it was riddled with uncertainty.

Could the demonic realm simply release me? Let me go with a stern warning and a "don't call us, we'll call you"? Or would I have to fight for my freedom—possibly against beings who'd taught me everything I knew about combat?

I tugged on the back door, verifying it was locked. A slight tremor ran through my fingers, the residual effect of my powers flaring. Typically, feeding on a mortal's negative emotions stabilized my energy. But I'd ceased drawing from Lily's insecurities. Instead, I'd nourished myself on something else: mutual caring and affection.

And it changed me. I no longer felt the hunger for the old manipulations, the twisted pursuit of despair or fear. It was like a void had opened in me and been filled with Lily's warmth, leaving no room for my realm's shadows. I felt stronger, more alive—and infinitely more vulnerable.

"All done," I muttered, flipping the corridor light off. My footsteps carried me back toward the main entrance, keys clutched in my hand, mind wrestling with questions I couldn't answer. What if Lily rejects me once she knows the truth? I wouldn't blame her.

But every fiber of my being needed to do this—no more lies, no more half-truths. If

there was a chance in hell that we could forge a future together, honesty was the only path forward.

The memory of Lily's body pressed against mine earlier that night sent a fresh wave of longing through me. The softness of her skin under my fingertips, the way she'd arched against me, demanding more. The sweet sound of her gasps as I'd taken her to the edge and beyond, again and again. The unexpected tenderness in her eyes afterward as she'd traced patterns on my chest, unknowingly touching runes that had been carved into my soul eons ago.

I stepped out into the cool night air, locking the door of the fitness center behind me. The parking lot was empty save for my sleek black Audi. The night was silent as I walked to my car, the only sound my keys jingling in my hand and my steps across the pavement.

Tomorrow , I decided. Tomorrow I would tell Lily everything. About my true nature, about my original mission to feed on her ambition and insecurity, about how something had gone catastrophically, wonderfully wrong and I'd fallen for her instead. I'd tell her about Maya witnessing my powers, about the danger my realm posed to both of us if they discovered my betrayal.

And then I'd let her decide. If she thought I was nuts, if she wanted me gone—if the truth was too much—I'd disappear from her life as completely as if I'd never existed. The thought sent a lance of pain through me so sharp I nearly doubled over in the parking lot.

But if she somehow accepted me...if she was willing to face the risks together...then perhaps there was hope for a creature like me after all.

I slid into my car, the leather seat cool against my back. Starting the engine, I allowed myself a moment to imagine a future with Lily—mornings waking up beside her,

evenings spent in comfortable silence, a lifetime of moments both extraordinary and mundane. It was a dangerous fantasy for a demon to indulge in, but I couldn't help myself. She'd become as essential to me in a flash of blinding light as the darkness once was.

As I pulled out of the parking lot, the gym fading in my rearview mirror, I felt a strange sense of anticipation mingled with dread. The entire night felt like standing on a threshold—and beyond it lay either ruin or redemption.

For the first time in centuries, I was willing to risk everything for something that mattered more than power or obligation or the insatiable hunger of my kind. Even if it meant burning bridges I could never rebuild. Even if it meant facing Marcellus and the full wrath of the demonic council.

Some things, I was discovering, were worth the flames.

The traffic light ahead turned red, and I stopped, drumming my fingers on the steering wheel. My phone buzzed in the cup holder—a text from Lily: Made it home safe. Still thinking about tonight. See you tomorrow?

A smile tugged at my lips despite the storm clouds gathering in my mind. I typed back a quick response: Wouldn't miss it. Sleep well.

What I didn't add was: Because tomorrow I tell you I'm a demon, and it might be our last day together.

The light turned green, and I accelerated into the night, toward whatever fate awaited a demon foolish enough to fall in love with a human. Toward Lily, toward truth, toward the terrifying possibility of rejection—or the even more terrifying possibility of acceptance.

Either way, nothing would ever be the same again. And for once in my immortal existence, that didn't seem like such a bad thing.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:40 am*

Lily

The frantic pounding on my front door startled me awake. I bolted upright, heart racing, my bedside clock glaring 11:47 PM in angry red digits. Who could possibly be at my door at this hour?

I stumbled out of bed, still groggy from dreams filled with Damian—his touch, his lips, the way he'd held me after we'd made love at the gym. The memory sent a flush of warmth through me despite my irritation at being woken.

