

MAUREEN CHILD



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To my wonderful friend, and a fabulous writer, Kate Carlisle.

*Kate, you're the best. I seriously owe you for all the help
and the understanding ear when I hit a brick wall with Cassidy!*

More Than Fiends

E

Chapter One



"Quit? What do you mean, you quit?" I yanked the phone away from my ear, shook it like it was one of those Magic 8 Balls and I could get a different answer out of it, then slapped it to my head so hard I saw stars. "Barbara, you can't just *quit*."

"I'm really sorry, Cassidy," the voice on the phone said, but she didn't sound sorry at all. "But I can't keep working for free. You told me that my check definitely wouldn't bounce this time, and it did."

Damn it, the bank. I *knew* there was something else I was supposed to do on Saturday. "I've got the deposit right here," I told her. "I'll head to the bank now, and you can resubmit your check this afternoon."

"Good to know," Barbara answered, "but I still quit. I just hate cleaning houses, Cass. It's just too gross. So, bye."

She hung up, and I listened to the dial tone for a couple of minutes. Then I tossed the phone onto the nearest chair and headed for the kitchen. For chrissakes, of course cleaning houses was gross. Why the hell else would people pay us to do it for them?

I walked across the kitchen, stepped over Sugar, the huge black-and-white dog we'd rescued from the pound as a five-pound puppy. Now, of course, we knew that the whole five-pound thing was a clever ploy to get herself adopted. Because grown up, she was the size of a small pony, with all the grace and dignity of an elephant whose feet were tied together.

Sugar didn't stir, which was fine by me. I didn't need affection. What I needed was coffee and the sausage, egg and

cheese sandwich I'd just cooked before the phone rang and . . . My coffee cup was still on the table, beside a plate, empty of anything but a few miserable crumbs.

Sugar's tail thumped against the floor.

A guilty thump if I'd ever heard one.

I gave her a narrow-eyed stare that she didn't bother reacting to. "Do you have sausage breath?"

She pretended to be asleep. Even managed a pretty credible snore. But I wasn't fooled. Dropping to one knee, I looked through the nest of hair into a pair of brown eyes and grumbled, "That was *mine*."

Sugar flopped her tail again and gave me a sausage-flavored swipe of her tongue. Swell. Guess it's as close as I was getting to breakfast that morning.

I grabbed the coffee cup before Sugar could look for a chaser and refilled it at the pot. On the service porch, my ancient washing machine was doing the hokey pokey hard enough to make its lid slap up and down like it was clapping time. I slammed one hip against the washer to hold it in place and tried not to notice that an old washing machine on spin cycle was as close to an orgasm as I'd come in too long to think about.

Wouldn't you know it, the minute I started enjoying the sensation, something inside the washer snapped with a loud, really expensive sounding *clank*, and hot water gushed out from the bottom of the damn thing. My sneakers were soaked; suds rode a wave of water into the kitchen—where Sugar jumped up like she'd been shot, and tipped the table onto its side. My empty plate shattered against the linoleum, and the jagged pieces floated into the living room.

The day just kept getting better.

Sugar was howling indignantly, and my hoo-hah was still tingling as I started a mental list of everything I had to get done that day.

With Barbara gone, I'd have to go out and clean a couple of places with Carmen Mendoza, my one remaining employee.

No way could she handle all the work alone. Just perfect. So all I had to do was mop up my entire house (upside, the floors were now clean), go to the bank, barter my body at the appliance store to get a new washer, work my ass off at two houses, hit the high school for a conference with my daughter's math teacher (a talk which I probably wouldn't even understand), then—

Sugar made a kind of half growl, half lurchy noise, and I looked over in time to see her barf up my breakfast sandwich.

Happy birthday to me.



A few hours later, I limped into my house. I was exhausted and dirty from the cleaning jobs, and after the meeting at the high school, feeling really unfit to be raising a math-genius daughter. But then, I'd known I was going to be outclassed when Thea was six and she balanced my checkbook—then gave me a brief lecture on the importance of IRAs.

Nothing much had changed. According to Ms. Welch, Thea's math teacher, my daughter was the next Einstein or something. And I couldn't help but notice that Ms. Welch kept looking at me as if she was trying to figure out just how I'd managed to produce such a gifted child.

Well, get in line.

Sometimes I had trouble with that one, too.

But, in the dissolving world that is my life, Thea is the one bright spot. I had her at sixteen. For me, keeping her was the best choice I ever made. Thea and I were a team. *Simpatico*. The Two Musketeers.

Until about a minute after the phone rang.

I grabbed the receiver on the way to the service porch, where I planned to kick the washing machine good-bye. At least one thing in my day had gone well. There was a spanking-new washer headed my way, as soon as the delivery guy could get to the house. I felt like I should be saluting the old machine. But, honestly, I just wanted it gone. Over the last couple

of months, it had made its displeasure with its existence known by chewing up my bras and spitting pieces of lace into the rinse water. I swear it was actually *swallowing* Thea's socks.

As it turned out, I hadn't had to barter my body for a new machine. Bob, of Bob's Appliances in downtown La Sombra, had already *had* my body back in high school. Hey, don't judge me—we all make mistakes, and believe me, Bob was one for the books. But at least he had declined a revisit, instead setting me up with a million and one easy payments that I'd probably be finishing up by the time I got my first Social Security check.

Gotta love a small town.

"Hello?" I gave the machine a good kick anyway, on principle.

"Cassie? Is that you?"

Only one human being in the world *ever* called me Cassie. Crap.

I felt around for a chair, yanked it out and plopped down onto it. Having your past charge up and slap you in the face? Not the thrill ride you'd expect.

Could this birthday *get* any worse?

"Cassie? You there?"

Just barely.

"Uh, yeah. Hi."

"That's it? That's all I get after—God, how long's it been, anyway?"

"Sixteen years." I knew exactly how long it had been since I'd seen Logan Miller, father of my darling Thea. See, I was pregnant during my junior year of high school. My prom date—Paul Martin, a good friend who hadn't come out of the closet yet—pinned my corsage to my belly for the photo. Good times.

Anyway, Logan was a senior in college the summer I met him. We had fun. (Obviously.) And over three great months, I fell in love and he fell into a good thing. By the end of summer, I was pregnant and he was gone, headed off to finish up at Stanford. When I found out I was pregnant, I didn't say any-

thing. I was going to, but then figured that I didn't want to get in his way during that last year of college. Let him take care of business, you know?

Of course, my dad was completely freaked at the time. He wanted the name of someone he could kill. Since my mom had died when I was twelve, Dad had taken on the protective instincts of both parents, sort of making him a cross between a rabid dog and a hungry bear. And finding out that somebody had slipped past his defenses and left his baby girl pregnant was enough to make him a little nuts.

But I kept my secrets—I hadn't wanted Logan dead; I'd wanted him *back*. I planned to tell Logan all about our baby at his graduation. After which, I imagined we'd all drive off together in a perfect little BMW, live in a great house on the beach and—Well, that's as far as my plans went.

Just as well I didn't put more effort into those dreams and schemes, really, since I left my new baby girl with her doting grandpa, went to Logan's graduation and got a big hug from him just before he introduced me to his fiancée, Muffy or Crusty or something, I don't remember. The rest of that afternoon was pretty much blessedly blank.

The point is, our twain hasn't met in sixteen years. And that's the way I wanted it.

Really. The hard beat of my heart and the swirl of something hot and gooey in the pit of my stomach had absolutely nothing to do with the sound of Logan's voice in my ear. Oh God. My chin hit my chest. Pitiful. At thirty-two, I was reacting to Logan the same way I had at sixteen. This could *not* be a good sign.

I gave myself a quick, mental talking-to. I'd been fine without Logan in my life, hadn't I? And so had Thea. Sure, she had gone through the whole I-want-a-daddy-like-everyone-else phase, but we'd survived it.

In fact, when she had first started asking about why she didn't have a daddy, I had said the first thing that came to mind: "He's dead."

Well, okay, I embellished a little, to take the sting out. Something along the lines of “Your daddy died saving poor little orphans from a flood.” Or was it a fire?

Made her feel better about the man who’d walked away from us without another glance. Well, he’d walked away from *me*. Technically, he didn’t even know about Thea, and that’s the way I wanted to keep it.

Thea and I were doing great on our own. We didn’t need Logan back in our lives now to mess things up. Not to mention I really didn’t want to think about having to tell Thea that I hadn’t been exactly honest about her dad.

“Wow. Sixteen years. Amazing.”

“Yeah. Amazing. So what’s up, Logan?” I stood up, yanked open the freezer, and grabbed a cookie from my emergency stash of Girl Scout Samoas and took a bite, instinctively shooting my hip at Sugar to keep her from jumping up to grab it. Hey, she’d already had breakfast, which was more than I could say.

“Just wanted to check in, say howdy.”

“Sixteen years and you’re just checking in? What’s going on? And why would anyone want to say the word *howdy*?”

He laughed, so I knew something was up. It hadn’t been that funny.

“You haven’t changed, have you?” he asked. “You always could make me laugh.”

“Yeah,” I said sourly, “it’s good to be me.”

“Cassie, I’m back in town, thought we could catch up.”

I gulped, took another bite of cookie and talked around it. *Back in town?* I thought wildly. Which town? *My town? Cool, Cass. Keep it cool. Don’t let the panic show. Yet.* “Catch up on what?”

“On what you’ve been up to. What I’ve been doing. And how I’ve moved back to La Sombra.”

I choked.

The Samoa got stuck halfway down my throat, and the coconut and chocolate were strangling me. Ordinarily, not a bad way to go.

So, not just back in town. Back in town to *stay*. Thea's *father*, here in La Sombra?

This was *not* good.

"You're back? Permanently?"

"Yep. Today's my first day at work. I waited to call until I was settled."

Hah. *He* was settled, while my world was rocking as badly as the old washing machine. My stomach was jumping and my head was pounding.

"So, you're not married or anything, are you?" he asked, oh so casually.

I slapped my chest like I could push air into my lungs, ignored Sugar's whining because I'd selfishly eaten the whole cookie, and managed to croak, "Uh, no. But you are. Remember?"

"Not anymore," he said, and I couldn't tell if that was depression or relief in his voice. "Got a divorce last year."

Was he looking for condolences or celebration? I took a guess. "Sorry?"

"Nah. It's good."

Great. Just what I wanted. Logan, happily single. Back in town. He didn't know about Thea, so why was he calling me? Sixteen years and he picks up the phone to chitchat with the girl he left behind? It so didn't make sense.

I was only half listening as he continued to talk, (a) because I had to come up with some way to keep him and Thea apart—which wasn't going to be easy—and (b) because the sound of Logan's voice was hitting me even harder now. Harder maybe because I was older, knew more about sex and could look back and appreciate just how good he'd been at it? Whatever the reason, I was getting that feeling again. You know the one . . . sort of a hot/cold, goose-bumpy, anticipational (yes, I know that's not a word) thing.

Oh man, Logan back in town was going to seriously confuse my already fairly confused life.

A knock on the back door had me turning around to see

the appliance delivery guy leaning against my brand-new, not-nearly-paid-for washing machine.

Any excuse in a storm.

"Nice talking to you, Logan," I said, talking fast so he couldn't stop me, "but I gotta go."

"Oh. Okay. How about I stop by later? Bring dinner?"

Fabulous. Just the three of us.

"I don't think that's a good idea—"

"You still like pizza, don't you?"

I rolled my eyes. Oh please. Who *doesn't* like pizza? He asks as if he knows me so well.

"Yeah, but—"

"See you later."

Worry about it later, I told myself, adding it to the mental list. Seriously, if all the worries I kept putting off ganged up on me on the same day, my head was going to explode. Hmm. Add that one to the worry list, too.

In a heartbeat I was back to the last day I'd seen him. Logan had made even those stupid graduation hats look good. His smile had been wide, his blue eyes flashing, and then he'd reached out and snaked one arm around the woman he'd traded me in for. I could still remember the sharp stab of pain that had sliced through me when he bent and kissed the bitch right in front of me. I could still remember mumbling something stupid and leaving before the tears I felt choking me could fall.

Ah yes. Why *wouldn't* I want to get together with Logan and talk about old times?

When I hung up, Sugar and I headed for the back door, with me trying to figure out if there was time to pack up, sell the house and move before dinner. Probably not. Guess I'd have to settle for turning off the power and telling Thea the electricity was cut off. Then we'd sit in the dark and hope Logan thought the house was empty.

I opened the back door and patted Sugar as she trembled at the sight of a stranger. Big dog, but a coward at heart. I looked

down at a fat guy with LEO stenciled on his blue-and-white-striped shirt. He was standing next to my faboo new washer, and he looked up at me and gulped like he'd never seen a woman on the edge before. Then a second or two later, he carefully handed me a clipboard and muttered, "Sign this."

I did, handed it back to him and said, "Don't you want to haul the old one out before you bring that one in?"

He snorted and backed up. "Nobody told me about taking away the old machine."

"What? Of course you have to take it away. What am I supposed to do with it if you don't?"

He avoided looking at me, and I had to wonder if I'd remembered to put on makeup that morning.

"Not my problem, lady."

I threw my arms out and braced my hands on either side of the door, blocking the entry when he tried to muscle his way past me. The man was built like a linebacker, but I was a woman on a mission. No *way* was I going to be stuck trying to drag that old machine out on my own.

"Come on, Leo. Cut me a break here."

"Lady," he growled, still not looking at me. What? Did I have a huge zit on my forehead or something? "Outta the way or I leave this baby outside."

Just what I needed. Broken machine inside. New machine outside. Neither of them working.

"Let me call Bob and clear this up." Bob the dweeb, who thinks he can screw with me just because he inherited his father's appliance store and made more money in a month than I did all year.

"Fine. I'll be in the truck. Takin' my break."

"Wow, yeah. Wouldn't want you to get all tired out, leaning on my new washing machine. Take care of yourself, Leo."

Thankfully, the phone was still in my hand, so I dialed the store and waited through a Muzak version of "Stairway to Heaven" for Bob to answer. While I grabbed another cookie and pushed Sugar into the kitchen and closed the door, the

music kept playing in a not-too-subtle attempt to drive me insane.

I was just wondering if it wouldn't be faster to hop into my Volkswagen, drive downtown and bitch-slap Bob in person, when a woman appeared on the back porch. One minute, the porch is empty. Next, some old lady in an ugly dress and hideous black shoes is standing there, staring at me.

I choked on another Samoa.

Seriously, I was beginning to wonder if the cookies were out to get me.

"Can I help you?" I asked, still gasping and clutching the phone.

Her gray hair didn't budge from its tidy curls despite the sharp, cold wind off the ocean. Her strong jaw was clenched, and her icy blue eyes were fixed on me like she was trying to see inside my head.

Weird.

"On the contrary," she said quietly, "I'm here to help you."

"Help me do what?" Ditch Logan? Scream at Bob? Bully Leo? Have I mentioned that men are currently pains in my ass?

"Accept your *destiny*."

"Okaaaayyyy . . ." I said, trying to be patient. It's never wise to upset crazy people.

"Today you are thirty-two years old," the old woman went on, and just how the hell did she know it was my birthday? "Your time has come."

She smiled, but it wasn't a grandma-type, wanna-cookie? smile. Nope, this was more like the grin on that fake shark they built for the movie *Jaws*.

"There is no time to waste," she said. "The demons are here. And only you can kill them."

Chapter Two



"Kill the demons," I said, nodding and giving her a wink like this was a little secret just between the two of us. I kept thinking, *Keep her calm. Don't upset her little fantasy world.* Meanwhile, I'm wondering how I can call 911 while I'm on hold with an appliance store. "Okeydokey. I'll get right on that."

She frowned. "You are the chosen one. It is your duty to fight the—"

The Muzak ended and Bob answered. Holding one finger up to the strange-and-getting-stranger-by-the-minute woman, I said, "Hold that thought. Bob? Hi, it's Cassidy. Look, Leo's here with the new machine, but he says you didn't tell him to take the old one away."

"That wasn't part of our deal, Cass, and—"

"Bob!" I cut him off because, really, once he gets going, it's hard to stop him. While I was gearing up for a fight, the old lady slipped past me into the house and was wandering around my kitchen. Sugar was no help. She was hiding under the table.

"Look, Bob," I said, frowning when Weird Grandma started opening my cupboards. I snapped my fingers at her, but she just gave me a quelling look and continued her snooping. Pretty snarky for an intruder. "You get Leo to take away the old machine, or I tell your wife about the time you took Terri Flannery to Vegas for that 'business trip.'"

He shrieked. Never an attractive sound coming from a man, but at least I knew I'd made my point. I'd been hanging on to that little nugget of information for two years now, just

waiting for the right chance to use it, ever since the night Terri got drunk and told me all about the trip with Bob and how he cried during sex. Though from how Terri described it, *she* should have been the one crying. God knows, I would have. Since high school, Bob had done some serious deteriorating. I hung up with Bob's promise to call Leo, then turned to face the creeper in my kitchen.

"You know," I said, "maybe we should get you back outside." Where people from the home can find you.

The occasional stray wacko wasn't exactly news around here. La Sombra is known for more than its great surf and excellent bakery. We've also got the biggest nuthouse in California just outside town. Excuse me, long-term mental health care facility. Whatever. It's a massive place that looks more like a medieval castle than a home for the terminally weird, but there you go. In California, it's always about appearances.

Point is, there are always a few escapees every year, and sooner or later, the guys in white vans go cruising the streets to round 'em back up again.

Of course, this was the first time one of the escapees had found her way into my *kitchen*.

"I'm not leaving."

That's what you think, Grandma.

As if to prove her point, she pulled out a chair and sat down. She plunked her purse onto the table, and I couldn't help sneering at it. Now I was convinced she was an escapee. Only a nutball would have carried that thing.

Let me explain. There are standards, you know? Vinyl was meant to be used on booths in diners or for car upholstery. Stepping out of its sphere was just wrong.

I mean, some women have a thing for shoes. God knows I'm not one to throw stones at any woman's personal addiction, but no way would I spend several hundred bucks on something for my *feet*. For chrissakes, streets are *filthy*, you know? Why would I spend all that money on something only to get it dirty?

Nope. Shoes were just utilitarian to me.

But a good purse was a thing of beauty.

I sighed just thinking about my small but excellent collection. I kept up the IRA for Thea's sake, but stashed spare cash to feed my addiction. Coach, Dooney & Bourke, Fossil, Fendi. I love 'em all. Which was why just *looking* at the weirdo's cheap vinyl pocketbook was nearly painful.

"Cassidy Burke," the wacko intoned like a voice from a bad horror movie, "it is your time."

I stiffened. This was suddenly not so funny. "How'd you know my name?"

She crossed her legs, swung one foot and almost clipped Sugar's nose. The dog whimpered.

"My name is Jasmine," the woman said, which was just fascinating, but didn't answer my question. She opened her purse to pull out a large spray bottle filled with a murky, light brown liquid.

"Fabulous. But that doesn't tell me how you know *my* name. Or what you're doing here. Or why I haven't tossed your bony ass out yet."

She sniffed at that, as if she knew I wouldn't carry through on my threat. Okay, fine, I talk a good game, but there was no way I'd actually *toss* her anywhere.

"I'm here to guide you."

"That's really great," I said, keeping a wary eye on her as I listened to Leo grunting and moaning over the old washing machine. Apparently, Bob had gotten through to him and convinced him to change his mind about taking the old machine away. One battle won. Now all I had to do was get psychic, crazy granny out of my kitchen. "But I don't need a guide. Born and raised right here in La Sombra. I'm good. Really. And I'm too busy for a destiny, but thanks for asking."

She reached into her purse again and pulled out yet another large spray bottle. God, it was like one of those clown cars you see at the circus: Looked small, but apparently it was bottomless.

"These are your weapons," she said, pushing both bottles toward me.

"Right. Weapons. What am I supposed to do?" I asked, picking up one of the bottles to play along. The liquid was nasty looking and had lots of little green flecks floating in it. I *so* didn't want to know. "What's this for, anyway? To stain the bad guys?"

She sighed. "This liquid is an antidemon mixture, a secret recipe which has been handed down from generation to generation."

Antidemon mixture?

"What? They're allergic to dirty water?"

On the service porch, the washing machine crashed into a wall, and Leo yelped. Visions of lawsuits danced in my head.

"You are an unusually stubborn woman, aren't you?" Jasmine asked, her lip curling just a little.

"I think I'm being pretty broad minded, if you ask me," I countered. "I'm letting you sit here in my kitchen instead of calling the home and getting you picked up, which is what I'm about to do."

She inhaled sharply and gave me a look that I'd once gotten from Sister Alphonsus in sixth grade when I tried to sneak in on the whole altar-boy-lesson thing. I mean, now girls can serve in Mass, but back then, I'd been a feminist rebel, and the nun who should have been an Army general had wanted to smash me like a bug.

"Your grandmother hasn't told you anything, has she?" Jasmine asked.

That caught my attention. "Gram? You know Gram?"

"Of course," she said, waving one hand in dismissal. "And I must say, when it was *her* time to be called, she wasn't nearly as much trouble as you are being."

"Sure." My grandmother knew the wacko? What? Were they best friends in high school or something? Shouldn't she have warned me that a crazy who knew the family might be showing up at my back door someday? As soon as I got Jas-

mine and Leo the hell out of my house, I was going to put in a call to Gram and try to get some answers.

"It's imperative that you listen to me, Cassidy Burke."

"Okay." I wondered if she'd notice my dialing 911 if I kept my hand at my side and just talked really loud.

"The mixture will identify demons and even slow them down a little." Then she added with a saucy wink, "Plus, it's an excellent window cleaner."

"Good to know." I grinned companionably, assuring her that we were all crazy together and wasn't life great? before wheeling my eyes to the service porch, hoping Leo would look in to say he was finished and I could signal him to strap the old biddy to his dolly and give her a ride to the curb.

No Leo.

"You *must* listen to me," she said.

"Oh, I am," I assured her, trying to look interested.

"You," she said, flattening her hands on the table and leaning in to make her point, "are the latest in a long, proud line of Demon Dusters. For centuries, the women in your family, on their thirty-second birthdays, come into their 'gift.' Now it is your time. You must accept your destiny."

Okay, this was just getting weirder and weirder. She knew my name. Knew it was my birthday and how old I was, for God's sake. She had to be a friend of Gram's. It was the only explanation.

"This is a joke, right?" If I were rich and famous, I'd figure that Ashton Kutcher was out there somewhere with his *Punk'd* crew, getting this all down on film. But since I was nearly broke and hardly famous, and the show had been cancelled, that wouldn't fly. "I've seen the TV show. Everyone knows that Slayers are way younger than I am. Tell you what: Why don't you wander on down to the high school and see who you can find?"

Her mouth flattened and pinched like an ill-tempered librarian's. "Don't be ridiculous. The Fates would *never* send a child into battle with demons."

"Oh sure," I said, nodding again, "I'm the one being ridiculous."

"Your mother was the chosen one before you, but she died too young to take up the mantle of responsibility."

So, (a) how the hell did she know about my mom? I was twelve the year my mother died at thirty-one in a car accident. And (b) where the hell did granny get off making my mother sound like a slacker for dying?

"Since she was not there to cleanse the demons in her time," the woman continued, "their numbers have grown substantially."

"Busy making little demons, huh?" Nice to know *someone* was having regular sex.

"This is not a joking matter."

"Trust me on this: I'm no longer laughing." For God's sake, did I have a damn sign over the house? WEIRDOS WELCOME HERE?

The phone rang and I jumped, startling Sugar, who WOOFED loud enough to make the windowpanes rattle. The old woman didn't even flinch. Nerves of steel and a sieve for a mind.

"Hello?" I snapped, idly shaking the spray bottle, watching those green flecks dancing around.

"Ms. Burke?" A female voice with the purr of a professional greeter. "I'm calling for Mr. Devlin Cole to confirm your appointment for this afternoon?"

Damn it.

I swallowed hard, straightened up and swung my hair out of my eyes like I was on a videophone—and, hey, thank God I wasn't. How had I forgotten about this? Oh yeah. I remember. The Day of Disasters. That's how.

"Hi, yes. Of course," I said, slapping a smile on my face so it would hopefully come across in my voice. The old woman was staring at me, Leo was still cussing up a storm, and Sugar's whining was starting to take on a panicked edge.

"Then I can tell Mr. Cole you'll be here at four?"

"You bet," I assured her, glancing at the clock and nearly whimpering myself. It was already almost three, and I still had to shower and change. Oh, and get rid of Jasmine, Leo and my old washing machine. No problem. "I'll see him then."

"We must go over our strategies," Jasmine (a fabulous name for a woman who looked more like a Myrtle) said.

"Nope," I said, tossing the phone. "What we must do is get you outta here so I can shower and change and then impress the hell out of Devlin Cole so he'll give my company the cleaning contract at his club."

"But I must explain about the mixture."

I held the spray bottle in one hand and had a tight grip on her arm with the other. As I dragged her up and out of her chair, I nodded and said, "Shake and spray, right? Got it. Won't forget."

Leo was just finishing up on the service porch, still muttering about the inequities of life, poor baby, when I hustled Grandma Ugly Purse out the back door. Ordinarily, I might have given her a lift back to the loony bin, but not today. Today I had to make that meeting if I wanted to get a contract that would keep my company floating and me and Thea eating. One thing we both really liked was eating.

"So, thanks for stopping by," I told her, pushing Mr. Charm out behind her at the same time. "I'll tell all my friends to watch out for those slippery ol' demons."

"Demons?" Leo echoed, eyes wide, eyebrows arching up into what was left of his hairline.

"Spray him!" Jasmine screeched.

"I'm not spraying him," I argued, still trying to get her scrawny yet surprisingly agile body out the back door. Leo had been easy in comparison. "God knows what you put in that stuff."

"I'll show you!" she shouted and covered my hand with hers to squeeze the trigger on the bottle.

"Hey!" Leo shouted and leaped back.

Too late.

A stream of dirty brown liquid shot out in a wide arc. I watched as it hit the window, the wall, the door and, finally, the top of Leo's head.

He screamed and slapped both hands to the tiny plume of smoke already lifting off his scalp.

"Ohmigod!" Panicked, I peeled granny's clawlike grip off my hand, grabbed a dish towel and tried to swipe at Leo. But he danced back out of reach, still rubbing at his head. And now his *palms* were smoking.

I glanced at the spray bottle and then dropped it, fast. Holy Marc Jacobs leather tote! "What the hell did you put in there?" I shouted. "Acid?"

Leo wasn't listening. He took off like someone had shot him out of a cannon, and for a portly guy, he could really move. I was a couple steps behind him, shouting apologies and trying to convince him on the fly that going for a personal injury suit would only get him a pitiful IRA balance and a few good purses.

He didn't even slow down. He hit the driver's side of his delivery truck, yanked it open and hopped inside. He had the truck in reverse and was barreling down the driveway before I could latch onto the grille and dig my heels into the concrete. Thank God, he'd already loaded up the old washer. I had a feeling I was never going to see Leo again.

Even from a distance, I could still see the smoke wafting out the window.

Jasmine, a little winded but otherwise looking pretty self-satisfied, caught up with me. "There. You saw it for yourself."

I swiveled my head to glare at her. For the first time in my life, I was speechless. Probably safer that way. Shaking my head, I ran back up the driveway, ignored her wavering voice calling my name, slammed and locked the door, and tried to convince myself none of it had happened—the secret to my life: selective memory.

I undressed as I ran and hit the bathroom already naked. In

less than fifteen minutes, I was showered, shampooed and pawing through my closet for something not slutty.

Finally settled on a sea green skirt with matching jacket and a white blouse. Simple. Plain. Boring. Laid out the outfit on the bed, dashed back to the bathroom and dried my short, dark blond hair—which needed highlights again—and slapped on some makeup. Then back to the bedroom, threw on the outfit and grimaced at my reflection. I have no problem with being a businesswoman. I just hate having to *dress* like one—but again, that pesky eating thing forces me to do a lot of things I'd rather pass on.

I pulled one of my beloved purses down from the shelf—they were all in their protective cloth bags, naturally, but I, being a genius, had labeled them, so I knew exactly which one was which. This one was the green Fendi envelope bag. Perfect. Even took the sting out of wearing a skirt. Threw my keys and wallet and, what the hell, a lipstick inside, then headed downstairs in record time.

Jasmine was nowhere to be seen. Had the boys in white coats already come by to scoop her up? God, I hoped so. So far, my birthday had really sucked. Having to deal with the crazy old woman who knew too much about me was just not something I was up for, you know? Anyway, I had bigger things to think about. Like impressing the hell out of Devlin Cole.

By the time I made it downtown, it was five minutes to four. I hopped out of the car, smoothed my skirt and folded my fingers around the leather of my Fendi, just to ease my nerves.

I stared up at Magic Nights, and it looked a lot different in daylight. White brick, so clean and brilliant it seemed to glow in the sun, the building took up nearly half the block. Windows glistened blankly, curtains closed tight across them. Neatly trimmed green hedges hugged the edges of the building, and a small, elegant brass plaque by the double front doors proclaimed in swirling script, *Magic Nights*.

If you didn't know what it was, the building could pass for any upscale business place. I'd never been inside Magic Nights, but I had driven past it at night, all lit up by bright white lights and flashes of color. Music poured out the doors that were harder to get through than the gates at Buckingham Palace.

I'd often wondered why Devlin Cole had chosen to bring his exclusive club to La Sombra. After all, he probably would have done even more business than he did, if the place were in Los Angeles or San Francisco. Maybe his clientele appreciated the smaller-town vibe.

The place was supposed to be a private nightclub, catering to the rich and tacky. But it was pretty common knowledge that it was actually a sex club—where your every fantasy could come true—with the help of your American Express Platinum Card.

And I was finally going to get a look at the inside. My hoo-hah tingled expectantly, but the reality was, the only fantasy of mine that would be satisfied would be snaring the cleaning contract.

I knocked on the front door and waited, stroking my Fendi for luck. If I could get this contract and somehow keep Leo from suing me because of Wacko Granny, all might be almost okay with my little corner of the universe.

When the door opened, I looked up, up, up into a pair of dark, nearly black eyes. The guy had to be six foot five, and next to my miserable five foot five, he looked like a giant. A really *great*-looking giant. I kinda liked that in a man.

He had a strong jaw, and thick, black hair hanging to the collar of the white dress shirt that covered a chest broad enough to tempt any woman to fling herself at it.

"Ms. Burke?" God, his voice was like dark, rich chocolate.

"Yeah?" I think I sighed, but let's not dwell. I cleared my throat and tried again. "I mean, yes. I'm Cassidy Burke."

"Devlin Cole," he said and reached out to take my hand in his.

When his fingers curled around mine in a firm shake, my insides lit up, and that tingle in my hoo-hah kicked into high gear again.

All I could think was, *The whole birthday thing is suddenly looking a lot better.*

Chapter Three



"*L*et me show you around," he said, dropping my hand and stepping back so I could move past him into the club.

My skin was buzzing, but he didn't have to know that. Nodding solemnly, in a perfect imitation of a calm, cool businesswoman, I said, "That's a good idea."

He walked beside me, taking one long step for every two of mine. "As you can see, it's a big place." He paused in a wide doorway off the entry hall, and I peeked past him at the main dance floor.

Gleaming wood floors stretched out in what looked like acres of space. Two tiers of tables and chairs formed a semicircle at the far end of the room, and at the opposite side was an elevated stage where a DJ's booth sat dead center. Mirrors lined one whole wall, and instead of wondering just how much glass cleaner that was going to take, I studied my reflection standing beside Devlin Cole's. Wow, we really looked good together.

At least, he looked really good, and anyone standing alongside him sort of basked in the glow. That's okay. I was comfortable with basking.

"I have an industrial crew come in every night to clean the club area," he was saying, and I had to force myself to pay attention to his words rather than stare at his mouth.

"Okay," I said, taking a firm grip on the Fendi. "So what do you need me and my company to do?"

He looked down at me and smiled—and, whoa baby, what a smile. He had that whole tall, dark stranger thing going for him anyway, but that smile really put him over the top. The

man was a walking orgasm. And, boy howdy, could I use one of those.

"I'd prefer that a smaller company handle the upstairs rooms. Better for business," he said, "if we maintain a semblance of privacy."

