

S. L. WRIGHT

*Desire has a mind
of its own.*

Confessions *of a* **DEMON**



SOMETHING WICKED THIS WAY COMES. . . .

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A demon is coming.

Praise for *Confessions of a Demon*

“Way-fast read, intensely built world, tortured hero, kick-ass heroine—what’s not to like?”
—Jennifer Stevenson, author of *Trash Sex Magic*

“A fascinating, utterly original demon world, teeming with conflict and intrigue. I fell in love with Allay and her struggle to keep her humanity despite the forces aligned against her. Mesmerizing and addictive, *Confessions of a Demon* is urban fantasy at its best!”

—Jeri Smith-Ready, award-winning author of *Wicked Game*

ROC

Published by New American Library, a division of
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street,
New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto,
Ontario M4P 2Y3, Canada (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Books Ltd., 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2,
Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd.)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124,
Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty. Ltd.)

Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park,
New Delhi - 110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore 0632,
New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd.)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty.) Ltd., 24 Sturdee Avenue,
Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd., Registered Offices:
80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

First published by Roc, an imprint of New American Library, a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

First Printing, December 2009

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eISBN : 978-1-101-15193-8

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*This novel is dedicated to
my loving husband, Kelly*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Jessica Wade, my editor at Roc, and my agent, Lucienne Diver, for their dedication in making this novel the best that it could be.

1

It was the usual Friday night at the Den on C, the neighborhood bar in New York City I had managed for almost a decade. That was a long time by human standards, but then again, I wasn't a standard human. I was something more—or less. The jury was still out on that one.

A group of pool-playing coeds had stopped by after hanging out at a beer garden in the East Village, but they were starting to trickle away as the midnight rush eased off. Some would end up in the chic bars popping up just to the south on the Lower East Side, leaving behind the regulars, mostly older Latino men and a smattering of working-class guys covered in ghostly drywall dust. A few crowded tables of arty hipsters still filled the back, where everyone was loudly talking over one another.

I swung open the front door wide to catch the mild night air of early spring, trying to ignore the metallic tang of exhaust. A few streets below Houston was Delancey Street, where the lights were much brighter and the avenue opened up wide to accommodate the steady flow of cars over the Williamsburg Bridge. The congestion always got worse late Friday night, choking the streets with fumes and honking horns as too many people tried to get in and out of Manhattan at the same time.

I could see my own reflection in the narrow glass pane; the light from the aluminum shade overhead cast a speckled pattern across my face. Wisps of dark hair touched my forehead, cheeks, and neck. I had tried to stay faithful to my original, human appearance, a heart-shaped face that was pretty enough, capable looking rather than delicate. I had aged myself over the years to look like I should—twenty-eight this spring.

Behind me, the opening strains of “Kiss Me,” the original version by Six Pence None the Richer,

with its tinny drums and silly, sweet vocals, came through the speakers hanging high in the corners. I knew the words by heart: “Kiss me, beneath the milky twilight / Lead me out on the moonlit floor. . . .”

It lifted my heart for a moment, like the song always had ever since the year I’d been turned. But that touch of minor key, the slight note of sadness, resonated much deeper than it should have. It meant so much more to me—all that I had lost; all that I would never be.

I knew better than to try to ignore my regret. That made it worse. The pain that came with the past was something I just had to endure.

Since I became a demon.

“Possessed” is the correct term, I reminded myself. I’m possessed by a demon.

I was a human-demon hybrid, the only one alive. No longer sustained by food or drink, I lived off emotions—any would do, but my preferred elixir, the feeling I’d do anything to provoke, was the simple yet all-powerful feeling of respite: relief from sorrow or pain. That was why I was known as Allay.

Plenty of people came to my bar looking for a little release from their pain. I provided all of the usual services bartenders typically give their patrons: I served them drinks and listened to them when no one else would. And when it was really bad, I would pat their hand and steal away some of their pain. But taking energy from people, even the bad feelings, caused an imbalance in their system. I took only enough to make them feel better, and then for my reward I would sip a drop of their brief contentment.

I had to be careful, for their own good, not to go too far. When people were drained of their emotional energy, they could turn schizophrenic, manic, or so depressed they killed themselves. Some people became physically ill and died.

I wasn’t sure, but I thought emotions were the seat of the soul. That was why they radiated so much energy.

But how can you recognize a soul when you don’t have one?

When the song was over, I decided it was time to call it quits and spend some quality time with my patrons. I could afford to hire only one bartender a shift, so I tended bar during the busy hours, along with restocking, dealing with salesmen, maintaining the books, and cleaning up the puke from the bathroom floor when my janitor and all-round handyman, Pepe, couldn’t make it in.

The Den on C was narrow and deep like most of the other storefronts along the avenue, with a scarred mahogany bar along one side. There was enough space to put two tables against the front windows and a few next to the bar. In the back, there was an old pool table that I had refelted a few years earlier. I thought the bar’s best feature was the floor, with its tiny black and white hexagon tiles. It made a pleasing old-fashioned pattern in spite of the cracked and missing tiles. My customers liked the bar-long mirror hanging from the ceiling that let them see behind them without turning around.

With my demon insight into people’s emotions, I could have talked my way into a bartending job anywhere in the city. Every week a new hot spot opened up for the celebrities and party girls who clattered over the narrow cobblestones in their spiky heels.

But I felt comfortable at the Den. They needed me here. When I found the bar, Alphabet City was still riddled with crack dealers and the gutters were strewn with empty vials and dime bags. But there were also vibrant murals decorating every long brick wall—images of trees, cars, people, animals, and exaggerated renderings of city buildings in hot tropical colors. The lower facades of the old tenements were painted bright red, turquoise, and green, and the air was

usually pungent with the smell of cilantro, fried plantains, and roasted pork. Now the neighborhood was full of trendy bars and restaurants, and bakeries that sold cup-cakes for five bucks each.

I hung up my black apron and realized it had been a good shift as I sneaked half my tips into Lolita's jar. Lo deserved it. She brought a friendly, fun vibe to the bar. All I did was pour and serve with a smile, touching my patrons to steal away their emotional energy.

Suddenly my hand froze on the tip jar, my senses tingling. The feeling was so mild, I almost mistook it for my own guilty excitement at finally being able to feed off my patrons. But the sensation built, and I knew what it was.

A demon is coming.