The pounding continued. "Lily! Open up!" Maya's voice, high and panicked, filtered through the door.

I rushed to unlock it, worry replacing my annoyance. Maya nearly fell into my apartment, her face pale, eyes wide with something that looked disturbingly like fear.

"Maya? What's wrong?" I guided her to my couch. She was trembling, her normally perfect makeup smudged beneath her eyes.

"It's Damian," she gasped, still trying to catch her breath. "There's something... not right about him."

My stomach clenched. I'd had my suspicions for weeks—little things that didn't quite add up, moments when something ancient and unfamiliar flickered in his eyes, instances when the air around him seemed charged with an energy I couldn't explain.

"What happened?" I kept my voice steady, though my pulse had accelerated.

"I forgot my phone at the gym," Maya said, her voice steadying slightly as she recounted her story. "When I went back to get it, I saw him in the locker room. He was just... standing there, and his eyes—" She shuddered. "They were glowing, Lily. Actually glowing. And then the lights started flickering, and this mirror cracked. It just split right down the middle, and he never even touched it."

I sat back, processing her words while trying to maintain a calm exterior. "Maya, it was late, you were probably tired after your session with Tasha. Those workouts can be brutal. Maybe you were dehydrated or—"

"Don't." She cut me off with uncharacteristic sharpness. "Don't try to explain this away. I know what I saw. There's something weird going on with him."

I sighed, running a hand through my sleep-tousled hair. "Okay. Let's say something strange happened. Why come to me at midnight instead of calling?"

"Because you've gotten so close to him!" The words burst out of her. "You're at that gym all the time, he's your trainer, and you talk about him constantly. And whatever he is, you need to be careful."

The concern in her voice was genuine. I hadn't told Maya about the shift in my relationship with Damian—about our moment of passion at the gym just hours ago. It was too new, too intense, too confusing even to myself. But her worry for me was touching, even if she didn't know the full extent of my connection to him.

"I'm not in danger, Maya." The words felt hollow even as I spoke them.

She gripped my hands, her eyes searching mine. "How can you be sure? The way that mirror cracked... it wasn't natural, Lily. And the look on his face when he saw me—like he'd been caught doing something forbidden."

My stomach dropped. I knew it. My hunches had been right—there was something

strange about Damian, something that went beyond his mysterious past and the way he seemed to understand my deepest insecurities before I voiced them. And I was going to find out exactly what it was.

"I'll talk to him," I promised, squeezing her hands reassuringly. "First thing tomorrow."

Maya looked unconvinced but nodded. "Just... be careful, okay? There's something not human about the way he looked tonight."

Not human . The phrase echoed in my mind long after I'd calmed Maya down, wished her goodnight, and returned to my restless bed. It shouldn't have made sense, yet somehow it did—a missing puzzle piece that explained all the little inconsistencies I'd noticed about Damian from the beginning.

Sleep eluded me for the rest of the night. By morning, determination had replaced confusion. I needed answers, and I needed them now.

VitalityFit was quiet when I pushed through the doors at 5 AM, still an hour before the first private training clients would arrive. I knew Damian would be here—he always came early to prepare for the day, to enjoy the solitude before the gym filled with people seeking transformation.

I found him in his office, bent over his laptop. He looked up when I entered, surprise and something like relief washing over his features.

"Lily." My name on his lips still sent a shiver through me, even now. "I wasn't expecting you this early."

"We need to talk." My voice was steadier than I felt. "Not here. Somewhere private."

Concern darkened his eyes. "Did Maya speak with you?"

The confirmation that he knew why I was here only strengthened my resolve. "Yes. And you're going to explain to me what she saw."

He held my gaze for a long moment before nodding. "Not here," he agreed, rising from his desk. "Follow me."

I trailed him through the gym, past the weights where we'd first met, past the aerobics room where he'd guided me through my first brutal HIIT session, past the private training area and massage room where, just days ago, we'd crossed the line from trainer and client to something far more intimate. Instead of stopping at any of these familiar places, he led me out the back door into the alley behind the building.

The morning air was crisp, the alley quiet except for distant traffic. Damian paced a few steps away, then turned to face me. In the unforgiving morning light, he looked both devastatingly handsome and utterly foreign—like someone I knew intimately and not at all.

