

# A DINNER DIABOLICAL

REGULAR 9-5

BOO LUDLOW

Copyright © 2023 by David Ludlow

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are products of the author's imagination and are used fictitiously.

[www.BooLudlowBooks.com](http://www.BooLudlowBooks.com)

✿ Created with Vellum

“**U**h, kev?” A head peeked over the short wall between our two cubicles. I couldn’t see most of it beyond the slobbery warthog snout and tusks—Spinesplitter was pretty ugly, even for a demon. **“help please? tappy broke.”**

“What’s going on this time, Split?”

Spinesplitter held his massive lobster claws over the cubicle wall. **“mash tings.”**

I walked over to his side and held back a whistle. Spinesplitter probably had gotten worked up when a program wouldn’t start and smashed the keyboard. And the desk. And the chair.

“That’s. . . that’s pretty impressive, Split,” I responded. “I think this is a new personal best.”

**“you fix?”**

“Naw, you’re probably going to have to speak to HR or the manager and request a new one.”

Spinesplitter wilted. Despite being nine feet tall and looking like a figure of nightmares, he was awfully timid. **“she scary. you go?”**

“I can’t go for you every time, eventually you need to get your new equipment yourself. I thought you weren’t going to start working before I showed up? I promised to help you with this.”

**“you late.”**

Well, he had me there—I was a full thirty seconds late because my mother-in-law tried to spray me with a hose as I was leaving for the bus this morning.

“All right, Split, I’ll help you out, but this is the last time, ok?” Spinesplitter nodded his head vigorously and I inwardly rolled my eyes. He probably forgot the promise as

he made it, but I had a hard time faulting the guy. Nothing in Hell is made with grade-A materials, particularly brains. I waved goodbye and grabbed my coffee—despite the sweltering work environment it somehow always managed to be cold—before heading off to the elevators. Lower management was a pain to work with, but was easier to push into action than my co-workers.

I greeted a few devils and demons as I passed by—I'm the only human here—and received mostly snarls and insults in response. Spinesplitter is the only one that seems willing to put up with me, but that's probably because he's the top of the infernal totem pole. (Most things work in reverse down here.)

"Running somewhere?" Faye, a succubus, breathed as I walked past; I walked faster.

"Helping Spinesplitter out with a technical malfunction, be back in a jiffy."

"You better be back before too long; I'd hate to have to set up a private conference with you." Her lips were full, but her grin fanged.

"Don't worry, I'll get my temptation ratings back up before too long!" I quickened my step.

Faye Tahl was my team lead. I typically volunteered for the hardest tempting jobs because I wanted to fail and figured that if everyone's expectations were low then it wouldn't be suspicious if I sabotaged my efforts. Even so, she kept threatening me with private conferences, and I didn't like the sound of that.

I've never been actively religious, and the funny thing about my time in Hell is that hasn't changed at all. My wife is the driving force that gets our family to church each Sunday. She didn't believe me, didn't think it was funny, when I came home one day and tried to explain that my

collared shirt was burnt because my new job was Hell and my boss was Lucifer himself.

The meeting with a lower management rep went about as well as could be expected (red tape, long lines, on-hold music, and every chair had a mandatory tack in it), but I convinced them that Spinesplitter wouldn't be able to work effectively without a new mouse, keyboard, desk, and chair. I also managed to convince them the value of sooner rather than later, meaning I got to drag the equipment back myself. Around lunchtime, sweating like a stuck pig, I arrived at Spinesplitter's desk with his new stuff.

He was happier than a puppy with a new bone. **"yay,"** the demon said, his eyes glued to the computer and keyboard I was carrying. No matter his real mood, almost everything that came out of Spinesplitter's mouth sounded like a tremendous understatement. Right about then, the lunch bell rang. Spinesplitter looked at the floor, his shoulders slumping, but I was already ahead of him.

"Yeah, I brought an extra lunch bag."

**"thank kev."**



"SANDRA, I'M HOME!" I called out, hanging up my coat.

"Daddy!" Erika shouted. She toddled out of the living room and grabbed my legs.

"Hey, Pip!" I responded. I picked the little girl up and swung her into a big hug as she giggled. "How was daycare today?"