Nobody else in the bar could tell. But one of the cats who had adopted the bar as home suddenly rose to his toes in the deep window frame. Snowplow's back arched and his tail puffed out like a Christmas tree, tapering to its Angora tip. He was a misplaced purebred, but to me, he was the best demon-alert device in the city—and his sirens were blaring. As he leaped onto the bar, his claws scattered napkins, and a couple of people snatched up their glasses as he dashed down its length.

"Watch out!" Lolita said as Snowplow's final leap took him up into the duct leading to my second-floor apartment. She scooped up the overturned gin and tonic the cat had knocked over.

"That was a good one. At least seven feet, maybe more."

Customers at the bar were complaining loudly while I hurried over to the open door. I needed to figure out who was coming. From this position, I could retreat upstairs to my fortified apartment, if I needed to. I hated to abandon my patrons to a hungry demon; they were all I had other than Shock. But I might have to in order to call in reinforcements. As the very last resort, I could call Vex for help.

Not that I'd ever had to resort to that.

Lo wiped up the spill with a wet towel as Carl, one of our regulars, bitched, "That stupid cat leaves white hair all over me, and I don't even touch it. Now it steals my drink?"

"Shut up—you'll get another one." Lo's sly smile took the sting out of her blunt order. Carl smiled sheepishly in return as he brushed at his mismatched shirt and baggy jeans. He liked it when women told him what to do, and both Lo and I in our different ways had figured that out early on.

Lolita was my rock, always there for me for the past five years. She was tall and voluptuous with an hourglass figure and a lusty swagger that caught everyone's eye. Lo took full advantage of the sensual charge she ignited in both sexes, flirting indiscriminately. She was open to all kinds of relationships, but she was slow to slap a label on anything or create expectations that couldn't be met. She liked no pressure, and not pressuring other people. That meant she rarely let people go, not for good, and the interlocking family she maintained openly and honestly included a number of relationships that continued to meander and grow organically. One of them was sitting right now at the end of the bar, chatting up the prettiest girl in the place; Boymeat was Lo's friend, her former playmate, and younger brother in her family of free spirits.

Lolita was just as vulnerable to demons as anyone else, but having her at my back made me feel safer. Especially this time; I didn't recognize the approaching signature formed by the unique energy waves that radiated from each demon. The signature, getting stronger, resembled Shock's distinctive buzz, but it was much more chaotic and jarring. It reminded me of Pique, the latest horror to invade my territory and feed off my people.

If Pique was coming that fast, it couldn't be good. He was constantly on the move, like a shark,

stirring up trouble, provoking people to feed off their irritation. Even worse, Pique liked to drain his victims of all their emotions.

A yellow cab pulled up outside. The signature was much clearer—a buzzing, tingling feeling that ran along my skin. It rose in intensity until it abruptly broke off. Then the buzzing restarted, rising again.

It *was* Shock's signature. She was the most important person in my life. Shock had always been a demon, whereas I had started out human and made my transformation into demonhood as a teenager. She became one of my first friends after I had been turned, and she was the only demon who'd never tried to hurt me or take anything from me. Shock had the same progenitor as Plea, the demon who had turned me, so among demons we were considered siblings. Everyone at the bar thought she was my half sister, born of the same mother but with different fathers. That explained our last names and why Shock was so petite and blond whereas I was brunette with a classic California tan.

But I could tell from Shock's signature that something was wrong with her. Very wrong. She was *pulsing*.

The cab door flung open and Shock's familiar slender figure appeared. With her men's sleeveless undershirt and loose jeans, she looked like a kid from the neighborhood. Her white-blond hair stood only an inch high over her sharply defined face, but her rounded breasts and hips left no doubt that she was female. Her expression was oddly blank as she staggered jerkily between the parked cars. She cut through three people who separated for her without a word, glancing back curiously.

"Allay . . .," she croaked.

Shock's pulsing energy made me instinctively bristle, ready to defend myself. This wouldn't be the first demon who had imitated Shock's appearance in order to get close enough to try to steal my energy.

I was fixated even as I wanted to run. "Is that really you, Shock?"

"Help me," Shock whispered.

Shock never asked for help. She was the one who helped people. She was an emergency medical technician, saving lives as she soaked up the stunned, pained emotions of the people she scraped off the streets. I couldn't believe this vibrating creature with the shaking hands was Shock.

Abruptly she stopped short, just out of arm's reach. One hand held on to the doorframe, and she clutched her stomach with her other arm. She looked ready to collapse.

Never let another demon get within touching distance. That was the first advice Shock had given me when she tracked me down in Southern California. Within months after I had absorbed Plea's essence, word of my existence had quickly spread within the demon world. Vex, the head of my line, had first sent Revel, then Shock, to fetch me to live in safety in his New York City territory. In exchange for his protection against the other demons, I had to do things for Vex, things I didn't like. But I didn't see any way around it. His influence kept most of the other demons away from me, though I still had to deal with rogues—the demons who didn't do as ordered by Vex and Glory, the progenitors of the two existing demon lines.

Only Shock was careful to stay more than arm's length away from me at all times. I always had to make the first move to get closer to her, even when it was something as simple as sitting down on a barstool next to her.

The fact that she was swaying out of reach, keeping her distance, was proof enough for me.

"Shock! What's wrong with you?" I reached out and drew her into the bar.

Shock stumbled against me, her hands clenching involuntarily into fists as her entire body

spasmed. “Upstairs now, Allay. Or there’s gonna be fireworks.”

I looked over my shoulder and down the street as cars flowed by. It was hard to sense other demons when Shock, with her abrasive signature, was so close to me. “Is someone after you?” Shock shuddered hard, clenching her jaw until she couldn’t answer. Everyone in the bar was watching, except for a few yahoos in the back shouting over their pool game. But for now the most animated expression was mild interest. Patrons staggered in dead drunk often enough that Shock’s condition wasn’t remarkable. The Den was known to give away cups of great coffee after midnight.

Lolita came out from behind the bar. “Need help?”

“I’m not sure.” I half dragged Shock farther into the bar, toward the inner door that led to the stairs to my apartment on the second floor.

Lo approached and took only one look at Shock’s rigid expression, blurting out, “That looks like an overdose. I’m calling 911.”

“Shock doesn’t do drugs. You know that.” I couldn’t let Lo call the EMTs. Demons could make their bodies appear any way they wished, but Shock was somehow losing control of herself. “I’m taking her upstairs. Maybe she’s just been scared by something,” I added to appease my bartender. “Maybe . . .”