"Maya saw something last night," I began, needing to break the tense silence. "Something about you that frightened her. She said your eyes were glowing, that you broke a mirror without touching it."

Damian didn't deny it. He simply watched me, his expression guarded but resigned, as if he'd known this moment would come.

"What are you?" I asked finally, the question that had been building in me for weeks.

He exhaled slowly.

"I'm a demon." He spoke the words matter-of-factly, as if stating his occupation or hometown. "I was sent here to harvest human emotions, particularly negative ones. Fear, insecurity, jealousy, ambition gone sour—they're all energy to my kind, sustenance that keeps us strong."



"A demon." I repeated the word, testing it for believability. It should have sounded ridiculous—the stuff of horror movies and Halloween costumes. Yet somehow, it fit. "You came here to... feed on people's emotions?"

"Yes. I've been doing it for centuries." He took a step closer, his movements careful, as if afraid I might bolt. "But something changed when I met you."

"Me?" My voice cracked slightly. "What does this have to do with me?"

"You were supposed to be my next... target." The admission clearly pained him. "Your initial fear about your job, your ambition to change yourself—they were perfect for me to manipulate, to enhance until they became a feast." His eyes held mine, intense and apologetic. "But instead, I started caring about you. Wanting to help you. And last night, when we..."

"Slept together," I finished for him, the memory vivid despite this surreal conversation.

He nodded. "It changed something in me. Fundamentally. My powers have been unstable ever since I met you, but what happened between us last night broke something open in me. I think it may have been my heart."

I wrapped my arms around myself, trying to process everything. A demon. I'd fallen for a demon who had initially targeted me as a source of emotional food. It was absurd, horrifying, and yet—I couldn't deny the connection between us, the way my body still responded to his nearness despite everything he'd just revealed.

"Why tell me now?" I asked.

"Because I can't lie to you anymore. Not after what we've shared." He ran a hand through his hair, frustration evident in the gesture. "And because Maya saw something she shouldn't have. I knew she'd tell you, and I wanted you to hear the

truth from me."

"The truth." I laughed, the sound hollow. "That you're a literal demon who came here to feed on my insecurities, but oops, you developed feelings instead? How am I supposed to believe that?"

In response, Damian closed his eyes briefly. When he opened them, they glowed with an unearthly light—not the warm brown I'd come to know, but a luminous amber that seemed to burn from within. The air around us charged with electricity, making the hairs on my arms stand up. A nearby dumpster lid slammed shut though there was no wind.

I gasped, taking an involuntary step back.

The glow faded, his eyes returning to normal. "I've never revealed myself to a human before," he said quietly. "Not in six centuries of existence."

Disbelief, betrayal, and an undeniable pull warred inside me. Despite everything—the lies, the manipulation, the revelation that he wasn't human—I still wanted him. Needed him. In ways I couldn't ignore or explain.

"What happens now?" I asked, voice barely above a whisper.

Before he could answer, a familiar voice called from the end of the alley. "Lily? Is everything alright?"

Harrison Slagle stood at the entrance to the alley, concern etched on his face. What was he doing here?

"Harrison?" I called back, confusion momentarily replacing my shock at Damian's revelation.

Harrison approached, his eyes flicking between me and Damian with unusual intensity. He'd been hanging around VitalityFit for weeks, always watching, always asking questions that seemed oddly specific. Now, the calculating look in his eyes suggested something entirely different.

"I thought I might find you two here," he said, his voice unnervingly calm. "I've been waiting for this confrontation." His gaze hardened as it settled on Damian. "I've been meaning to have a chat with Mr. Strong here for quite some time."

Damian's posture stiffened beside me. "You know," he said. It wasn't a question.

Harrison nodded, a satisfied smile spreading across his face. "I've suspected what you are since the first day I walked into your gym. The energy signature was unmistakable." He glanced at me. "I've been tracking unusual activity in Sweetberry Hollow for months."

"Unusual activity?" I echoed, feeling like the ground beneath my feet had turned to quicksand. "You mean Damian?"

"Among other things." Harrison's attention returned to Damian. "Demons don't typically settle in small towns and open fitness centers unless they're harvesting something. I've been watching you, trying to figure out your angle."

I looked between them, struggling to process this new development. Had I been living in an episode of "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" without realizing it?