"We ate mac-a-noni for lunch. I put some in David's hair. He tried to throw his mac-a-noni at me, but it hit Mr. Edwards!"

I looked at Sandra as she entered the room. "That's

great, Pip. Did mommy already talk to your teacher about that?" Sandra rolled her eyes and nodded, but smiled as she did so. Erika continued prattling about her daycare misadventures, which included hiding a frog in the boys' bathroom. I carried Erika into the kitchen, giving my wife a hug and a kiss as I walked by.

"How was work today?" Sandra asked.

"Split is still loving your sandwiches. He broke some company equipment again, on accident, and I covered for him. Beyond that, just a fairly normal day."

"Not hell today?"

I stuck my tongue out at her. She didn't believe I worked in Hell and no matter how hard I tried I couldn't convince her. I mostly had given up and accepted her teasing. Then I remembered something that was different about today. "Actually, I did learn something new. Split got evicted."

"That's terrible!"

I put Erika down in her booster seat and started setting up the table while Sandra finished dinner. Spinesplitter *actually* lived underneath a bridge near our office building in Hell—sorry, *used to*—and got kicked out by a gang that decided to expand their territory, but I knew Sandra wouldn't believe me if I told her. So I softened the story a little bit.

"He's holding up fairly well, I think. He's still coming to work, anyways"

"I think that's because you're a bit of a rock in his life, Kevin."

"Maybe. There's not a lot I can do other than being nice."

"Maybe." The was a pause in conversation as we finished our chores and sat down with Erika to eat. I offered

grace. Then Sandra said, "I was thinking that, perhaps, we could invite Split over for dinner sometime."

I almost choked on my meatloaf, which made Erika giggle. "Um. Huh. Yeah. I don't think you could feed him enough."

"I think it would be fun! And since you're finally making friends at your new job, I think this would be a good way to feel connected again."

"He might scare Erika."

"Kevin! That's rude. Erika, do you want to meet daddy's new friend?"

"Muffuffaghuff."

"Pip, don't speak with your mouth full."

Erika giggled.

I laid my hand on Sandra's. "How did your day go?"

Sandra gave me a *I'm not forgetting this topic* look, but responded, "Probably the biggest part of my day was meeting with the daycare people. On the plus side, Erika's teacher likes her and says she's doing well. . . He affectionately refers to her as a 'precocious little scamp.' That was Mr. Edwards, so I know he meant well."

"Well, thank goodness for that."

Our conversation continued in like manner and left me with a peaceful feeling the remainder of the evening—it was a picture of domestic bliss. We cleaned up the kitchen and sat down in the living room to watch a cartoon together (something about a family of dogs—I didn't get it). About halfway through Erika was asleep and it was just me and Sandra. She turned her head and kissed me. I kissed her back.

"I love you." Sandra said.

"I love you too." I smiled. "Thanks for being so

supportive—the downsize and everything. I know it’s been hard on you.”

Sandra snuggled in closer. “So, when are we having Split over for dinner?”

Inwardly, I sighed. There was no avoiding something once Sandra put her mind to it. “I’ll ask him. See if he’s available.”

“Good. Just not next Tuesday.”

“Why haven’t we invited any of *your* friends over? What happened to Stacy?”

“I see my friends at Sepulcher Elementary every day, and you already know all of them. We can invite them later; you need this more.”

I didn’t have anything to say—not even to tease the poorly named school she volunteered at. We quietly hugged each other until it was time to go to bed.



SPINESPLITTER ENTHUSIASTICALLY AGREED to dinner with my family, much to my concern. I asked him how he’d get there, to which he responded, “**pent gram.**”

It took me a moment to realize what he meant. “I’m not setting up a summoning circle to bring you into my home! Are you mad? I don’t *do* those kinds of things.”

That made Spinesplitter tap his goatee thoughtfully. “**walk?**”

“That’s a long walk. I’m not sure there’s a connection between your world and mine you can walk across.”

“**it fine. i go.**”

“Ok. . .” I gave him the address to, and a description of, a small park near my house—I didn’t want him showing up on my doorstep to risk Sandra opening the door before me.



I also wrote the address down—twice—to keep him from forgetting. Then I thought about the aimless way Split clicked on his computer screen. “You can read, right?”