"Oh, we can provide that," I said, hearing myself ramble at high speed. "I mean, we can't provide privacy, but we're discreet. Our customers are like family. Well, not family. Better than family, since you don't always like your family, you know. But we take care of our people, and we're quiet. Just really quiet and never discuss clients with anybody. Heck, we hardly even talk." Oh God. *Shut up, Cassidy*. I took a breath, hoping it would help. When it didn't, I at least went for a change in subject. "This really is an amazing place. I hear you practically have to give blood to get inside."

"We do have a select clientele."

Oh, you betcha. The rich, the tacky, the famous and the wannabes all eventually came to La Sombra at some point to fight their way into Magic Nights. There were reporters who would literally kill to get the inside scoop on what happened in here.

Now it was me getting that scoop—and so far, no fatalities. I wasn't going to think about Leo's possible third-degree burns.

"I actually tried to sneak in past your gargoyle on the door one night about ten years ago," I said, wondering if I should be admitting that—then hey. It was too late. Bag open. Cat out. "Didn't get far."

"If I'd known you were outside, I'd have made an exception." His dark eyes flashed with something. Interest?

Oh boy. Flirting 101.

It had been a long time for me, and I wasn't sure how to play this. After all, this was supposed to be a business meeting, but at the same time, how often does a guy like Devlin Cole trot through your life?

Um, let me think . . . never?

"Next time, I'll mention your name," I said.

"Next time, I'll invite you," he said, and the timbre of his voice dropped about three octaves, and the resulting shiver along my spine made me quiver all over.

No doubt that was unintentional. To men like this one, flirting came as naturally as breathing. But I wasn't complaining. This little interview was really going to spice up my fantasies for a while.

He headed for the stairs, and I hurried to keep up with him even though the view from behind was pretty spectacular. Broad shoulders and great butt. Added to that smile, a triple threat.

Lucky me.

His big hand skimmed the polished banister as we walked up the stairs. "Have you lived here long?" he asked.

"All my life." Boring, I know. Born in La Sombra, raised here, still living here and will probably die right here, too. God, quick, somebody! Find me a biographer!

"Your family's from here, too?"

"No, actually, I'm a princess, but gypsies stole me and brought me to La Sombra." Crap. *Shut up, Cassidy. Don't let the nervous rambling start again.*

He chuckled and I relaxed a little. Probably not a good idea. I ramble when I'm nervous, but I *really* talk when I'm relaxed.

"So how about you? I mean, I know you're not from here, so . . . where?"

Did he stiffen a little? The moment came and went so fast I wasn't sure. But, hell, maybe he was just a touch more private than someone like me, who has been known to tell perfect strangers things most folks wouldn't confess to a shrink.

"Europe, originally," he said finally. "I moved here from Cleveland twelve years ago."

And no accent. A shame, really. A guy like him should have an accent. Something Latin, maybe. Or, God help me, Irish.

"Cleveland?" I asked with a laugh. "Sorry. It's not really funny, but you don't seem like the Midwestern kind of guy."

And from Europe to Cleveland. Not exactly the kind of move most people would think to make. You know, sitting at a street café in Paris, you don't usually think, 'I'm tired of this life. Think I'll move to Cleveland.'

Somebody stop me!

"I was visiting . . . friends in Ohio. I didn't stay there long. I don't care for snow."

"Oh." Reasonable. "Me, neither. Give me the ocean and an eighty-degree Christmas with Santa in board shorts every time."

"Hmm . . ."

Was he bored?

Terrified?

At the head of the stairs he paused, and I took a sec to look around. Even the hallway was pretty spectacular. Long and wide, a thick white—a bitch to keep clean—carpet covered the floor, and the walls were painted a soft, dusky blue. Framed photos dotted the walls, and my gaze went to the closest one.

A naked woman in silhouette, arching over her lover—a man, also in silhouette. Strange, but the shadowed people made the photos even more erotic than they would have been had the figures been well lit.

"You like the photos?"

"Beautiful," I said and swallowed hard as I glanced at the next one. There, the silhouettes were posed in an acrobatic clinch that made me wonder if *anyone* was really that limber.

"Our photographer has a good imagination," he said.

"I'll say."

He grinned at me, then took my arm and steered me to the first door on the right. He opened it and stepped back for me to take a look. Ah, *finally*. I was going to get my first peek at a top-of-the-line fantasy room in an exclusive sex club. I braced myself to maintain a look of sophistication despite being appalled, shocked . . . *bored*.

Just between us, it was a major letdown.

The whole room was a soft blue. From the thick carpeting

to the walls, the ceiling and the oversized pillows—the only furniture in the room—dotting the floor. It was like stepping into the sky. A plush, fabric sky, but still. I walked inside and glanced to my left. On one wall, blue fabric with Velcro straps draped from the ceiling and coiled at the floor. All ready for a little bondage fun. Which in today's world really didn't qualify as kinky.

This kind of thing just wasn't for me, though. The only place I'd want to be tied down was in the freezer at Cold Stone Creamery, and even then, I'd need my right hand free to hold a spoon.

"Well, it'll be easy to vacuum," I said, on a sigh of disappointment.

"You don't like it?" he asked, one corner of his mouth quirking.

"Oh, um, sure," I said, not really wanting to offend him or anything. I needed this contract. "It's just that, well, why pay for this when you can stay home and throw a few pillows on the floor for free?"

"Maybe it's not about where you are but who you're with." His gaze darkened, and my breath caught in my throat.

I shrugged. "If that were true, you'd be out of business."

"Touché," he said, then swept out one hand, indicating the room. "Being here is freedom to some. You leave the world behind, and in this room, along with the others, there is only you and whoever is sharing the room with you." He looked into my eyes, and I swear I *felt* my mouth go dry. "Here, there are no distractions. Nothing to come between you and the fantasy."

"Okay, now, that makes sense," I said when I thought my voice would work without a squeak. After all, if Devlin Cole was in the room, I was pretty sure no woman alive would be looking at the décor.

"And every room has a different theme," he said, taking hold of my elbow with his long fingers.

Plenty of strength in that grip, and I could have sworn I felt the heat of his fingertips sizzling straight through the fabric

of my jacket. Couldn't help wondering how much hotter the heat would be skin on skin. Then I scrapped that thought and ordered my hoo-hah to take a nap. It didn't listen.

"But not all of the rooms are used every day. I'd only need your company twice a week. Early mornings are best for me."

"Uh-huh," I said as he showed me a room that boasted a two-seater velvet swing hanging from the ceiling on silver chains. Wow. Okay, this was better. More what I was expecting to see here. Could you really do it while swinging? Who kept balance? The one on top? And how would you stay on top while the swing was moving?

Who the hell cared?

He was talking, and I really tried to focus on his words even while a part of my brain was spinning as it tried to tick off rooms, square footage and the hourly rate for cleaning it all. Figuring out the bid for this contract was going to be so much fun. Well, fun for me, since Thea would be doing the actual math parts.

Still, happy little potential dollar signs were flashing in my mind. Though it really would have been easier to plot and add and multiply if Thea were there.

Not that she would be. I try to be an understanding, extremely cool mom, but I do draw the line every now and then, and sex clubs are definitely "over the line" places.

"Ms. Burke, I checked out your company after we spoke on the phone last week."

Crap. Could he find out that I'd recently bounced a couple of checks?

"And?"

"You have good references." He shrugged those big shoulders. "But you're a small business. Only a few employees."

Even fewer today, I thought, but thankfully didn't say. Besides, it didn't matter. The minute I wrangled this contract, I could hire a couple more women. No more college students for me, though. This time, I'd listen to Carmen and hire some of her cousins.

"But you just said you preferred a smaller company for privacy reasons."

"So I did."

"We may be small, but we're good."

He nodded thoughtfully. "So I hear. In fact, Davis Howell swears you're the best at what you do. That you're efficient and discreet."

I had to smile. Davis Howell thinks bologna is a gourmet treat. But, hey, who am I to argue? "Davis is a sweetie."

"Not many people think of the DA as a sweetie."

"I'm not most people."

"I'm sensing that."

"Good." I gave him a smile because (a) I really wanted this job, and (b) it's hard to *not* smile at a guy who looks like Devlin Cole. "Clean Sweep can take very good care of your place, Mr. Cole."

"Devlin."

"Devlin."

"Would you like to see the rest of the place now?"

"Oh," I said, grinning now. "You bet. I need as much information as I can get to put my official bid together. I can have it to you by the end of the week." As soon as Thea did the actual math.

"I'm impressed."

Impressed was way better than terrified or bored. Feeling better about the whole situation, I headed on down the hall to peek into the next room.

This one looked like a cave. The walls had been plastered, then sculpted, then painted gray to resemble rock walls. The fireplace looked as though it had been hewn from solid rock, and stone benches had faux-fur rugs thrown across them. Wow. Made me want to strip down and roll around on the furs for a while. Until I remembered somebody else already had been.

Ew.

"The You Tarzan, Me Jane room," I muttered, walking in-

side and doing a slow turn. "So, will you want us to, um, wash these furs every day or just vacuum?"

"Vacuuming is fine. Heavy cleaning once a week or so."

Oh, I didn't want to think about how much action those furs saw in a week. Mentally, I added an extra box of rubber gloves to the bid.

"So we're talking stain removal, too?"

"That would be part of the job, yes."

"Make that two extra."

"Two extra what?" he asked.

"Boxes of rubber gloves."

"Ah . . ." He leaned one shoulder against the doorjamb and managed to look both coiled for action and totally relaxed at the same time.

"How many of these rooms?"

"An even dozen," he said.

I whistled and stepped into the hall. Opening up the Fendi, I scrambled for a pad and paper and scratched out a ballpark figure as my initial bid. Just for the hell of it, I made it a little on the high side. "Here's a vague estimate of what my bid might be. I can't give you anything definite until I see the rest of the place and work out the figures." Or have Thea work them up. "I don't think you'll find anyone else in La Sombra who can do the quality work we do at so reasonable a price."

His eyebrows lifted as he glanced from the figure on the paper to me. "You're not cheap," he said.

"I said reasonable, not cheap. Besides, you get what you pay for, and I guarantee you won't be disappointed in our work," I countered, and in this one area of my life, I felt completely at ease talking facts. It was better we got this straight before we went any farther. "If you're looking for a bargain, you can call Sheila Benson. She's cheap, but so's her work."

"Is that right?" he asked, and his really terrific mouth curved again.

"Why would I lie?" I quipped, hitting my stride and going right on. "You can check her out as easily as you did me. *And,*"

I added, "if you do go with Sheila, I'll only charge you five percent more when you come running to me later, begging me to forgive you your lack of foresight."

He laughed. The booming sound echoed down the long hallway and then bounced back at me. His eyes were gleaming now, and there was no question. Definite interest there. Goody for me.

"Ms. Burke . . ."

"Cassidy."

He inclined his head like king to peasant. "Cassidy. I admire your style."

"Well, thanks. I like your place."

He shrugged. "People like fantasy."

"And who can blame 'em?" I asked. "Sure as hell beats reality most of the time." Especially mine.

"What's your fantasy?" he asked, and his voice came so soft, from so close, I shivered.

"You're looming," I said.

"Are you intimidated?"

"Nope, just saying." Okay, maybe I was a little, but damned if I was going to tell him that.

He backed up and leaned one shoulder against the wall. "Fair enough. But you didn't answer the question. What's your fantasy?"

His eyes were really, really dark. I mean almost black. Hypnotic. I couldn't look away. (Not that I wanted to, but that's not the point.)

"My fantasy?"

"Everyone has one."

"Well, sure."

"And yours is?"

"Private?"

He smiled. One quick twist of his lips and, wahoo, an electric reaction sped through my bloodstream. Man, I really had to get out more.

"In this place, secrets remain secret," he said, and his voice, I swear to God, rumbled through the room. "Tell me."

My nipples got hard.

Wow. If his *voice* could do that to me, imagine what an actual touch could accomplish. Was it getting hot in here?

"Fantasy, huh?" I blurted and hoped to hell my ugly green jacket was covering up my nipples. "I do have a favorite."

"Yeeessss . . ."

"A deaf, mute boy toy who cooks, cleans and can't get enough sex." Oh God, did I really say that?

"Interesting."

"Yeah, well, just off the top of my head." And the product of many years of careful consideration.

"You intrigue me," he said, tipping his head to one side to study me. "You're not what I expected."

Now, that could be good or bad. The way my day'd been going, I was betting on bad. Instantly, I went into defensive mode, which—if I'm going to be honest—is always pretty close to the surface. "What? You expected a maid uniform? Or maybe you thought I'd be wearing an apron and have a rag tied over my head? Just because I clean houses doesn't mean—"

"That's not what I meant."

"Oh." To give me my due, the defensive thing disappears as quickly as it arrives. "Then, what?"

"I didn't expect you to be . . . pretty. Charming."

"Uh . . ." *Fabulous, Cassidy. Way to think on your feet.*

"I've embarrassed you."

I laughed. "Oh, hell no. Takes a lot more than this to embarrass me. Just ask my daughter. She still hasn't forgiven me for the clown costume I wore to throw the school carnival."

"Clown costume?"

"Yeah, I went as a clown. Thea went as a neurosurgeon. She was eight. What does that say?" I stopped and held up one hand. "Never mind. Not sure I wanna know."

He started downstairs again and I went along, wondering

if I'd managed to talk myself right out of this contract. God, I hoped not.

"So, when can you have that bid to me?" he asked when we were once again in the entryway.

"Friday morning." Three whole days to get everything together and make a bid so fabulous he'd *have* to give me this job. Plenty of time.

He held out his hand, and when I gave him mine, his fingers closed around it and squeezed gently. "I'm looking forward to hearing from you."



I was still mentally fanning myself an hour later as I drove down my block. Devlin Cole made quite the impression. But, honestly, the heady sensation of possibly steady employment had a lot to do with my elevated blood pressure. I'd even splurged, stopped at the market and picked up Thea's and my favorite gorge-fest food: frozen pizza, Coney Island Waffle Cone ice cream and Hershey's Kisses. A big night at the Burke house.

The street was quiet. Here in La Sombra, things were usually quiet, except for, as mentioned earlier, the occasional breakout from the Nut Factory.

I'd grown up right here on this block. In the same house I lived in now. And I was grateful for it. If my dad hadn't left me the house when he died, Thea and I never could have afforded to buy one.

California bungalows, each of them more than fifty years old, sat far back on large, tidy lawns. Huge trees leaned toward each other, their branches forming thick, green arches over the street. Classic rock and roll poured from the garage where the Marchetti boys were working on their always-dead Chevy, and a lawn mower grumbled in the background.

I noticed the strange car parked in front of my house, and instantly, my good mood dissolved. I'd forgotten all about Leo and the crazy woman with her bottle o' acid. Was this a lawyer here to sue me for the money I was about to earn?

As I pulled into the driveway, already formulating arguments, plea bargains and, if necessary, completely undignified weeping and sobbing, Thea came down the front steps to meet me. Her long, black hair was pulled back in a ponytail, her nearly threadbare (and brand-new) jeans hung low on her hips, and the hem of her blue T-shirt stopped a couple of inches above the belly button she wanted to get pierced. (I need hardly add, over my dead body).

As far as rebellious teens went, Thea was pretty mild. She was basically such a good kid that the most she ever came up with to annoy me was being a smart-ass. And frankly, she'd learned that from me, so I couldn't really complain much, could I?

Now, despite the weirdness of my day, despite knowing that her long-lost father was back in town and about to screw everything up, I looked at Thea and smiled. I knew that as long as the two of us were together, we could weather any storm.

Lawsuits, crazy old women, bouncing checks, newly discovered dads . . . none of it meant a damn. The Burke women could deal.

I got out of the car and gave her a hug I needed more than she did and said, "Hey, baby girl. I think we're gonna get the job."

She smiled at me briefly. "That's great, Mom, but—"

"Whose car is that?" I asked, jerking a thumb at the black SUV parked at the curb. "Is it a lawyer? Oh God. Did he say something about Leo? And the acid?"

"Who's Leo? What acid?"

Whew. Dodged that bullet.

"It's not a lawyer, then." I sighed and did an exaggerated slump of relief. "Thank God. You know, after the day I've had, I really didn't need one more problem."

Handing Thea my purse, I turned and reached for the bag of groceries on the front seat. When I had it, I slammed the car door shut with one hip and said, "I got all the stuff for a great birthday dinner. Extra ice cream."

“Uh-huh.” She glanced back at the house, then turned back to me. “But first, there’s somebody here who wants to talk to you.”

A tiny, tiny, *tiny* curl of dread unwound in the pit of my stomach. For the first time I noticed that Thea wasn’t smiling. She hadn’t said happy birthday and hadn’t even made a grab for the Hershey’s Kisses she had to know were in the grocery bag. When my daughter didn’t lunge for chocolate, something was up.

I looked back at the black car and bit down hard on my bottom lip. As I watched, a huge dollop of bird poop landed on the gleaming hood and splattered. A warning from the gods? A hint of things to come?

“What’s going on, Thea? Whose car is that? Who’s here?”

She folded her arms across her chest, shot one hip higher than the other and cocked her head to look at me. “Well, he says he’s my *father*. You know . . . the *dead one*?”

Chapter Four



Oh crap.

God, I really needed chocolate.

“Mom? *What* is going on?” Thea’s voice took on that nobody-has-a-worse-mom-than-me tone, and she whipped up one black eyebrow. Just like her dad used to do.

Her dad.

Oh yeah.

Chocolate.

I dropped the grocery bag onto the hood of my bright yellow VW, rustled inside for the Hershey’s Kisses and yanked the cellophane bag so hard that foil-covered caramel kisses flew everywhere. I grabbed up three, unwrapped them as fast as I could, and shoved them all into my mouth.

A win-win situation as far as I could see. Couldn’t talk while chewing caramel—and, hey, chocolate was bound to make me feel better.

Although, a quick glance into Thea’s deep blue eyes told me it might take a few more than *three* kisses to survive this one. Grabbing the first stall tactic I could think of, I concentrated on gathering up the chocolate off the hood of my car and then giving the little suckers lying in the street a wistful glance.

“You have to swallow sometime,” Thea warned.

I gave her a smile that felt more like a grimace, and shrugged. I could probably chew forever—especially if the alternative was talking to Logan. Or talking to Thea *about* Logan.

You know . . . looking back, maybe it would have been better to tell Thea the truth about her dad right from the

beginning. About how he had had this nifty future with Snippy or Snuffy or whoever all laid out in front of him and how I had been doing the *noble* thing to never tell him that he had a daughter.

But then, I'd have spent the last fifteen and a half years answering questions about him and maybe having to deal with him and Muffy or whoever, and who needed that? Besides, Logan had had his life, and we had had ours. By all rights, we never should have met up again.

While I chewed and tried to peel caramel strips off my back teeth with my tongue, I considered that for a second or two and decided this whole mess was *Logan's* fault. If he'd just stayed married to his society bimbo, everybody would have been happy.

Instead . . . I looked past Thea and watched my past stroll out my front door to stand on my porch as if he actually had a right to be there. And even wanting to run over him and then kick his battered body to the curb like roadkill, I had to admit that he looked damn good.

Better than he had the summer I met him, and we all know how *that* turned out. Okay, probably best not to think about that.

His short, black hair was styled to give it that effortless, I-never-worry-about-my-hair look. His blue eyes were fixed on me and didn't look friendly. He wore a black sport jacket over a white T-shirt tucked into faded jeans. As he brushed the edge of his jacket back and jammed one fist on his hip, I noticed the gun hooked to his belt.

Gulp.

Nah. Just kidding. Logan wasn't homicidal.

Probably.

Back when we were kids, he'd always talked about being a cop. Hopefully, he'd become one and that explained the gun. Otherwise, I was in more trouble than I'd thought.

"So, he didn't save any orphans from a fire, huh?" Thea asked.

And so it begins, I thought, and shifted my gaze—okay, reluctantly—from Logan to my darling daughter. She looked not only pissed, but hurt. That’s when I really felt bad. It wasn’t like I’d lied to her *only* to make it easier on me.

“Mom?”

“No. No fire.”

“And there was no flood.”

“Nope.”

“So you lied.”

“Sorta.”

Thea blew out a breath. “Good to know I can always count on Mom to tell me the truth.”

Okay now, is it just me, or did that seem a little harsh? Sure, I hadn’t told her the truth, but I’d given her a hero father, hadn’t I? Hadn’t made up something ugly, like he’d had too much Wild Turkey one night, stumbled into a gutter and drowned.

Points for creativity, anyway.

“We can talk about this later, okay?” Welcome to my world. Never talk about now what you can put off until later.

“I don’t know if I’ll be speaking to you later,” Thea said, and poor thing actually thought that was a threat. But I knew better. She might have her dad’s eyes, but she got her gift of gab straight from me. There was simply no way she’d be able to stop talking to me. It’d kill her.

Besides, how could she torture me if she didn’t speak?

“I’ll risk it,” I said and picked up the grocery bag. The chill from the frozen pizza seeped into me as I headed for the front porch, but in all honesty, that chill could have been the direct result of the ice forming on Logan’s face.

I tried to stall, slowing my steps down, but doing that only made me notice that the yard needed mowing and more of my flowers had died during the night. What can I say? Just call me the Grim Reaper of the nursery world. Every time I walk through the garden department at Wal-Mart, I actually *hear* the little flowers shrieking, *Not me, not me! Don’t sell me to her!*

"Good to see you, Cassie," Logan said through gritted teeth, which took all the charm out of that statement.

"Right." I waved a hand at the pistol at his waist. "That's why you came armed?"

He sighed and flicked the edge of his coat over the weapon. "I'm a cop."

Thought so.

"Used to work for LAPD," he said. "Now I work for La Sombra."

"So, you're not just passing through?" I asked, feeling my last little bit of hope slide away.

"I told you on the phone I'd moved back."

"Right." I juggled the grocery bag in my arms and spoke up again, cutting through all the crap to get to the ooey gooey center: "Why are you here, Logan? Just stop by to ruin my day?"

He pushed away from the porch post and glared down at me. "Ruin *your* day? You know, I think I'm being pretty reasonable about this."

Actually, he was. Hated to admit it, but if someone had kept Thea from *me* for sixteen years, I'd have been completely freaked.

"Great," I said, stepping past him to get into the house, where I could stick my head under a pillow and pretend everything was fabulous. Better living through oblivion. "Think you could be reasonable tomorrow? I'm just not up for this right now, Logan."

I didn't need to see it to know Thea was rolling her eyes.

"Not a chance, Cassie," Logan said, and his voice was so tight it sounded as if it were scraping the air. "We need to talk about this now."

I kept walking. They were both right behind me, so I didn't even slow down. . . . Would it be childish to head right out the back door and keep going? Probably.

Sugar leaped to her feet at the crinkle of a grocery bag. I didn't fool myself. It wasn't mommy love she was looking for. It was Sausages.

“Make yourself useful,” I muttered. “Attack.”

She didn’t, of course. Instead, she greeted Logan in the traditional manner of dogs everywhere and stuck her cold, wet nose into his crotch with so much eagerness it would have brought a lesser man to his knees.

“Ooof! What is this?” he demanded, shoving her big, hairy head to one side in a belated attempt to protect his favorite body part. “A pony?”

I set the grocery bag down, glanced at a crestfallen Sugar, whose affection had been rebuffed, then shifted my gaze back to the current thorn in my figurative paw. My darling daughter stood just behind the thorn, and the resemblance between them was amazing. There was just no way I could have denied their relationship even if I’d seen a chance at it. Which I didn’t.

“You should have told me,” Logan said.

“You should have told *me*,” Thea said.

“I need more chocolate,” I said and turned for the bag of kisses again.

“Damn it, Cassie,” Logan continued, and his voice got a little louder, as if I were deaf along with inconsiderate, rude, thoughtless and— Oh hell, you get the idea. “In fifteen years, you couldn’t tell me I had a daughter? What the hell were you thinking?”

I pointed to my mouth and made a really conspicuous chewing motion.

“Don’t you yell at my mother,” Thea said hotly, giving her newly discovered, dear old dad a shot to the arm.

Sugar whimpered and tried to crawl into my lap. Not easy, since I was still standing, leaning against the kitchen counter. I tore open her treat bag, gave her a couple Snausages and turned my attention back to the daughter I was never more proud of.

“You don’t know anything,” Thea continued, and her eyes flashed. “You haven’t been here. You don’t even *know* me. You can’t just walk in and start trying to take over or something.

This is our house, and you can't yell at my mother in our house."

Which cleared the way for him to yell at me anywhere else in La Sombra, but who was complaining?

"I'm not yelling," Logan shouted, then stopped to take a deep breath. "Thea, I just want to talk to your mother. Alone."

Glrrrk . . . Never panic when chewing. I tried to swallow the last of the kisses, but they got stuck in the middle of my throat. I so wasn't in the mood to talk to Logan, alone or otherwise. But clearly, he wasn't going to let this go with a shrug and an "Isn't this nice—I have a nearly grown daughter" thing, so since I couldn't put it off, I might as well talk then as later.

I slapped my hand against my chest, hoping to help that chocolate go down but only succeeding in drawing the attention of the other two people in the room. Finally, I managed to choke down the kisses enough to say, "Thea, why don't you go over to Zoe's house to study or something."

She scowled at me. "I finished my homework."

Of course she had. "Well, do Zoe's, then. Go."

"Fine." She crossed her arms over a chest that hadn't developed yet, much to her dismay, and gave her father a wary glance. "I'll go. But I won't be far."

Logan lifted both hands as if in surrender, which ordinarily would have been pretty funny. Today? Not so much.

She turned and flounced through the living room, smacked the screen door open hard enough to bounce it off the wall of the house, then clomped down the front steps. My dainty little princess.

Logan glanced at me. "Who's Zoe and where does she live?"

I really wished I could lift one eyebrow. I would have. He'd been a father for ten minutes, and he was asking questions?

"Zoe Cohen. Best friend. Across the street."

"Oh. Okay."

"I'm so relieved that it's okay with you, Logan," I muttered and grabbed another fistful of kisses. A few minutes earlier I'd

actually been feeling a little guilty. But irritation crowded out that emotion fast.

"No more candy," he said, striding across the kitchen to whip the bag of kisses out of my reach. "You won't talk if you're eating."

I made a futile grab for the candy, but his arms were longer, and I came up empty. "For this kind of talk, I require chocolate."

"For chrissakes, Cassie, I just found out I have a daughter. What the hell do *you* have to be upset about?"

"The fact that you're standing in my kitchen springs to mind." Not to mention the fact that despite being royally pissed, I could feel that old flash of attraction flaring up again. Another empty grab. "And there's the whole stealing-my-candy thing."

He tossed the candy onto the table, and Sugar followed its movement like she was at a tennis match.

Shaking his head, Logan grumbled, "I would have been here a lot sooner if I'd known."

"I know that."

"You should have told me."

"I tried."

"Really?" he snapped and fixed his gaze on me as if he was pinning me to a board to be examined later. "When was that? 'Cause I think I would have remembered."

There was one stray kiss on the counter, and I went for it blindly. My fingers played with the foil-covered candy and then tugged out the stupid little white paper that had absolutely no reason to exist. "I went to your college graduation. Remember that?"

"Yeah, so?"

"So, I was going to tell you right then, until you introduced me to your 'fiancée,' Spiffy or Sparky or whatever the hell her name was."

"Misty," he said, shoving both hands into his jeans pockets. "Her name was Misty."

"Ah yes." I nodded but didn't roll my eyes. And, hey, good for me. "Much classier name. Thanks for clearing that up."

"You should have told me anyway," he said and stalked around the perimeter of the kitchen.

My gaze followed him and so did Sugar. The big dog's nails clicked happily on the floor while she played what she thought was a new game with her new best friend. Me? I stood still and wished he was in Nevada.

"Yeah, that would have gone over well," I said and walked to the kitchen table to grab a handful of chocolate. "'Oh, so nice to meet you, Scrunchy. Logan, you're a daddy. When's the wedding?'"

"Misty."

"Whatever."

While he paced, I unwrapped a piece of chocolate-covered caramel, thanked whatever genius little candy maker had come up with *that* concept, and stared idly through the back door to the mud porch. Now, my business is cleaning houses, so my house is always clean—almost always—and my windows are always shiny. Usually. Anyway, my point is, while I stared out the upper, glass half of the back door, I noticed something.

Even though the windowpane was clean and nonstreaky, there was a long pattern of *extra* clean right across the middle of the glass. Frowning while Logan continued to fight his way past Sugar to pace, I thought about that for a long minute, and then it dawned on me.

When crazy-lady Jasmine was there earlier, she'd made me shoot Leo in the head with that nasty-looking stuff in the spray bottle. Some of the liquid had missed poor, smoking Leo and splattered on the glass.

Now, that glass wasn't just clean, it was damn near gleaming. What the hell was in that stuff, anyway?

"So you see my position."

"Uh-huh." I popped a kiss into my mouth and studied that sliver of extra clean.

"So you agree."

"Sure. What? Huh?" I swiveled my head to look at him, and he looked way too pleased for my comfort level. "Agree to what?"

"To me seeing Thea on a regular basis."

"I didn't agree to that."

"I could sue you for joint custody."

"You wouldn't," I said and hoped I sounded way more confident than I was. He could really make things ugly for me. I mean, I owned my own business, but it wasn't a Fortune 500 company. And he was a cop. Judges liked cops. Plus, I'd sort of hidden his daughter from him for, well, her whole life. That wouldn't look good.

"I want to know my daughter."

"You just met her. Good start."

"Cassie . . ."

"We'll work something out," I said and forced a smile that felt too tight and grimacelike to be convincing, but he appeared to be okay with it.

"Good. Now, how about dinner?"

"Huh?"

"You and me," he said and walked across the kitchen, stepping over Sugar, who'd given up on pacing because it was way too much like exercise. He stopped right in front of me, and I have to say, he smelled just as good as he looked.

It had been sixteen years since the last time he touched me, and at the moment, all I could think of was, *I'm a lot hornier now than I was then*. God help me, Logan was even better looking now than he had been then. Which was really saying something, believe me.

Recipe for disaster.

"What do you say?" he asked and reached out to tweak a lock of my hair. "We could go to Tully's. Get a pizza."

Sure. Tully's on the pier. Just where we spent most of that summer. What? Were we going back in time? Was he trying to rekindle things? Or start a brand-new fire?

And why was I hesitating? The truth was, it had been a long

time since I'd had a fire anywhere near me. The way I remembered it, Logan had a real knack for fires.

Plus, we were both grown-ups—well, he was, anyway—and neither one of us was involved and—

“God!” I shrieked, pushed his hand away and slithered to one side, scooting past him closely enough that I could actually feel his Mr. Happy all hard and eager in his jeans. “How do you do that? We’re fighting one minute, and the next minute, we’re . . . not.”

His hand fell to his side, and he shrugged and gave me a grin that made my knees feel all slippery. “Worth a shot. You look really good, Cassie. I’ve missed you.”

“Be honest. Until you moved back to town, you hadn’t given me a single thought in sixteen years.”

He shrugged again, and I watched, fascinated, as his chest muscles clenched and released. Man. He was seriously getting to me.

“I thought about you, Cassie.” His gaze moved over me slowly, and I almost believed him. “Then, when things got so bad with Misty, I started thinking about you even more. Remembering how much fun we had together. How *good* we were together.”

“I was a kid,” I managed to squeak.

“Didn’t feel like a kid to me,” he said, and now his voice was so soft it was like a caress. “Now I find out you’re the mother of my child.”

“And this makes you horny?”

“I’m a guy.” He grinned. “I was born horny.”

“Well, don’t I feel special.”

He sighed. “I’m still pissed about you hiding Thea from me—”

“I wasn’t hiding her,” I argued. “She’s been right here. Living out in the open and going to school and everything.”

“You know what I mean,” he said. “Anyway, I want you to know I’m still pissed about that, but damn, Cassie, it’s so good to see you again.”

Something inside me did a quick little hop and skip. Hey, so shoot me! I can't help it if it felt good to have Logan giving me that hot and sexy look again.

"There never was anyone like you, you know?"

My mouth went dry, and my brain short-circuited. But I defy any living, breathing female to think when that close to Logan Miller. Back when I was a kid, he'd been able to turn me into a molten puddle of goo, just watching him stride in from the ocean, water sluicing off his tanned, completely cut body.

But I wasn't sixteen anymore. I couldn't just give in to my hormones, no matter how much I wanted to at the moment. There was Thea to think about and how Logan showing up was going to change everything.