Lolita shook her dark curls. “*Rape?*” she mouthed in concern, taking Shock’s arm to help her. I gave Lo a stricken look over the top of Shock’s hunched head. The way she was holding on to herself, shoulders tight, knees together, it did look as if Shock had been violated. But a human couldn’t have hurt her—it must have been another demon.

Drawn to my surprised distress, Shock latched on to my arm. Her aura flared as she tried to stop herself from absorbing my energy, but her favorite emotion was too tempting.

“I’ll take her up!” I insisted, pulling Shock away from Lo. “Stay with the bar, Lolita.”

Lolita glanced back at the now avidly interested patrons. The music was drowning out our words, but clearly there was something wrong with Shock. I felt the tottering of the semiprofessional wall I had erected to keep everyone from asking questions so I wouldn’t have to lie to them. I liked being their confessor, but for that to work, my own life couldn’t intrude. Lo turned to face everyone, her hands on her hips. Though she reveled in breaking down boundaries in every way possible, she protected my right to privacy. “You’re supposed to be drinking, not gawking at us,” she called out to Jose as she returned to the bar, asking if he wanted another.

The door to the stairs closed behind me, shutting out most of the sounds in the bar. It was a good thing demons were strong, because I had to drag Shock up every creaking step to my apartment door. As soon as it slammed shut behind us, I demanded, “Shock, what’s wrong?”

Shock stuttered, hardly able to move her lips, “Birthing . . .”

“You’re not going to—”

“Split. In two.” Shock grimaced at me, her face rippling with the pulsing of her aura. “Not safe. The demon . . . It’ll attack me.”

“Holy shit.” I couldn’t think of anything else to say, so I repeated myself several times as I helped Shock across the slanting floor of my kitchen. It was big enough to hold an old-fashioned Formica-topped table with matching green vinyl chairs, and had a frosted window over the sink facing an airshaft. There was a coffeemaker for when I had visitors, but no microwave, toaster, or any of the usual food clutter that filled ordinary kitchens. The back of the counter was lined with a row of books, with a few piles on top. I kept only the barest essentials in the refrigerator as cover—some cheese, bottled goods that wouldn’t spoil quickly, and several bottles of soda

that were years old.

I dragged Shock through the arch into the front room, which was strewn with odds and ends, the comfortable clutter of daily life. My place had never been renovated, so the battered tin ceilings and exposed pipes were thick with paint, and the plaster had buckled and cracked over the lathe. There was no bed because I didn't sleep, so I put Shock down on the old red sofa. She didn't look good, but I didn't know whether this was normal; I had never seen a demon birth before. Shock's last offspring was Stun, born fifty years ago. He made my skin crawl every time I had to deal with him, but since he was one of Vex's minions, I had no choice. It bothered me to think that a creature like that had come from Shock.

I was determined to avoid birthing a demon at all costs. I consumed only the bare minimum I needed to survive, never building up reserves. Not only did it make me a less-tempting target for other demons who wanted to absorb my energy, but it made it impossible for me to overdose and birth another demon into the world.

When a demon absorbed too much emotional energy, it split in two, giving birth asexually. The original demon was basically unchanged, while another fully grown demon was created. New demons were born with memory traces from their progenitor, and the basic knowledge about the ways of the world, other demons, and how to feed off the energy of human emotions. It had been difficult for me, with Plea's knowledge clashing against my seventeen years of human memories. I had eventually coped by walling off those unsettling thoughts and feelings—visions of myself hurting people, giving in to ugly desires, surrounded by reaching hands. Those thoughts made me feel tainted, inhuman.

But my body seemed the same; in that way nothing had changed. I listened to my own heartbeat for hours in the early days, feeling the blood pulse through my veins, cutting myself to watch the red rivulets flow down my skin until my flesh miraculously healed, digging deeper despite the excruciating pain to see muscle and the glint of bone, over and over again, until I wearied of examining my own body from the outside in. Other than the way I healed, the only thing that felt different was that my appetite was now focused on emotions instead of food. Laughter was like sugar cookies, cynicism like a tart lemon, and comfort like a bowl of warm stew, satisfying to my heart.

I had asked Shock what her body felt like, and she said it was the same. She was even more fascinated by her humanlike yet ephemeral body. She had a habit of clasping her wrist to feel her pulse race when she was pumped up on adrenaline.

I eyed her nervously. "How much longer?"

"Almost there." Shock panted, curling into fetal position. "You got any energy? That'll help. Over with faster."

I gently clasped her hand so she could draw what she needed. The aura around our hands flared orange with my fear.

Shock writhed on the sofa, her feet kicking the cushions as her back arched. I didn't need to turn on the light—a pearly glow filled the room as energy shed off her like the tail of a comet. Surely every demon within a few blocks could feel her signature now, amplified by the impending birth. With a spike of panic, I realized I hadn't bolted the door behind us. What if the door hadn't closed below? What if Lo came upstairs when she heard Shock's strangled cries? But she was holding on to me so tightly that I couldn't let go.

Shock released my hand the instant before energy exploded from her body. The shock wave thrust me back against the wall. Cracks radiated away in the plaster where I hit. I couldn't breathe; I could only stare.

Shock was flat on her back, nearly rigid. The lustrous glow swelled so brightly that the outline of her body grew fuzzy. I almost had to turn away; it hurt my eyes, but I couldn't stop looking. I was born human, so it was hard for me to remember that I was a being of pure energy now. Demons looked exactly like humans, felt like real humans, so it was easy for me to forget my true nature.

This—*this* made it real. The veil of flesh ripped away as Shock's body split apart.

The brilliant glow shattered as the upper part of Shock rose from the sofa. But Shock still lay there, twisting in agony as the light-filled shadow tore from her flesh.

A brand-new demon stood up before me. As the blinding light began to fade, the last remnants of energy burned off in its creation. The new demon looked like Shock. It was naked, sexless, but the slender form and short white hair were Shock's.

I gaped, looking from the demon, back to Shock.

"Allay . . .," Shock mouthed. She tried to sit up but fell back, depleted.

The demon turned to Shock and took a step back to her. Every moment, it was looking less like Shock, its features blurring and reshaping, the hair darkening, growing, then curling. It was expending energy with every shift, but it seemed much stronger than Shock, who struggled to sit up.