Spinesplitter glanced at the notes. “**sure.**”

Pridemuch, a toadlike demon, jeered at Spinesplitter as it walked by. “Hey weakling, having fun with your human? Been going to food banks and handing out free lunches? Haw haw haw!”

Demon insults were weird, but Spinesplitter shrunk into himself nonetheless. I glared at Pridemuch before patting Spinesplitter on the arm. “Maybe it’s a good thing we’re looking for a way to get out of here for a little bit.”



TO SAY I was nervous to meet a demon in the middle of a children’s park in broad daylight was an understatement. My foot kept tapping nervously; I checked my watch every twenty seconds, anxious to get out of here. The time I gave Spinesplitter to meet was an hour and a half earlier than Sandra actually wanted him to show up, but he managed to be even later than I had expected. My phone dinged. A text from Sandra.

*Having a good chat with your friend? She asked.*

*He hasn’t shown up yet. I think he’s lost.*

*Oh :( That’s too bad. Have you called him?*

*He doesn’t own a phone. Breaks them too often.* I frequently wondered how my wife imagined Spinesplitter, given that our conversations of him typically went back to him breaking things on accident.

*Well, I hope you find him soon. We don’t want the roast and vegetables to get cold.*

*I think I see him. Love you! <3*

*Love you too, babe*

I put away my phone, looked up, and groaned. I hadn't expected Spinesplitter to have the foresight to come in disguise, but he managed to stick out more than if he had just come as himself. He wore a grey hat with an enormous brim that deeply shadowed his face, and a bulky trenchcoat that went down to his ankles—all he was missing was a windowless van. I could still see his feet (bearlike paws with wicked-looking claws), but thankfully his lobster claws were in his pockets. Local moms started packing up their kids and fleeing the area, not without reason.

I grimaced as Split stopped next to me, clearly facing me. "Hey. How was the trip?"

**"sorry late. traffic. many much go."**

I sniffed the air. Spinesplitter smelled strongly of smoke and brimstone.

We barely made the bus—and took up an entire row to ourselves. We sat in the back and did our poorest best to look inconspicuous. I got into character by imagining Spinesplitter as the Ronald McDonald statue that kids can sit next to and get pictures with. Spinesplitter was just a really big, ugly clown. Totally normal.

An older lady the next seat over crinkled her nose and leaned over. "Are you ok?" She said to Spinesplitter. He was so hunched over to fit in his seat that his eyes were almost level with the lady. He responded, **"cosplay."**

"What?"

I jumped in. "It's an adult costume thing—uh, but nothing weird! We're taking him home to get it removed." The lady nodded and pretended to bury her face in a book. I noticed her crossing herself a few moments later.

We almost made it to my house without further incident. A dog chased us halfway there; then Spinesplitter

removed his hat, grinned at the dog, and tried to pet it. The poor creature's tail immediately went between its legs and it ran home fast enough to trip into the road as it rounded a corner. Spinesplitter was very disappointed.

But the demon was very impressed with the small building I called home—I imagine it would be very impressive compared to a corner under a bridge.

I turned to Spinesplitter. "Ok, there's something really important that you need to know before we have dinner tonight."

**"ok."**

"Sandra doesn't believe you're a demon. She might be a little nervous." Spinesplitter looked confused, so I added, "Kind of like I was my first day at the office."

Spinesplitter chuckled. **"you shake. funny. like bunny. who sandra?"**

"Sandra. . . my wife."

**"wife?"**

I sighed. Relations didn't really happen in Hell. Well, not healthy or stable ones. At least, not among the demons I interacted with. This could have been just another Spinesplitter thing.

"I thought I explained this. We live together, we're committed to each other—we signed a contract and everything—and her happiness is extremely important to me."

Spinesplitter nodded soberly. If there was one thing that almost was considered sacred in Hell, it was a contract—all soul-binding, of course.

I continued. "I care for her, she cares for me. So I'm kind of nervous."

**"be nice."**

"Yes, please, be nice. Sandra, we're home!" I announced

the last part as I opened the door and hung my coat up. Sandra appeared as my hat went on the rack.