"He was feeding on emotions," I said, finding my voice. "He just told me. That's why he came to Sweetberry Hollow."

Harrison nodded, unsurprised. "Emotional energy is potent fuel for his kind. But something changed, didn't it, Strong? Your aura has been shifting. I've been watching it happen on the sensors I hid in the gym when I dropped in."

Damian tensed beside me. "I stopped targeting Lily. I couldn't... I didn't want to hurt her anymore."

"Harrison," I interrupted, stepping forward. "What exactly are you planning to do? Because Damian just told me everything, and I—" I hesitated, the truth of what I was about to say hitting me with unexpected clarity. "To be perfectly honest, I'm falling in love with him."

Damian's head whipped toward me, shock written across his features. "You are?" His voice was barely audible. "Do you really mean that?"

Despite everything, I found that I did. The realization should have terrified me, but instead, it felt like the most natural thing in the world.

"Yes," I said, meeting his eyes. "I do."

His eyes grew watery, and he nodded, wrapping his arms around me with a gentleness that belied his supernatural strength. "I'm pretty sure I'm falling in love with you too," he whispered against my hair. "I've never felt anything like this in six hundred years."

Harrison watched this exchange with keen interest, his expression shifting from wariness to something like scientific fascination. "If you're falling in love, Damian, you may not be entirely demonic anymore."

Damian pulled back slightly, looking surprised. "What do you mean?"

"True demons are incapable of genuine love," Harrison explained, pulling a small notebook from his jacket pocket, and jotting something down. "It's one of the fundamental laws of supernatural entities. If you're experiencing real love—not just possessiveness or obsession, but actual selfless love—then something in your essence is changing."

Damian considered this, rubbing his beard thoughtfully. "I never considered that possibility, but... it would explain a lot. I don't have the appetite anymore to manipulate humans or feed off their suffering. Instead, I want to help support them to become their best selves, whatever that means." His brow furrowed. "I'm not sure how to handle Marcellus though, my boss who reports to the demonic realm. If he discovers I've gone rogue..."

Harrison's face broke into an unexpected grin. "I can help with that. In my line of work, you make useful connections. I know a qualified witch with excellent credentials who can send Marcellus back to the place he came from with a good crystal or two." He tucked his notebook away. "The real question is, are you prepared to step in as the new legitimate owner of VitalityFit? No more demonic business model?"

Damian laughed, the sound relaxed and genuine in a way I'd never heard before. "Only if Lily approves."

They both turned to me, and I felt a smile spread across my face despite the absurdity of the situation. "I do approve. Very much."

Damian's relief was palpable. "Thank you, Harrison. How can I repay you for your help?"

Harrison laughed and shrugged. "By offering me a free gym membership. It's really time I do something about these noodle arms."

We all laughed, the tension of the morning dissolving into something lighter, filled with possibility. After Harrison left, promising to return later to discuss "protective countermeasures," Damian turned to me, his expression serious once more.

"Are you really okay with all of this? With what I am? Or what I used to be?"

I took a moment to truly consider his question. The man before me had entered my life with the intention of manipulating my insecurities for his own gain. And yet, he'd stopped. He'd chosen connection over consumption, vulnerability over power. Whatever he'd been when he arrived in Sweetberry Hollow, he was something different now—something evolving, becoming more than the sum of his demonic nature.

"I'm not saying it's going to be easy," I admitted, taking his hands in mine. "Finding out your boyfriend is literally from hell is a lot to process. But I've spent my whole life playing it safe, doing what was expected, never taking risks." I smiled up at him. "Maybe it's time I embrace a little supernatural adventure. I think we all have a little demon in us, after all."

Relief and joy washed over his features. He pulled me close, his lips finding mine in a kiss that felt like a promise. When we finally broke apart, he rested his forehead against mine.

"We just have to choose to use our powers for good. And have a little faith," he murmured.

"To new beginnings," I whispered, feeling strangely at peace despite the extraordinary revelations of the morning.

Whatever came next—vengeful demon bosses, spiritual transformations, or just the ordinary challenges of a relationship—we would face it together. Me, a girl determined to find her way, and him, a centuries-old demon, doing the same thing.

It wasn't the future I'd imagined when I first walked into VitalityFit seeking physical transformation. It was infinitely stranger, wilder, and more wonderful. And I wouldn't change it for anything.