"Logan . . ."

"C'mon, Cassie," he said and lifted one black eyebrow again. "A pizza at Tully's. For old time's sake."

Tempting.

If I'm gonna be honest, it was way more than tempting. It was übertempting. But the plain, ugly truth was, the last time I'd been tempted by Logan, I was a kid. I could use brainless and romantic as excuses for having sex under the pier with a guy I *knew* was going to be leaving town to finish college.

Now I'm an adult. Technically. A mom, of a nearly dating-age daughter. So hey, I need to set some standards. Be a good role model.

"You're thinking too much," he said. "Which means you're going to say no."

I frowned at him. "Just because you knew me back then doesn't mean you know me now."

"I'd like to."

"And I'd like a million bucks," I quipped and hoped to hell my voice wasn't quavering. "Looks like both of us are doomed to disappointment."

He walked toward me, and just to be sure I didn't go back on my brand-new "role model" resolution, I backed up until I hit the door behind me.

He ran his hands up my arms, and I swear I could actually *feel* little flames dancing along my skin. Like I said, good with fire. He looked into my eyes, and for a second or two, I saw the boy he'd once been in the man he'd become—and, boy howdy, the combo was really appealing.

He smoothed his thumb across my bottom lip, and it was all I could do not to nibble on it. Oh God, I was so in deep shit.

"I'm not going anywhere, Cassie," he said and tapped the end of my nose with his index finger. "We've got lots to talk about, and I'm looking forward to getting to know my daughter—and you—better."

He left right after that, and I sort of slid bonelessly into a kitchen chair. Sugar gave me a disapproving look.

"Hey," I argued, "easy for you to say. You've been fixed."

Chapter Five



So far, my birthday sucked.

Well, semisucked. I still had a shot at the cleaning contract to Magic Nights, unless Devlin Cole called in the next couple of minutes to tell me it was all an ugly joke. My gaze slid to the phone, half expecting it to ring. When it didn't, I grabbed a couple more kisses, because they were handy and why the hell not?

With Logan gone and Thea at Zoe's, no doubt complaining about the hideousness of her life, I had a good hour or more to myself. Plenty of time to figure out just what the hell I was doing to so piss off the karma gods. Or time to just grab a beer and forget about everything else.

"Sounds like a plan to me." I stood up, went to the fridge and gave the handle a good yank because the stupid door always stuck. Not today. Well, not entirely.

The door stayed shut, but the handle came off in my hand. "What the hell?"

I looked at Sugar, but she was as confused as I was. Just what I needed. More appliance death. I tossed the stupid door handle onto the table and peeled the stupid door open with my bare hands, giving it a lot of *oomph*. Too much, as it turns out, since the damn door popped off and crashed to the floor, spilling out half-empty bottles of ketchup, mustard and salad dressing along with a jar of what looked like fuzzy salsa.

Whoa.

The light in the fridge shone out at me, and I reached in to grab a beer. Twisting off the top, I took a long drink, stared down at the door and asked nobody, "Okay, is it just me, or did things take a seriously weird-ass turn here?"

Sugar whimpered and crawled farther under the table, just in case the stove tried to get her next. I was about a minute away from joining her.

"You are the Demon Duster, with inherent strength that will continue to increase."

"Yikes!" I spun around on one heel of my boring little green pumps, felt it snap off and staggered a little while I caught my balance by grabbing the back of a kitchen chair with one hand and steadying the beer I really needed with the other. The loony tune was back. Naturally. "Are you *trying* to kill me?"

Jasmine gave me a small smile and widened her nearly black eyes until they seemed to take up most of her face.

I could already see the headlines in the *La Sombra Daily News*: CRAZY OLD BAT SNEAKS INTO KITCHEN, KILLS KARMICLY DAMNED WOMAN.

"What the hell are you doing back here?" I asked when I was pretty sure my heart was back in my chest where it belonged.

"I never left."

"What?" She'd been lying in wait for me? And nobody noticed? Not Thea, not Logan? Not *Sugar*?

I took another long drink of my beer, hoping to cool myself off a little, but it didn't do much good.

"Some watchdog you are," I muttered and glared at the dog, who actually had the nerve to give me a "Who, me?" look.

"I cannot leave until I have convinced you of your duty."

"Duty again. Right." Okay, no more Ms. Nice Guy. This old lady was about to get a one-way ride to the Happy House. As soon as I figured out a way to put the refrigerator door back where it belonged. Just why the hell had my life chosen today to take a turn for the crappy?

"I've been waiting for you to return," she said and set her ugly vinyl purse down onto the kitchen table. She opened it and pulled out yet another bottle of that spray stuff she'd had on her earlier. "The day of your destiny has arrived, and I'm here to help you accept it."

“Look lady, I don’t want to be rude. . . .” Actually, that wasn’t completely true. By then, I didn’t really care if I was rude or not. You know, I’m usually a pretty patient person—well, I try. But as I mentioned earlier, my birthday was really sucking, and at the moment, what I really wanted to do was throw myself a pity party. “I’ve got a refrigerator to fix, a beer to drink, an ex-boyfriend to kill, a daughter to soothe and, hey, what’s left of my birthday to survive. I don’t want you here, and if you don’t leave, I’m going to—”

What? Call a cop? Yeah, because that wouldn’t be too embarrassing. *Help, a hundred-and-fifty-year-old woman broke into my house and is holding me at spray-bottle point.* Great idea. Besides, call a cop and it would be just my luck for Logan to show up.

Fine. I didn’t have a threat handy. But I *could* forcibly walk her bony ass out the back door and into my car, where I would strap her in—she should be used to *that* feeling—and take her back to Mixed Nuts Central. I walked around the end of the table and made a grab for her, and the old woman jumped five feet in the air.

Straight up.

I kid you not.

Impressed into momentary speechlessness, I could only look at her as she landed in a crouch, then stood up again, smoothing one gnarled hand down the front of her dress. If I hadn’t seen it, I wouldn’t have believed it.

“Does the Olympic committee know about you?”

She blew out an exasperated breath. “I’m here to explain your duties. To give you the recipe for the demon elixir. To guide you as you rid the world of—”

“—demons. Right.”

“You don’t believe.”

I did an eye roll. “Duh.”

She sighed again, like I should be riding the short bus to school. Waving one hand at the refrigerator door lying on the floor, she pointed out, “You see your strength is increasing.”

“Bad hinge.”

“Why do you refuse to listen?”

“To what? Stories about demons and secret potions? Are you crazy?” I shouted, then stopped, listened to myself for a second and said, “Never mind. Of course you’re crazy. I’ll just call the Hotel Screw-loose and see if they’ve got your room ready.”

She muttered something that sounded like “I’m too old for this shit.” But old ladies with blue/gray hair didn’t cuss, did they? Still, no point in pushing her over the edge. Because frankly, if she was this bad *on* the edge, I didn’t want to have to deal with her once she went over.

“You seem like a nice crazy person.” That’s me. Ever tactful. “But I don’t believe what you’re saying. Who the hell would? Even if I did, I still wouldn’t be interested. I’m too busy for a destiny. I’ve got a life, and let me tell you, it’s already pretty crowded.” Not that I actually had a life, but certainly not the point at the moment. “I’ve got enough responsibilities, thanks. I don’t have time to save the world. Besides, I don’t even know *how* to fight.”

There. Calm. Reasonable. Even the crazy old lady was bound to understand now.

I headed for the phone to call the mental ward, but before I got there, Jasmine charged me. She had neat, sprayed-down, blue/gray hair, enough saggy skin to make two old ladies, no boobs to speak of and orthopedic shoes. But she snarled and raced at me as if there were a Metamucil sale and the last bottle was right behind me.

I, of course, being a legendary (hah!) Demon Duster, destined to save humanity, shrieked like a big girl. Cut me a break, okay? It’s not like I was attacked regularly by crazed senior citizens—or anyone, for that matter. Then, something happened. I can’t explain it. But all of a sudden, I *knew* what to do.

Which is strange all in itself—as anybody who knows me can tell you, I don’t make fast decisions. I’ve been known to stand in the cleaning-products aisle at the grocery store for a half hour trying to choose between Comet and Ajax. And

don't *ever* offer me a choice between white or chocolate fudge-covered Oreos.

But in that one split second, I was no longer Cassidy Burke, house cleaner extraordinaire. . . . I was Catwoman/Batman/Spiderman and a bunch of other cool superheroes all rolled into one.

Instinctively, I spun around, kicked my right leg out and caught the gray marauder dead in the stomach. The air whooshed out of her lungs as she flew back and slammed into the kitchen table. This was all too much for Sugar. The dog jolted out of her terrified stupor, leaped to her feet, turned the table over in her wild scramble toward the back door, and what was left of the Hershey's Kisses plopped onto Jasmine's head and shoulders like brass-colored raindrops.

Holy crap.

I just beat up an old lady. Catwoman never did stuff like that. Hell, even Buffy never beat up old ladies. Well, she staked one or two, but that was her job.

Good thing I was raised Catholic so I could call up my guilt at a moment's notice. Nobody does guilt better than a Catholic. We *excel* at guilt. My friend Rachel Cohen—Zoe's mom—and I go over this whole Catholic/Jewish guilt thing all the time, but I always win. See, Rachel was born and raised Catholic, then converted to Judaism when she married Simon, so even *she* doesn't believe that anybody could beat Catholics when it came to the Guilt Games. Like I told her. Doesn't matter if the Jews have been persecuted for centuries.

None of them had to deal with nuns as teachers. And the Jews don't have Hell. *We* have Hell. How can you feel guilty if there are no eternal flames waiting for you? Fear of a bad reincarnation? Forget it. Come back as a cockroach? Who cares? Cockroaches live forever.

Nope. Catholics win the guilt crown every time. Nobody can compete with us. We grew up learning the sign of the cross as the Father, the Son, and the It's All My Fault, otherwise known as the *Mea Culpa*.

But I digress.

I'm standing there wondering how in the hell I'd just done that—I haven't exercised since the day I taught Thea how to ride her bike. I had held on to the seat and steadied her for about twenty steps, then I was wiped and she took off, leaving me in the dust. So I had to wonder, how did I come up with that completely cool, kick-ass move?

Could you learn kung fu shit from watching *Angel* and *Buffy* DVDs?

I stepped out of my shoes because—with the one heel missing—I was a little lopsided, and then I took a step closer to the old lady smiling at me from the mess on the floor.

She was grinning at me like . . . well, like a loon.

"What the hell do you have to be smiling about?" I demanded. But, hey, on second thought, this could work to my advantage. She's happy. Maybe she has Alzheimer's and doesn't even remember me kicking her. We tell the nice men in charge of rubber rooms and Prozac that she sneaked into my house and fell down—nobody's any wiser. Sure, I'd feel guilty. But I'm comfortable with that.

"Well done," she said and pushed herself clumsily to her feet.

"Well done? I just kicked you across the room—" I shut up fast. If she wanted to compliment me instead of suing me, who was I to argue?

The phone rang and I jumped, startled. Jeez. I swear, if I survived the rest of this day, it was going to be a miracle.

"There are many things for us to discuss," Jasmine was saying.

You betcha. Like why the hell the nutball catchers weren't scouring the streets for her.

"Right. Hold that thought," I said and scanned the rubble of my kitchen, trying to find the phone. I finally spotted the damn thing on the counter, half-hidden behind the bag of groceries. I kicked the mustard bottle out of the way and grabbed the phone on the third ring.

“Hello?”

“Mom,” Thea said, “I’m just calling to tell you I’m not speaking to you.”

Normally when Thea was mad at me, she would spend hours explaining in painful detail exactly how long it would be before she spoke to me again. Right this minute, I didn’t have the time to hear it.

“Okay,” I said and watched as Jasmine picked up the refrigerator door. My eyeballs popped. She set it back into place, then handily went about steadying the hinges. Man. She could be making a fortune doing exercise videos for old folks. Didn’t look like she weighed eighty pounds, yet she was really spry for a woman who had to be . . . oh, a hundred years old at least.

“Mom? Are you listening? Zoe and I talked it over, and she totally agrees that I should not speak to you.”

I nodded. “Okay. Thanks for telling me.”

Sugar scooted back into the kitchen on her belly—apparently being terrified alone was worse than being terrified with company. She kept one eye on Jasmine and settled on top of my feet.

“I think you should know that this has seriously affected the whole mother/daughter trust thing,” Thea continued, “which is why I think the only way to handle this is to not talk to you anymore.”

My darling daughter’s voice was nothing more than a persistent buzz in my ear. How the hell could I concentrate on Thea torturing me while I had this weird-ass woman in my kitchen who was busily rehangng the fridge door as if it weighed nothing? Besides, I’d just discovered I was a superhero. Hell. Maybe I could even fly.

“Look, honey, could you not talk to me later?”

I hung up while she was still explaining about not talking to me, and looked at Jasmine. What the hell was going on here? I swallowed hard, took a deep breath and pinched myself. Ow. Yep, still awake and breathing. My stomach felt like the last time I mixed wine and tequila—without the good times.

Not a single one of Jasmine's blue/gray hairs was out of place. She wasn't winded or limping or even whimpering quietly. Once she had the refrigerator door hung again—how did she do that so easily?—she dusted her palms together and turned to face me.

"Now we can talk," she said.

Actually, I didn't feel like talking. I felt like drinking my beer. And then another one. Or twelve. Something totally strange was happening here. It wasn't just that Jasmine was freakishly strong or apparently impervious to being kicked in the stomach. It was me.

There was something going on with me, and I really wanted to know what it was.

As much as I prefer the view with my head in the sand, I had to acknowledge that I was all of a sudden pretty damn strong. And then there was the cool kicking thing.

"Just who are you?" I asked. "Really?"

"I'm your guide," she said, and her black eyes sort of swam with a wash of color. Weird. Big surprise. "I'm here to help you accept your destiny. To—"

"Yeah," I interrupted fast, because I just wasn't up to hearing the whole destiny speech again. "I got that part. But—"

The phone rang again, and irritated, I grabbed it. "Thea, you're not talking to me, remember? Tell me later."

"Cass, honey, is that you?"

"Gram?"

"Just called to say happy birthday!"

Oh yeah. As birthdays go, this one had been a beaut. "Thanks, but—"

"Is Jasmine there?"

I whipped the receiver away from my ear and stared at it before slapping it back against my head hard enough to make me wince. Damn. Forgot about the strength thing. "Jasmine? So you *do* know Jasmine?"

"Well, of course I do, sweetie. She was my guide, too."

I snapped a quick look at the old lady, who was now peeling

one of my Hershey's Kisses. As she popped it into her mouth, she smiled, settled herself on a kitchen chair and folded her wrinkled-up, bony hands on the table in front of her.

"Your guide?"

"Oh, hasn't she explained yet?" My grandmother sounded a little whiny, which was totally not like her. "I was hoping she'd already given you the talk. But I can wait. I'll just call back later and—"

"Oh, no you don't, Gram," I said, giving Jasmine a steely-eyed look that didn't faze her a bit. "No slithering off until you tell me what the *hell* is going on!"

"Cass, honey, language."

I thumped my forehead against the cupboard. "Gram . . ."

Growing up, especially after my mom died, I spent a lot of time at Gram's house. There were always cookies, a willing ear and warm hugs waiting for me there. Harriet—better known as Harry to her friends—Burke was a constant in my life—and Thea's, too—until she up and moved to Florida a few years ago. Why Florida when she already lived in California was beyond me. After all, we have sunshine, too, without the humidity and the hurricanes and alligators and bugs big enough to own property.

"She said something about me being a Demon Duster?"

"Oh, good. Then she has told you." She laughed a little. "You had me worried for a minute there."

"I had *you* worried?"

"Well, it *is* Jasmine's place to tell you, after all. Don't want to step on toes."

"You mean it's true?" Weird, weirder, weirdest. Woo-hoo! I win the Crappy Life Contest! What's first prize? An *enema*?

"Well, of course it's true, dear. Why would anyone make up something silly like that?"

I glanced at Jasmine and saw that she was still smiling and still eating my kisses. Old lady or not, she'd better not eat all of my chocolate, or we were going to have another kick-a-thon.

Just beneath my grandmother's voice, I heard the echo of

a ship's horn and the rattle and clank of silverware mixed with muttered conversation.

"Where are you, Gram?"

"Oh, honey, I'm on a cruise."

"Again?"

My grandmother went on cruises every other week. Even in the fall, when most sane people want to stay on dry land, Harry was out on the high seas, bingo-ing her way to happiness.

"Listen now, Cass honey," Harry was saying, dropping her voice until it was almost impossible to hear her over the background noises. "You pay attention to Jasmine. She'll teach you everything you need to know. Then when I get back, I'm coming for a visit, and we'll have a long talk about . . . everything."

"You bet we will. Starting with why didn't you tell me any of this before?" I demanded, not ready to let her off the hook for never once in my thirty-two years mentioning this weird demon thing.

"Well, it's not allowed," Harry said, then added, "Besides, you had so many other things in your life, sweetie. Losing your mom so young. Then having Thea. Then losing your dad. I thought it best to just wait."

In other words, she hadn't wanted to be the one to tell me. And seriously, who could blame her? Sure, it would have been easier on me to hear it from Gram, but—let's be honest—I wouldn't have believed her. Still . . . "You know, Gram, a little warning would have been a good thing."

"I understand that you're a little pissy, honey, but Burke women have been doing this for generations. You'll be fine."

Burke women.

Growing up, I'd always wondered why my mom had kept her maiden name. Why I'd gotten *her* last name instead of my father's. Although, to be honest, being Cassidy Burke was way better than the alternative of Cassidy Cossetti. Sounded like a stripper.

But I never would have guessed that it all boiled down to killing demons.

“Oh!” Gram said, excitement crowing in her voice. “And tell Jasmine that I took out a Baranza demon last night at bingo.”

“A Baranza demon?”

“Oh, nasty little things,” Gram said. “Always drooling, and they have the ugliest black fingernails. Just so tacky. Though, with the whole Goth thing, they can really blend in with the younger crowd. They stick out like bad plastic surgery in my group, though.”

I shook my head and leaned back even harder against the kitchen counter. “You killed a demon? Last night? On a *cruise*?”

“That’s the job.”

“But you retired.” From the bookstore she owned, I had thought.

“Well,” Gram said, “I do like to keep my hand in! Now, sweetie, you listen to Jasmine, and we’ll talk again real soon.”

She hung up, and I just stood there listening to the dial tone humming in my ear. My entire world had just turned upside down. My sweet, slightly off-center grandmother killed demons at bingo. My ex-boyfriend/lover/whatever was back in town destroying my relationship with my daughter.

And a blue-haired old lady with spray bottles was going to teach me how to be a superhero.

I needed a drink.

Chapter Six



By the time I got the kitchen straightened up, Jasmine out the door but promising to return tomorrow (oh boy, can't wait) and the frozen pizza in the oven, Thea was home.

I knew this because the front door slammed with enough force to peel paint off the walls. Since she pretty much inherited her gentle demeanor from *me*, I wasn't really in a position to complain.

Thea stomped through the living room, pounded into the kitchen and plopped down onto a chair. Then she stared at me with her mouth all firmed up—just to make sure I understood she still wasn't speaking to me.

Okay by me. I'd had enough talking so far today to last me a week at least. A little quiet, a little time to gather my thoughts—hah!—a little time to relax and try to get a handle on my new “destiny,” for God's sake, would not be a bad thing.

“Who was that old lady?”

My chin hit my chest. So much for peace. “I thought you weren't talking to me.”

She gave me one of those looks that said, “Mmmmmmmmmmm”—stretching a one-syllable word into about eighty-five. And one of her eyebrows lifted, too—just like her father's.

I was stalling. Hell, I was trying to think of something to say. What *could* I say? I was still trying to get used to the idea of demons myself—I was in no way ready to try to explain this new truth to Thea. So, at the risk of lying yet again to my one and only child, I just said, “She's a friend of Gram's.”

“Why's she here, then? Gram lives in Florida.”

Like I said before. Smart kid. Damn it. “She’s, um . . .” Funny. All the lies I’ve come up with in my lifetime, and I couldn’t find one big enough to deal with a demon-obsessed old woman.

I should probably be telling Thea about this anyway. If there were really demons out there, then she should know to be careful. *Look both ways, don’t take candy from strangers—oh, and keep a sharp eye out for demons.* Yeah, that’d go over big.

Thankfully, I didn’t have to answer that question because she came up with an even more difficult topic a second later.

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell me my father was alive.” She grabbed a paper towel off the roll in the middle of the table and started shredding it. “Why didn’t you tell me? I’m almost sixteen. I had a right to know. You should have told me.”

I took the chair on the other side of the table from Thea and took a deep breath of pepperoni-scented air. Nothing like a good whiff of pizza to give me a little extra strength. “Probably I should have.”

“Probably?” Her voice squeaked, it went so high.

“Fine. I’m a terrible mother. A rotten human being. I should be shot.”

That eyebrow lifted again. “Really.”

“Since we don’t have any guns, you want to just slap me around for a while?”

She thought about it for a long moment or two, then finally shrugged. “If I do that, who’ll take the pizza out of the oven?”

Aw. Sniffle. I was so touched. My genius daughter, who should be taking college courses—or, hell, maybe *teaching* college courses—was afraid of the oven. Something about all that heated air rushing out to steal her breath and singe her eye-lashes. But then, it might be the fact that when she was a little girl, to keep her from getting too close to a hot oven, I told her a dragon lived in there.

God. I really did lie a lot.

As it turns out, though, good thing for me.

“I didn’t mean to lie to you, Thea.”

"Sure you did."

"Okay, I did." I scraped up the shredded paper towel and crumpled it in my hand. "But it was for a good cause. You were really proud of your dad, weren't you? You know, the hero dad who saved all those kids from a flood?"

"A fire."

"Whatever."

"But it wasn't real."

"It was real for you, baby girl." I reached across the table and gave her hand a pat. "Look, you were a little kid, wondering where your daddy was. I didn't want to tell you—"

"That he left us?"

Ouch. See, that was the conversation my lies had helped me avoid for sixteen years. I *never* wanted her to think her dad hadn't wanted her. So I cleared that up, fast.

"Not true. He left *me*. He didn't even know about you."

"He does now."

She didn't look as if she knew what to think about that, either. Was she happy? Weirder out? Probably a little of both. Well, hell. Me, too.

I don't mind admitting that I wasn't real happy about Logan coming back to town. Aside from the whole hormonal reaction to the man, it was damned strange to think of having to share my daughter with someone.

Being a single parent isn't always easy. There's no one else to blame when something goes wrong or you make a bad decision. There's no one to take a shift when your kid is up sick for a week. There's no one to whine to because your kid is smarter than you.

But along with the grief, you also get the good stuff to yourself. The hugs. The secrets. The smiles. The love.

Okay, I guess I could see why Logan was pissed off about never knowing about Thea. But in my own defense, I'd raised a great kid. All he had to do now was swoop in and take advantage of it. Plus, he was the *new* parent. Everybody knows that kids always like the *new* thing best.

I slapped myself in the forehead. Idiot. I was so not going to be the kind of mom who was always asking her kid, *You like me best, right?*

Thea grinned. "Want to tell me what you hit yourself for?"

"No," I said. "It's better if you don't know how your mom's mind works."

"Too late for that."

"Smart-ass."

Sugar slunk into the kitchen, hopefully following the scent of pepperoni. My dog is a comfort-food eater, too. No surprise. She crawled under the table and tried to disappear.

"She's had a rough day," I said.

"She's not the only one."

"So you're talking to me again?"

"Only until you get the pizza out of the oven."

"Deal."

I grabbed a dish towel off the counter, doubled it up and lowered the oven door just wide enough to pull out the pizza pan. Hot cheese bubbled, pepperoni beckoned, and the scent of basil and tomato sauce filled the kitchen. All of a sudden life was looking good again.



I slept like a rock.

Demons. Weird old ladies. Super strength. Nothing keeps me awake at night. Turn off the worries and sleep it off. That's my motto. I do oblivion second only to guilt. I staggered into the bathroom, washed my face, took a passing swipe at it with just enough makeup to help me look alive, then dressed in my usual—blue jeans and T-shirt. I stepped into my tennis shoes and flopped down the hall, laces flying, to the kitchen, headed toward coffee. Even if Thea was pissed, she knew enough to hit the button on the coffeemaker. Nobody wanted to be around me until I'd had a little caffeine.

Thea was at the table, having a sensible breakfast of toast

and orange juice—but she'd set out my brown-sugar-and-cinnamon Pop Tarts. What a great kid.

Sugar sat right beside Thea, always hopeful that my tooneat kid would drop food and not pick it up.

I poured a cup of coffee, inhaled deeply and then took my first swallow. Sighing, I shifted a glance at my darling daughter and asked, "You ready for school?"

"Yes."

I sighed again. This time not so much in satisfaction. That one-word, clipped answer told me Thea was still not speaking to me.

"So, how long am I going to be punished?"

"Not sure yet," she said, then looked at me and handed off the rest of her toast to Sugar. "It's kinda weird, you know? I have a father."

"Technically you always had one."

"Yes, but he's actually here now."

"We'll get used to it."

"You think?"

Truth? Or comforting lie? God, I'm a rotten human being. I went for the lie. "Of course we will, baby girl. Logan probably won't be around much, you know. He'll want to give you space and—"

The phone rang and I grabbed it.

"Cassie, it's me."

"Logan." Jeez.

Thea looked like someone had just sprung a surprise quiz on her—worried, with just a touch of happy. I believe I've mentioned that she's a smart kid. She loves pop quizzes. Nothing quite like screwing the curve for her fellow students.

"I thought maybe I could give Thea a ride to school this morning."

"You want to give Thea a ride to school?" I only repeated it so that Thea could let me know if she was interested or not. She shook her head. Then nodded. Then shook her head again. This way lies insanity. So I made the call for her.

Logan wasn't going away. He was her father. Plus a decent enough guy. There was just no way for us to stall him indefinitely, so might as well get it over with.

"Sure."

Thea jumped up, Sugar barked and hit the table, and the juice glass tipped over, spilling in an orange rivulet onto the dog's head. Perfect.

"When can you get here?" I asked.

"I'm out front."

"Of my house?"

"Well, yeah. Seemed like the place to go to find Thea."

"Fine." I hadn't had nearly enough coffee to deal with all of this yet. "She'll be right out."

I hung up, and Thea went into panic mode. She smoothed her hair, straightened her blue tailored shirt and wiped nervous hands on the thighs of her jeans. "Oh God. He's here? Already? Outside? He's gonna take me to school?"

"Yes, yes, yes and, oh yeah, *yes*." I grabbed her arm and started tugging her toward the front door. I stepped on a shoelace and would have hit the floor with my face, but Thea grabbed hold of me and stopped the forward tilt. Naturally my überorganized child had already put her backpack together and set it beside the door, so she was ready to go.

Almost.

She dug her heels in hard enough I wouldn't have been surprised to see sparks fly up from the soles of her sneakers.

"What am I supposed to say to him?" she demanded. "What am I supposed to *call* him?"

"Call him Logan."

"I can't do that."

"Then Dad."

"*Ohmigod*."

I pulled her in for a tight hug, set her back and grinned. "Then just shout, 'Bye, stranger,' when he drops you off."

She scowled at me. Hey, at least she was speaking to me again.

"You're not helping."

I gave her another quick hug, more because I needed one than for any other reason. "You don't need help, baby girl. You're a terrific kid. He's gonna love you."

"Maybe."

"No maybes. Now, go to school. Be brilliant. Impress me."

She laughed. "I impress you when I balance your check-book."

"Very true," I said, walking her out and down the steps to the lawn. I didn't stop to tie my shoelaces, so I kept kicking my feet out to make sure I didn't fall on my face in front of Logan. So I didn't look clumsy—only like a goose-stepping moron.

Thea was tensing up, and I couldn't really blame her. Hell, watching Logan climb out of his car was making me a little on the uneasy side, too. For different reasons, obviously.

Thea looked at him and saw her long-lost father. I looked at him and remembered fast hands, long, deep kisses and promises whispered in the moonlight. I'm not so much looking for the promises anymore, but I wouldn't turn down the fast hands and long kisses.

He was wearing jeans again, with a red and black flannel shirt worn jacket-style over a bloodred T-shirt. Since September in Southern California is way too hot for flannel, he was probably wearing the shirt to cover up his gun.

His hair lifted in a sudden breeze, and his eyes shifted from me to Thea and back again.

While we all stood there like idiots, saying nothing, a red Lexus drove down the street. I glanced at it. Zoe Cohen had her face pressed to the passenger window, staring at us, and her mom's mouth was hanging open. Hope she remembered to tear her gaze away from Logan long enough to watch the road. Rachel wasn't a good driver under the best of circumstances. On our narrow street, moms were known to bring their kids in from the yard when Rachel headed out to her job as receptionist in her husband's dental office.

"You guys better get going," I said, way too bright and

perky for that early in the morning. But I couldn't stand the strained silence any longer. "Don't want Thea to be late."

"Right." Logan jumped into action, running around the front of his car to open the passenger door for Thea. She got a kick out of that. I could tell by the way she looked at me behind his back and did the big eye roll.

"Thanks," Logan said as he slid into the driver's seat.

"Sure," I said, and I give me full points for not adding, *Don't think this is gonna happen every day, Bucko. That's my kid and you can't have her!*

He backed out of the driveway, Thea waved, and I was just thinking about getting into my car and following them the three whole blocks to the school—give me a break; I've had to share her for exactly one whole day—when my cell phone rang. I dug it out of my jeans pocket, checked the call screen, sighed and flipped it open.

"Jesus, Rachel. Took you almost two minutes to dial. You're slowing down."

"Zoe wouldn't let me call while I was driving. So I had to wait till I dropped her off."

I hope she slowed the car down before she pushed her kid out the side door.

"Was that Logan Miller I just saw in your yard?"

One of the problems with living in a small town all your life is everybody knows you. Everybody knows everyone you know and everyone you will ever know, and nobody forgets a damn thing. Ever.

Take Rachel, for example. She's a year older than me, but we've been best friends for my whole life practically. She was there the summer I fell for Logan. She was there the first time I did the deed. The first time I threw up she read the damn pregnancy test when I was shaking too hard to look for myself.

Now her daughter Zoe is a year younger than Thea, and they've kept the whole best-friend thing going into the next generation.

Comforting.

Usually.

"Yes, it's Logan. He moved back to town."

"And you didn't tell me?"

"I just found out yesterday."

"And you didn't *tell* me?"

Right. What was I thinking, having a nervous breakdown by myself?

"So Thea knows?" she asked.

"That her dad didn't die in a flood?"

"Fire."

"Whatever." Why was it everyone but me remembered my lies? "Yes, she cleverly figured it out when he showed up at the house and said, 'Wow, you look a lot like *me*.'"

"Damn. What now?" she asked, then shouted, "Hey, pick a lane, will you?"

I stepped out of the stupid tennis shoes, picked 'em up and headed back into the house. I didn't even want to think about Rachel driving while distracted. Concentrating, she was a menace.

"What're you gonna do?" she demanded.

"Right now? Get some coffee."

"After."

"More coffee."

"Damn it, Cass, this is serious."

She's telling me? I dumped cold coffee into the sink, then refilled my cup and watched Sugar finish licking up the OJ. "What the hell am I supposed to do?"

"*Something*," Rachel shrieked, and I heard a horn blasting. "Leave the car at home and call a cab, why don't you?" she shouted, then came back to me. "We have to be proactive about this."

God, I hated when she pulled out the self-help words. "Nothing to be proactive about," I said. "Logan's here. Thea knows. What's left to do?"

"God, it's a good thing you have me," Rachel said. "I want

to hear all about this. But first things first. Is he still hot? He looked really hot.”

Rachel’s married to Simon Cohen, dentist. Nice guy. Smart guy. Hot guy? Not so much.

“Yes, he’s still hot.” The fires warming the gates to Hell sprang to mind.

“Jesus,” Rachel said, “do you remember how he looked that summer . . . ?”

All too well. I gulped coffee, fought down a tingle that reminded me of feelings I hadn’t felt in way too long and scowled at myself. I’m not going there, I told myself. He’s Thea’s father. That’s it. No more. No less. Hell. Even *I* didn’t believe that one.