“Hi! How are you two. . . Oh!” Sandra stood in the entry, clearly enthused, but did a double-take when she saw Spinesplitter. “Well. . . hello!”

**“hi.”**

Sandra held out her hand. “It’s good to meet you, Split! Kevin has told me all about you.” Split regarded Sandra’s hand warily. He pulled a claw out of his pocket and attempted to shake.

Sandra stiffened up, her expression strained. Then she laughed. I could tell from her posture the laugh helped loosen her up a bit, but her nervous smile told me a lot about her real feelings. “I’m sorry! Kevin didn’t tell me you were coming in costume. It’s. . . remarkable!”

**“not.”**

“Hmmm, if you say so.” Sandra gave me a strained look. I waved back, bemused. This was already going swimmingly. Sandra looked back at Spinesplitter’s face and narrowed her eyes a bit, searching for something. Spinesplitter’s watery black eyes looked back, confused at Sandra’s response, as he continued to hold out a claw. Sandra produced a fake laugh and patted Spinesplitter’s claw. “I’ll shake your real hand later. Does anyone smell something?”

I swooped in, taking Sandra by the waist and giving her a kiss. I said, “Probably some exhaust from the road or something,” and pulled her into the living room before she could respond. I motioned for Spinesplitter to follow, giving him a brief tour on our way to the kitchen. “This is the living room, over there is the half-bath. We have the two bedrooms over there. And here’s the kitchen! Watch your step, our little monster loves to leave booby traps everywhere. By the way, where is Erika?”

“Daddy!” I heard Erika squeal from her booster seat as we walked into the room. Sandra had truly outdone herself, considering our circumstances. There was a nice green spread on the table, on which was neatly arranged plates, glasses, food, and drinks. The room was filled with the aroma of beef and baked vegetables. My mouth began watering immediately and I hoped there’d be enough left for the rest of us after Spinesplitter started eating. I looked back at my friend. He was staring at Erika, eyes narrowed like he was trying to figure something out.

**“not monster,”** Split mumbled. **“just baby.”**

Sandra whispered in my ear, “Please, please tell me that’s somehow a costume. Because it can’t be, it can’t.”

“It was hard for me at first, too,” I responded, before bursting into motion. With how Sandra looked at Spinesplitter—like a mother sheep at a predator—I knew it would take a lot of effort from me to make sure tonight wasn’t a complete disaster. I pulled out a chair for Sandra and pushed her in, I offered a seat to Spinesplitter (I made sure I sat between them), and I gave Erika a hug and kissed her forehead while saying, “How was your day, Pip?” Erika kept looking at Spinesplitter strangely, once pointing at him and loudly saying “Monkey!” before I shushed her. Once everyone was seated, after I had parceled out food to everyone, finally I sat and offered grace. Split didn’t spontaneously combust when I closed in the Lord’s name, so I counted that as another disaster avoided.

In awkward silence, Sandra and I began eating our food. Erika, entirely immune to social awkwardness, began pretending her carrots were airplanes and suicide-bombed most of them to the floor. Sandra would have put a quick stop to that under normal circumstance, but tonight she spent her time covertly staring at Split as she ate her food.

Spinesplitter stared at his plate. The sounds of silverware clinking on plates emphasized the quiet spaces in between.

After the silence became tense enough, I attempted to break the ice. “So Split, how’s the hunt for a new place been?”

**“bad.”**

“That’s too bad. Do you have any homes you’re looking at right now?”

**“alleys. back of office. or fire lake. caves there. far. loud—made of screaming souls. loud. hard to sleep. but pretty.”**

“That sounds. . . It seems difficult to find a good place where you live.” I tried to think of a way to continue the conversation, but my mind was blanking on me.

Eventually, Sandra cleared her throat and, in a higher pitch than normal, said to Spinesplitter: “Are you feeling hungry tonight, Split?”

Spinesplitter nodded sadly at his full plate.

“Well. . . there’s plenty. Feel free to. . . dig in.”

Spinesplitter glanced at me; I nodded back. He moved his snout closer to his meal and sniffed it, then stuck his face in the plate and began noisily slurping up his dinner piece by piece, starting with the roast. Erika laughed and followed suit, sticking her face into her tray.