The demon was close to Shock—too close. Shock was having trouble shielding herself, trying to tighten her remaining energy to protect her inner core. My skin prickled as if chilled as my own shields instinctively snapped into place. Usually I was more lax, but not when another demon was anywhere nearby.

To distract the demon from Shock, I peeled away from the wall. "Get away from her."

The demon whirled on me like a cornered animal, dropping into a defensive crouch. I froze, locking eyes with it. *Shit! That thing's about to jump on my face!*

This was a demon in its most primeval form—shapeless, a parasite driven by hunger, ready to do whatever it took to survive. But an arc of recognition shot between me and the tensed creature before me. Because of my background, I was as different as I could be from this demon, yet I was formed from the same material. We were the same at the core.

At least now it was focused on me instead of on Shock.

I took a slow sidestep, careful not to advance or retreat but taking control of the situation by making the first move. That was when fear hit me in the gut. The demon's signature finally penetrated the persistent buzzing of Shock's signature. It was a shiver down my spine, making me yearn to look over my shoulder to catch the eyes that were watching me, following me, waiting to do the worst things imaginable to me. . . .

"Petrify," I said. That was the demon's name, his true nature. My palms were sweating as I radiated exactly what he wanted—fear. I had been feeding Shock a steady stream of panic ever since the poor girl had arrived, so that was what this demon craved.

Some help I am! Why didn't I pour love into her? Or calm?

Petrify, his hands opening and shutting, took a step toward me, compelled as he was to touch me, to soak up my fright. But I couldn't let him—he would steal the little energy I had left.

I stumbled toward the kitchen, drawing him away from Shock. His facade was still wavering, but he was quickly gaining more control, conserving his energy for an attack.

Shock managed to push herself to her feet. "What are you waiting for, Allay? Take him. You need his essence."

It took me a second before I realized what she was saying. "You want me to consume him?"

"Go on, Allay. It'll be easy to slip past his shields. He doesn't have much control."

I stared at Petrify, who stopped his advance. It was true that his aura was fluctuating, his energy flow chaotic. Maybe it would be easy to absorb his power and expose the core that kept him alive. Then I could steal his essence for myself, just as I had inadvertently stolen Plea's essence ten years ago.

Yes. The longing swelled inside of me until it made my heart pound. I had felt this need growing for a long time, but I had tried to deny it. I couldn't hide from it any longer.

That hot fire of life will make me immortal.

Well, at least it would keep me alive for a couple of centuries. That was how long it took to burn down the candle again, to reach the final waxy puddle where our demon flame began to gutter and go out. I could feel it happening inside me and knew if I didn't take the core of another demon soon, I would wither and fade away. That is, if a stronger demon didn't kill me first. Then the spark of my essence would renew his life for another two centuries.

Plea had last consumed a demon 188 years before I had taken her essence. From the first time I'd heard about this catch to demon immortality, I had hoped the clock had been reset when I was created. I had enough problems to deal with. But the odd, growing urgency inside of me, forming a tight knot in my stomach over the past few months, was unlike any other. I knew instinctively that I needed to take another demon's essence soon, or I would begin a rapid decline and eventually disappear into a puff of nothingness.

The craving suddenly overwhelmed me. I reached for Petrify, unable to resist that animating spark buried deep inside of him. Our hands met, fingers interlacing like lovers.

Power fluctuated between us. He tried to pull the fibers of my being into him, but I wrenched back. This was different from the everyday desire to fuel myself. This was life or death.

The influx of his energy hit me like a lightning bolt. I felt as if I could crush the slight man in my arms, as if I could leap into the sky and fly. Demon energy was nothing like human emotions, which suddenly seemed pale and insignificant next to *this*—this glorious power. . . .

I breathed out, relaxing into myself for a rare, compelling moment. This was what it meant to be a demon, to consume one of our own. No wonder some demons were addicted to demon energy. Some made sport of specifically hunting *me*.

This time I was doing it—stealing his essence, his soul. As I stared into his eyes, the impossible suddenly seemed perfectly reasonable. I could kill him, just as I had killed Plea, though that had been a terrible accident.

Perhaps I'd been afraid that I couldn't beat another demon, that if I tried, I would lose. Then I would finally and truly die. That fear had kept me running from demons ever since I had been possessed.

Now I realized who would triumph was a matter of will. My will had been as bendable as a reed. But now I felt like a different person, like Allay the Demon. It was as if the secret powers I had collected were nothing but match-sticks, and this was lighter fluid. It was pure, unadulterated energy—*all mine*.

Actually, it was Petrify's. Before that, it had been part of Shock. Petrify hadn't existed a moment ago. What did it matter if he disappeared now? If I crushed him like a cockroach because he meant nothing to me or to anyone. If I devoured him like—like a killer. Like a cannibal.

"No." I shoved Petrify away from me.

He scuttled off, but Shock managed to trap him between us. "Don't let him go," Shock said.

"You have to finish him off, Allay. You're almost done."

I shook my head, clutching the countertop behind me. "No, I won't. I'm not going to lose the last bit of humanity I have."

Shock was wobbly, but she blocked Petrify from getting around her. Now that he was weakened, it was easy. “Go on, Allay. You’ll be exactly the same. Without him you’ll die.”

I stared at Petrify, who was slightly hunched over and shaking, leaning against the wall. He was trying to gather together what was left of his energy.

“I would be different. I’d be a murderer.”

“It’s not murder!” Shock protested. “It’s . . . how it has to be. How it’s always been.”

I shook my head. “I’m not going to kill your offspring, Shock. Now move aside. He can go out the bedroom window.”

“You’re letting him go?”

I gave her a hard look. “You don’t eat your own.”

“I’m not going to take a demon until I have to. Like you, right now.”

“It’s not that urgent.”

Shock shook her head. “You think so? Because it seems to me it’s getting that way. Besides, if you let him go, someone else will snap him up. The new ones go quickest.”

“Maybe. But it won’t be me.”

Petrify had been listening, and he wasn’t as frightened anymore. In the bedroom, he snatched up a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt and hurriedly pulled them on, as if he expected me to deny him. I dragged the chaise lounge away from the window in the bedroom, and pushed the old wooden frame as high as it could go.

A titanium lock secured the gate at the wide lock plate. I had installed the heavy-duty gates made from three-quarter-inch iron, the strongest I could find. Soon after I had moved in, a demon had broken the window and tried to force its way inside, but a can of mace had burned its eyes and given it a seizing cough, just as it did with humans. After that, I turned my place into a fortress of steel to make sure no demon could sneak up on me again.