“I wonder if he still does that tongue thing you told me about—”

My body lit up, and I instantly wanted a detailed map to those flaming Hell gates. Talking to Rachel was so not helping. I started making staticky noises, hissing and snarling into the phone. “Hey, Rach, you’re breaking up. Sor—Can’t—hear—”

“You idiot,” Rachel said, “you’re in your house; you’re not breaking up. But I can take a hint.”

“Happy to hear it. Bye.”

“This isn’t over.”

No shit. Rachel never gave up on anything. She’d be interrogating me more thoroughly when she had the time.

But for now, there was silence.

Man, it was good.

At least, my life was my own until Jasmine popped back into it. God, how was I supposed to handle this demon thing? “Sugar, this sucks. All of it.”

The dog didn’t give a damn. She was still looking for more OJ to lick up off the floor. Life was simple when you were a hundred-pound dog with a tapeworm.

When the doorbell rang, I groaned and headed out of the kitchen. I opened the front door, took one look at the man on

my porch and wondered why I couldn't catch a break. Even a tiny one.

"Logan, what do you want? You already took Thea to school, and I don't need a ride anywhere."

"Funny." He was frowning, probably not a good sign. Did I care? Not so much.

He pushed past me into the house, walked all the way into the living room, then turned around to face me, arms folded across his chest, blue eyes narrowed and chin jutted out like he was expecting somebody to punch it. "Thea's a great kid, Cassie."

"And this makes you mad?" I asked and flopped down into the closest chair. Give me a break. It was barely morning, and already I was having to deal with problems.

"It makes me furious that I don't even *know* her," he said and threw both hands high. "She's practically grown. We made a *person* and I never knew about it. Shouldn't I have known? Shouldn't I have sensed it or something?"

Who was he mad at? Himself? Or me?

"You should have told me."

Question answered.

"We already covered that yesterday," I reminded him.

"Yeah, and I told you we weren't nearly done. Damn it, Cassie, I missed her whole life." He shook his head in disgust. "This morning, she talked to me like I was a stranger."

"You are."

"And who's fault is that?"

I pushed up and out of the chair and faced him on my own two feet. "Mine, okay? It's all my fault. I was sixteen, and I chose to keep my kid and not tell you. And then later, I didn't tell you because you were married and, for all I knew, *happy*."

"I still would have wanted to know about her."

"I know!" Disgusted myself now, I added, "I should've told you. Happy?"

"No."

"Well," I sighed, temper gone, drained away by a vast need for caffeine, "if it helps, she's not speaking to me."

"Thanks," he said as he followed me into the kitchen. "It does help."

"Look," I told him, pulling an extra coffee cup out of the cupboard and filling it for him, "I'm willing to work this out because I'm a fabulous human being, but I'm only going to listen to you being mad for so long."

"About sixteen years?" he asked, a reluctant smile curving one corner of his mouth.

"Ha-ha," I said and handed him his coffee. "One more time, Logan. I was a kid. And pregnant, okay?"

He leaned back against the counter, holding the cup between his palms. "If I'd known, it would have been different," he said. "Cassie, you wrote to me all that year, and you never even mentioned it."

"Uh-huh," I said, taking a huge gulp of coffee, "like you never mentioned that you were dating Skippy."

"Misty."

"Whatever." I set my cup down and walked to the service porch with Logan only a step or two behind me. While I stuffed the new washer with a load of towels—Thea used two for every shower, one for her hair and one for her body, and took two showers a day (you do the math)—Logan leaned against the dryer, watching me.

To be honest, he gave good stare.

He made me so jumpy I dumped in enough soap to wash five loads and hoped that wouldn't come back to bite me in the ass. Then I slammed the lid and looked up at him. Well over six feet, it took a while to lift my gaze all the way to his eyes, but it was worth the trip.

"What do you want from me, Logan?"

He blew out a breath, crossed his feet at the ankles and said, "Another shot."

"At what?"

"You."

Whoa baby!

"I mean," he said, reaching out to skim his fingers along my

bare forearm (and I felt the goose bumps jumping up to shout hello), "you're not seeing anyone."

"And you know this how?" I asked, trying to keep from shivering as the *tingle, tingle, tingle* rocketed through me, straight down to a hoo-hah screaming for some action.

"Because you would have thrown him at me by now."

"Hmm. Good point."

He straightened up and leaned into me, pushing my hair back behind my ear. "I'm back, Cassie, and this time I'm not leaving."

Breathe, *breathe*, damn it. Okay, now I was calm.

"I can't get involved with you, Logan."

"Why the hell not?"

"Because . . ." *Come on, Cass, where's that nimble brain when you really need it? Where are all the great lies that tumble from your mouth every time you're in a tight spot?* Finally, I just blurted, "Because we had a kid together."

He laughed, and both black eyebrows went up. "That's your reason?"

"Well, yeah," I said, warming up to it as the seconds ticked past. "Thea would be horrified. You don't want to blow anything with her, do you?"

Logan frowned thoughtfully for a long moment. "Okay, maybe it is a little soon."

"Good. Better." Nodding, I felt like I'd gotten myself out of that one smoothly enough. Of course, then I realized I'd just talked my way out of a possible orgasm, and that was depressing as hell.

"So we won't tell her," Logan said.

"Huh?"

Logan dipped his head to mine and came so close to kissing me I automatically leaned in, licking my lips in eagerness. Then he dropped both hands to my shoulders and smiled. "You know," he said, "maybe you're right. Don't want to rush into anything."

When I caught the gleam of amusement in his eyes, I prac-

tically snarled at him. "You rotten bastard." My lips were going to be disappointed. Hell, they'd get used to it. My hoo-hah had. "You did that on purpose."

"What?" He feigned innocence, but I wasn't fooled. I had seen that look on his face before, right before he said, "Trust me. You won't get pregnant the first time we do it."

I may learn slow, but eventually I wise up.

Grabbing a fistful of his flannel shirt, I dragged him through the house to the front door. Sugar barked and leaped around us, trying to play. Logan was still laughing when I pushed him through the screen door to the porch.

Then, as the laughter faded, he grabbed my hand before I could slam and lock the door.

"Okay, Cassie," he said, trying for solemn and apologetic, "so it wasn't funny."

"You think?"

"But come on. I owed you. You hid my *kid* from me."

My heart felt like it was dropping into my stomach. Ick. "That's what this is all about for you, Logan?" I asked, watching his eyes. "Payback?"

"No." His blue eyes met mine straight on, no games, no laughter, no jokes. "You really threw me, Cassie. Seeing Thea. Being home again. Being with you . . . It's a lot."

That I could understand because, hey, it was a lot for me, too. "Yeah, it is."

And as we stared at each other, I thought wildly, *Okay, this might be all right. We can be grown-ups about this. It'll be fine. We'll work it out and everything will be good.*

Then he spoke up again, popping that balloon.

"I've got to get to the station now, but, Cassie?" He reached up, cupped my cheek with one hand and stroked his thumb across my cheek. "We're not done. I've got plenty of questions for you. And I'm gonna want answers."

Well, crap.

Chapter Seven



An hour later, Jasmine arrived, and suddenly I felt like there wasn't enough coffee in the world to turn me into a superhero.

That afternoon, I knew that if a real live demon actually showed up, I was dead meat.

After three hours of "training" with Jasmine, I was covered in grass stains, and my favorite jeans had a rip in the knee, not to mention bloodstains from where my knee was cut from the rock I fell on. I'd broken two nails, and there was actual *sweat* rolling down my back. I don't do sweat. I have an allergy to exercise of any kind and to the sweating kind in particular.

I've got nothing against nice, slow walks to the bakery or even running—if there's a purse sale at Nordie's. But there was just something inherently wrong in actually *trying* to sweat.

We buy deodorants to *keep* from sweating and then go on a run? I don't think so.

I was too tired to crawl into the house, so I stretched out on the sun-warmed grass in the backyard. No point worrying about more grass stains or mud now, right?

"You did well for your first day."

I pried open one eye and glared at the old woman looking down at me. She was backlit by too much sunlight, so she looked as if she were standing in a halo. Big lie. If anything she should have had horns and a tail.

She looked the exact same as she had when she'd walked into my kitchen that morning. Her blue hair was still sprayed tightly to her skull, looking like a fuzzy swim cap, her dress hadn't wrinkled, and she wasn't even out of breath.

I'm thirty-two, she's two hundred, and I'm the dead one.
That's fair.

And humiliating, sort of.

"Just kill me now," I muttered and then went *oomph* as Sugar threw her entire body across my stomach. The dog was confused. She wasn't used to seeing Mommy move around so much. She'd probably need therapy. Get in line.

"We will continue this tomorrow."

"No, we won't," I managed to say, closing my eye because I didn't want to die with one eye open, looking like I was winking at the grim reaper. "I've got a business to run. A kid to embarrass. A life to—" She got the idea.

"This is more important."

"That's what you think. But, since Thea and I both like to eat, I'm going to have to go with the work thing."

God, I didn't want to think about moving, let alone working. But until I hired more help, it was just me and Carmen to handle our customers. God. Made me tired just thinking about it. Was it too late to be born independently wealthy?

"You've accepted your destiny."

"Not willingly."

"You've agreed to kill demons."

I lifted one hand. Briefly. "I've agreed to spray 'em."

She'd already explained that ugly-ass liquid in the spray bottle. Seems it's some ancient, secret recipe that affects demon skin like acid. Ew. Which meant, of course, that Leo, my surly appliance-delivery guy, was actually a *demon*. Crabby, I knew. Bald, fat and lazy, I knew. But *demon*? No wonder he ran like a bat outta hell.

Once sprayed and identified, Jasmine said, demons must be killed.

"Won't the acid do it?" I asked. "It'd sure as hell do it for me."

She huffed. "The acid would, of course, kill them if you *dunked* them in the solution. A spray will only help you identify them. And in some cases, it may weaken them."

"So what? I'm supposed to walk around squirting perfect strangers?" I rocked my head back and forth in a no-freaking-way signal. "I can't do that. I'll get arrested."

She talked right over me. "Once they've been identified, you must destroy them."

"How'm I supposed to do that? Exactly?"

"It's quite simple, really," Jasmine said, folding her hands neatly at her waist. "You reach into their chests and remove their hearts."

Bells clanged in my head, my stomach lurched and raced up my throat, and I had to swallow hard to push it back down into place. "I reach into their what and remove their huh?"

"Chest. Heart."

"No. Way."

Could my life get any weirder? Where was a time machine when you needed one? I'd go back two days and leave town before either Jasmine or Logan could show up. I'd take Thea and we'd go somewhere exotic. Europe maybe. Or Canada. A place where nobody wanted to make me reach into somebody's chest and rip the heart out.

Jesus . . .

"It must be done."

"Not by me. I wear rubber gloves to hold a *toilet brush*," I said. "Don't get me wrong. I'm all for dead demons. Go, demon death!" I waved an imaginary pom-pom to show my enthusiasm. "But no *freaking* way am I going to shove my hand into some *thing's* chest. Hello? Unsanitary much?"

Jasmine looked for a minute like she wanted to kick me, and I would have had to let her since I was still too tired to move. But the moment passed, and I guess she decided to go for strained patience instead.

"You're in training," she said reasonably.

"Apparently." CRAMP. Cramp in my right leg. *God, help me move my leg—or if not, send a lightning bolt.*

Now would be good.

I desperately rubbed at the pain and, *aah*, it receded from

morphine-needed-here to Motrin level. I might live. I looked up at my tidy gray nemesis and said, "I'm willing to jump and leap and in general beat myself up for the cause—and if you knew me better, you'd realize just how big a concession that is—but I gotta draw the line at tearing hearts. Ew."

Jasmine sighed. She'd chased me around the damn yard, made me jump and crouch and fight shadows all morning without a comment, and *now* she sighed?

"We will resume your training tomorrow after you finish work."

"And we will never discuss ripping out hearts again," I added, just to make sure she understood I hadn't changed my mind about that.

Shaking her head, she walked around me, and I heard her footsteps headed for the house. Probably going inside to get her butt-ugly purse. Then she paused. "You *are* a Demon Duster, and you *will* do your duty."

"Right." As long as it didn't involve chest punching. I would have said anything to get her to leave. Boy, as soon as Gram got back from her cruise, we were going to have a showdown.

Sugar's steamy dog breath was fanning my face, and I felt her drool soaking into my T-shirt. But I just couldn't care.

Superhero?

Me?

The world was in deep shit.



After a shower I climbed into clean clothes and felt almost ready to take up my real life.

When the phone rang, it was Carmen Mendoza, my remaining employee, a tiny woman with a will of iron and a never-ending supply of clichés.

"I wanted you to know that I have hired my cousin Rosario."

"Okaaaayyy . . ."

"I have told you," Carmen said patiently, in the tone she

used on her ten-year-old son. "My cousins are dependable, not like those college girls who are fly-by-nights."

First cliché of the conversation.

"I promise, no more college girls."

"Enough said about that, then," Carmen said with a victorious sniff.

I like to think I'm in charge of my own business, but it's actually Carmen who runs everything. At least, that's how she sees it. And since my only other employee had only just quit, who was I to argue with Rosario being hired? At least I knew she wouldn't up and quit. Carmen would kill her if she tried.

"We have taken care of the Johnsons, and the Nelsons and the Toledos wanted to put cleaning off until tomorrow," Carmen said, catching my attention again.

Guilt pinged around inside me like an insane pinball going TILT. "Hey, you guys don't have to do it all. I can get out to the Toledos' in the morning and do that one myself," I said, pouring another cup of coffee.

"No need," Carmen said, then added, "You would be rushed, and haste makes waste."

Cliché number two.

"I have told Rosario that she is not to be late again or I will tell you to fire her."

"Yeah," I said, smiling, because Carmen hadn't even bothered to have me hire Rosario. Why would she come to me to fire her? "I'm a beast."

"It is your business," Carmen said. "I only work for you."

"Sure, you do. Hey, before you go out tomorrow, why don't you swing by here? I've got some great new window washing fluid I want you to try out."

"Leave it on the porch," Carmen ordered. "I'll have Rosario pick it up on her way home."

I almost saluted, but the sarcastic gesture would have been lost on her since she couldn't see me. So I just let it go and hung up.

Now that I had the afternoon to myself, all I had to do was

start working on the bid for Magic Nights. Of course, when I say working on the bid, I mean that I was gathering everything together for Thea to figure it out when she got home from school. Why have a math-genius daughter and not use her?

But first, the bank.



La Sombra Trust stood on the corner of PCH (Pacific Coast Highway for those not in California) and Fifth. It had been standing there for more than a hundred years. And that's when its parking lot had been built. Back then, apparently, you didn't need much room for your horse and buggy. Or horses were way smaller than cars. And people were probably more civilized then, taking turns.

Not now.

The bank parking lot was a free-for-all, and anyone who didn't arrive ready to fight for one of the all-too-few slots was forced to park down at the pier and hoof it. Well, I'd already had my ass whupped for the day, and no way was I going to walk an extra three blocks just to make a deposit that I should have made over the weekend.

So I did the parking lot cruise. Me and four other cars, looking like the slowest parade on the face of the planet. Each one of us was willing to cheat the others out of the first open space. It was like playing musical chairs with cars.

The man driving the car in front of me stopped suddenly, forcing me to do the same as his wife slowly climbed out. Using her walker, she clomped up to the driver's side window of the guy nesting in handicapped to shout at him, "Do I get a turn before I die?"

I knew exactly how she felt.

The guy in the parked car, however, was unmoved.

And so, apparently, was everyone else. My radio was blasting out an old Beach Boys tune, and I had my windows rolled down to catch the last of the afternoon breeze off the ocean.

That's the only reason I heard it.

An engine. Running a lot faster than anything else in that lot. It sounded like someone was gunning it. You know, pressing down on the gas pedal to make the engine sound like a tiger ready for its five-hundred-pound steak?

The old lady with the walker lifted her nose like she was trying to sniff out trouble. Then she bolted for her car (well, shuffled really quickly), climbed back inside and rode off.

“Good,” I muttered, still wondering where the hell the idiot with the racing motor was, “at least I’m moving again. I’m not parking, but I’m moving.”

That’s when I noticed that I was suddenly the only car in our parking parade. The guy behind me had backed off about fifty feet—apparently I’d already passed a parking space, and he was gonna get it—and the old guy in front of me had swung around the edge of the lot.

A woman stepping out of the bank ahead of me lifted one hand and pointed while she shouted, “*Look out!*”

Who? Me?

I looked up into the rearview mirror, and my eyes popped open. An old Chevy that had more rust than paint on its body came around the lot, aimed right for me. That gunning engine roared, I caught a glimpse of the driver—young with a nasty little goatee—and then it felt as if a wall the size of Kansas slammed into the back of my little VW.

“CRAP!” I shrieked loud enough to break glass, tightened my grip on the steering wheel and felt my head whip forward and back again with the impact. My poor little car was shuddering as badly as I was.

The Chevy blasted past me, and I was pretty sure the driver flipped me the bird, which just added insult to injury, in my opinion.

When my shaking stopped, I was pissed, naturally enough, but there was nobody around for me to bitch-slap.

Just to add the topper to all of this, the guy behind me in the parking parade whipped his Caddy into the now-empty space that my attacker had left behind.

Then my airbag burst open and crashed into my face.
Perfect.



Finally got the deposit made, listened to a lot of sympathy from the very people who had luckily moved their own cars out of the way before I got slammed, and then took my little yellow Bug to my favorite mechanic. Well, my only mechanic.

Joey Paretti went to school with me, and he always could fix anything. A few years ago, he'd taken over his father's shop, and he was the go-to guy for any car calamity. Thankfully, he too assigned me a million and one easy payments, and I left my poor Bug with him and drove one of his loaners home. A '97 Nissan Sentra, it was a nice enough car, but it felt way too much like a grown-up's car. Wasn't it bad enough I'd turned thirty-two? The sedate silver car didn't suit my style at all. Not that I actually *had* a style. But you know what I mean.

Anyway, Joey promised to get my baby back to me in a few days, and my insurance agent promised my premiums wouldn't go up. Right. And any day now, Prince Andrew would be dropping by my house for a quickie.

Still, after a so-far rotten day, my own house was clean, bills were paid (barely), and for lunch I had my bowl of microwave popcorn (movie butter flavor) sitting on the table in front of me. I dropped a handful of the popcorn onto the floor for Sugar, and while she made like a Hoover, I got up to answer the doorbell.

I tugged my black T-shirt down over the waist of my jeans, hurried across the room and smashed my little toe against a chair that had been in the same place for ten years. Pain whipped through me. With stars blinking on and off in front of my eyes, and still whimpering, I opened the door.

Oh God.

Devlin Cole, big as life and twice as yummy, was standing on my front porch. Tears were in my eyes, my toe was throbbing,

and long-ignored parts of my body were suddenly alive and humming.

He was wearing all black today. Black slacks, open-collared black shirt and shiny black shoes. He looked way too good, and suddenly I was wishing I had taken more time with my hair, and maybe a little makeup wouldn't have been out of line.

"Hi."

"Yeah," I said. "Hi back." I looked past him and saw a silver gray Porsche parked at the curb, and almost whistled. If the Marchetti boys across the street were home, any minute now they'd be outside drooling on Devlin's car.

Shifting my gaze back to the man still watching me, I managed to croak, "Did we have an appointment?"

"No," he said, and his lips twitched as if he wanted to smile but was holding back. Too bad. He has a great smile.

"Then . . ."

"I wanted to talk to you about having your company do the cleaning at my house, too."

Okay. This is good. More work, always a plus. But why come by my house? Why not call? And why did I care? There was a gorgeous giant of a man standing on my front porch, and I'm gonna be picky about why he's there?

I don't think so.

"Sure. Come on in."

He walked into the house, and I got a good whiff of him as he passed. God, he smelled good. Almost better than chocolate. A second later, I heard the scrabble of Sugar's nails on the wood floor and tried to move fast enough to head her off before she could shove her nose into Devlin's crotch.

I was too late. When Sugar's on a greeting mission, she's hard to stop.

But then Devlin managed it with a word.

"No."

The look of stunned surprise on the dog's face should have been funny. Sugar had never heard that word, but I could tell

she didn't like it. She tried to put on the brakes, but couldn't find purchase. Her eyes got wide with panic behind her black-and-white hair, her nails skittered, her butt hit the floor, and her momentum sent her sailing past us to slam into the round table sitting beneath the front window.

The table tipped, and the blue glass vase I'd found at the swap meet upended, rolled to the edge of the table and crashed onto the floor, sending shattered glass, rust-colored china mums and water across the floor in a veritable river of destruction.

Sugar stood up, shook herself all over, then walked out of the room, head high, like she was trying to convince us she'd done that whole slide-and-spill thing on purpose just to entertain us.

I didn't even look at Devlin. It was his own damn fault for coming to my house. I project businesslike and competent when I'm out in the world. In my own habitat, it's a whole different story.

"Welcome to my world," I said and dropped to my knees to gather up the remaining scraps of a crystal, cobalt blue antique vase.

"Your dog's clumsy," he said and stooped beside me, giving me a hand with the cleanup.

"Yes, but on the upside, she eats enough for three dogs and poops with appalling regularity." *Crap. Shut up, Cassidy.*

I looked out the corner of my eye and found him watching me. "You don't have to help."

He took the jagged pieces of glass from my hand and picked up what was left off the floor. "You get the flowers. I'll take this; you could cut yourself."

Wow. Gorgeous *and* thoughtful. Okay, a little authoritarian, but nobody's perfect.

While he carried the trash outside, I gathered up the flowers I'd just bought two days ago and followed him to the kitchen. He'd already yanked off a handful of paper towels and was turning for the living room again.

"You know, with as good as you are at this, you don't really need someone else cleaning up after you, do you?"

He gave me a half smile that sent a few delicious little tingles bubbling through my veins. "I prefer having an expert."

"Right. Well, that's me. Expert at cleaning. Of course, as you can see, I get a lot of practice around here." Sugar was under the kitchen table, giving Devlin a death glare, like she blamed him for the entire incident.

My dog. In denial.

I took the paper towels from him, walked back to the living room and got busy cleaning up the spilled water. He was standing right beside me, and I could actually *feel* his eyes on me. My temperature spiked a little, and the small hairs on the back of my neck stood straight up. Not in a bad way.

"So," he said when I'd finished and was standing up again, clutching sodden paper towels in one hand and catching the drips with the other, "can I interest you in coming to the house to take a look around?"

"Now?"

"Unless you're busy."

"No," I said, then realized I should have said I was all backed up—so many customers. But then he'd think I didn't want his business or I was too busy for it, and the truth was, I really wanted to see his house. Like his club, Devlin's house was a mystery. Big and beautiful, it sat on a cliff overlooking the ocean, and every time I drove down the Pacific Coast Highway, I looked at it and wondered what it was like inside.

I was a little surprised he didn't have a housekeeper. A man alone, a place that size. So I asked.

He shrugged. "Actually, I do."

"So why do you need me?"

He reached out and tucked a strand of my hair behind my left ear, and when his fingertips stroked against my skin, I swear I saw fireworks. Big red and blue ones bursting in front of my eyes. I really hoped it wasn't blood vessels exploding.

"Truth is," he said, "I don't need you to clean my house. I just wanted to see you again and needed a reason."

Whoa.

This is more than Flirting 101, Cass, I warned myself. This is graduate courses. This is, like, master's-caliber flirting. And you are so not prepared. I'd been spending most of my time over the last few years with kids and dogs and dirty houses. Not exactly the life of the party. Hey, I'd *never* had a man like Devlin flirt with me. This was some serious pressure.

Think of something clever to say. Be brilliant. Witty. Or at least, not mute.

"I, uh . . ."

Great. Good one.

"You seem surprised."

"Kind of," I admitted and knew an instant too late that that was the wrong attitude to take. I should be acting like I go through this all the time. Like every day I have to beat off rich, gorgeous men with a stick.

Oh.

Maybe I should reword that a little.

"Why?" he asked and took a step closer. Was it hot in here? Seriously. Did all the air leave the room? Because I suddenly couldn't catch my breath, and it felt like my eyebrows were smoldering from all the extra heat shooting off the top of my head.

"When we spoke yesterday," he was saying and swept me up and down with a gaze hot enough to set fire to my jeans, "I felt . . . something between us. Didn't you?"

Lust? Could it be *lust* he felt between us? 'Cause, hey, I was right there with him. Bone-numbing, blood-firing, mind-expanding lust that was at this moment setting up shop in my hoo-hah and limbering things up, just in case.

Cassidy, you slut. My stern, talking-to-myself voice was silent, but effective. Just a few hours ago, I'd been drooling over Logan. Now here I was letting my hormones do a two-step, trying to get Devlin's attention.

Slut.

For sure, I was going to Hell.

God. I squeezed the wet paper towel in my right hand, and my left filled up with water. Moving on automatic pilot, I scurried to the kitchen, tossed the mess into the sink, then grabbed a dish towel to dry my hands.

Devlin was right behind me. He was probably following the thundering pound of my heartbeat. Man, I really had to get out more.

"You know," I said when I thought I could speak without slobbering, "it probably isn't a good idea for us to have a personal relationship if we're working together."

"We're not."

"We're not?" Crap. Should have had Thea do the bid up last night and hustled it over to him today before he could back out. Visions of lovely piles of money were fading right before my eyes and even took some of the shine off the nice little body buzz I had going.

I turned to face him. He was wandering around the kitchen, and I wished I'd put all the bottles of demon spray out of sight. But then why care about the little shit?

"But, I'm doing a bid for you," I said.

He grinned, and my knees turned to liquid. Oh boy. Really hard to stand up straight when your bones are all slippery.

"We haven't signed a contract yet."

"True."

"And if you're as interested as I am . . ."

Interested?

I'd have to be *dead* six months to not be interested. The question here was, why was *he* interested? This man moved with the rich and famous and the nearly famous who loved to be photographed. This man was why paparazzi had been invented. This man was—

—staring at me like I was the last double-fudge brownie on the dessert cart.

Oh boy. If he was feeling what I was feeling, then it was

a wonder he could still talk. On the other hand, who needed chitchat?

He walked closer, and with every slow step, my heartbeat hitched a little higher and faster in my chest, and my mouth went just a little bit drier. I grabbed hold of the counter behind me, gripping both hands around the edge as if it meant my life.

I generally keep my business world separate from my real-life world. It's neater. Takes less time to sort through; and, hey, none of my other customers ever really hit on me, so it had never been an issue. Now suddenly it was, and I knew that I should just say, "Gee thanks for stirring up my hormones, but you should be going now." And I also knew there was no way in hell I was going to say it.

I was about to do something really, really dumb. Ordinarily, I try to avoid stuff like that on general principles. But this time, I was willing to make an exception.

"I heard you were in an accident this afternoon," he said, catching me completely off guard.

"Uh, how'd you hear that?"

He paused for a second, then shrugged and said, "Small town."

"Oh . . . Right."

"Were you hurt?"

"No," I said and marveled at that simple truth. Apparently this Demon Duster strength thing was good enough to keep me from feeling whiplash. One small blessing in an otherwise—up till now—crappy day. "Just mad. My car got crunched."

"A shame, and yet, it could have been far worse."

His eyes looked almost black, and something inside me shivered. He'd only made a statement, but somehow, it felt almost like a warning. Weird.

"Have dinner with me?" he asked, close enough now that his warm breath dusted my face.

Okay, forget about the weird thing. He was just being nice and I was overreacting. Besides, the best-looking male I'd seen

since Logan left my kitchen that morning was offering me both food and, perhaps, lusty good times.

Damn it, my life was a mess. I deserved a reward for simple survival.

“Sure,” I said. “When?”

Chapter Eight



I had a date.

An honest-to-God date. With a man—an incredibly hunky man—in just three days. More than enough time to lose five pounds, right?

As soon as Devlin was gone, I discovered I had way too much energy. Suddenly, all the aches and pains of demon-killer training—not to mention my poor toe and my misery over my poor car—were gone.

Excitement sizzled, then sort of drifted into nerves and then back to excitement and, finally, disgust.

Honestly. So pathetic that I was that excited.

Couldn't really blame me for the excitement factor, though. My last date had been when Thea was thirteen. He was a mystery writer who'd been renting one of the beach cottages for the summer. Turned out he liked to act out his mysteries, so I spent most of the night posing as a murder victim in different areas of his house. Nice guy, but scoring a little high on the creep meter.

Not surprising that I'd steered clear of men after that little disaster. But now, with Devlin, a whole new world of possibilities was opening up in front of me. If the date went well, who knew? There might be another one. And eventually, maybe even *sex*.

God. Just thinking about that gave me another little burst of energy. To make good use of it, I grabbed up a bottle of demon skin acid and squirted some on the kitchen window. I'd been thinking a lot (okay, not a lot) about that extra-clean streak where the liquid that had missed Leo's head had splashed on the window, and decided to give Jasmine's potion a real test.

I wiped it off a second later with a paper towel and stood back in awe and admiration. No streaks, and the damn glass was sparkling like diamonds under a spotlight. I took a good look at the liquid in the bottle and shook it up a little. Green flakes floated in the brown solution and swirled merrily with every shake. Unscrewing the spray top, I took a whiff. Vinegar, molasses and . . . oregano? Oregano killed demons? I was guessing there weren't many Italian demons, then. I shrugged, screwed the cap back on and finished the rest of the windows. By the time I was done, my kitchen was bright enough to do surgery in.

"Oh *yeah*. Can't wait to see what Carmen has to say about this stuff in action," I muttered.

When my phone rang, I grabbed it. "Hello?"

"Thank God," Rachel breathed into the phone. "I've been calling you all afternoon."

"It hasn't rung once."

"Well, I've been thinking about calling you for hours, so it's the same thing."

Okay.

"What's up?"

"What's *up*?" Rachel shrieked that last word, and I winced and pulled the phone away from my ear. "Hello? Logan? Me, still not having details."

I sighed, nudged Sugar out of the way and sat down on one of the kitchen chairs. "There are no details to be had." I was completely overlooking the whole Logan-teasing-me-into-wanting-to-be-kissed-and-then-not-following-through thing. There were some humiliations too deep to share, even with your best friend. Of course, Rachel didn't see it like that.

"Well, that's disappointing."

"Sorry," I said and reached for the Pop Tart box I'd left on the table that morning. I peered inside and found an empty silver wrap. Damn it. That's okay. A Pop Tart wouldn't help me lose those five pounds, now would it? "I could lie if that would help."

"I don't want lies," Rachel hissed, her voice dropping now so that I had to strain to hear her at all. "I want to know what's going on. Where's he been? Where's the wife— What was her name? Doesn't matter. What'd he say when he found out about Thea?"

"The wife's name was Busty or Musty or— He's divorced."

"Ooh. Now see—that's a detail." She paused, half covered the mouthpiece of her phone and said, "Fine, fine. I understand that you're in pain, the doctor will be with you as soon as he's free."

Whenever Rachel called me from work, it was entertaining. As Simon's receptionist she had to check in all the patients waiting to have their teeth drilled or whatever, and she wasn't the most laid-back person in the universe. "Gee, great bedside manner there, Rach."

"I'm not the dentist. Simon is. And I think that it's chair-side manner for dentists."

"Right. Thanks for clearing that up."

"So, what're you going to do with Logan?"

"Do with him?" Oops. Did I just get a tiny hot flash there? Nah. "I'm not doing anything with him." Not that the promise hadn't been there that morning. At least until he shut me down while my engine was still running. Bastard.

Where was a damn Pop Tart when you needed one?

"Why the hell not?" she whispered. "Honey, I know you and Logan didn't exactly end things well . . ."

"Hah!"

". . . but come on. He's here. You're here. . . ."

I sighed. "Rach, you *have* a sex life. Why do you spend so much time worried about mine?"

"Because you *don't* have one. It's not healthy. Things get bottled up. You know you're bottled up; you just don't want to admit it."

True. If somebody ever pried the cap off my bottle, I'd probably spew in all directions. Mmm. Lovely image.

"Besides, you make a lousy nun," Rachel added.

True again. I don't take orders well. And, hey, now that you didn't even get to wear special outfits, why bother being a nun? You could pray on your own time, right?

"Cass, you know I love you, but you need to get out. With a *man*."

I pitched the empty Pop Tart box into the trash. "Actually, I have a date."

"I knew it. You did too get up to something with Logan. Still sparkage there, huh?"

"It's not with Logan."

"Then who—? Oh God, don't tell me the mystery writer's back. Honey, that was just too strange."

"Nope, not him." I was really sort of enjoying this.