Sandra’s eyes widened and her left eye twitched. I quickly tapped Spinesplitter on the head, to get his attention, and held up a fork, smiling. “Hey, could you use one of these please? You use it like this.” I speared a baby potato and stuck it in my mouth. Spinesplitter sat up straight, glared at his fork, and attempted to pick it up with one lobster claw. After a few moments of failure, he tried using both claws to get the thing off the table, but the rounded tips of his claws couldn’t touch the fork handle when

pressed together. He tried scooting it off the table into a claw, but the fork fell to the ground with a loud clattering that reverberated in the still kitchen. Spinesplitter froze; then, embarrassed, he shoved his claws back in his pockets and stared at his lap.

I looked at Sandra. Her eyes were wide, her lips were pressed tightly together, and she was white-knuckling our nice silverware. I set mine down and said "I'm sorry Split, but may you excuse us for a moment? I need to speak with Sandra." I softly took her hand and brought her to her feet. Sandra had been sitting so stiffly it was hard to get her to move; she continued to stare at Spinesplitter as we exited the room. I guided Sandra out of the kitchen, through the living room, and into our bedroom, closing the door softly behind us.

"What. The hell. Is *that*." Sandra whispered.

Inwardly, I started grasping for responses, but the only thing that came to mind was *I tried to warn you, but I can understand why you wouldn't believe I literally work in Hell or that my coworkers are demons.*

"I tried to warn you, but I can understand why you wouldn't believe that I literally work in Hell or that my coworkers are demons." *Dammit, that sounded much better in my head.*

Sandra paled significantly. "That's. . . that's a literal. . . a literal. . ."

I responded slowly. "Yes, he's a demon, I'm sorry."

"And. . . and you brought. . . brought him in. . . our house. . ."

"I promise, to the very core of my being, he's harmless. Better than harmless. He knows what it's like to be picked on in almost every way, and he doesn't dish it back at all. He's like. . . ugh, that big guy in the book you told me about.

Who kills mice. On accident.” *That comparison probably didn’t help.*

Sandra looked me in the eye; I could see tears in hers. “All this time, I thought you just hated your job. It seemed like such a change of character for you to become so pessimistic, but I blamed your boss for firing you and the downsize. But now. . . you really do work. . . in. . .” I nodded, and Sandra sat on the bed, breathing quickly.

“Hey, honey, it’s ok.” *Calm down*, I thought, while sitting next to her. I held Sandra tightly and she grabbed me back. “If it makes you feel any better, I try my hardest to be miserable at my job so I can avoid ruining anyone’s life. I’ve done a pretty good job so far. Out of all the tempters on my floor, I’m not only the worst, I’m setting new bottom records. So, positive thoughts, positive thoughts.” *Please, please take this well.*

Sandra continued to process, months of my new job and everything she’d thought hadn’t been true compressing into moments, and I could see it wasn’t passing well. After a few minutes of thinking, she shuddered and looked around. “Where did you put Erika? Why’s she being so quiet?”

If I wasn’t in the doghouse already, I knew this would do it. “She’s still in the kitchen.”

We both sat for a moment that felt like hours, staring at loading screens in each other’s eyes. I didn’t know what she was thinking, but it probably wasn’t good. For my part, I knew Spinesplitter would never harm a fly—well, intentionally. Knowingly.

Perhaps I’d been a bit irresponsible.

Just then, we heard a deep rumbling sound from the kitchen, like rocks being ground together, and Erika screamed. I could see the mother bear in Sandra’s eyes stir



to life. I started, “Honey, that’s just—” but it was too late: Sandra was already out the bedroom door. I followed after, through the living room, and into the kitchen, where Sandra was frozen in place. I quickly looked over the room.

In front of us, Spinesplitter stood hatless, shaking with rock-grinding belly laughter as Erika threw carrots at him (which he’d catch with his frog-like tongue and eat) and giggled with the body-shaking intensity that only children seem to possess. She made a funny face at Spinesplitter, causing him to laugh even harder and miss the next carrot she threw, which made her giggle even harder. “Monkey, monkey! No eat, catch!” She squealed joyfully.