The lock was stiff, but I wrenched it open and swung the gate out. The backyard was very narrow, made of concrete with a drain in the center. “Jump down and go that way.” I pointed.

“Then into the yard behind that one. You’ll find an open lot with a fence on the next street.”

Shock sighed behind me. “Word will spread fast. It always does after a birth.”

“Get out of the city,” I told him. “Stay away and don’t come back until you have to.”

Petrify swung his legs through the window and glanced back inside at me. “Why are you helping me?”

My flip retort—*I’m Super Demon, champion of poor and oppressed fiends everywhere!*—died at the sight of his big, soulful eyes. Now he looked much darker than Shock, an elfin man with shaggy hair. Despite his appalling signature, he wasn’t that bad.

“I’m trying to be humane,” I said honestly.

“But you’re a demon.”

I sighed. “Yeah, I know.”

Self-preservation reasserted itself and Petrify ducked out the window, then poised on the sill, judging the drop. His feet made a soft thud as he hit the ground. I locked the gate again and pulled the window back down so it was partially open to let in the night air. The flowers on the acacia next door smelled so good.

Then I turned to Shock. “Is that why you came here? To give me your offspring?”

“Yes. Plus I knew that birthing another demon so quickly would weaken me. I was afraid he would turn on me while I couldn’t defend myself.”

“He almost did.”

Shock shook her head. “I still don’t understand why you didn’t take him, Allay.”

I watched the shadowy form climb over the fence. “I just couldn’t . . . kill him.” I turned away from the window. “Did you really think I was going to eat your child, Shock?”

“He’s not my child, Allay. He’s my offspring. There’s a big difference, and besides, I don’t see what that has to do with anything. You need to take a demon. Soon.”

I shook my head, suddenly unable to speak. I could still taste it, that overwhelming desire to steal Petrify’s essence. The hunger burning inside of me was much stronger now that I had gotten a taste of what I needed. I had almost given in to my worst demon urges.

“I didn’t mean to make you feel bad.” Shock shoved both hands into the front pockets of her baggy jeans. She always dressed down when she wasn’t in her EMT uniform. “I want to help you, Allay. I don’t want to lose you.”

“You demons just want me because I used to be human,” I said as a joke, trying to lighten the mood.

But Shock was serious. “To be honest, maybe I was fascinated with you because of that in the beginning. You know you’re different. I could really feel it when you were feeding me. You taste like that last burst of energy a human releases. . . .” She glanced away, aware that she was admitting to having drained someone. “So sweet, but passing. They say people get the same high from drugs. But you have it all the time. You radiate it. It’s really compelling.”

It was nothing I hadn’t already figured out. But I hated to think that my human-tainted energy was why Shock kept coming back to see me. “Lucky for me, my godfather sends his finest to watch over my nonexistent soul.”

Shock was standing awkwardly in the archway. “I think it’s love. I don’t know anything about love; what demon does? But I can see it in you, how you treat people, how you care about making things right. You hug me and I want to hug you back; I want that feeling. But I don’t know how.”

My throat closed up. She was warped, vulnerable, and inhibited. But she was reaching out—trying. I appreciated that.

“You hug great.” I smiled sadly. “The more you do it, the better you get.”

Shock didn’t move. She was always hesitant to touch me because of her instinctive fear that other demons would try to steal her energy, so hugging definitely didn’t come naturally to her. I had to go to her and put my arms around her. She hugged me, surprisingly hard and long. It was the first time I tried to let go before her. I squeezed her tighter for a few moments more, sinking into that safe, familiar feeling. It had been so long since I had felt like that . . . the last time I’d felt so human.

2

I used to be an ordinary girl living an ordinary life in Orange County. But a month before my eighteenth birthday, I’d accidentally been possessed by a demon. It happened over spring break during my senior year. I’d lied to my parents and gone to a rented beach house with my friends in San Diego. It wasn’t the first time I had lied to them—I’d been sneaking out of my room since

I bought my first junker at sixteen. I saw no harm in soothing my parents' fears so I wouldn't have to deal with their worry. I took care of myself.

But on the last night of my vacation, there was a pimply-faced dude at the bonfire who wouldn't leave me alone, so I told my friends I was going back to the hotel. They were right behind me, packing up the towels and saying good-bye to everyone. But it turned out to be an important few minutes, because on the boardwalk in a vast shadowed space between the lamps, I stumbled on a man attacking a woman.

I didn't know what was happening at first, and thought maybe they were making out. The guy had his arms wrapped tightly around her, and there wasn't any noise—the woman didn't call out for help or protest. That was why I didn't see them until I was almost on top of them. I felt the impact of their feet hitting the boardwalk as they struggled, and the woman beat feebly on his back with her fist. Then her arm dropped as if she were too weak to fight back anymore.

I didn't even think about it; I ran right into the guy, hitting him in the side as hard as I could. He spun away from the woman and slipped on the sand, hitting his back against the railing. He disappeared over the edge, falling down to the beach.

I skidded on the sandy boards, sprawling down and scraping my hands and knees. From below, not eight feet away, the would-be rapist shot me a look I could barely see in the darkness, only a wild-eyed glare of animal rage that turned my insides to mush. I thought I was a goner, but the guy was too far below to climb back up. He loped off into the shadows down the beach, probably looking for a staircase.

In a panic, I scabbled over to the girl. She had collapsed onto her back, her arms and legs akimbo, as if she couldn't even curl into a protective ball. I didn't know it then, but Plea was a three-hundred-year-old demon. The guy I had pushed off the boardwalk was another demon who had drained her of all the energy she had collected from her human prey, from feeding off their emotions. Without that protective shell of energy, her essence lay exposed.

I couldn't see the pulsing white core nestled in her belly, that magic bullet of demon immortality her attacker had tried to steal from her.

But when I touched Plea, her essence, the unending flame of life, passed into me. In that instant, my old life was over and I became the demon Allay.

My physical body was transformed into pure spirit; a replica of what I had once been, a simulation of flesh that still bled and felt pain. Yet with a thought I could change how I looked, willing myself into being. I no longer slept or ate or drank. I would never get sick and die the way other people did. I would never grow old.

It was completely disorienting. I felt the same physically, though I no longer experienced hunger in the same way—I wanted emotions instead of food for sustenance. And I couldn't sleep, which was maddening. I felt as if I were on a constant coke binge and couldn't stop, could never stop, and I revved myself higher and higher, compelled to touch people to suck off their feelings, surviving by instinct rather than conscious thought.