"There's *another* man in your life and I don't have details? What the hell is happening to this world?"

I laughed, leaned back in the chair and hugged that thought to myself for a long minute. Yes, it was really *fun* to all of a sudden have men in my life. Okay, they weren't really *in* it, but they were at least *adjacent* to my life.

Rachel was right. Logan was still hot. But there was a lot of crapola to dig through before *that* could go anywhere. Not that I wanted it to go anywhere. I'm not actively anti-Logan or anything, but . . . maybe I should just be moving on. And moving on brought me right back around to Devlin.

"So, who is this mysterious man?" She paused again. "Yes, Mrs. Spencer. Right. I'll put it down that you were here ten minutes early for your appointment." Then to me, she muttered, "I swear I think she wants a gold star by her name. So, come on, Cass. Spill. Who's date guy?"

"Devlin Cole."

A long silence that became longer and longer until . . . "Are you freaking kidding me?" A whispered shout that hissed over the phone line with an air of excited insult. "I can't believe you met that guy and didn't tell me."

"Rach, I'm bidding on a contract to clean Magic Nights."

"So, have you been inside the place?"

“Yep.”

“*Ohmigod.*” Her voice dropped again. “You are so dead the first chance I get. This is a betrayal of all Best Friend rules, you know. To have this amount of stuff to tell and *not* tell it.”

“I was going to,” I said, but knew I had planned to wait to tell anyone until I knew if I had the job or not.

“Sure, sure,” she said. “When’s the date?”

“Saturday night.”

“Where’s he taking you?”

“Don’t know.”

“What’re you wearing?”

“Not sure.”

“Are you going to give me details afterward?”

Best Friend test. Score well on this one or forever suffer the consequences.

“Of course I will.”

“Especially if you have sex.”

“I’m not having sex on my first date with the man.”

“Never say never,” Rachel said sagely. “It’s been a long time for you, sweetie, and you just might not be able to help yourself. God knows, if I was anywhere near Devlin Cole . . .”

“You wouldn’t do a thing,” I said and idly brushed the hair out of Sugar’s eyes. She looked surprised to see a world beyond her hair. “You have Simon.”

Rachel actually sighed. “True. I do. So therefore I need a little vicarious thrill now and then. So promise you’ll tell me.”

“I swear,” I said, holding up my right hand as if she could see me or something, “on a stack of Godiva.”

“Okay, then. Oh God, the Henderson kids are here. Gotta go.”

She hung up before I could say good-bye or wish her luck dealing with the twins.

When the phone rang again instantly, I punched the button, grinned and said, “I *swear* already, Rachel, the minute I have sex, you’ll be the first to know.”

A deep chuckle sounded in my ear. Then Logan said, "With any luck, *I'll* be the first to know."

Perfect.

Great.

"Logan," I said, sweeping one hand over the kitchen table, searching for food that wasn't there. The bowl of apples didn't count. "I thought you were Rachel."

"Yeah, I get that a lot."

"Ha-ha," I said. "Very humorous. What do you want?"

"Well," he said, "I heard about your accident and wanted to make sure you were okay."

Damn. Why'd he have to be *nice*?

"I'm fine—but whoever hit me won't be if I ever catch him."

"Somebody said it looked like the guy slammed you on purpose."

"What?" Surprised, I jolted straight up. "Why would somebody do that?"

"Beats me," he said, and I heard amusement in his voice. "I'm new in town. Got any enemies?"

Hmm. Besides every demon in town? Man, I hadn't even thought of that. Was the word out? Did the bad guys know I was officially on the job?

"Cassie? You still there?"

"Yeah."

"You were quiet so long. . . . Take that long to add up your enemy list?"

"Nope," I said, going for the dig, "there's just you."

A pause, then, "I'm not your enemy."

"Then what are you, Logan?"

"Guess that's what I'm trying to figure out," he admitted.

"Well, good for you. When you get your answer, be sure to share."

He chuckled. Apparently my snotty little comments weren't exactly putting him off. "Oh, I will. But first I'd like to know who you're planning to have sex with."

"That's not gonna happen, so why'd you call?" Not friendly, but, damn it, why did I have to be friendly with a man who had really screwed up my life just by moving back to town?

"Cassie, we need to talk."

I groaned, rolled my eyes and immediately turned to the pantry. "Logan," I said, "we already talked."

"Not enough."

"Trust me, it was plenty," I said and started pulling boxes out of the pantry, rummaging past Thea's shredded wheat and dried soybean (what was she thinking during that brief but hideous healthy binge?) snacks. I needed sugar. Preferably chocolate, but anything would do.

God, why had I been such a pig and eaten both of the last two Pop Tarts that morning?

"I think we should have dinner," Logan said, and I stopped dead.

A dating drought for freaking *years* and then two invitations inside an hour? Shaking my head, I pushed my right hand through all the nonessential crap—flour, salad dressing, microwave popcorn—*Finally*. I grabbed the bag of chocolate chips and studied it for about ten seconds, considering whether I really needed to lose those five pounds by Saturday or not.

Screw it. I ripped the corner of the bag off with my teeth while Logan kept talking in my ear.

"Cassie, it's been a long time. I think we should talk about what's going on with us."

I chugged chips, got a good mouthful and chewed while I tried to come up with a good answer. Sugar flooded my system, bringing a calm I really needed.

"There is no *us*."

"There could be."

Briefly, I remembered that morning, Logan leaning in, his fingers smoothing over my skin. I sucked in air like a near-drowning victim and told myself to get a grip. Logan was *not* my boyfriend anymore. I wasn't the teenager who'd slept with his picture under her pillow anymore. (Hey, give me a break. I

was sixteen, okay?) And I wasn't waiting around for some man to give me a happily-ever-after.

These days I made my *own* HEAs.

"I don't think that's a good idea, Logan," I said around a mouthful of really stale chocolate chips. A little gritty, but good in a crisis.

"Cassie, we've got history. And I'd like to know if maybe we could have a future, too."

WHAT???

I choked on the chips, swallowed, then took another mouthful and bumped Sugar away with one knee. "It's poison, you idiot."

"Poison? Who're you talking to?"

"Sugar. She wants my chips."

"You have poisoned chips?"

My eyes rolled so far up in my head, I saw the roots of my hair. "Never mind. Logan, it's nice that you moved back, nice that you've met Thea and nice that you want to go to dinner, but—"

"Nice?" he interrupted, and I had to give him points. Apparently he remembered that to have a conversation with me, you had to be prepared to talk right over me.

"I'm not being nice," he said. "I'm trying to connect with you."

Connect? God, he'd been in LA too long.

"I just don't think it's a good idea. I'm not really connectible."

"With me, you mean."

"Well . . . yes."

"We were good together."

"Ah yes," I said, popping chocolate chips into my mouth and biting down hard enough to straighten my back teeth. "We were great together. I was sixteen, and by the time you went back to school, I was pregnant. Wow. Good times."

"I didn't know about the baby. Remember?"

"Yeah, I remember. I remember Musty, too."

"Misty."

"Whatever."

"That was a long time ago."

"Hello? That's my point, Logan. We've got nothing in common now."

"Yeah we do," he said, his voice dropping a notch or two. "You think I'm hot."

I leaned in and thunked my forehead on the pantry. Once. Twice. I'd like to argue with him, but how the hell could I? He was right.

"I think you're pretty hot, too, you know."

Pretty hot? Gee, thanks. Wait a minute while I find my smelling salts so I can wake myself up from my faint.

"Logan, this isn't gonna happen." Okay, I admit it. I was tempted. Who wouldn't be? Logan looked damn good—and I believe I've mentioned a time or two that I was sadly lacking in the whole orgasm thing here lately. Well, more than lately. But, damn it, I couldn't go out on a date with my daughter's father! She was already pissed at me. That would just cap it off.

"I'm not giving up."

"Thanks for the warning."

"I'm back in town now, Cassie, and I'm just getting started on you."

He hung up before I could, the bastard. So I did the only thing I could do.

I ate the rest of the chips.



First thing in the morning, I was up, dressed and hovering over the coffeemaker, waiting impatiently for that first, magical cup. Carmen and Rosario had already stopped by to pick up some of the new "window cleaner." Hey, sure it works on demons, but it's a great little glass cleaner, too, and waste not, want not—as Carmen would say, given half a chance.

Just as the cup I'd substituted for the coffeepot in desperation was half-filled, a knock on the door had me spinning

around warily. Thea was still brushing her hair, so she wouldn't be answering the door, God knew. I grabbed my pitifully small amount of coffee, slammed the pot back into place and headed through the living room.

I opened the door and didn't bother to hide my groan.

"Jesus," Logan said, drawing his head back as if he was appalled. "You look like shit in the morning."

"Uh-huh. Thanks for stopping by. Go away."

He was way more awake than me, because he slipped into the house before I could shut the door. Then he handed me one of the cardboard coffee cups he was carrying. "Thought you could use this, and I see I was right."

I sniffed blindly, then sighed. "A latte?"

"You don't like 'em?"

"Please." I stumbled back toward the kitchen, set my own on the counter and cupped my hands around the gift of the gods. I took a sip, felt life begin to stir inside, then lifted my gaze to Logan.

Nobody should look that good first thing in the morning. As if he knew what I was thinking, he smiled.

"Just stopped by to pick up Thea."

Without even asking. *Oh yeah*, I thought. *We're really connecting now.*

"So, this is going to be an everyday thing?" I asked.

He shrugged, took a drink of his coffee and said, "I like taking her to school. She talks to me. I'm getting to know her, I think."

"Logan," I said after another invigorating sip of latte—God, the man really knew how to get on my good side, "you can't just walk into her life and expect everything to work out the way you want it to."

He leaned one hip against the counter and watched me thoughtfully for a long minute. "I know. But I've already lost fifteen years with her, Cassie. I don't want to waste any more time."

Okay, fine, I'm a softie. My heart wrinkled up in sympathy

for him. "I get that. I really do. But you have to let her decide when to let you in."

"I am," he insisted and gave me a smile. "I'm just enjoying being a dad. I think I could be good at this."

"Oh sure," I said, laughing at his silly naïveté. "Wait until she turns on you like a snake. Then we'll talk."

"Thea?" He said her name like he would never believe anything but that his little girl was a princess. "She's a great kid."

"True. She's also a teenager," I warned, though I could see it wasn't getting through. "And a girl. The double threat." He frowned, but I was on a roll and kept right on talking. It was only fair to clue him in that being a parent wasn't all hugs and flowers. "Don't get me wrong, Thea's a great kid, but teenagers can kill you."

"Cassie, you're not gonna scare me off."

"Not trying to," I assured him. "But consider yourself warned."

"Mom?" Thea shouted from her bedroom.

Ah, there was the delicate princess now. "What?"

"Are you ready?" Her voice was getting closer, as were her heavy footsteps. The new boots she had insisted on buying had soles four inches thick. I didn't think she actually bent her foot to walk at all. It was more of a step-slide maneuver. "We've got to go now—" She broke off as she stepped into the kitchen and saw Logan standing there, smiling at her.

"Your dad is going to drive you again, okay?"

Thea ducked her head, and her long black hair swung down to hide her expression. But not before I saw the pleased smile on her face. Awww.

"See you later, Cassie," Logan said and headed out right behind his daughter.

I couldn't really tell by his tone, but the words sort of sounded like now *he* was warning *me*.



By the end of the day I'd had about enough of all of the people in my life.

And, I got a migraine while cleaning the house of one of my regulars. Nice woman, but she talked my ear off, following me from room to room, shouting to be heard over the vacuum. By the time I got out of there, I needed a handful of aspirin and sugar, so I drove to Sun and Shadow bakery, stood in line between the last of the summer tourists for what felt like forever, only to discover the fathead in front of me had bought the last cinnamon roll.

"Sorry, Cass," Donna Cullen said from behind the counter. "That guy in the plaid shorts just about cleaned me out."

I cut him a dagger look, but he was already waddling out the door. Plaid was bad enough, but plaid big enough to cover a butt *that* size was really appalling.

Donna and I had gone to high school together, and her family has owned the Sun and Shadow bakery for fifty years. They made incredible cakes and those great little butter cookies with the dollop of chocolate in the middle, and their artisan breads were incredible.

But I went there for the cinnamon rolls. The size of hub-caps, they were drowning in that thick, white icing, and I could practically *hear* my arteries clogging shut with every bite. Just the way I liked it.

"Want a glazed doughnut instead?"

Sad, sad life. "I'll take two."

I ate them both on the way home, then raced through the front door, balancing a bag of groceries (out of Pop Tarts, remember?), when I heard the phone ringing. Like Pavlov's dogs, a bell rings and I'm off and running. I couldn't stand a ringing phone. Had to answer it.

"Hello?"

"Cassidy, this is Daniela Baker."

CRAP. The customer who followed me all over her house, wanting to chat over a screaming vacuum.

"Yes?" I should have gotten another doughnut. If she

wanted me to come back and redo something she didn't quite like, I was going to need another one.

"I just wanted to tell you that you did a fabulous job!"

Well. Wasn't expecting that. Usually Mrs. Baker had at least one complaint.

"Thanks. Good to hear." I kicked the front door closed, walked into the living room, set the grocery bag on the coffee table and dropped into the closest chair.

"It's amazing," she was saying. "I don't know what you did today but—"

She knew exactly what I'd done. Hadn't she haunted my every step?

"—my ghost is gone."

"What?"

"My ghost. Herbert. He's gone."

"You have a ghost named Herbert?" I sat up straight. First demons, now ghosts? What the hell was happening?

"Oh my, yes," she said. "Herbert's been here forever. I believe he died in the twenties, and he's a very rude spirit, if truth be told."

"I . . ." didn't have a clue what to say to that.

"He's very obnoxious, really. Slamming doors and making my bathwater cold. He plays the piano at all hours of the night—awful music, loud and crashing."

"You don't have a piano," I pointed out.

"No, dear. Herbert does."

"Uh-huh."

"And he hates having the house cleaned. I think the sound of the vacuum irritates him."

Or it's you, I thought, *shouting to be heard over the vacuum*.

"Every time you leave, he plays with the lights and turns off my TV right in the middle of my soaps. Except for today."

"That's good?"

"That's wonderful. Why, the house has never been this quiet. I have the whole house to myself, and I'm going to take a hot bath to celebrate!"

“Good for you,” I said, because what the hell else could I possibly say?

“Now, just in case Herbert isn’t actually *gone* gone, be sure to do whatever it was you did today, the next time you come. All right?”

She hung up, and I just stared at the phone.

The only thing I’d done differently was use the demon mixture on the windows and mirrors in the house. So not only did the handy-dandy little brew identify demons, it chased away ghosts?

Score another point in the weird column.

Chapter Nine



"He WALKS me to my class," Thea complained. "Mother, nobody's parent walks them to class. I'm in HIGH SCHOOL, for God's sake."

I heard the capital letters in Thea's voice and silently cheered. Seemed I wasn't the only one in Thea's doghouse. She wasn't very fond of either me *or* Logan.

We'd had dinner, Thea had worked up the bid for Magic Nights, and now we were in our usual places on the couch, with the TV blasting background noises while Thea went on a first-class rant.

"He actually went in and spoke to the PRINCIPAL. He wanted to see my GRADES."

"Well," I said, trying to be the reasonable parent. The calm, quiet, collected parent who knows her worth and doesn't have to berate the daddy-come-lately in her life to feel better about herself. Sliding the bowl of popcorn closer to her on the couch, I said, "Maybe he just wants to be involved in—"

"I cannot believe you're taking his side in this," Thea said, and her eyes narrowed into slits.

"I'm not taking any sides. I'm trying to be calm and reasonable about—"

"I knew I shouldn't have started speaking to you again."

"Thea . . ."

"You lied to me about him."

"Yes," I said and took the popcorn back. If I was going to be punished, I wanted a snack.

"And now you're sticking up for him against me."

"No, I'm not."

"You are and it's just not right, MOTHER."

"Please stop talking in capital letters."

Her eyes widened. Her jaw dropped, then snapped shut.

"Fine. I'll just stop talking altogether."

"Thea, you can't keep punishing me for this."

"Why not?"

"Because you're a smart girl. Because you know I love you. Because we've been a team your whole life. You can't break up the team."

"I'm not the one breaking anything up, Mom," Thea said and stiffened her spine until I was sure I'd hear a vertebra crack. There is absolutely nothing more dramatic than a teenager with a right to be pissy.

Sugar lifted her head, scooted it across my lap and stuck her nose into the popcorn bowl. I sighed. There isn't much I won't eat, but I refuse to share a bowl with my dog. "Thea, honey, it's going to get better."

Did I sound believable? I sure hoped so, because at the moment, I wasn't convinced myself.

"I'm practically grown," Thea said. "I don't need a daddy."

Briefly I thought of my own daddy and felt tears rise up suddenly. He'd been gone five years now, and there were times, like this one, that I really missed him. Reaching out to take her hand, I gave it a squeeze. "Don't knock having a daddy."

Instantly, my darling daughter knew what I was thinking about, and she squeezed my fingers before letting go. "Grandpa was different, Mom," Thea said, her voice as soft as the look in her eyes.

For one brief, shining moment, the tension between us was forgotten, and we were as we had always been. We'd grown up together, Thea and I. Being a mom at sixteen hadn't been easy, but from the moment I held her, I knew that keeping her had been the right thing to do. We were closer than just mother and daughter. We were friends, too.

Or had been. Until my lies finally caught up to me and shattered Thea's trust in me.

Yes, I knew this situation was my own fault, whether I wanted to admit it or not. The problem was, I didn't have a clue how to fix it.

I edged back on the couch, curled my legs up under me and looked at Thea. God, she was just so beautiful. And she was growing up so damn fast. When had that happened? When had enough years slipped past that just looking at her I could see the woman she was fast becoming?

"Honey," I said, struggling to find the right words, "sometimes even when you do what you think is the right thing, it turns out to be all wrong."

"Lying to me, you mean."

"Well, yeah."

"What else have you lied to me about, Mom?"

"Nothing." Well, except for the Santa and Easter Bunny and Tooth Fairy things, but those didn't count. Those were *traditional* lies, told by lying parents to generations of trusting children.

Thea shook her head, tossed her hair back behind her shoulder and heaved a dramatic sigh. "See, Mom . . . that's the problem. How can I believe you?"

I winced. It was a good hit, and Thea knew it. "Okay, I give you that. But, baby girl, we're just going to have to figure out how to get past this, you know?"

"I want to," she said, but didn't sound convincing. I know my girl. She can hold a grudge like a miser clutches his last penny.

"You're gonna have to torture me for a while longer, aren't you?"

"I think so."

I sighed. Fine. I could deal. But despite our private little war, there were a few things she had to know.

"Okay, you can be mad at me, but I have to talk to you about something important."

"'Dad' important?"

I grimaced. She was good.

“Yes. *Dad* important.”

She leaned back into the corner of the couch, folded her arms under the breasts that weren’t growing fast enough to suit her, and watched me warily.

“Wow. How to start?” I sucked in a gulp of air, blew it out and then just dove right in. “Remember Gram’s friend who was here yesterday?”

“Jasmine.”

“Right. Well, she’s more than Gram’s friend. She’s sort of a teacher.”

“Oh God. I don’t need a tutor,” Thea exclaimed and tried to lurch off the couch.

I caught her before she got far and yanked her back down beside me. Sugar woofed, thinking this was a new game. I set the popcorn bowl on the floor to distract her. While the dog crunched happily, I looked at my daughter and thought about how I should tell her the latest. But there was no easy way to say, *Guess what? There are demons in town!* So the best thing to do was just say it and get it over with.

“Jasmine’s not here to tutor you. She’s here to teach *me*.”

That got her attention.

She frowned, and her dark, finely arched eyebrows drew together. “Teach you what?”

“You’re not going to believe this.”

“Is it a lie?” she asked, lifting that one eyebrow at me again.

“No. It’s a very weird truth.”

“Okay.”

“She’s teaching me how to kill demons.”

There. I’d said it. Got it out into the open, and now all I had to do was wait for Thea to either freak out or laugh in my face or think I was back to lying. I didn’t know how the hell I could prove this to her, other than taking her into town and letting her watch me spray Leo again. But the delivery guy would probably hit the ground running if he saw me coming.

“I know it’s hard to believe,” I said into the growing silence.

"But it's true. There really are demons and apparently ghosts, but Jasmine didn't tell me about that. I only found out by accident today, but that doesn't have anything to do with what I'm telling you. I just think you should know there are demons in La Sombra, babe, so you have to be careful and—"

"I know."

"Huh?"

"I said I know. About the demons."

I blinked, thunked the heel of my hand above my ear and asked, "You *know*?"

"Well, duh." Thea gave me a look that was filled with patient pity. "Of course I know. Everybody knows that."

Everybody knew about demons? How did I miss this? Did I not get the memo? This was not how I'd imagined this little chat going. She knew about demons? Was I the only person in the freaking world who hadn't had a clue? Why hadn't she ever mentioned this to, say, *me*?

"What? Who? What?"

"REALLY, Mom," she said on a sigh, "demons are no different than anyone else."

My eyes bugged out. I wouldn't have been surprised to see them land, *plop*, on the couch and roll over to stare up at Thea. "Are you kidding me?"

"Just because a person's a demon doesn't mean he's a bad person."

"Hello? A *person* isn't a demon. A *demon* is a demon."

"See? Overreacting." She shook her head. "Adults are so . . . Neolithic."

She was pulling the big words out to win this little battle, but no way.

"Honey, demons *are* bad. *Demon*. Look it up."

"This is why I never told you. I knew you'd react this way."

"Logically?"

She did an eye roll, so I knew the conversation was racing toward an end. So I hurried up to make the point I think she hadn't quite caught.

"Honey, did you hear me when I said Jasmine's here to teach me how to *kill* demons?"

"WHAT?"

"That's right, baby girl. Surprise! Your mom's a Demon Duster."

She jumped to her feet and looked down at me in stark horror. "You're going to KILL them?"

I stood up, too. There weren't many people I was taller than, but Thea was one of 'em, and right now, I wanted that authoritarian feel. "Look, I didn't ask for this gig. It's not like I want to kill 'em. Trust me, it's pretty disgusting. But apparently *all* Burke women are Demon Dusters."

"You mean—"

"Yep. Your time is coming." Even as I said it, I thought, *hmm*. I really didn't like the idea of Thea facing down demons. But instead of worrying about it now, I put it on the mental list.

"No way. I won't do it."

"I don't think you get a choice," I told her ruefully. "At least, I didn't. Gram says she did her share of dusting, and my mom was supposed to, but—"

Another brief blip of warmth in Thea's eyes appeared and disappeared again in the next instant.

"I'm going to be a doctor, not a demon hunter."

"You can probably be both," I said in an attempt to assure her that her life would still be hers.

"I don't WANT to be both."

"Honey, demons are not a good thing."

"That is SUCH a prejudicial statement."

I narrowed my eyes. She was a little bit too defensive. Was this a defense of an entire *race* of demons? Or one demon in particular?

"Thea . . ."

"I just can't talk to you, Mom. Clearly we're on different planes of existence."

"Huh?"

She backed up a step. "We don't even speak the same language anymore."

"It's called English," I reminded her. "I taught you how to talk." Big mistake.

The drama queen was back. Her gaze dropped, then lifted, and she shook her head sadly. "Mom, you just don't GET it."

True.

Then she walked to her bedroom and, with an emphatic slam, shut me out.



I tried to watch TV, but suddenly reruns of *Angel* felt a little too close to home. I mean, demon hunting on TV seemed like a good time. In real life, not so much. So I gave up, left Sugar curled up and snoring, and went out to the front porch to pout on the swing.

My dad had made it twenty years ago, and whenever I needed a little extra peace, I sat there and it was almost like he was giving me a hug. Which I could have really used at the moment.

I kicked off with my bare foot and set the swing into motion. The street was quiet, like an old woman settling down for a nap after a hard day. The flicker of Rachel's television fluttered through her front window and down the street, and the Sanchezes' dog Rosie was howling at the moon.

I knew how she felt. I wanted to howl, too. My car was crunched, Thea wasn't speaking to me—*again*—and . . .

A black SUV pulled into my driveway, and the headlights danced across my eyes. Didn't matter if I was temporarily blind now. I knew who was in the car.

"Bad day?" Logan asked.

"You could say that." I stared at the white bag in his hand. "What's that?"

He shook the bag, wiggled his eyebrows and said, "Cinnamon rolls."

I perked right up. "From Sun and Shadow?"

"Is there anywhere else?"

Damn. He did have smooth moves. "Come on up."

He paused. "Where's your dog?"

"Inside, sleeping off a popcorn binge."

"God, Cassie." He sat down as soon as I scooted over on the swing. He handed me a napkin and one of the giant rolls, then took a bite of the other one. "Man," he said after he'd chewed and swallowed. "I really missed these."

I wasn't talking. Too busy eating. Not too busy to look at him, though. In the moonlight, his dark hair shone, and his pale blue eyes almost glowed. He was so close to me I could feel his body heat, and it was really spiking my own, let me tell you.

"I missed you, too," he said.

"Hmm."

"I did," he argued. "Always wondered what you were up to."

I took another bite. Hey, he's the one who brought me the cinnamon roll. He couldn't really complain because I wanted to eat it, right?

"How's Thea?" he asked after another minute or two.

"Not speaking to me," I said on a sigh.

He grinned. "Yeah? Still?"

"She's not real thrilled with you, either."

Now he looked insulted. "What'd I do?"

I started to tell him, then thought, nah. He wanted to be a parent? Let him get a peek at the dark side, too. "Ask her."

"I will," he said, but he sounded worried.

"Logan, not that I don't appreciate the sugar rush, but why'd you come here?"

He looked at me hard for a long minute, then said, "To do what I should have done this morning."

And then he kissed me. Sitting on my front porch, cinnamon roll icing all over the damn place, he kissed me like he had that long-ago summer.

It didn't take me long to remember why I'd been so crazy about him.

The swing creaked and groaned as his arms came around me, and the bakery bag rustled between us. His lips were warm and soft, and his tongue was still damn talented. When he finally pulled back and looked at me, I could have sworn I saw stars dancing in the air.

When he left me sitting there a minute or two later, I was too stunned—and, okay, yeah, too stirred up to be able to walk straight. So I just sat there in the moonlight and thought about the past and the present and the still-hazy future.



I had some great dreams about Logan that night, but in the morning, I had to put hormones on hold and struggle back to reality. After all, I had my meeting with Devlin Cole to deal with. I put on my serious business suit—blue one this time—took down my Coach black bag and stepped into black heels that gave me an extra three inches of height. My hair had turned out great; I wore just enough makeup to look civilized and, for good measure, a little spritz of demon liquid in lieu of perfume. Oregano smells good, so what the hell: If demons were out there, it wouldn't hurt to smell like their worst nightmare.

Gripping the bid Thea had worked up before she went all Bad Seed on me, I got in the Nissan and drove to Magic Nights. I wasn't too worried about Thea's strange attitude to the demon population. After all, she was a kid. There was plenty of time to convince her that demons were dangerous—not a minority needing protection.

Actually, I was more worried about my response to Logan the night before. I had been so sure that I was over him, and then the second his mouth touched mine, *boom*. All good intentions went right out the window. I swear, sometimes even I don't understand me.

I parked the dreaded Nissan-boring-car and straightened my suit jacket. This time I went straight to the business office entrance, upstairs at the back of the building. Devlin was

expecting me, and I wanted to get this job sewn up. Then I could separate business and pleasure and start planning for the big date.

"Ms. Burke." A woman who looked like a supermodel pushed her desk chair back and stood up to greet me. "I'm Serena Sands, Mr. Cole's personal assistant."

"Um, hi." So cool. So smooth. Of course, watching the woman walk across the room had reduced me to less than my most confident self. Although, in my defense, I'm pretty sure Jennifer Aniston's ego would have taken a hit if faced with this chick.

She smiled, and I swear her teeth glinted like in a cartoon. She was at least six feet tall, with long, silvery blond hair, enough boob for three healthy women and legs that looked to be about five feet of her total height.

God. Just call me Cinderella.

"Mr. Cole will be with you in just a moment."

"Thanks," I said and flashed her a smile I hoped was bristling with the confidence that was deserting me.

Then she sniffed and made a face.

"Something wrong?"

"No," Wonder Woman said, shaking her head and smiling again. "Not a thing."

The door to Devlin's office opened, and a youngish guy with a stringy goatee walked out. He shot me a look, then ducked his head and hustled past me like I was the IRS chasing him down for an audit.

I watched him for a second, wondering why he looked familiar. Then I realized he sort of looked like the guy who'd crashed into my car at the bank the other day. But as soon as I thought it, I dismissed it. Lots of young guys had those ugly-ass goatees (which always looked to me like the guy couldn't grow a real beard, so he was doing the best he could), and besides, what were the odds my VW killer would be here in Devlin's office?

A second later, Devlin stepped to the door and smiled, and I confess I wasn't doing much more thinking. He swept one

hand wide, inviting me inside, and then he shut the door behind me.

Alone with Devlin.

Woo-hoo.

He gave me a smile and escorted me to the chair in front of his desk. "It's good to see you again," he said—and, wow, his voice really had an amazing timbre to it.

Sunlight splashed over the dark green walls of the huge room, and my heels clicked on gleaming wooden floors. His desk was massive, and I was really hoping this wasn't a case of male compensation.

"Thanks," I said. "Um, who was that guy who just left?"

Why did I ask? Couldn't tell you.

"Oh." He frowned slightly. "Frank. He's a bartender here."

I nodded. *See, Cass? Perfectly reasonable.* Ridiculous to think my car killer would be here, anyway. So. Back to business.

"You brought the bid?"

"Yes," I said and laid the manila folder on his desk as he took his seat opposite me. "You'll see that it's a very fair price for the job you want done. We're fast. We're bonded. And we're very good at what we do."

"You don't have to sell me," he said, leaning back in his chair and tapping his fingers against the folder he hadn't even opened yet. "I've asked around. Clean Sweep is very popular in La Sombra."

Pride had me sitting up a little straighter. After all, this was my baby. I'd built my business up the hard way, client by client, relying on word of mouth from satisfied customers to keep me growing. And it had worked. With this contract, it would be working even better.

Up until now, all of our customers had been residential. But if we could prove ourselves with Magic Nights, we could expand into any number of the businesses in town. Heck, Carmen could hire six or seven of her cousins.

"Don't you want to look at the bid?" I asked, anxious to get this deal sewn up.

"Of course," he said, "but I'm sure it's fair."

"That's trusting of you."

"Not at all. As I said, I researched you thoroughly." He sat forward, leaned his forearms on his desktop and stared me in the eye. "I like what I've discovered."

Well, color me happy. I let loose a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding and slumped a little in my chair.

"Thank you," I said. "Good to know."

He smiled, and my insides did a gleeful little two-step. The man had some serious magnetism working for him, and I was pretty sure he knew it, too.

"So, if I hire you, are you still willing to go to dinner with me?"

Hell yes. But I didn't think it was smart to be quite so eager, so I said, "And if I wasn't?"

His lips curved again. "Then I'd have to seriously rethink hiring you. Because if there's a choice, I'd rather see you personally than professionally."

Whoa.

Okay, he was way past a master's in flirting. We're talking doctorate at least. "Then let me make it easy on you," I said. "I'll still go out with you."

"Then you're hired."

"Just like that?"

"Is there a problem?"

No. No problem. But he hadn't even looked at the bid that Thea had burned brain cells over. The bid I'd worried over and thought about and fretted over turning in. "You still haven't looked at the bid."

He sighed, flipped open the manila folder, glanced at the neatly printed-out estimation of labor and service, then slapped the folder shut again and looked at me.

"You're hired."

I blinked. Okay, then. "Well, I like that you make up your mind fast."

"I have," he said and stood up, walked around the desk to me and helped me to my feet. "About a lot of things."

Oh boy. Just being this close to him was setting off brush fires in every corner of my body. He bent his head to mine. Closer, closer. Wow. I had been in the longest sex drought of my life, and now all of a sudden, two different men wanted to kiss me, two days in a row. How slutty was I? Never mind. I really didn't want the answer to that question anyway.

Oh, I knew this was so unprofessional. I should have stopped him, but I wasn't a dummy. I moved in, too, closer, closer. God. He smelled so good. Like . . .

"What is that perfume you're wearing?" he asked and pulled his head back.