I’d never see my friend smile, let alone laugh, before. Smiling and playing with Erika, he didn’t seem that scary at all. And I was dumbfounded that Erika had taken such a quick liking to him, given that Sandra and I had to check under her bed for monsters every night. I couldn’t imagine what was going on in Sandra’s mind.

“Mommy, catch!” Erika threw a potato piece at Sandra; it bounced off her hair and landed on the table. Erika rasp-berried loudly, then threw her head back and laughed again. Spinesplitter, noticing us standing and staring, shrank into himself a little bit.

“**sorryfoodfloor.**” Spinesplitter hunched his shoulders and moved to return his hat to his head.

“Wait.” Sandra responded, causing Spinesplitter to freeze. She grabbed the potato off the table and tossed it to Erika, who tried to catch it with her tongue, but it just ended up bouncing it off her nose. She looked perplexed that her tongue couldn’t do what Spinesplitter’s did. She looked at Sandra and held out her tongue.

“Mowuh.” Erika said.

Sandra let out a small giggle. It was a bit high-pitched

and nervous, not a real giggle, but I could tell she releasing *something* and trying to control the form it took. I picked up a bit of celery off the floor and tossed it to Spinesplitter, who easily grabbed it out of the air with his tongue and swallowed it. Erika giggled while shouting, “Me me me me!”

I couldn’t help but chuckle. The atmosphere was so tense that I had to either laugh, or panic and run. I felt that chuckle build a little in my throat. It fell down to my chest as it built, then my belly. I couldn’t help but let out my own gut-wrenching laugh. Erika immediately, gleefully, joined in, followed closely after by Spinesplitter, then Sandra, who still looked more than a little dazed.

The kitchen was a complete mess by the time we finished dinner, but Erika and Spinesplitter both had a wonderful time. Sandra looked almost like she was in a dream the remainder of the night and I just felt exhausted from trying so hard to keep the tenuous balance of nerves from crashing again. I was more than a little grateful when it was time to usher Spinesplitter out the door. It was difficult; Split is very big and didn’t want to leave.

“**thank kev.**” Spinesplitter said over and over as I smiled and shuffled him to the door. “**wife good. spawn good. home feel good.**”

Even in my exhaustion, I couldn’t help but chuckle at how Spinesplitter saw the world.

Spinesplitter looked at me intently. “**come back?**”

I didn’t want to imagine bringing that up with my wife. “Sure thing, Split, we’ll figure it out.”

Spinesplitter smiled again. “**thank. see you?**”

“Same as every day, Split. And please be more careful with your keyboard.”

Spinesplitter waved goodbye to me, then looked past

me and whisper-yelled, “**bye friend!**” I turned around to see Erika half-hiding in a doorway. She gave a shy three-year-old wave goodbye and disappeared into the family room. After that, Split walked off into the night on what I assumed would be a long trip back to Hell.

I closed the door, leaned against it, and slowly slid to the floor, exhausted. Sandra had disappeared to the bedroom the moment I started helping Spinesplitter leave, which probably meant it was up to me to put the precocious scamp to bed tonight. I just needed to rest my eyes a moment. . .

A small dribble of drool ran down the back of my throat. I jolted awake, choking, wondering why it was so dark. Then I remembered what had happened. Groaning, I found Erika asleep on the floor of the living room. I carried her to bed, then slipped into my own, hoping not to wake my wife in the process.

END



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Boo Ludlow was named after Boo Radley in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a book he *has not* read, not Boo from *Monsters, Inc*, a movie he *has* seen. He's fully aware of the tragedy there. He was active in theater throughout high school, but a love of writing both preceded theater and won him back quickly in college. Boo loves books and film; food; board, card, and video games; and writing content for tabletop role-playing games that he doesn't have the time to play anymore. His most re-read book is *The Hobbit* and his most re-watched movie is *The Princess Bride*. Boo happily—and mostly by choice—resides near family in Utah, living with his wife and hyperactive baby.

*A Diabolical Dinner* is an early short story written by Boo, but his debut self-published novel is *The Failed Technomancer*. You can follow Boo on his blog at [BooLudlowBooks.com](http://BooLudlowBooks.com), where he shares weekly writing updates and reviews on what he's currently reading and watching.