But the worst thing was the memories, those glimpses into Plea's life, her secrets, her knowledge, her experiences. All fragmented into puzzle pieces, and I could see only a few pieces at a time, which was next to useless for helping me figure out what was going on. It was from these scant clues that I knew I was now a demon like Plea had been. I got flashes of mythology; in various times we had been considered angels, devils, vampires, ghosts, ghouls, goblins, spirits, fairies, the *daevas* of Zoroastrianism, the Hopi *powaga*, the *narakas* of Jainism, and the jinn or genies of Islam created out of fire two thousand years before the creation of Adam. We were the *kuei* that Chinese Taoism used bonfires, firecrackers, and torches to ward off; the *oni* and *tengu*

the Japanese believed to possess spirits.

At first, I truly thought I had gone mad. I ran through the streets babbling about things I should know nothing about. When the authorities came and wrapped me in a straitjacket, I told them they were doing the right thing, that I was possessed by a demon named Plea that needed to be exorcised. I kept asking for a priest, though I had been born a Protestant and attended relatively few church services in my life.

When my parents arrived at the county psychiatric ward with their sad, shocked eyes, my mother's red-rimmed from crying, they sat and spoke in hushed tones on the other side of a scarred table. It was like a slap in the face. I had never caused any trouble, always got good grades, and had good friends, as I successfully kept the more unsavory aspects of my experimentations from them. They never met my first real boyfriend because he was a senior while I was a fresh-man. They never knew about my late-night visits to parties at UC Irvine. At that moment, knowing I had to "protect" them, I somehow managed to get hold of myself, and talked my way out of there with the help of my parents. I confessed to a drug experience gone bad, and claimed I had learned my lesson. *No more acid for me, I swear! Never again. I'll go home and be a good girl.*

Then I struggled to live the lie that I was still Emma Meyers of Fountain Valley, California, celebrating my birthday with people who suddenly seemed as if they were strangers. But I was the one who was different. I was now "Allay," because Plea's final emotion had been relief to see a girl rather than a demon looming over her. She thought she was going to survive, but instead I took her life without meaning to. That's why my strongest desire was to touch people who felt relieved and to absorb their emotion.

Over the years, I had tried to keep a relationship with my parents, my sister, and assorted cousins, but they were now firmly convinced I was addicted to drugs. To them, nothing else could explain my bizarre behavior. Even worse, demons were attracted to them when I visited. I finally gave up holidays at home, and having to pretend to eat and sleep. I told them I didn't want more from my life; that I couldn't be around them right now. I hoped it would be different someday, but it was hard to explain why I didn't have any serious relationships and why my sister's talk of having babies and getting promoted left me cold. I was stuck like a fly in amber. Who was brave enough to confess to their mother that they had been transformed from a nice, God-fearing girl into a demon? No, it was better that they thought I was a loser than some unworldly creature.

No doubt Shock had had other motives when she had dropped by my bar every few days over the years. I figured she was under Vex's orders, so what difference did it make that it was also because my hybrid energy was alluring? A real bond had grown between us, and at this point in my life, she was the only family I had left.

And here I was, standing in my living room, holding a demon close.

"My sister," I murmured as we finally separated.

Shock was nodding. "That's why I wanted to give you my offspring, Allay, because you need it. You can't die. I can't lose you."

I couldn't argue with her now. "You should rest, Shock. You look like you're about to fall over. I think you should stay here. It isn't safe for you to go out again tonight."

Shock reluctantly nodded in agreement. She preferred hiding away in her brownstone apartment in the heart of the Village when she wasn't working the streets. Her current persona had "inherited" the place when her last persona, a butch spinster, got too old to work as an emergency room doctor. It wasn't an easy charade to pull off, but Shock had done it for almost a

hundred years. That was why most demons lived in cities; it was simpler to disappear in the crowd.

“I’m definitely feeling punky,” she admitted. “That one came too fast.”

“You should control yourself better at work.” Shock skimmed a little energy from everyone, like I did. Perhaps she’d made a mistake, gone too far without realizing it. I knew better than most how seriously she took the “Do no harm” motto of a physician. But every shift she handled people who were boiling over with pain and terror—a lot to absorb on a daily basis. She had always loved medicine, starting back when leeches were a doctor’s most reliable remedy. She was still enthusiastic about the little buggers and how they could bring down swelling and bruises better than any modern-day remedies. I thought their being slimy slugs was enough reason to move them out of the realm of medicine.

I left her lying on the sofa and made sure to lock both bolts behind me. Demons were strong, but not strong enough to rip the hinges off my door.

I took a few deep breaths before descending, firming my shields around myself. I usually didn’t bother unless I felt another demon coming. But after that blast of energy from Shock, I had to be ready to defend myself. There were a few cannibalistic demons living in the city: Bask was addicted to demon energy, and dogged me on a fairly regular basis. Goad was also known to prefer demons. They were bound to be drawn here tonight.

I also had to prepare myself to face Lolita and my patrons; it wouldn’t do to rush down looking as if I had just banished the monster my sister had spawned.

“How is she, Allay?” Carl called out as soon as I came through the inner door of the bar. The bolt clicked as it shut behind me. I shouldn’t have doubted my security system.

“She’s fine. She’s gone to bed.” I tried to smile it off. “It happens to the best of us.”

They laughed, as they wanted to. It was too late to be getting all serious. Then I noticed Savor at the bar.

It was a nasty shock, since I hadn’t sensed the demon’s arrival. But Savor had a very light signature; a slight humming in the back of my throat and a mouthwatering sensation. I hadn’t noticed it in the clash between Shock’s and Petrify’s signatures. Now Petrify’s signature was rapidly fading away.

Savor was wearing one of his male personas—a man who went by the name Sebastian. He was short and slender, in his mid-twenties with black, artfully spiked hair over his prim face. But that knowing smirk and sarcastic drawl were enough to put anyone in his place.

Savor was leaning over the bar, holding out a chocolate for Lolita. She tried to take it from him, but he pulled it back, chiding, “No, you’ll nibble at it like a squirrel, like you always do. You have to eat the whole thing to get exactly the right burst of flavor.”

Lolita opened her lips obediently, ready for anything. Savor delicately popped the chocolate onto her tongue. Her eyes widened with delight as she bit into it and chewed.