"It's, um . . ." *Think, Cassidy, think.* Couldn't really tell him it was demon spray, now could I? "Jasmine," I said quickly, thinking the demon hunter would get a kick out of it if she knew.

He frowned a little. "Doesn't smell like jasmine."

"You don't like it?" Mental note. Do *not* spritz before big date. My body was humming, but clearly, there wasn't going to be any fun and games at the moment.

He gave me another smile and shrugged. "It's . . . different."

Hooking my arm through his, he walked me to the door, then opened it for me. "I'd like for you to start at the club next week. Monday?"

"Great. We'll be here. First thing in the morning."

"Good. I'll have keys messengered to you this afternoon."

This was great. A terrific job, a great-looking man who wanted to take me to dinner. Everything was perfect. Except for the whole demon thing. And my car. And Logan. And, oh yeah, Thea. Well, perfection was overrated anyway, right?

"And I'll see you Saturday night?" His voice was low, husky, and sent a shiver of expectation rattling around inside me until I wouldn't have been surprised to hear my knees knocking with the force of it.

"Saturday."

“Seven?”

“Seven.”

Then I left, and on the way to the parking lot, my brain kept up a steady stream of criticism.

You kissed Logan last night.

He kissed me, I argued with my rotten conscience.

And you almost kissed Devlin.

Not my fault.

How is it not your fault that you're lusting after two different guys?

It just happened!

You're going to have to choose between them.

I don't do decisions. Besides, why do I have to choose? Why couldn't I want both of them? Was there a law nobody told me about? Some decree that you were only allowed to fantasize about one man at a time?

I didn't think so.

Men do it all the time, I argued silently. Nobody tells them they have to take one woman at a time.

That nasty little voice reminded me why. *That's because we're way more civilized than they are. They can't help themselves.*

You know what? I was tired of being civilized. Maybe it was time to let loose my inner barbarian.

Trouble . . .

I stopped dead, shook that voice right out of my head and said aloud, “A little lusting never hurt anybody, so get off my case, okay?”

An old man hunched over his shopping cart looked up from sorting his cans and bottles and said, “What'd I do, lady?”

“I wasn't talking to you,” I snapped, then handed him a five-dollar bill before marching to my ugly rental car and driving home with my radio blasting high enough to drown out that annoying little voice.

Chapter Ten



"I brought pizza."

I looked at Logan, standing there hopefully waving a pizza box at me from the front porch. Gotta say, he really knew the way to get in good in our house. The pizza did smell good and . . . "Fine. Come on in."

I'd had a great day. A brand-new contract for Magic Nights, a little training with Jasmine, another fight with Thea, and let's not forget that almost kiss with Devlin.

Why not top it all off with a visit from my former heart-throb, who still knew how to knock my socks off with a kiss?

He grinned at me and hustled through the door as if half-afraid I'd change my mind and slam it on him. To be honest, it could have happened. But there was THE KISS to think about. Damn, now I was thinking in capital letters. Until the night before, I had actually forgotten just how good Logan was at tonsil examinations. Besides, I was hungry, and I figured pizza might be enough to get even Thea out of security lockdown.

"Thea," I shouted. "Pizza."

Logan was already on the couch. In my spot, by the way, but I didn't say anything. Instead, I sat on the floor and pushed Sugar off my lap before she could get comfortable. When Logan lifted the lid on the pizza box and those hot, cheesy fumes poured out, the dog whimpered, and I was right there with her.

"No way does that dog get my pepperoni," Logan warned.

"He's a selfish baby," I murmured to Sugar and gave her a piece of mine. "Just so you know, hogging the food is so not the way to win friends in this house, Logan."

"What kind of pizza?" Thea asked, stepping into the room and stopping dead like she'd walked into a solid wall of ice. Glaring from me to her father (was it wrong for me to enjoy seeing him get *his* share of teenage angst?), she said haughtily, "I'm not hungry."

"Of course you are," Logan said and jumped up from his seat on the couch. I thought about snatching it, but I was already comfortable. Besides, I had a better seat for the action. Poor Logan. He was trying so hard.

Too hard.

If he kept pushing at Thea, he'd push her so far he'd never be able to reach her.

He offered Thea a slice of pizza, but she walked past him, went to the coffee table and got her own. Have to say, I'd seen that one coming.

Then looking down at me, she said, "I want it understood that my taking this food does not mean that I'm through being pissed. It only means I'm hungry."

"Got it," I said around a mouthful of amazing pizza.

"Explain it to HIM," she said.

Still with the capital letters.

"You betcha," I assured her and handed off another piece of pepperoni to the dog.

"Explain what to me?" Logan asked, carrying his rebuffed pizza back to the couch.

"That she's not speaking to us," I told him and reached for another slice. Hey, it was a long day, okay?

"It's more than that, MOTHER," Thea said, ice dripping from her voice. "He has to stop following me around. He can't talk to my friends at school. Or my teachers. And he can't check up on me at the mall."

I choked on a bite of pizza, and steaming-hot cheese stuck to the back of my throat. Eyes watering, I looked frantically for something—*anything*—to drink. But there was only my more-than-an-hour-old cup of coffee. Desperate times. I grabbed the mug, downed a slug of really disgusting cold coffee—who

drinks this stuff iced?—and swallowed the pizza that had probably scarred me for life. Finally, I shot a look at Logan. “You didn’t.”

He fidgeted a little, clearly guilty as hell. “I saw her with some weird-looking kid, is all.”

Hell. *Weird-looking* described half of Thea’s class. I looked at her. “Who?”

She shrugged and grabbed another slice of pizza. All this not-speaking-to-us stuff was making her hungry, too. “Just Jett.”

“Aw, jeeezz.” Jett, aka Morgan Talbot, aka the kid every mother feared her daughter would bring home. Nice enough, but every time I looked at his eyebrow ring or, God help me, the silver bolt through his nose, I cringed and wanted to go get pliers to set him free. And that wasn’t even mentioning the spiky black hair, the pants always hanging down around his knees or the fact that he always called me *dude*.

Let’s be clear. Thea was still fifteen. She wasn’t going to be dating until she was sixteen. Or thirty, if I could manage it. But she could see friends. Or see them at the mall. Or bring them home. Why that friend had to be Jett, only Thea knew.

I could totally understand why Logan had followed his only child when he spotted her with Jett.

“HE,” Thea said, jerking her head in her father’s direction, “totally embarrassed me in front of Jett. Asking PERSONAL questions. Telling him he was going to RUN him, whatever that means. Jett will probably NEVER call me again.”

“You think?” I asked, and maybe my voice was too hopeful, because I got a sneer, and then Thea was off, back to cellblock D with another slice of pizza.

“This parenting thing isn’t easy,” Logan said and took a bite of pizza.

“Duh.”

“Right,” he said, leaning forward and studying his slice of pepperoni pizza like it was the first he’d ever seen. “I know. You’ve been doing it for years, and I’m coming into it late.” He

stopped and waited for me to look up at him. "But that doesn't mean I don't care. Or that I don't love her."

Hell.

I could see that, and I didn't want to. Damn it, I didn't want to have a soft spot for Logan. He was my past and—

"Thea's not the only one I've got feelings for, Cassie," he said and edged off the couch to sit beside me on the floor.

He was way too close. My blood started humming even while I was trying to edge away.

"Logan," I said, "last night was . . ."

"Great," he whispered and leaned in closer.

God. He not only looked good, he smelled good, too. Some kind of spicy aftershave mixed with the scent of his black leather jacket.

"I told you I've thought about you a lot over the years," he said.

"Bet Topsy was happy about that."

"Misty."

"Whatever."

He smiled. "I know you know her name."

"Sure, I remember Fluffy." I grinned and took another bite of pizza.

"You always could make me a little nuts," he admitted, and moved in even closer, edging the dog out of her comfy spot. Sugar took exception and huffed out a breath before scooting away from both of us. Logan took advantage and eased in even closer. "Mmmm. What's that perfume you're wearing?"

Apparently the demon brew had a different effect on Logan than it did on Devlin. Lucky me.

"Jasmine," I said, since I was in no shape to think up a new lie.

"Yeah?" Logan said. "Smells great. Makes me hungry. Makes me want to take a big bite of your neck."

"Yeah?" I turned my face and, oh, look what happened. My mouth was just a breath away from his.

See, this was why I hadn't wanted him around. Sixteen

years ago, he'd made me burn. Now? I could smell smoke, and I swear I could feel the flames licking at my feet. Apparently I hadn't gotten any smarter about him over the years. I looked up into his eyes and heard myself say, "Show me."

He smiled first. One of those smiles guys get when they know they've got you interested and there's no way you're going to push them away. Which was almost enough to make me give him a shove. Almost.

Then he kissed me, and this time, he really put everything he had into it. He dragged me across his lap, and I felt the hard, solid proof of just how glad Logan was to see me. I scooted around a little to get comfortable and (I admit it) to make him a little more *uncomfortable*.

He groaned a little and tightened his hold on me, his hands sweeping up my back to hold me even closer. His tongue danced with mine, and breath was really hard to come by. In a tiny corner of my mind, I remembered that Thea was just a hallway away, and that was the only thing that kept me from stripping off my shirt and slapping his hands to my breasts.

Yes, I know I'm a terrible human being. Get over it, okay? I already admitted to being a slut puppy. I refuse to feel guilt twice over the same thing. I think there's a law that covers that. Double indemnity or something? Doesn't matter.

Anyway . . . while he was kissing me, I couldn't help wondering if I shouldn't send a thank-you note to his ex, Spanky, for letting him hone his talents on her. Nah.

He dipped my head back, pushed his fingers through my hair and used his tongue to give every one of my teeth the once over. Very thorough, and I really appreciated the attention. I mean, I *really* appreciated it. There were parts of me that were sitting up straight and cheering him on from the sidelines, pom-poms waving!

Logan groaned and I did, too. Amazing just how well we still fit together. Was that a good sign? Or a bad one? Who knew? At the moment . . . who cared?

His mouth was warm and soft and hard and demanding,

and I leaned into him, enjoying the rush of being kissed by an expert.

I admit, there was one small voice in the back of my mind, shrieking at me to stop. But who listens to small voices?

As it turns out, I should have.

CRASH.

A rock sailed through the front window, splintering glass into a crystal rain and landing just a foot or two away from us.

Logan threw me to the floor, shielding me with his body; then a second later, he pushed himself to his feet and raced out the front door like a man looking for a battle. I was still sitting there, stunned into stillness, and Sugar was spinning in circles and howling like a maniac.

"What was that?" Thea bolted into the room and came to a quick stop when she saw the glass shards all over the floor.

"Stay there," I ordered, knowing that she, like me, was barefoot.

"What happened?"

"Rock. Window."

"Who would do that?"

"Beats me," I said and scooted farther away from the broken glass littering the floor. I sounded pretty calm, but inside, I was shaking.

Logan came back into the house, his features grim. "I heard a car peeling away, but it was too dark to get a look at it." Crossing the room, he bent, scooped me up and carried me away from the mess. Looking down into my eyes, he forced a smile. "Gotta say, life with you is still exciting. You okay?"

"Yeah," I said as he set me on my feet before I could get much of a charge out of being carried. "Just surprised."

And totally cowed by Fate. For God's sake, one lousy kiss and a rock has to sail through my window? What was next? Locusts? Plague? What is it about me? Why did the gods want me to go touchless? Did I have bad sex karma or something?

"Stay away from the glass," Logan ordered. "I'll clean it up."

I looked up at him and shook my head. "No thanks. I appreciate it, but you should just go."

"Cassie . . ." He didn't want to go. I saw that in his eyes, and if I'd looked down, I was pretty sure I would have seen it in his jeans, too. But for whatever reason, this intimate little moment had been shattered big time, and there was no recapturing it.

"Thanks for the pizza," I said, then half turned to Thea. "Take Sugar into your room and then get me my sneakers so I can clean this up, okay?"

Thea was still shocked enough to do it without a big production, and I was really grateful. While the now-whimpering cowardly dog followed Thea out of the room, I turned back to Logan.

"You better go," I said again.

For a minute or two, I thought he'd argue with me. But he nodded and said, "I'll go. But not for long." He reached out and cupped my cheek. His thumb stroked my skin, and I sucked in a breath. "We have unfinished business," he said, smiling. Then he dropped a kiss on my forehead and left.

I blew out a breath and got a grip on the few remaining hormones that were entirely too hopeful. By the time Thea came back with my shoes, I was alone and wondering what the hell was going on with my life.



"You have enemies."

"You think?" I bent at the waist, struggling for air, and gave the old woman in front of me the death glare. How could she run all over my backyard and not get tired?

September sun was hot and burning down on us out of a steel blue sky. Not even the slight ocean breeze was enough to cool me off. I was really ready for fall.

"The demon population knows you are active now," Jasmine said. "They won't be happy about it."

"So you're saying a *demon* pitched a rock through my window last night?"

“Who else?”

She had me there. Nobody I knew was a rock thrower. Insults, sure. But rocks? Nope. Straightening up, I tried not to notice the roll of sweat down my back. This getting into shape was going to kill me.

“And,” she asked quietly, “did you see the driver of the car who hit yours?”

“Got a quick look. Guy. Ugly goatee.” Wheels started turning in my brain. “You think he was a demon and he ran into me on purpose?”

But the more I thought about it, the more it seemed that there was no way that could have been an accident. We were in a parking lot, for God’s sake. The engine had gunned and revved for a couple of seconds, like whoever was behind the wheel was really getting up some momentum.

He’d hit only me and then taken off like a shot, giving me the one-finger salute. That did seem a little personal.

“It is certainly possible,” Jasmine said.

“Well, that sucks.” I bunched my fists into the lawn and came up with dirty fingernails. Really pissed me off that some *thing* had deliberately hurt my VW. I could fix a window. But my car was something else again. Nobody messed with the Yellow Machine. “What’s the matter with these guys? Hitting a person’s car? Is nothing sacred?”

“Not to them.”

“Well, they’ve really pissed me off.” And I was beginning to wonder if that guy in Devlin’s office had been my car killer. And if he was, why was he there talking to Devlin privately? Did all bartenders spend one-on-one time with the big boss?

Okay, paranoia rears its ugly head.

Get a grip, Cass.

“I’m delighted to hear it. It is time for you to begin your duty.”

“I thought I had,” I pointed out, frowning, still winded from all the running, crouching, jumping.

Jasmine shook her head, folded her hands at her waist and said, "You must begin to patrol the city."

I laughed at the thought, despite the flare of temper still bubbling just beneath the surface. "Just like Buffy."

She sighed. "Has it occurred to you that perhaps the television shows of which you seem so fond are based on reality?"

"Uh, no."

Jasmine rolled her eyes up so high, they went completely white. Yeesh.

"No matter now. This is not fiction. This is reality. To kill the demons you must first find them."

"Seems reasonable," I allowed. "Can I start with the little shit who wrecked my car?"

"If you can find it, certainly. Until then, you will spend a few hours each night searching out the demons in La Sombra."

"Oh, I don't know," I said. "I mean, I'm not saying I won't spray 'em if I run into them, but going out *looking* for them seems a little pushy."

"They will not come to you."

"Hah!" I jabbed my index finger in the air to make my point. "You just said yourself somebody came to me and tossed a rock through my window."

Jasmine rubbed her forehead. "You must hunt them. There is no choice."

Then she added something that sounded like "If only there were" under her breath. I let it go.

"Fine, I'll look around a little." I was kind of a night person, anyway.

"Starting tomorrow."

Oops. "No can do."

Her eyes slitted, and she hissed in a breath through gritted teeth. "Why not?"

"I've got a date."

"You would put off your duty in favor of the pursuit of pleasure?"

I grinned at her. "Oh yeah."



Naturally, though, there was a lot to do before the big date. Had to go shopping with Rachel, which wasn't easy. We had to squeeze it into her lunch hour, and the entire time, she hit me with advice and questions.

"Logan *and* Devlin?" Rachel's brown eyes gleamed with amusement. "Let's all pause to remember just how sucky you were in high school at juggling more than one guy. You never could keep your lies straight."

"I'm better at it now," I said. Wow. A better liar. What a proud moment for me.

"So you like living dangerously?"

"Oh yeah," I said. "No dates in two years. I'm dangerous. Ladies, lock up your men!"

"See, that's what's dangerous. This is the bottled-up theory."

"Oh, this should be good." I flipped through the Nordie's rack and shook my head when Rachel held up a blue shirt. She put it back.

"You've been tamping down everything inside for so long you're ready to blow—hmm. Perhaps not the best choice of words." She shrugged. "Anyway, the question now is, whose bottle opener you gonna use?"

I laughed.

She held up a green shirt, sniffed and put it back. "Come on. Two guys, two chances for sex. Who's first?"

"Maybe neither of them." But I didn't believe that, either. My hoo-hah had been on red alert for days now. There was a Grand Reopening party going on down there, and the whole place was ready to rock.

"Do I get a vote?" Rachel asked, gasping at a hideous blouse with red and green horizontal stripes.

Horizontal stripes are *nobody's* friend.

"No," I said. "Yes. No. Hell, I don't know."

"Okay," Rachel said, "I vote both."

"Damn, Rach. Does Simon know about your kinky side?"

"Why do you think he loves me so desperately? Besides, not two at the same time, gutter brain— Oh! Get that red silk one. It'll look great with your hair— I mean, have both guys on your terms. Why not?"

She was appealing to the slut puppy within and doing a damn fine job of it.

"Devlin's famous," she reminded me. "Oh, and take pictures."

"Pictures of Devlin?"

"Hmm." She tipped her head back, smiled and sighed. "Not a bad idea, but I meant pictures of the club."

"I'm not taking a camera on a date."

"Please. It's a sex club. There're probably cameras in every room— Do you have decent shoes to wear?" She shook her head. "I already know you don't. Let's go."

She grabbed my arm, steered me to Nordie's shoe department and snagged a pair of strappy black sandals with three-inch heels.

"I'll fall over."

"Devlin will catch you. Romantic."

"Unless I break my leg."

"Trust me," she said. "You know purses; I know shoes." She snagged a salesman. "She wants these in an eight."

"Seven and a half," I said.

"Oh please." Rachel snorted. "An eight," she told the kid, who made a break for the back room. Who could blame him?

"You're giving me a headache," I complained.

"You'll live," she said, then pouted when her purse started ringing. Reluctantly, she reached inside, pulled out her phone and stuck her tongue out at it. "Simon. Probably wants me back at the office."

"Thank God. I'm done shopping." Unless I was buying chocolate, I didn't really enjoy the mall experience. Rachel, on the other hand, was born to mall.

"He can wait," she said as the now-retuned salesman rang

up my shoes. "First we have to get you some *fabulous* underwear. If Devlin's gonna be peeling off your clothes, you gotta have something sexy to throw on the floor."

I glanced at the kid looking from Rachel to me and back again with the kind of fascination usually reserved for car accidents. "What?" I snapped, getting his full attention. "You don't think I can have sex?"

"None of my business, lady. . . ."

Rachel laughed and dragged me to the lingerie department. I was too weak to protest. By the time she went back to work and I went off to clean a house for a new customer before going home myself, I had a headache like you wouldn't believe.

I love Rachel, but she isn't easy.

My new customer lived on one of the narrow streets of old homes that backed up against Pacific Coast Highway and a string of strip malls, motels and gas stations. La Sombra didn't have much of a "bad" part of town, but this area was a little more dilapidated than others.

A Mister Harris, who owned the tiny bungalow, had called the day before and asked for an emergency cleaning, since he was having guests this weekend. He'd said he would leave the key in the mailbox, and that was good enough for me. Thankfully, it was a really small, old house, so I knew it wouldn't take more than a couple of hours to whip it into shape and head home. Grabbing my supplies out of the backseat of the VW, I headed up the walk and took the house key from the rusty mailbox.

Most of our customers were at work when we went in to do the cleaning, thank God. It's a lot easier to clean a place when you didn't have to make small talk with the owner. Besides, being in somebody else's quiet house was the only really peaceful time I could get.

The inside was dark and, as it had looked from the outside, cramped. Smelled a little musty, too, and I wrinkled my nose, determined to open some windows and air the joint out while I cleaned.

The front door opened directly into a small living room. Then there was a short hall with a single bedroom, a bath and a kitchen beyond.

I hit the wall switch, looking for light, but the bulb must have been burned out. Perfect. So I went into the living room to open the drapes and carried my supplies with me. Felt good to be working. This I knew. This I was good at. I'd leave the old place so polished the owner wouldn't recognize his own home.

I tugged on the cord, the dark blue drapes swept back, sunlight flooded the room, and someone behind me SHRIEKED.

"Jesus!" I dropped my supply caddy and spun around, heart in my throat.

A huge guy, with bright red eyes and fingernails that were long and curved into claws aimed at my face, raced at me from out of the shadows. Panic reared its ugly head, and I bolted to one side, narrowly missing a swipe from those nails of his. His breath sounded loud and strained, and my own heartbeat was hammering in my ears.

I jumped over a low coffee table, hit the edge with my toe and sent it flying, scattering ancient magazines in every direction.

Crap, crap, CRAP!

"You will die!" the guy screamed, and I was afraid he was right. If my heart beat any faster, I was going to stroke out on the spot.

Blindly, I grabbed the first thing that came to hand. A lamp. I pitched it at him, and it bounced off his wide forehead but didn't slow him down any. If anything, I think I pissed him off. Well, join the club. Show up to clean a house and get attacked? So not right. He lunged again, then headed around the edge of the couch. I went the other way and changed directions every time he did. We had an excellent standoff going until he got tired of the game and leaped onto the cushions to make a wild grab for me.

From there on, it's a blur. I remember running in crazed

circles in the little room, picking up everything I could find to throw at the guy—but nothing fazed him. Every time I made a break for the front door, he jumped in front of me. Like he was getting some hard charge out of terrifying me.

And maybe he was. What do I know from demons? Maybe this was like foreplay to him. Oh, *ew*.

“Look, this doesn’t have to get ugly,” I said and jumped when he lunged at me again.

“You will die, Duster.”

Hey, catch that? I’m famous. Then, his threat kicked in.

“I can’t *die*,” I shouted, hurling a cut-glass ashtray that had to weigh ten pounds. “I have a *date*!”

He laughed, and that fried me. A demon didn’t believe I had a date? All of a sudden I remembered what Jasmine had been trying to teach me all week. I wasn’t supposed to run from these guys. I was supposed to be fighting back. Killing ’em. And damned if this red-eyed claw monster wasn’t asking for it.

He charged me again, and this time, I jumped up, hurtling him like an Olympic track star. I landed near the front window, stunned, surprised and, yeah, a little proud. I reached into my supply caddy for the demon spray, tossing everything out of my way. Furniture polish, rags, floor and oven cleaner—I sent them all flying at him like domestic bullets.

Finally, though, I found my trusty demon spray and sent a squirt directly at him. It arced through the air, glittering in the hazy sunlight, and hit him full in the face. While he was blinded and screaming in fury, I spun halfway around, kicking his legs out from under him. He went down like a redwood and kept right on screaming as he clawed at his eyes. But I wasn’t done. I whipped out my right hand, and it went right through his chest wall like it wasn’t even there, and I pulled out his *heart*.

He stared up at me in total disbelief, then *poof*.

Yep. Just like on *Buffy*. He popped apart into a cloud of dust, and the heart in my hand disintegrated just as completely.

My knees gave out, and I dropped to the floor, landing in a gritty pile of Mister Harris. Breathing wasn't coming easily, but just as well—I didn't really want to inhale demon dust. Couldn't be sanitary. My stomach gave a hideous lurch, and for a second there, I really regretted the Big Mac I'd had with Rachel.

"Ohmigod." I couldn't believe it. I'd done it. Just the way Jasmine had said I would. I had actually pulled out the guy's heart.

"Oh, that's just disgusting." I looked at my hand and made a mental note to dip it in boiling water as soon as I got home. Then I staggered to my feet, went into the hall closet and looked for a vacuum. When I found it, I plugged it in, sucked up the evidence, then gathered up my supplies and left.

I figured the demon who'd hired me to clean his house wouldn't really care if I did the windows or not.

Chapter Eleven



I was still shaky when I got home. Having a demon dissolve into instant soup mix right in front of you was enough, I think, to make any woman need a quiet moment to hurl in private. But since my Big Mac was staying put, I used that private moment to grab a bag of Hershey's Kisses and eat my way to peace instead. After the sixth or seventh foil wrapper hit the coffee table, I felt a little better. Chocolate. The Wonder Drug.

I heard the mail slot open and turned in time to see a piece of paper drop onto the floor. I turned on the couch, grabbed the edge of a curtain and tugged it back, but didn't see anyone out there. Whoever had dropped the note was either Batman fast or was sneaking away, trying not to be seen and apparently excelling at the job. As soon as I picked up the paper and read it, I understood why.

Back off, Demon Duster, or your daughter will be ours.

Okay, *now* I wanted to hurl.

I yanked open the door, raced onto the porch and, looking for an enemy, stared at the familiar, comfy street where I'd grown up. But there was no one. The Marchetti boys were in the garage, Bon Jovi blasting from their radio. Our next-door neighbor, Harlan Cates, was working in the yard, probably setting bear traps to keep kids off his precious grass.

Everything looked normal. But nothing was.

Not anymore.

I crumpled the note in my hand and thought about the red-eyed guy with claws I'd dusted just an hour or so before. Imagining him going after Thea made me so sick I had to bolt

for the bathroom. It was one thing to know that one day she'd be a Duster, too. But she'd be grown up then. Now she was just a kid. A kid more important to me than my own life.

I just barely made it to the bathroom in time, and when the disgusting festivities were over, I stared into the mirror and hardly recognized the pale, wild-eyed woman looking back at me.

I gripped the sides of the sink, and I'm pretty sure my fingers left indentations in the porcelain. I was so damn mad, so scared, I wanted to rip somebody's heart out. And, hey, now I *could*.

"Okay, demons, playtime's over," I murmured to the crazed woman in the mirror. "Nobody threatens my baby."

A half hour later, Thea was home, and I only just managed to keep from grabbing hold of her and dragging her into the house, where I could keep her locked up until she was thirty-two and had some demon-killing power of her own. Instead, I looked at her, standing next to Jett, and a niggling worry began to tug at the edges of my mind.

"Where were you guys?" I asked, stepping back to let both of the teenagers inside.

"God, MOTHER," Thea said, with an eye roll toward Jett. (This is code for "Don't embarrass me in front of a guy.") "We stopped for a Coke on the way home from school."

"Uh-huh." The worry was still there, poking at me, prodding at me to find out for sure if what I was thinking was true or not. Ordinarily, I was willing to cut Jett a little slack. Up till now, I'd always thought of the kid as just a thorn in my parental paw. But now I knew there were *demons* out there. Now I knew that someone was threatening my baby.

And Thea had been just a little too eager to campaign for demon rights. If I was right, Thea and I were due for another chat that would make me Public Enemy Number One again.

So when they went into the kitchen, I followed. Grabbing my trusty spray bottle off the table, I took careful aim and gave the kid a squirt right on top of his nose piercing.

Instantly, smoke curled from his face, and Jett screamed like he'd been shot. Which he had. Thea freaked out, running for a paper towel while shrieking at me, and Jett was wiping his face with the sleeves of his ratty flannel shirt. Sugar was howling, and I was standing there tapping my foot, waiting for a damn explanation.

When the noise finally faded away, I said, "You're a demon."

The kid sniffed, wiped his face with the paper towel Thea was waving at him and said, "Well, yeah."

"I can't BELIEVE you did that," Thea shouted, clearly mortified.

I slanted her a look but kept one wary eye on the little demon in front of me as I asked her, "You knew, didn't you?"

"Of course I knew Jett's a demon. It's not exactly a SECRET."

"It was to me," I pointed out, then gave Mr. Piercings my full attention. "What're you up to?"

"Dude," Jett said, lifting both hands in an as-innocent-as-he-could-get shrug. Which wasn't real impressive, considering his head was still smoking and his pants were on their way south. "I'm just chillin'."

"Uh-huh." Chilling with *my* daughter.

"Mother, you're being insulting."

She says that like it's a big surprise. I've been embarrassing Thea for her whole life. No point in stopping now. "I'm asking questions."

"Exactly."

I was still watching Jett, not really sure, but half expecting his eyes to turn bright red like those of the guy I'd dispatched earlier. A few soft tendrils of smoke were still curling in the air over his head, and a part of me was feeling a little guilty about squirting a kid. Still, a demon was a demon. Right?

"Dude," Jett said, taking a step back, as if reading my mind. "I'm cool, you know? The demon thing? That's just whatd'yacallit, my *heritage*. I'm not into the whole demon/

human war thing, you know? It's, like, so over. I'm, like, into music and doing whatever."

I blinked, mentally translating lazy teenspeak into English, then asked, "What is 'whatever,' and why're you doing it with my daughter?"

Jett shrugged again, reached down and tugged his baggy jeans up. They hung on narrow hips briefly and then drooped down to expose way too much of his pale blue boxers.

Thea was actually simmering. I could feel waves of humiliation and fury rippling off her and didn't even risk another glance her way. I figured there would be plenty of time for us to get into this later. Right now, I wanted to lay down some ground rules for Hell Spawn Junior.

"Thea's cool," he muttered, dipping his still-smoking head and looking up at me. "And she's, like, pretty and everything. I, you know, like her and everything."

Thea sighed.

Good God. Demon poet.

"Okay, Jett," I said, idly shaking my spray bottle. It had his attention. He watched the brown liquid sloshing around with a dread fascination, which cheered me right up. "Some ground rules."

"That's cool," he said, nodding, and I figured he'd be willing to agree to just about anything while I was holding that bottle.

"One. You hang around with Thea, you keep your hands to yourself."

"MOTHER!"

Bigger nod. Gaze still fixed to the demon mixture. "Cool, dude. Cool."

"Thea," I said, still watching Jett, "go to the living room."

"But—"

"Now, please." I didn't use the "mother" tone very often, so when I did, it really got results. Thea stomped off into the other room, and when we were alone, I leaned toward Jett and stared him right in the eye. "Listen up, Jett. I don't know if the

word's gotten out to all of the demons in town, but do you know who I am?"

He nodded and swallowed hard. "Demon Duster."

"Right." I gave him a tight smile that didn't have a single thing to do with good humor. "But just so you know? The Demon Duster isn't *half* as scary as Thea's *mom*. And that's who's talking to you right now."

"Got it." He nodded so hard, one of his hair spikes fell over.

"Good." I caressed the trigger of the spray bottle, just to make sure he knew who was in charge around here. Was I enjoying this a little too much? Probably. But give me a break. I'd been putting up with the kid for six months now. There are limits. "I'm glad you get it. Because when you're with Thea, you're going to keep your spiny little demon fingers to yourself, or I'm going to chop them off for you. At the shoulder."

He gulped.

I leaned in closer. "Then I'm going to beat you to death with the bloody stump. And *then* I'm going to rip out your heart and store your ashes in Tupperware."

His eyes went wide, and he nodded again.

"Clear?" I asked.

"Dude."

"Good."

"We done?"

"For now."

He scuttled past me for the living room, moving faster than I'd ever seen him move before, and I congratulated myself silently on a threat well delivered.



The minute Jasmine showed up the next day, I hit her with, "Did you know Thea's boyfriend is a demon?"

She smiled and straightened the collar of her sea green dress. "Of course."

I saw sparks flying at the edges of my vision and had to

blink them away to see her clearly. She looked . . . smug. God, I hated a smug guide. "You didn't think maybe you should *tell* me?"

Jasmine sighed, then wandered to the white Adirondack chair in the only shaded spot in the yard. Perching herself daintily on the edge, she looked up at me and said in a *very* patient tone (the same tone usually reserved for challenged three-year-olds), "Jett is harmless."

"He's a *demon*!" I waved both arms in the air like I was trying to get her attention. "Hello? Aren't you spending, like, every day here trying to teach me to *kill* demons?"

"Cassidy, not all demons are dangerous."

"They're demons. Doesn't *dangerous* describe them?"

"No."

"That's it?" I asked, tapping the toe of my sneaker against the grass. "That's all I get? *No*?"

She gave me a small smile that was anything but kindly. "As you spend more time practicing your duty, you will find that demons, much like people, come in all shapes and sizes."

"Contrary to popular opinion, it isn't always about size," I snapped, but she clearly didn't get my sad, sad attempt at humor.

"Simply put, there are evil demons and good demons," she said.