Savor stroked the back of her hand, soaking up her pleasure at the taste. Bright yellow eddies of delight swirled around their skin where he touched her. I knew it would taste as sweet as that chocolate.

I stomped over. “What kind of poison are you feeding my bartender, Sebastian?”

“It’s good.” Lolita slurped as she tried to swallow and speak at the same time.

Savor raised one brow at me. “See, she likes it.” His hand was still resting on hers, absorbing her enjoyment.

I grabbed a towel to wipe the bar, moving it between them so they had to let go. Lolita rolled her eyes at me, then grinned at Savor. She sauntered off to the other end of the bar where Boymeat

was laughing at her, having watched the entire thing go down.

I was going to have to say something to her. I had tried to avoid it, knowing that Lo wouldn't take kindly to my interference. But Savor was getting out of hand. This was my territory, my people. I didn't like his coming in here and feeding off them.

But I had no choice. Savor worked for Vex, just as I did.

I followed Lolita to where we could speak alone. Lo's voice lowered so no one could hear.

"What's with Jamie?"

Shock's current persona was "Jamie Shoquille," so her nickname could be Shock. Everyone called her that, including her workmates. But Lolita had gotten into the habit of calling her Jamie because it got Shock's attention. Shock was so emotionally distant that Lo had made a game of trying to loosen her up.

"She's not hurt. She was scared more than anything." I touched Lolita's arm to reassure her. I absorbed hardly more than the waste cast off from her radiant energy, her worry about Shock, about me, and the residual pleasure from eating the chocolate Savor had given her. Thankfully, there wasn't anything special she was feeling for Savor.

At my reassurance, a jolt of relief quickly flowed through her. Unable to resist, I took a tiny bit, like a sip of pure delight; it satisfied me like nothing else could.

It made me feel like a filthy parasite, like Savor. He was watching us, glancing down pointedly at my hand. He probably thought I was marking my territory in front of him. I pulled away as if I'd been burned.

"Poor thing," Lo said. "Is she staying here tonight?"

"Definitely. If you see her, don't let her leave."

Lolita rubbed my shoulder comfortingly. "Are you sure you don't want to report this, Allay? This guy who did it—he could hurt someone else."

I had to force the lie through my lips. "It was a misunderstanding with a patient at work. They'll handle it."

"That doesn't sound good."

Now I was going to have to cover myself. "Don't tell her I told you. You know how Shock is about her personal stuff."

"It runs in the family." Lo gave me a quick squeeze.

I refrained from soaking up more relief from my friend. It was bad enough that I was lying to her; I didn't have to steal her emotions, too. "Sorry," I muttered reflexively. "It's been a rough night."

"You can go back upstairs to your sister. I'll take care of closing." Lo knew I didn't like to be pressed when I was upset, so she turned to start cleaning the shelf under the rows of liquor bottles behind the bar.

I didn't want to go back upstairs. I was revved up on the supercharged demon energy I had taken from Petrify. "No, thanks. I should let her rest."

I set off like a golf cart with an eight-cylinder engine, moving faster and burning brighter with power than ever before. I felt like I was high—on top of the world, and whatever I did was right and good.

It was probably mistaken for nervous energy as I wiped down tables, picking up some stray glasses and settling the chairs back in place. The bar would be clearing out soon enough. I calculated every move to bring me in contact with the patrons. I touched their arms as I bid them good night, gave them little nudges along with my quips, and was big on leaning into people as I took their order.

I didn't really need to feed, but a surprising number weren't happy despite their outward cheer. I lingered with them, reasoning that it was better to absorb a little bit of their negative emotions since that offered them some relief. Some customers came back night after night without understanding they came because I made them feel better.

Like most demons, I could feed on any emotion. For the dump truck loads of shit I had to absorb, I got to taste only a few drops of ease. But I would do anything to create those precious drops. So rather than an altruist, as too many called me, I was a hypocrite at heart, seeing only the comfort they found with me and not what I took. It was selfish in the extreme. And I could never forget it.

That was what made me a demon.

All the while, I avoided Savor. He was the only demon, other than Shock, allowed in my bar. I was Vex's bagman, and Savor was his messenger; Savor's job was to drop off the discreet envelopes of payola that I passed on to local, state, and sometimes even federal officials. The enormous Prophet's Arena would never have been built in Brooklyn right on the East River if the church hadn't paid off the commissioner of the planning and zoning board. His driver still picked up an envelope on the first of every month.

Vex's empire was his religion, the Fellowship of Truth. He'd started it right after World War II, posing as the first and now-dead prophet of a philosophy that was more libertarian than spiritual. The current prophet was Dread, Vex's firstborn and most loyal demon—they had been working together since the fifth century. Without the draconian personal restrictions that Vex's older religions had tried to impose on people, the Fellowship was growing at a respectable rate.

Believers emphasized personal responsibility over everything else, and judgment by none. The church's ultimate carrot was the promise of immortality gained through individual perfection. The fact that none of their followers had attained such a state didn't matter—the promise of it seemed enough to inspire hundreds of thousands to join the Fellowship.

I knew the other side of the church, the one that had no qualms about subverting laws and blackmailing people to get whatever Vex wanted.

I wasn't proud of what I did. I hated it. But it was the price I paid for Vex's protection. After I came to the city and took my job at the Den on C, the demon attacks subsided to a manageable trickle when I gained his support. As the head of his line, he had more power than anyone in the demon world other than Glory, both of whom had been born from the ancient demon, Bedlam. Through Vex's influence, I was mostly left alone. I was human enough to be grateful for that. So I stayed at the Den. A savvy owner would have closed it long ago and transformed it into something more profitable. But Michael Horowitz was my benefactor, the most important person I had ever won over with my demon persuasion. Michael gave me the use of the apartment upstairs and the freedom to do whatever I wanted with the bar, as long as I managed everything. It was one of a number of real estate investments he owned, while he managed many more. He wasn't like other business people I dealt with—Michael cared about me. Aside from work, he made sure I was doing okay, and he bustled in like a doting gay daddy to fix anything I needed. Most things I was able to take care of myself. I regularly had to cajole city authorities into allowing the rickety old building to remain open, and once I'd resorted to asking Vex to pay for necessary restorations to be done on the facade rather than letting the building be condemned. I'd thought about asking Vex for money to buy the bar from Michael, but it would put me even more in his debt, and besides, I couldn't reconcile myself to being a permanent blight on the community. Even with Vex's protection, demons were drawn to my hybrid energy. But when they couldn't get to me, they ended up preying on my neighbors instead. It was the reason for the

high crime rate in the area. Gentrification had moved in from every direction, but within the radius of a few blocks, my territory still contained too many closed and empty shops. Thanks to me, it was one of the last pits of decrepitude in Manhattan.