"*Good* demons?"

"Yes. Despite what you may think, that is not a contradiction in terms. Just as humans are divided into good and evil, so are the demons." She sighed again and suddenly looked every one of her, like, two hundred years. "Not *all* demons are at war with humanity. Some simply want to live their lives and do what they can to blend into human society."

I huffed out a breath. "Well," I muttered, "Jett should try harder."

"He's young," she said with a lift of one shoulder.

I couldn't believe it. My own guide wasn't giving me all the facts. Jett was a "good" demon? I was just getting used to

the idea of demons at all. Now I find out there are good ones and bad ones?

“Just how the hell am I supposed to tell the difference without a damn scorecard?” I asked, but Jasmine didn’t have an answer.



Saturday evening and all was good. Joey had called to say I could pick up my car in the morning. My new outfit looked terrific—except for the thong Rachel had talked me into. Just couldn’t wear it. Drove me nuts. Later, I’d tell Rachel I *had* worn it, and she’d be happy. I had killed a demon and survived and was well on my way to figuring out how to deal with Logan. And the cherry on top of my personal sundae?

My date.

“I can’t believe you have a DATE.”

I only glanced at Thea. To be honest, I didn’t have time to get involved in one of our long “discussions” that always happened whenever she wasn’t speaking to me.

Especially since she’d been at me for a half hour, ever since Jett suddenly decided he’d rather be in the safety of his own home. Hey, I’m reasonable. I hadn’t been crazy about the kid *before* I knew he was a demon. I was even willing to let him keep coming around. Hadn’t Jasmine herself told me that not *all* demons were evil? Some, like Jett, apparently were just annoying.

But, like I said, no time for this. Devlin would be by to pick me up at any minute, and I was having hair issues. Not to mention I was still shaky—and this long after I’d showered, shampooed and showered some more, just to make sure I’d washed off all the demon dust. *Yeesh*.

I poofed my hair with my fingers and frowned as the few waves I’d been able to produce flattened out a moment later. Screw it. I’d just have to dazzle the man enough that he didn’t notice my hair. I almost laughed. Sure. Dazzle. Although, had to say, my outfit was excellent.

The red silk shirt Rachel had found dipped low enough to provide a peek at my boobs, and the full, long sleeves covered the bruise I'd gotten while fighting my first demon. My black skirt was short, a couple inches above my knees, and I was wearing my new black sandals with the three-inch heels. (And, yes, I had needed the size eight.) My feet already hurt, but they made my legs look great.

While Thea was complaining about my treatment of the poor little Jett demon, I opened my Judith Leiber black satin evening bag and paused just long enough to stroke the smooth, expensive fabric for good luck. Then I dropped in my perfume, a lipstick, my house key and twenty bucks.

Last I added a travel-sized perfume spritzer filled with demon acid. You just never know.

"I was completely humiliated and may NEVER recover," Thea was saying. "Jett was hurt. He couldn't believe you could be so cruel."

"Cruel?" I asked. "One little squirt? Kind of a whiny demon, isn't he?"

"Mother"—Thea inhaled sharply and blew the air out in a rush—"you could have blinded him or something, and you didn't even *care*."

With one final look in the mirror, I figured I'd done all I could and turned to face my darling daughter.

"Baby girl, the kid's a demon."

"You're prejudiced."

"Against demons?" I said with a shrug. "I can live with that."

Good demon/bad demon. Didn't really matter what Jasmine had to say, I was keeping a wary watch over the little creep demon.

Thea set both hands on her narrow hips. "Jett is COMPLETELY cool."

"As long as he remains cool, I've got no problem with him." Well, so far only minor ones, like the piercings.

"You're not going to kill him?" She looked at me warily.

Hmm. How to answer? When I'd first discovered the truth about the little twit, my first instinct had been the ol' hand through the chest move. Amazing just how quickly I was getting to be okay with that maneuver. But Thea was right. She'd known him for months, and he'd never been anything but irritating. Hardly a death-penalty offense.

"No," I said, as that mental decision was made. "But I *am* going to keep an eye on him."

"God, MOTHER," she said, "he's not a criminal or something. He can't help it that he was born a demon, you know. It's not like he's done something hideously wrong or anything."

"Yeah, I get that," I said, totally patient—and, hey, good for me. "But when a demon wants to hang out with my kid, I'm going to be careful."

"You're being completely unreasonable."

"Then my work here is done." Hey, nobody ever said being your kid's friend was easy. Besides, she already had friends. Time to be the mom.

The doorbell rang, thank God, preventing Thea from saying anything else. I grabbed my bag and headed for the door, with Thea and Sugar just a step or two behind me. I slapped a sophisticated smile on my face, opened the door and shouted, "*Logan?*"

He sailed past me into the house, wafting some delicious smells under my nose. "I brought Chinese."

"HIM?" Thea squealed, appalled. "You got my FATHER to BABYSIT me while you're on a DATE?"

"I didn't—"

"You have a date?" Logan asked, one black eyebrow lifting right into his hairline.

"I don't NEED a sitter. I'm old enough to BE a sitter," Thea sputtered.

"I didn't—"

"Who's the date with?" Logan demanded, clutching his white sack filled with what smelled like egg rolls and beef and broccoli to his chest.

"I can't believe how you're treating me," Thea said.

"I didn't do anything to you," I said to Thea, then shifted my glare to Logan, "and I don't think it's any of your business who my date's with."

Logan put the bag of food on the coffee table, crossed really muscular arms across what I knew to be a hard, broad chest and braced his feet wide apart, like some caveman ready to tie up "woman" and throw her into the back of the cave. "Who is this guy? Do I know him?"

"I don't think so," I said and looked at Thea. "I didn't invite your father here. He just . . . came."

A rustle of paper caught Logan's attention, and he grabbed up the food just as Sugar was ready to make her move.

"He's not staying," Thea said.

"No, he's not," I agreed, grateful that my daughter and I were finally on the same side.

"Yes, I am," Logan said, and holding on to the paper sack of delicious aromas, he grabbed my elbow with his free hand, smiled tightly at Thea and dragged me off a ways to hiss and whisper into my face.

"You're going on a date? But we—"

"—kissed. It wasn't an eternal commitment."

"It was a great kiss," he pointed out—apparently unnecessarily, as my blood started pumping the moment he leaned in closer. Oh yeah, I remembered the kiss, and it seemed like my body was more than ready for a second go-round.

However . . . places to go, gorgeous guys to see.

"Yeah, it was, Logan—"

"Cassie—"

The doorbell rang again, and I whirled around to face it. Saved by the bell. Again. "Crap. Logan. Thea. Go away."

"I live here," Thea announced hotly. "I'm not going anywhere."

"I want to meet the date," Logan said, already narrowing his gaze on the door like he was ready to do battle. What was this? A testosterone infection?

"Are you serious?" The doorbell rang again, and I glanced from Logan to the closed door and back again. "How'm I supposed to explain you being here?"

"Tell him the truth. That I'm Thea's father and I'm here to—"

Thea shouted from the couch. "You will NOT tell someone that you're babysitting me."

"Oh, for God's sake," I muttered, turning to open the door. The only way to get through this was to face it down and then hustle Devlin out before he could figure out just how nuts my family really was.

He looked great. Tall and gorgeous, he was wearing a suit that probably cost enough to feed a small country and, boy, did it do amazing things for him. He smiled at me, and my knees went wonky again. Wow. If he did that too often tonight, he might have to carry me on the date—not necessarily a bad idea.

"You look beautiful," he said, stepping into the house and handing me a small bouquet of what looked like a dozen tea roses in several different colors.

"Thanks. And thank you for this, too." I turned and watched Logan's face freeze up at the same time that Thea's eyes went wide and appreciative. Good to know the girl had excellent taste in men—Jett notwithstanding.

"Devlin, this is my daughter, Thea," I said.

"Hi." Thea's voice sounded all croony.

"And this is Logan Miller."

"Thea's father," Logan pointed out.

Well, that wasn't awkward.

"It's nice to meet you, Thea," Devlin said, then nodded at Logan and returned his cool look. Apparently testosterone infections were highly contagious.

"Well, this has been fun," I said cheerfully, handing my flowers off to Thea. "Put these in water for me, honey? We have to go now."

"Cassie—"

“MOM.”

“Bye, you guys,” I said, waving wildly and nearly shoving Devlin out onto the porch before heartlessly closing the door behind me. No doubt Thea would make me pay later, but for the moment, Logan was her problem.



“I’m really sorry about the wine stain,” I said and stared up at Devlin as we danced.

“Don’t worry about it.” He tightened his arm around my waist and pulled me in close to him.

I could feel every line and ridge of his body, and there was one particular ridge pressing into my abdomen that had my complete attention.

He’d brought me to Magic Nights, and it was just as magical as I’d imagined. Music pulsed all around us, and splashes of neon shattered the shadows of the upscale club. People crowded the dance floor, and conversations and snatches of laughter shot up from the mob like confetti at a party.

I couldn’t believe I was really there. I mean, I’d been seeing pictures of celebrities coming out of this place for years. Now I was here, in the center of it all, with the incredible owner of the place, no less. It was enough to make my head spin, but I couldn’t risk it. Didn’t want to miss anything.

In a shadowy corner booth, a couple was kissing and crawling all over each other, and I was pretty sure it was Brad and Angie. Yep. *That* Brad and Angie. Made me wish for just a second that I was wearing my Team Aniston T-shirt. There were other famous people there, too, of course. Actors and celebrities and one so-called singer who should have stayed home with his wife and baby, but who was I to judge?

People clustered around the bar, and the wide mirror behind it reflected the lights and people until it looked as though there were thousands of us packed into Magic Nights. And, hey, maybe there were. I *did* notice a certain goateed bartender, who kept trying to avoid my gaze, and until I knew for sure

he was the guy who'd slammed me, I was willing to let him get away with it.

Besides, there were better things to concentrate on. Like the feel of Devlin's arms around me and the sigh of his breath on my neck.

If his idea had been to romance me, he was doing a hell of a job. He spun me in a slow circle until the faces and the lights surrounding us blurred like images from a dream. It had all been perfect, so far. At least, except for one blooper.

He had so thrown me for a loop—him with those dark eyes and whisper-soft voice—I'd managed to spill half a bottle of four-hundred-dollar red wine down the front of his suit during dinner. Nothing like a good impression.

"I'll pay for the cleaning," I said abruptly, as the memory jolted through my brain again. I was praying silently that the dry cleaners could get red wine out of Armani.

"No you won't," he said and spun me in a tight, close circle. "I'm keeping it. To remember the night by."

My mouth twitched. He was just too good to be true. "Please tell me there's something more memorable than my klutzy moment about all of this."

He looked down into my eyes, and his dark gaze heated. "There are a lot of things, and the night's not over yet."

My hoo-hah sent up a cheer, but I managed to keep a lid on things. *For God's sake*, I told myself, shaking a mental index finger at me, *what are you thinking? Sex? On a first date?* True. How tacky is that? But what if, my treacherous hoo-hah whimpered, there *wasn't* a second date?

How many times in my life am I going to go on a date with a guy like Devlin Cole? Millionaire, gorgeous, charming, gorgeous, funny . . . and did I mention gorgeous?

Come on.

"So," Devlin asked, his voice rumbling just below the music, his breath dusting my ear, "Logan Miller."

Damn.

We hadn't talked once about his brief time at my house. I was sort of hoping we could keep that up. Apparently not.

"What?" I gave him a big smile and batted my eyelashes. He wasn't distracted. Should have used more mascara.

"He's your daughter's father."

"Yep," I said, giving up on the whole avoidance tactic—what was the point? "But we haven't seen him in years. He just moved back to town recently, and he's been hanging around a lot, trying to get to know Thea." And, I thought guiltily, checking out my tonsils to see if they've changed any.

God.

"So you and he are—"

"Hmm," I finished for him. "Not really sure, you know? He's just . . ."

"In your house," he finished for me.

Interesting thought. Was he still there? Would he be hanging around waiting for me to get home so he could have me dusted for prints? Nah.

"Probably not anymore. I'm guessing Thea got rid of him pretty quickly after we left." I nodded, liking that idea a lot. I wasn't going to be in the mood to talk to Logan by the time I got home. "She has no problem telling people exactly what she's thinking."

"She's like her mother, then," he said, and tightened his grip on my right hand.

"Pretty much," I agreed, smiling at the thought of Thea. "She's stubborn and loud and klutzy. . . ." I winced, thinking about the red wine again.

"And beautiful," he added, dipping his head to nibble at my ear.

Oh boy.

Skyrockets went off, I swear—actual fireworks—as every hormone I had started a conga line through my bloodstream. It had been a *realllllllyyyyyy* long time.

Those kisses with Logan had started up a chain reaction that

was now impossible to stop. Maybe Rachel was onto something with the bottled-up theory. I felt like I'd been shaken like crazy the last few days. The minute a bottle opener came anywhere near me, I was going to spew.

Okay, perhaps not the best mental image.

But I have to say, it felt a little weird, letting Logan get my engine running only to hand the keys over to Devlin. Was that really bad? Probably. Best not to think about it.

The music stopped, then started again, sliding into a fast song with drumbeats that reverberated up from the floor to bounce through my body.

"Would you like to go upstairs with me?"

I stared at him.

Upstairs?

To where the sex toys and swings and pillows were lying in wait? To where people all over the country dreamed of going? To the happy little land where orgasms lived?

"Sure."

Chapter Twelve



He gave me another smile, but this time I was ready for it and locked my knees. Didn't want to risk fainting just before the good stuff.

"Come with me."

Interesting choice of words, I thought, and hurried through the crowd, keeping pace with his longer legs with an ease born of eagerness. We stopped by our secluded table just long enough for me to snatch my bag from the linen-covered table-top. Then Devlin's hand tightened on mine, and he led the way down a long hall, bypassing the amazing staircase in favor of a private elevator.

When the doors swished shut, I was suddenly speechless. I know. Hard to believe. But there it was. The walls of the elevator were painted a dark red, and the lighting resembled candlelight.

Couldn't have been more romantic.

Thank *God*, there were no mirrors in the elevator. I just don't think I could have looked myself in the eye and gone through with this. Yeah, yeah. I talk a good game, but let's remember, I don't get out much. My last date was two years ago, and my last sexual experience was a special moment between me and my shower massage!

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes. Fine. Sure." *One* would have been enough, idiot. No, I wasn't all right. Nervous. Worried. Did I remember how to do this? What if I sucked at it? God. Performance anxiety.

"I've been thinking about you since the first moment we met."

Thinking about me? Thinking *what* exactly? And did it matter?

Devlin turned toward me and wrapped his arms around my waist. Oh, those arms felt good, and when he pulled me in close, I knew *he* was feeling pretty good, too.

Oh God. What was I doing? Was I really going to go through with this? Was I really stepping into sex-toy central with a guy I'd known about a week? Was he aware that I was silently shrieking?

Maybe, because in the next second he did his best to distract me. And damned if it didn't work. He bent his head and kissed me, his mouth moving over mine with practiced seduction. Not that I needed a hell of a lot of seduction at the moment. I was primed and ready to roll.

It had been so long, I could hardly *remember* rolling. So now, open the gates and step back, people.

His tongue tangled with mine, and I heard someone groan. I was pretty sure it was me. I grabbed hold of him, wrapping my arms around his shoulders and holding on for life.

As kisses went, this was an 8.5 on a scale of 10. I knew Rach would demand comparisons later, wanting to know who was the better kisser . . . Devlin or Logan.

So, in the interest of fairness, I decided to let Devlin do his all to impress me.

He was so big. So muscle-bound. Even through the fabric of his once-great suit, I could feel the shift and play of a really toned body. And I so wanted to see it. Feel it. Taste it.

But even while he was kissing me senseless, tugging the tail of my shirt free of my skirt and sliding his hands up over my skin, my brain started screaming at me again.

Slut! Worse, easy slut!

One date. A bottle of wine, a terrific steak and a little chocolate mousse and, bingo, there goes Cassidy!

But it had been so long, I reasoned with my logical self.

So what? You couldn't wait two more dates? Are you really that pitiful? Have you no pride? Have you no decency? No self-respect?

"I want you bad," Devlin muttered, dropping his mouth to my neck.

Shut up! I silently shouted at my logical self and made the decision to be a slut for the night. So what? Would worlds collide? Apocalypse time? The seas rise and overtake the land?

I didn't think so.

Besides, I'd killed a demon today. I owed myself an orgasm in reward.

The elevator doors opened, and I leaped back from him. I have no problem being a slut (apparently) for one man, but I'm not doing a striptease for any customers who might be wandering the halls.

He chuckled and hauled me up close again. "Relax," he said. "We're on the third floor. My private apartment."

Whoa. Impressive. And yet, I was a little disappointed that we wouldn't be swinging on a vine in the Tarzan room. God. I could almost *feel* Hell's flames licking at my feet.

"Private apartment? But you have that house on the coast highway and—"

He was steering me down the hallway now, toward a set of double doors that probably led straight to Hell.

"Some nights," he said, "I just stay here rather than drive home."

"Handy," I murmured and braced myself when he opened the doors.

Forget it. I wasn't braced. I was struck dumb. *Again.* The place looked like a palatial hunting cabin, for God's sake. It was sitting on top of a notorious sex club in a tiny beach town in Southern California, and it could have been in Montana!

Wood walls caught the soft gleam of a fire burning in a hearth tall enough that I could have stood up in it—if I were fireproof or had a death wish. The matching sofas were covered in some plush-looking dark green fabric, and there were braided rugs on the polished floors.

Directly across the room, there was a bank of windows with

a view of the moonlit ocean that made me go even gooier than I already was.

"This is amazing," I said, walking into the room and turning my head from side to side, wanting to see everything. "Why didn't you show me this place before I put the bid in?" As soon as I asked that question, I turned to look at him. "If cleaning this apartment is part of the deal, the bid's going up."

He grinned, tossed his suit jacket onto a nearby chair and shook his head. "No, I have a housekeeper here."

"Here?" I said, spinning around, half expecting to see some tidy little woman spring up from behind a chair.

"Not here *now*," he said and came toward me, with a look in his eyes that told me the talking part of our evening was done.

And just like that, I got nervous. Slut puppy becomes virginal librarian. Give me a break; it's been— God. Way too long.

"Wait a sec," I said, holding up one hand, like that was going to accomplish anything. The man was enormous. If he didn't want to stop, he wouldn't have to. But he did and waited for me to speak. Don't know why I hadn't thought of this before. Hell, maybe I was just lucky I'd thought of it at *all*. "Um, I don't exactly travel with condoms or anything, so maybe we shouldn't be hasty about this—"

"I have some."

"Of course you do," I muttered, and didn't know if I was pleased or disappointed by that. Okay, pleased, but let me have my illusions.

"And you're healthy?" I asked, although the condom thing would take care of that worry. "I mean, it's an ugly question, but—"

"I'm healthy," he said, "and I'm guessing that you are, too, since it doesn't seem like you do this much."

"Hah! That's what you think," I said, walking backward, just to get out of arm's reach. "I mean, I do this all the time. I'm a woman of the twenty-first century, you know? Confident, capable, able to have, um . . ."

“Sex?”

“Right. Whenever I want to.” God, I was babbling. And worse, there didn’t seem to be an end in sight. I trailed my fingers across the glossy surface of an antique table and kept backing up. Idiot. “This is no big deal for me, you know. I’m totally sophisticated, spilled red wine notwithstanding, and of course you realize that I was being clumsy just to make you think I was sweet and vulnerable and innocent and—” Somebody *shoot* me!

“Of course,” he said, and he was smiling again.

He really shouldn’t smile at me like that, I thought, and took a breath. It just wasn’t fair. The man had an arsenal of seductive weapons that, frankly, I just wasn’t equipped to fight against. Even if I’d wanted to fight.

“I’m helpless in your seductive plans,” he said, still smiling, still walking slowly toward me.

“Okay,” I admitted, “so I don’t really do this much, or *ever*.”

“I know.”

“You know? How do you know?” I asked, thinking that all that pretense at sophistication had been a real waste of energy. “Is there, like, a sign on my forehead that says four years since her last man? Oh *God*.” I slapped my forehead with the heel of my hand. “Did I just say that out loud?”

He laughed and moved so fast I hardly saw him, and then he had me flush up against him and—Hell, I didn’t care about anything else. I’ll admit it. Now that I’d decided to be the big slut puppy of the known universe, I was willing to throw myself into the role.

I dropped my bag—my Judith Leiber bag, the one I didn’t allow people to *breathe* on—onto the floor and never gave it another thought.

How the hell could I think with Devlin Cole’s mouth on mine?

The man was talented. Sometime during the tonsil exam, Devlin had gotten my shirt off and my bra undone, and now he had his mouth on my breast and his hands up my skirt.

Every single square inch of me was flashing on and off like a broken neon light. I felt hot, then cold, then hot again, and the expectation roiling around inside had me teetering on the edge.

I wasn't wearing nylons (hello, sandals?), so he had really easy access to all the good parts. His fingers tugged at the thin elastic of my best black panties and snapped it neatly in half. I couldn't even care. Then he touched me, sliding his hand between my thighs, and I groaned, tipped my head back and stared at the ceiling while he stroked me with really clever fingers.

I was hot and slick and so damn ready it was a miracle I didn't scream at his first touch. Then he was pushing his fingers high and deep inside me, and I was riding his hand like I was on a prize-winning stallion in a rodeo.

His teeth and tongue tormented my nipples, and every time I swayed like I was about to fall over, he tightened his grip on me with one hand and pushed me nearer the edge with the other. I didn't care that I'd only known the man a week. All I cared about was what he was making me feel. I would have done just about anything to experience a "man driven" orgasm.

I clutched at him, I moaned, I groaned, and I'm pretty sure I promised to give him my firstborn child (sorry, Thea) if he'd just make me come. *Now.*

And then he did.

With his mouth on my nipple, his fingers pushed me over that slippery edge, and I pumped my hips into his touch, pleading for more even as a staggering climax thundered over me.

"More," he said, his voice heavy with need.

"More," I agreed before the last lovely ripple faded away and practically leaped into his arms. He carried me to the closest sofa, quickly stripped me naked—how the *hell* did he do that so fast?—and then got rid of his own clothes.

The man was *awesome*.

Broad, tanned chest with dark curls of hair spiraling down to his abdomen and—Wow. For a second or two, I wondered

if I could sprint to the door and get away before he noticed me running naked for my life. The man wasn't just big; he was *big*. And no way could there be room in me for *that*.

"You should come with a warning label."

Naturally, being male, he took that as a compliment. "Second thoughts?" he asked.

"And third," I muttered as his pet monster moved in closer, "and fourth."

"Don't worry," he said, reading my thoughts so easily I had to wonder if my jaw had dropped open in a silent scream. "It'll be fine."

"I don't know . . ."

He grinned. Pride warred with amusement and, as it would with most men, pride won. "Trust me, we'll fit."

"If we don't," I muttered, "and this kills me, tell Thea I love her."

He laughed aloud, and the sound of it echoed through the room and seemed to take the edge off my nerves. Now that I was relaxing, I had to admit, I'd had one orgasm and I really wanted another. Badly enough that I'd risk that telephone pole he called his pride and joy.

After all, I'd accepted playing at the whole slut-for-a-night thing. Might as well give it my all.

"Okay," I said, "let's go for it."

"I'll be right back," he said and stalked across the room to disappear through a doorway.

"What?" I shouted. "Now I'm ready and you leave?"

When he came back, he tossed a handful of condoms onto the coffee table, and I know my eyes bugged out.

"Confident, aren't we?" I asked.

"Very," he said, and while I watched, he sheathed himself, then loomed over me.

He parted my thighs and skimmed one hand over my slick heat. I almost jumped off the couch at his touch, but quickly enough, that simple caress turned into something demanding, and I was all for it. His fingers were dipping and caressing and

probing, and I was right there with him, feeling it all, wanting it all. Hell, wanting *more*.

My hips rocked into him, and I arched so high off the couch my butt wasn't even touching the cushions anymore. My eyes were glazed—I know because everything looked damn blurry—but nothing beyond his talented touch mattered. Not now.

"I want you," he said tightly, "now."

"You're getting me," I managed to say though I don't know how I found the breath.

"Not enough," he growled. I'm not exaggerating here: he actually *growled*.

Then he grabbed me, sat down on the couch and set me on his lap. I went up on my knees and looked down into dark eyes that were a shifting mass of shadows and light, drawing me in, urging me to take him. I really didn't need urging.

The fire snapped and hissed in the background. Outside, the wind howled in off the ocean and rattled the glass French doors. Softly flickering light filled the room, tossing dancing shadows across Devlin's face as he looked up at me.

I stared into his amazing eyes as I slowly lowered myself onto his thick, hard body. My own body stretched and slicked around him, easing his entry inch by delectable inch. He was right. We *did* fit. He filled me so completely, I could hardly draw a breath. So tight. So hard.

So . . . *good*.

I shifted on him, grinding my hips against him, flexing inner muscles to hold him, hissing in air at the tremendous sensations rattling through me. But apparently, I was going too slow for him. He gritted his teeth, clamped his hands on my hips and took over. Okay by me. I gave myself up to the glorious ride, tipping my head back, feeling his body shove into mine with a strength and power I'd never felt before. It was incredible. Overpowering.

"I love your body," he whispered, hands digging into my hips, mouth a breath away from my nipple.

"I'm pretty fond of yours, too," I managed to say around a moan as he thrust high and hard. He pushed himself so high inside, I was pretty sure I could feel the tip of him at the base of my throat.

And it still wasn't enough. I leaned into him and he buried his face between my breasts. I locked my fingers in his hair and tried to hold on to my mind. But it wasn't easy. The man's body was doing things to me I'd never felt before. His tongue traced damp patterns over my skin, and his breath felt like fire.

I couldn't believe another orgasm was coming. So quick. So incredibly huge. This one was making that first one feel like—well, a smaller one. I was almost there. My breath caught, my body tightened—

Suddenly, he flipped me over, landing me on my back on the sofa, without ever disentangling us. Then he held my knees apart, whispered, "Now," and thrust even harder and deeper than before, once, twice, and then the world exploded.

I know because I went blind.



Not to brag or anything, but it was almost two hours later before we were finished, and that was only because I'd lost all feeling in my limbs.

Okay, so I don't mind bragging.

I hadn't felt so limber, so relaxed, so amazingly . . . *orgasmed* (and, yes, I know that's not a word) in forever. Getting dressed seemed a shame, but I had to get home. A kid was waiting there to punish me. Oh God. I had a hideous thought. Would Logan still be at my house? Would he take one look at me and *know* what I had been doing? And *why* was I suddenly feeling like a cheating wife, for God's sake?

Logan had kissed me exactly twice. It wasn't like we had anything going on between us. I didn't owe him anything. He shows up back in town after sixteen years and what? I'm supposed to drop everything and become that stupid, silly teenager again? I don't think so. If I want to go out and have sex with

Devlin, I can. There was nobody stopping me. And if Logan thought he was going to be getting an explanation out of me, then he was really going to be disappointed, because I so wasn't telling him—

Aaack!!!

How did Logan get back into my head? Who invited him in? I closed my eyes, pushed him back out of my brain and admitted it was really time for me to go. Didn't want to have some bizarre mental breakdown in front of Devlin. And let's face it, time as a slut puppy had come to an end.

For now.

I was checking myself out in the mirror near the front door of the apartment—had to know if Thea would be able to tell by looking at me that I'd been a bad role model—when Devlin came up behind me.

His arms went around my waist and he bent his head to the crook of my neck. His teeth nibbled, his lips and tongue teased, and I felt a rush straight down to the hoo-hah that had been practically comatose a few minutes ago.

"That is so not fair," I whispered, tilting my head to one side, to make sure he didn't miss a spot. "You know I've got to go."

"I know," he whispered, his breath sliding over my skin like a hot rush. "But you'll be back."

I sighed as he straightened up and met my gaze in the mirror. Fumbling in my purse, I blindly pulled out my perfume, tugged off the lid and aimed the spray at my throat. "Yes, I'll be back. Soon, I hope."

He smiled.

I sprayed the perfume.

It hit Devlin.

It *wasn't* my perfume.

He snarled and smoke lifted off the top of his head.

YIKES.

Chapter Thirteen



"You have *got* to be kidding me!" I screeched, giving him a shove that sent him staggering backward. Good. Demon Duster strength. That could come in handy in the next few minutes.

I couldn't believe it. I was worried about Jett's little demon fingers on Thea, and I'd just *ridden* a demon *ding-dong*? I did a wild eye roll. No wonder Devlin's penis was so damn big. He was a different damn *species*. Oh God. I was in serious danger of a hurl-a-thon.

"I can explain," Devlin said, swiping his shirtsleeve across his face, trying to wipe away the demon mixture I'd inadvertently shot him with.

"Oh, I really don't think you *can*," I snapped. Hurling would have to wait. At the moment, I had bigger things (no pun intended) to worry about. Holding the atomizer in front of me, pointed directly at him, I said, "You're a *demon* and you didn't *tell* me."

"Yes, but—"

"No buts! There can't be a but. How can there be a but?" I shouted. "You're a demon. And we just—" I waved one hand at the couch, the floor, the antique table that he had bent me over so he could— *Oh God*. That hurly feeling came back with a sudden vengeance. "I had *sex* with a *demon*!"

"Yes," he said, wrinkling his nose and blinking his eyes to clear away the last of the spray. "But *I* just had sex with a Duster. Look at it from my point of view for a minute."

"Why the hell should I?" I demanded and took a deep breath. I was shaking, furious, embarrassed, and I still wanted him. How sick was *that*?

"Cassidy," he said and sounded weary.

"Don't," I told him and spritzed the air in front of him.

He leaped back out of the way. "Cut it out!"

"I should be ripping your heart out, you bastard. I can't believe you let me do all of that with you and didn't tell me who—*what*—you really are."

"It's who, not what."

"Oh." I nodded grimly. "Thanks for clearing that up. I feel so much better now. You're not a what. You're a who. Well, peachy."

"Damn it, Cassidy, if you'll let me explain—"

"What's to explain?" I shouted and heard my voice getting a little shrill, but I think *any* Demon Duster in my position would be just a tad annoyed by this point. "You took advantage of me. You put some weird sort of demon spell on me and convinced me that I wanted to be here with you and do—"

"No spell."

"There *had* to be a spell," I muttered. Otherwise, I wasn't just a slut puppy. I was a slut for demons and that could mean only one thing. "I'm soooooo going to Hell."

He chuckled until I glared at him.

"Which one?" he asked.

"One what?"

"Hell."

"The *Catholic* one, and what difference can that make now?" My finger tightened on the spray button, and he seemed to sense it, because his big body clenched like he was waiting for the impact of the acid.

But even as he readied for it, he held up both hands again and said softly, "I'm not your enemy."

"Right. Bet you say that to all the Dusters."

"Cassidy . . ." He sounded tired. And, hey, he probably was. The last couple of hours would have *killed* a lesser man, er, demon.

"You knew, didn't you?" I demanded, keeping the spritzer aimed at him and asking myself why I wasn't firing the damn

thing then yanking out his black heart. "You *knew* who I was before you ever called me for the job. Before I came up here. Before we—"

"Yeah, I knew."

"Bastard."

"Undoubtedly."

"And your agreeing is supposed to make me feel better?" I asked, more furious now than I had been before, and that was really saying something!

"Are you going to squirt me again?" he asked, slowly lowering his arms.

"I'm thinking about it."

The edges of his shirt hung open, displaying his gorgeous chest, and I had a *tiny* urge to stroke it. Damn it. Had to be a spell.

"Just let me explain first."

"Sure. Go ahead and try," I said, reaching behind me for my purse and shooting a quick look at the door to my left. I wanted a clear path to get out of there when I had to.

"Despite what you think," he said quickly, as if sensing my impatience, "not all demons are devoted to the destruction of humanity."

Jasmine had said pretty much the same thing, but that had been about a teenage twerp. Not a gigantic, walking orgasm.

"On your birthday, when you came into your powers," Devlin was saying, "the head demon in La Sombra assigned me to meet you. To keep you busy."

I snorted. Had to give him full points for *that* at least. "So what?" I asked. "You're like Double O Demon now?"

One corner of his mouth lifted briefly. "That's not far from wrong. I was told to keep you occupied. To find out what you knew. How strong an opponent you would be. I didn't expect to like you."