After the bar closed in the wee hours, I usually spent the rest of the night inside my apartment. If the other demons knew I rarely went out, then there was no reason to hang around.

That was the price I paid for living the illusion of being human. I could give up the act and stop endangering the people I lived among; I could leave my friends and the bar, and isolate myself, just as I had given up my family for their own good. I could become a wanderer so nobody would suffer because of me.

But what sort of life was that? I wasn't that big a person. I needed my home and my people. So I sacrificed my demon-self instead. At least, I tried to. I avoided demons, except for Shock.

This included avoiding Savor when I could. He was looking up into the long mirror hanging over the bar, watching me with an amused expression. I usually didn't have to talk to him to do my job; he deposited the envelopes of dirty money through the mail slot into the foyer of my apartment.

But Savor seemed to take a perverse joy in forcing me to treat him like an ordinary patron.

I went behind the bar and pulled down the crystal bottle filled with an emerald liqueur. I found a large brandy snifter and filled it almost a third of the way. "Sebastian, you aren't drinking. I know how much you love this."

"Sorry, I don't have any money." He patted his pockets blandly. "I'll have to pass."

"I insist. It's on the house. For bringing Lo chocolate."

Next to him, old Jose muttered something about bringing candy for booze next time. Savor stalled; he didn't want the drink. It burned energy for demons to process food or liquids, and was a real drain on the system. "That's not the glass it's supposed to be served in. You're ruining the bouquet," he protested.

I picked up the snifter and poured the contents into several shot glasses, filling them to the brim.

"How's that, Mr. Silver-spoon-up-his-ass?"

Savor grinned and passed two of the shot glasses to the guys. Old Jose knocked it back in one swig, then grimaced at the sticky-thick consistency. Savor sipped his. "Hmmm . . . lovely. Is this a celebration in honor of the recent birth?"

Thankfully Lolita was in the cooler and couldn't hear him. I leaned forward. "You felt it?"

"I was coming off the bridge and I felt it. You should be careful, Allay. A blast of energy like that is like sirens calling the hounds home. I wouldn't be surprised if you see a few more of our people hanging around tonight. You'd be better off taking Shock home and getting out of here."

I snorted. "As if I were going to take advice from you. Shock is safe upstairs, and that's where she's staying."

Savor shrugged. "Do what you want. I'm only trying to help."

"Why would you help me?"

He pursed his lips as if he were giving me a mock kiss. "We're on the same side, you silly child."

"You mean demons versus humanity? In case you hadn't noticed, I'm on the side of the humans."

"Ha-ha. No, I mean the whole Vex versus Glory drama."

"That has nothing to do with me."

"You think? Because from where I sit, you're quite the prize for Vex. He's got the only human-demon hybrid alive in his tight little grip."

That irritated me. As if I were his pet guinea pig. “I work for him, just like you do. And whether I like it or not, I’m a sixth-generation Vex demon. I’m part of his line.”

“Unlike me,” Savor added, so I wouldn’t have to. Savor was the only demon alive who didn’t know who his progenitor was. Two hundred years ago, moments after he had been born, his progenitor had shoved him overboard into the Indian Ocean. He wasn’t even sure what kind of ship it was, but it was moving so fast that by the time he recovered, he couldn’t sense his progenitor’s signature. The shock had distorted his memories, so he didn’t have much to work from, and he was reckoned damaged by all the other demons. None of them had stepped forward to claim him, so he was a free agent. It was only recently that he had begun working for Vex. I almost envied him his freedom—almost.

“At least I know what it means to be a Vex demon, though you obviously don’t,” Savor added. “Don’t I?” I gestured bitterly to the inner door that separated the bar from the foyer and staircase, where undoubtedly Savor had deposited a packet of money for me to pass on.

He waved that away. “Oh, that’s Dread’s stuff. He’s the businessman; he handles the administrivia. Vex doesn’t care about Manhattan real estate and privacy laws. Vex is busy stirring up wars and making enemies on a much larger scale than you can imagine.”

“So I’m only a penny-ante accomplice. Not a true minion of evil. I guess I can live with that.” For a moment, something flashed deep in his eyes, a frustration that he couldn’t voice. Then it was gone. “Don’t sell yourself short, sweetheart. Nobody expected you to live this long, you know. Not only are possessed humans more unstable than new demons, but you’ve got that amazing taste.” He touched the back of my hand so quickly that I couldn’t move away in time. “Succulent, delectable, not demon and not human, but the best of both, distilling the essence of each into one fragrant bouquet. How can we resist it?”

“That’s it.” I picked up his mostly full shot glass of liqueur and poured it into the sink. “You’re cut off.”

Lolita emerged from the cooler in time to hear me. “Allay! Stop picking on Sebastian. He’s not drunk.” Her glance took in the old man who was leaning on the bar with his head nearly touching the scarred mahogany. He was definitely drunk. “Time to go home, Jose. Your wife is waiting for you.”

Savor got up to leave, taking the hint for a change. Lolita sounded apologetic as she bid him good-bye and thanked him for the bite of chocolate. “There’s more where that came from,” Savor promised. His slinky walk was effete as he headed out the door and gave us both a flip of his hand in farewell. Lo was epicurean in her tastes, sampling all kinds of people, including the occasional woman. But the one time when Savor had asked her out—to my shocked annoyance—I’d been relieved when she had laughed it off as a joke.

I barely waited until he was gone, unable to contain myself. “Lolita, don’t encourage him. You can’t trust him.”

“You say that, but you never say why. I like Sebastian. If he asks me out again, I’m going to go.”

“Lo, you shouldn’t go near him. He’s a wily, slimy little bastard.”

She considered it, as she considered everything. “I . . . don’t think so. I think he’s sweet. And a little lonely.”

It was true that Lo’s intuition was almost as good as a demon’s. I didn’t know anyone who was better at assessing people so quickly.

But I couldn’t begin to tell her the truth about how wrong she was about dating a demon. If she had sex with him, he could accidentally suck off too much of her emotion and leave her a