A stupid flutter of something that was probably pleasure rippled through me, then was gone again. "Gee, color me happy. A demon secret agent likes me."

He stabbed his fingers through his hair and winced like he had the mother of all headaches. I have that effect on people.

"Damn right, I like you," he said tightly. "And that's no small thing for me. Demons don't usually want to have sex with the woman who can kill them."

I wasn't impressed. "Human men do it all the time. There's not a woman alive who hasn't daydreamed about slamming a baseball bat into some moron's head."

"Granted," he said with a tiny bow of his head. "But this situation is a little different." He took a step closer, and I tightened my grip on the atomizer. "In siding with you, I put myself at risk."

"And why would you do that?" I asked.

"Because you're . . ." He stopped, thought about it for a long moment, then said, "*Different.*"

Different wasn't always *bad*, so I let that go. "And siding with me means what exactly?"

"It means that I'll help you. I'll do what I can to protect you. And your daughter."

"Why?"

"Because you *need* it," he snapped. "Take your car 'accident.'"

Shock slapped me again. Images of the bartender who had slammed into my VW flashed into my already-churning brain. "The guy who hit me! You *know* him. He *works* for you."

"Yeah."

"Yeah? That's all you've got to say? You send some guy out to wreck my car—and possibly me—and when it doesn't work . . . what? You bring me here to kill me during sex? That's the backup plan?"

Devlin's features tightened. "I didn't tell him to do it, and I could point out that you're *not* dead and *I'm* the one with acid on my face!"

"Good point."

"He ran into you hoping to score some points with the top demon around here."

Great. Trying to kill me earns demon brownie points. Excellent news. “Uh-huh. And the top demon’s not you.”

“No,” he said tiredly, and shoved one hand through his hair. “Look, haven’t you noticed that some damn weird things are going on around here?”

“Duh.”

“Have you been watching the news?” he asked, taking a step closer until I lifted my handy-dandy little demon spray a touch higher.

“No. Too depressing.”

He blew out a breath. “Fires are erupting, then blowing out again all over town. Pets are vanishing.”

“*Pets?*” My heart twisted, and just how dumb was I? I’m standing in front of a demon warning me about all kinds of trouble and I’m worried about cats and dogs?

Clearly impatient himself now, Devlin said, “That threat aimed at Thea? That came from the judge. And he meant it.”

My eyes narrowed on him, and it was all I could do not to shriek and plunge my fist through his chest. But if I did, I wouldn’t get any answers, and I really wanted some.

“The judge?”

“Harrison Jenks.”

I staggered. “Jenks is a *demon*?”

“The head demon around here. He’s powerful. Nobody you should ignore.”

In a weird sort of way, that piece of information explained a *lot*. Judge Jenks was near legendary in La Sombra. Nobody in town liked him, and yet he somehow managed to keep getting elected. Now I knew how.

Hell, I’d been up in front of the mean old goat myself when I was eighteen. I had one teeny-tiny speeding violation, and the miserable demon had revoked my license and sentenced me to crossing-guard duty for six interminably long months.

“That old bastard is the one threatening Thea?”

“Like I said, he’s powerful.”

"What kind of powers?" I asked. "X-ray vision? Spitting fire?"

"Not that kind of power," he muttered. "The judge is connected to lots of highly placed, influential people. He can get away with almost anything."

He gazed into my eyes with an intensity that made me want to look away. I didn't. "And he plans to hand Thea over as a sex slave to the demon community."

I staggered. I know I did, because I backed up hard and fast and slapped my head against the wall. That sharp pain brought me up out of the shock numbing my system. In a way, I sort of wished the shock had stayed. When it was gone, I had a clear mental image of my baby girl being tossed from demon to demon to demon and— "Never gonna happen," I said.

"It won't be easy to prevent. Since you came into your power, the entire demon community is on edge."

"Community?" I echoed. "Demons have *communities* now?"

My arm dropped, suddenly feeling leaden. Something suspiciously like despair washed through me. How the hell could I protect my daughter from a "community" of demons? My fingers rubbed the small spritzer of demon spray as my gaze lifted to Devlin again.

If he'd been waiting for an opportunity to kill the Duster, I'd just handed it to him. But he didn't move. He only looked at me out of those dark, dark eyes.

"I'll help you protect her," he said finally.

"Why would you do that?"

He shrugged. "I already answered that."

True. He hadn't answered it well, but it *had* been an answer. I wasn't stupid enough to refuse help when I so clearly needed it. Still . . . "Fine," I said. "I'll take your help. But," I added, giving him the death stare, "you make me regret it just one time, and I'll rip your heart out and dump what's left of you into an ashtray at the Indian casino."



Devlin was right.

I started paying attention to the news.

Reading the paper.

Over the next few days, I was stunned to see just how strange things were getting in La Sombra. Not only in my little corner of the world, either. The *strange* was spreading.

It wasn't just the mysterious fires or the disappearance of pets, either. There was actually a rain of *toads*. Seriously, *toads*. The news guys explained it away with some trumped-up story about a cyclone sweeping over a lake. But, hey, cyclones in California? Not so much.

"What's next," I wondered. "Locusts?"

"What?"

I glanced up at Thea and felt a wash of maternal love so powerful that it nearly choked me. Morning sunlight spilled through the kitchen window and lit her up in gold. She had a spoonful of Lucky Charms halfway to her mouth and mascara smudged under her right eye. She was beautiful. And smart. And funny. There was no chance in Judge Jenks' hell that he'd succeed in hurting her.

"Are you still seeing Jett?" I asked, catching my darling daughter off guard. (The only way to get a straight answer out of a teenager is to surprise it out of them.)

"Yeah. Why?"

"You know why."

"The demon thing again?" Her left eyebrow lifted, and she scowled at me. "Honestly, MOTHER, I thought we'd worked all this out."

"It's not Jett I'm worried about," I lied, breaking off a piece of Pop Tart and tossing it into my mouth. "It's his relatives."

"Mom . . ."

"Baby girl, something's going on in town, something big, and I want you to be careful."

My tone must have convinced her when my words didn't. She set her spoon down in the bowl and watched me. "I'm almost sixteen, Mom," she said. "I can take care of myself."

Huh. That's what *I'd* thought when I was sixteen. Nine months later, I was a mommy.

"I'm just saying to watch yourself. The demons aren't real happy about having me around."

Instantly, her brow furrowed and her eyes narrowed. "Are you in trouble?"

"Nah," I said, not wanting her to worry. "I can handle it as long as I know you're safe."

"I am," she assured me airily, and stood up, dropping the last of her toast to Sugar. "Honestly, Mom, you worry too much."

Outside, a car horn honked, and Thea rolled her eyes, though a small smile curved her mouth. "When did picking me up for school every morning become my father's job?"

Logan. Hadn't seen him in a few days. Ever since my date with Devlin, Logan had made himself scarce. He still saw Thea every day, but it seemed he was avoiding me. Strange as it sounded—even to me—I almost missed him.

I didn't say any of that, naturally. Instead, I shrugged and took another bite of my breakfast. "He likes doing it."

"I know," Thea said, waving as she raced from the room. "Later!"

As soon as my daughter was gone, the back door opened behind me, and Jasmine stepped into the room. I turned on my chair and looked up into her dark eyes.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

Ready to train. To get better at fighting. To be able to protect my daughter and anyone else who needed it. "Hell yes, I'm ready."



After I nearly exhausted myself with Jasmine, the thought of cleaning made me want to sit down with a bucket of ice cream. It didn't seem fair that I had to not only save the world, but also clean toilets.

I whipped through the two houses on my list for the day and met up with Carmen back at my house.

"We are getting more clients than we can handle," Carmen said, taking another bottle of our demon/window spray. "Mrs. Hasting's neighbor asked me yesterday for your phone number."

"That's good news," I said, watching as the older woman frowned. Carmen was way more predictable than the weather. When things were going well, she frowned. When they were going bad, she frowned harder. She says it's because her sons sucked all of her smiles out years ago and she's too tired to find more.

Hey, I have a daughter. Maybe sons *do* suck!

"Rosario is doing well," Carmen said, taking a sip of her coffee and frowning at it. "But I think we will have to hire Teresa and also Yolanda to keep up with the new work."

She was right. We were getting way too much business for the three of us to handle. It seemed the weirder things got in town, the busier we got. Not a bad thing ordinarily, but at the moment, I half wished we were losing customers. At least then I could concentrate more on what was happening with Thea, the demons, Devlin, Logan.

"That'll work," I said and tasted the coffee. Seemed fine to me. Carmen was pickier than most. Once she'd even stepped behind the bar at a Starbucks to show the barista what he was doing wrong on her latte. "Carmen, are you noticing anything . . . different in some of the houses lately?"

"You mean the ghosts?" she asked, folding up the apron she habitually wore when working. "*Sí*. They are quiet now."

"You *knew* about the ghosts?" I hadn't had a clue until I'd started getting phone calls from relieved owners.

"You didn't?" She chuckled a little and shook her head at me.

"No. And I suppose you knew about the demons, too?"

"*Sí*," she said, and I had to pull a chair out and plunk down at the kitchen table. "There are dark places here. The name La Sombra in Spanish means The Shadows. Of course there are demons. There always have been."

"I don't believe this," I muttered. "We're having an actual conversation about demons, and you're not freaked out?"

"Pfft! Why would I be worried about a demon? I lived through three sons, all teenagers at once. And now, *Dios mio*, a ten-year-old. What could a demon show me that I have not already seen?"

"Got a point."

"These things have always been, Cassidy," she said sagely, packing up her supplies and hitching the box onto one hip. "Good battles evil. Children make us crazy. Clean houses get dirty. It's the way of the world."

"Wow. Thanks, Grasshopper."

"Pfft!" She smirked at me and marched out of the house, off to make somebody else nuts for a while.

So, had I been in a fugue my whole life? How had I missed what everyone else had been aware of? How had I not known about demons and ghosts and God knew what else was out there?

And had I woken up in time?



"I brought subs."

I stared at Logan, standing on my front porch in the soft twilight, and thought about slamming the door in his face. He stays away for days, then shows up like he's expected? How rude was that? Besides, I'd had a miserably long day and really wasn't in the mood for this.

My expression must have told him exactly what I was thinking. He opened the top of the bag and let the delicious scent of marinara sauce waft over me. Sneaky bastard.

I still tried to be tough. "Thea's not here."

"Didn't come to see Thea."

Damn. I stifled a groan. He was going to want to talk about Devlin.

"Come on," he coaxed and waved a bottle of wine at me to

complete the temptation. "You can go out with Mr. Rich and Slimy and not have dinner with me?"

"Rich and slimy?"

His eyes narrowed despite the half smile on his face. "Cole's got quite a rep."

"Logan—" I so didn't want to go there with him. Hell, I was only now coming to grips with the fact that I'd *done* a demon, for God's sake. I did a mental eye roll. That sounded like a porn movie. "No talking about Devlin."

"Fine, we won't talk about him. We'll just eat." He rattled the bag. "Torino's deli."

I was done for and I knew it. I swung the door wide and let him in, nudging Sugar out of the way with a gentle knee shove.

Logan shot the dog a wary glance and hitched his bag of food a little higher, just in case. Hah! Like Sugar would actually jump for anything.

He walked into the living room, plopped himself down on the couch as though he belonged there, and set the white deli bag onto the coffee table. "I got two chicken parmesans."

"Chips, too?"

"Of course." He looked up at me. "Got a couple glasses and a corkscrew?"

I nodded and went to get them. When I came back into the room, he was settled in and looking comfy. I handed him a glass, let him open the bottle, fill mine then his own, and I took a long drink (screw letting it breathe) before reaching for my sandwich. First things first.

As I took a big bite and savored the hot cheese and thick tomato sauce, Logan took a long drink of his wine and shifted a look at me. "So, where's Thea?"

"Out with Jett," I mumbled.

He inhaled sharply and blew the breath out in disgust. "I don't trust that kid."

"Well, to coin a phrase, *duh*." Really good sandwich.

"You don't trust him, either?" he demanded.

"I don't trust *any* boy who looks at Thea like he does," I told him, though secretly I thought maybe I distrusted Jett a little more than average.

"Okay, yeah, but the kid's a thug," Logan pointed out, waving his sandwich to make a point.

Sugar's head moved back and forth right under him, hoping for a spill. She was disappointed.

I handed her a piece of chicken, which disappeared so fast she made David Copperfield look like an amateur. Then I had more wine. The dry red went down great, and I could feel a buzz already starting to build inside. Good. I could use a buzz.

We talked for a while, finishing off the sandwiches and making a hell of a dent in the wine. By the time dinner was over, we were both leaning back into the couch cushions and I was feeding that buzz, hoping for more.

"So," Logan said, "we're finally alone, with a chance to talk."

"Talk about what?" I topped off my wine and took another thirsty gulp.

"You. Me. Us."

I already had both him and Devlin on my mind. I *so* wasn't in the mood to talk about it all.

"No, no and, um . . . no."

He sighed and set his glass down onto the table before leaning toward me. "Cassie, I don't like you seeing this Cole guy."

"You agreed not to talk about him."

"I lied."

"Well, you don't get a vote." I set my wine on the table, knowing suddenly that I didn't need more buzz.

Logan scowled at me. "His place, Magic Nights, is a magnet for trouble. We're getting called out there all the damn time."

"That doesn't mean anything. It's a hot spot," I told him. "People all over California want to get in there. There's bound to be a little trouble occasionally."

"It's a sex club."

"Not technically."

“Now you’re defending him.”

Was I? That was weird, because at the moment, Devlin wasn’t high on my favorite ten people in the world list.

“What’s going on, Cassie?” Logan asked, leaning in close enough to give me a small burst of heat that zapped through me like a live electrical wire jumping on wet cement.

Oh man. I really was a slut. Sleeping with demons then getting turned on because my ex leaned in a little close. The problem was, I’d actually had a few orgasms now, and I think my body was just so damn excited it wanted more. Well, it could just suffer. No way was I going to be having sex with two different guys at the same time.

Oooh. A mental image leaped up into my fevered brain, and for one amazingly erotic minute, I enjoyed the picture of a me sandwich, my body layered between Logan’s and Devlin’s.

Suddenly desperately dry mouthed, I lurched for my wine and gave myself a mental head slap. *Bad Cassidy!*

“Something strange is happening around here, Cassie,” Logan said, his gaze spearing into mine. “How about you tell me what’s going on?”

Chapter Fourteen



So I did.

I told him everything.

Outside the house, it was dark, streetlights shining like bowls of light in the black. It looked like night was an entity, alive, threatening and pressing *deliberately* against my window, but that could have been just an effect of the wine.

Logan watched me as I talked, and I couldn't tell what he was thinking. Guess he was wearing his "cop face," as good as a poker expression.

In between sips of wine, I told him all about the demons living in La Sombra, the junior demon his daughter was dating and the fact that *I* was some kind of superhero.

"A Demon Duster," he said, his voice wry, his expression suddenly completely skeptical.

"Yep. That's me. Super Cass."

"Uh-huh." He lapsed into silence again, and I kept right on talking, in between sips of wine.

I told him about Devlin (not about the sex, just the demon part—I'm not a complete idiot), I told him about Jasmine and the demon spray that apparently also cleaned ghosts out of haunted houses, and I told him that Carmen knew about the ghosts and demons before even I had.

"Carmen knows, too."

"Yes. Totally." I took a drink of wine, swallowed and said, "So it's not just me talking here."

"Right."

Then I told him about Judge Jenks being the top demon

in town. That's when Logan choked on the wine, burbling it down the front of his shirt as he gasped for air.

When I finally wound down, I felt like I'd been to confession, something I hadn't done since I was in sixth grade and confessed to cheating on a test and the priest told my dad. For God's sake, the confessional was *supposed* to be private. Was it any wonder I now considered myself Catholic-lite? But I digress again.

I watched Logan as he used a napkin to blot at the wine soaking into his shirt, and silently waited for his reaction.

Didn't take long.

Logan laughed so loud and for so long, he scared the hell out of Sugar, who bolted for the kitchen, forgetting all about the prospect of snacks. Glaring at him, I drank the rest of my wine and wished for more.

Finally, he caught his breath and, shaking his head, looked at me like I was a loon. "Christ, Cassie, that's the dumbest pile of shit I've ever heard."

"You asked," I reminded him.

"Uh-huh." Still chuckling, he leaned back into the couch and dropped a friendly hand onto my knee. Only I wasn't feeling real friendly anymore. He didn't seem to notice. "I loved the part about the judge. Judge Jenks goes too easy on the bad guys, sure, but he's no demon, for God's sake. There *are* no demons. If there *were*, why the hell would you go out with one, let alone allow Thea to date one?" He poured more wine. "God, if you're gonna tell lies at least make 'em believable."

This was what happened when you became known for creatively extending the truth from time to time. When you finally tell the absolute truth, nobody believes you!

"She's not dating," I said. "She's spending time with this kid and staying either in a crowd or where I can see 'em at all times. Besides, Jett's a good demon. Like Devlin."

"Right," Logan said with a snort. "A good demon. Christ, you really are something else."

"This is so typical," I said, shaking my head. "You want the truth, and when I give it to you, you don't believe it because it's not the truth you wanted to hear."

"Please. Truth?" Logan shifted on the couch and stroked his hand down my thigh. "Cassie, you're so used to lying you wouldn't know the truth if it bit you on the ass."

"Very nice," I said, trying to ignore the feel of his hand as it now slid up the inside of my thigh toward my own private Disneyland.

"Come on, Cassie," he said, leaning in toward me, his eyes linked with mine. "You don't really expect me to buy all of this, do you?"

Right then, I just wanted him to keep moving his hand closer to Zip-a-de-dah.

"Haven't you noticed?" I asked and inhaled sharply as his fingers brushed over the denim covering my leg. "All the weird stuff happening around here?"

"Yeah. So?"

"Rain of toads, for God's sake, Logan? When does that happen?"

He sighed and set his glass down onto the coffee table. His fingers moved a little bit closer to where I really wanted them. "A freak happening. That's all."

"And the fires?"

"Some firebug getting his jollies. We'll catch him."

"And the missing pets?"

He sighed. "You really believe all this crapola, don't you?"

Now, I didn't want to acknowledge it, but there was some definite heat getting stirred up inside me. A minute ago, I'd wanted Logan to touch me. Now I just wanted him gone. I absolutely refused to get turned on by a man who was so pissing me off. Grabbing his hand, I lifted it off me and tossed it at him.

He frowned. "If you're not interested, say so. You don't have to invent these fantasies about dashing demons and superpowers. At least be honest with me."

"Hah!" I scooted back from him on the couch and stared

at him in the lamplight. "I *am* being honest," I said and reached out to slap my wineglass down onto the coffee table. "More honest than you were with me sixteen years ago."

His expression froze over. "Excuse me?"

I pushed off the couch and jumped to my feet. It made me feel better to look down on him. As short as I am, I don't get the chance to look down at anybody very often. Pointing my finger at him, I reminded him, "You told me you loved me. You screwed my brains out that summer. Then you went off to college and found Dusty."

"Misty."

"Whatever."

He stood up, too, and I lost my advantage.

"I *did* love you."

"For three whole months? Gee, thanks. A love for the ages. So basically it was, 'Great summer, good sex, good luck with the baby.'"

"I didn't *know* about the baby," Logan shouted. "And, by the way, it was *great* sex."

True.

"You would have found out all about Thea if you hadn't introduced me to Spiffy at your graduation."

He wanted to correct me, like always, but didn't. Maybe I really did look as mad as I felt.

"I had it all planned," I told him. "I was so sure you were still mine. In all the letters you wrote me from school, you never told me about that girl. Never told me you were even dating."

God, we'd already had this argument. Why was I saying it all over again? It wouldn't change anything. Wouldn't make *us* turn out any differently. But somehow the hurt was still there, buried under sixteen years of denial, and I couldn't stop myself.

He pushed one hand through his hair and let his gaze shift away from mine. "I was a kid," he muttered.

"You were older than *me*," I reminded him. "And you

weren't propping up your swollen ankles while your best friends were out shopping for prom gowns, either." It still pissed me off that I'd had to buy my dress from Elephants-Are-Us. Not to mention I'd had to attend the dance with a pal instead of Logan, the would-be love of my life.

"You never said anything, either. In all of your letters about school and Rachel and every other damn thing going on in your life, you never *once* said anything about being *pregnant*." His gaze locked into mine.

Yep. Same old argument. Nothing ever gets settled; we just take turns flaying each other alive. Good times.

"I didn't want you worrying about the baby while you were trying to graduate," I muttered, thinking back on my martyred sixteen-year-old self.

"If I'd known," he said, his voice no more than a whisper.

All the air left me in a rush. This was so pointless. We were having the fight we should have had sixteen years ago. Back then, it might have meant something. But now it was just too late.

"I never stopped thinking about you," Logan said, and his voice was as soft as mine had been loud. Which, just so you know, was pretty damn loud.

"Well, now," I said wryly, covering my pain with humor, "maybe that's why your marriage didn't work out, hmm?"

He reached out for me, but I was too damn tired for any more. I'd had wine and food and a big fight. Now all I wanted to do was lie down somewhere and wait for morning.

"You should go," I said, taking a step back, just to make sure my hormones didn't take on a life of their own again. Apparently my body still wanted to respond to Logan even while my brain was telling me *Been there. Done that.*

"Cassie, this doesn't have to be the end."

I smiled. "Logan, we ended sixteen years ago. You just didn't notice."



“Santa Maria, Madre de Dios.”

The next morning, Carmen and I went to Magic Nights to clean, and Carmen’s reaction was the same as it had been the first time. She just couldn’t get over all the goodies up on the second floor. And, hey, who could? Watching the older woman’s face as she opened the door to the Tarzan suite was priceless. If her eyes had bugged out any farther, they’d have been lying on her sharp-as-knives cheekbones.

“Right there with you,” I said and leaned in, peering over her shoulder. I knew Carmen was still stunned by the pseudo-rock walls and the vines hanging from the ceiling and the— Oh hell, by everything. But I had to admit, there was something about the room that made parts of me tingly.

Carmen clucked her tongue in disapproval and walked inside, gaze sweeping over everything. She scowled at the bear-skin rug and reached out to tug one of the “vines.” “This is a room made for sin.”

“Yep,” I said on a sigh and winced when she frowned at me. “Hey, I was just agreeing with you.”

“Pfft. You were wishing for someone to swing on the vines with,” she said, then got such a thoughtful look on her face I figured she was wishing the same thing. But, since I really didn’t want to imagine a fifty-something Carmen swinging through the air with Tarzan, I shoved that thought out of my mind fast.

“Look,” I said, “why don’t you start in here, and I’ll head down the hall.”

She narrowed her eyes on me. “What room of sin will you start in?”

“I’m feeling like Camelot this morning,” I told her and caught the flash of interest in her eyes before she could hide it. Then I turned and left her to her mumbling and cleaning and headed down to the knight-in-shining-armor room.

Before I could open the door, though, I heard a sound, turned my head and spotted Devlin down the hall at the top of the stairs. He was watching me and, I swear, even from a distance, I could feel those dark eyes on me.

Oh boy. Clearly, finding out he was a demon hadn't done a thing to put out the fire in my hoo-hah. I could almost *feel* the heat pouring off him, and as he walked slowly down the hall toward me, I told myself that if I was smart, I'd turn around and ignore him.

Well, color me stupid.

"Good to see you," he said when he was close enough.

"Yeah," I said and swallowed hard. I had really tried to prepare myself for seeing him again. I took a cold shower that morning, and I was wearing my oldest jeans plus a dark blue sweatshirt with CLEAN SWEEP emblazoned across the chest and hadn't even bothered with makeup.

None of that deterred him.

He was still looking at me like I was a Slurpee and he a straw.

Oh boy.

"Um . . . Carmen and I should be done here in a couple of hours."

He nodded, glanced over his shoulder at the open door from which the roar of a vacuum escaped, then took my arm and led me down the hall.

He smelled *really* good.

I smelled like the demon duster liquid, since I'd spritzed my whole damn body before stepping foot into Magic Nights. Cold shower, ugly clothes and, oh yeah, the demon spray. Needless to say, Devlin let me go pretty quickly and rubbed the tips of his fingers together as if to wipe off the traces of the liquid.

When we were far enough away from Carmen, he looked down at me and smiled as he took a whiff and wrinkled his nose. "You sprayed yourself today," he said. "So, who're you afraid of? Me? Or you?"

"Ego check?" I quipped, though I really wasn't feeling quippable. (Yes, I know it's not a word.) "There are plenty of demons around here. Maybe I was just being careful."

He loomed. And as tall as he was, looming was really effective.

"I can accept that," he said, his dark gaze flashing with what

looked to me like flames. "Just so you know, if I want you again, that spray won't stop me."

Okay, my temperature shot up about a hundred degrees, and air was seriously hard to come by. Not to mention that my knees were weak and other parts of me were hopping up and down in eager expectation.

"And just so you know," I told him, keeping my voice steady through sheer willpower, "you try something I don't like, and your chest is going to be air-conditioned."

He grinned. "I shouldn't like you so much."

"Would've made my life a hell of a lot easier, too."

His smile faded, and those dark eyes danced with shadows and light that were so damn compelling I felt myself leaning toward him. Managed to find my balance before I flung myself at his broad chest, though, so yay me.

"Have you thought any more about what we talked about?"

I checked over my shoulder, but Carmen was still in the Tarzan room. Turning back to Devlin, I said, "Pretty much been thinking about nothing else. There's a powerful demon who wants to steal my daughter, so yeah, I've been thinking about it."

"Any ideas on what you'd like to do?"

"Oh, a few hundred, up to and including ripping the guy's heart from his chest."

Devlin winced a little, but nodded. "He won't be easy to get to. He's a powerful man."

"Demon."

"Yes."

Okay, I knew that. The judge was pretty intimidating as a *man*, let alone as a demon. And I wasn't exactly a real experienced Duster.

"Maybe you could meet with him. Reach an agreement."

"You mean tell him to back off Thea and I'll let him live?"

"Something like that."

My head snapped up, and I looked him dead in the eye. "Are you trying to set up a meeting between us? Is this Dou-

ble O Demon playing at being a double agent or something? Because I've seen all the movies. I know that spies can't be trusted. By anybody. If you set up a meeting, how do I know you're not just setting *me* up to get killed?"

He sucked in air, and his chest swelled to amazing proportions. The frown on his face was enough to terrify anybody else. But my daughter's life was at stake here, and it was going to take more than Mr. Scowly Face to scare me off.

Besides, he'd had a perfect opportunity to kill me—when he was lying on top of me—and he hadn't taken it. I figured I was safe. At least for the moment.

Reaching out, he grabbed my upper arms and hauled me up close to him. Okay, maybe not safe safe. Smoke lifted and twisted in the air between us as the spray came into contact with his body. But he didn't seem to mind. If it was actually burning his skin, he had some great self-control, because I couldn't see a trace of pain in his eyes. Just pissed-off male.

"I told you already. I *like* you," he said, grinding each word out as if he were spitting bullets. "I'm working for the judge. I'm not going to help him kidnap your daughter, and I'm *not* going to let him kill you."

I swallowed hard, and damned if I didn't feel tears at the backs of my eyes. How stupid was that? For some damn reason, I really appreciated that little speech. I only hoped I could believe it.

"Thanks," I said when I was pretty sure the tight knot in my throat had dissolved enough to allow for speech.

His gaze was still locked on me, and I heard him sigh in exasperation. "You don't believe me."

I thought about that for a minute. Sure, he said he was on my side, but how did I know that? Take his word? The word of the demon who had the guy who'd crashed into my car working for him? He hadn't exactly fired him or anything. How did I know that Devlin wasn't still working for the judge and just trying to keep me off guard?

How did I know that he was really a “good” demon? For all I knew, he could have been plotting against me like crazy.

“I’d like to.”

“What’s stopping you?”

His hands on my arms were still tight. I could feel the imprint of his fingers on my skin, right through the fabric of my sweatshirt. And the twists of smoke were twining about our heads like misty wreaths.

“Just the demon thing,” I admitted.

Shaking his head, he said, “Guess I’ll just have to find a way to convince you I can be trusted, then.”

“Firing the guy who tried to run me down like a dog would be a good start,” I pointed out.

“Firing him wouldn’t help. I can’t keep an eye on him if he’s not here, now, can I?”

True. But how did I know that he wasn’t keeping him around to make sure the demon’s *next* plan worked better? Oh, I had such a headache. I just wasn’t made for intrigue, you know? Give me a dirty house, and I’m your girl. Give me problems to solve, and I had to go lie down for a while.

“Fine, then,” I said on a sigh. “If you won’t fire him, then how’re you going to convince me to trust you?” I pulled in a gulp of air when his hands left my upper arms and moved to cup my breasts. “Oh man . . .” I think I actually whimpered, but I really don’t want to admit that. “That is so not playing fair.”

His thumbs moved over my nipples, and despite the sweatshirt and my bra, I swear I could feel his skin on mine. My hoo-hah trembled, clearly remembering the last time we’d been here with Devlin, my legs quaked, and the edges of my vision blurred.

He smiled.

“I want you again,” he said, dipping his head to nibble at my earlobe. His teeth caught the edge of the silver hoop in my ear and gave it a tug.

Swear to God, I felt that tug all the way down to my toes.

"I . . . um . . . I . . ." God. *Brilliant, Cassidy. Is it any wonder you're such a freaking demon magnet?*

"You want me, too," he whispered, his breath as hot as his mouth against my neck.

"Um . . . I . . ." *Somebody* help me.

"The spray won't stop me," he whispered, teeth nibbling at my jugular.

Jesus. He *was* just a demon, right? Not a vampire?

Did I care?

Not at the moment.

"Doesn't it hurt at least?" I moaned as his tongue swept across my skin. "The spray, I mean?"

"Burns like hell," he admitted and grabbed my breasts in a tight, firm grip, squeezing until I was whimpering for more.

Holy crap.

The slut puppy was *back*.

Standing in a hallway of an exclusive sex club, I wanted Devlin to pull off my clothes and take me against the damn wall. Oh boy . . .

"Devlin—"

"Cassidy . . ." Carmen called for me from down the hall, and her voice was like a bucket of cold water dousing me from head to toe. I grabbed hold of Devlin's wrist and oh so reluctantly pulled him off me. Seriously, the Duster strength? Pretty impressive.

"I have to go see what she needs," I said, backing away while I still could. I made a mental note to buy Carmen a cinnamon roll when we were finished here. She really had called me just in the nick of time. Whether she knew it or not.

His eyes narrowed, and he huffed out an impatient breath before stuffing his hands into the pockets of his slacks. "Fine. We'll continue this . . . discussion, another time."

Oh, boy howdy. I swallowed hard, turned and walked quickly away. Frankly, I'm surprised my knees worked.

"Cass?" he said, and I stopped, swiveling my head to look at him. "Don't use the demon spray on the windows in here,"

he said and gave me a half smile that jittered across every single nerve ending I had. "Some of my customers might not be as . . . forgiving about the scent as I am."

"Right." Then the hereditary Demon Duster scurried for the safety of Carmen's scowls.



Thea was at the mall with Zoe, and I was in the backyard training with Jasmine. The late September air was cool, and clouds were rolling in off the ocean in a thick, black bank that promised rain later. I was so damn grateful the heat was gone that I wanted to hit my knees and thank the weather gods for the reprieve.

Unfortunately, I was a little too busy.

Jasmine's sharp, dark gaze followed me as I jumped and lunged and stretched my way around the yard, feeling like an idiot. For God's sake, did it matter how much I trained? Every one of the demons in La Sombra had been demons a hell of a lot longer than I'd been a Duster.

But then I thought about Judge Jenks and his threat against Thea, and I knew that I'd have to train to be able to protect her. Unless Devlin did what he promised and set up a truce meeting with the judge.

Truce.

Was that even possible?

Did I even want a damn truce with a demon who was trying to hand off my baby girl as a sex slave? Nah. What I wanted was the old goat's disintegrating heart in my hand. Hence the stupid training.

My head was pounding, and it didn't help hearing Jasmine shouting instructions in a loud voice completely at odds with her appearance. Then Sugar started barking, and my headache blossomed into Brain Tumor mode.

Just as I turned to shout at the damn dog, though, a tall, thin woman with dark blond hair, bright red eyes and knife-blade-sharp fingernails about a mile long leaped over the white picket fence and charged me.

“Whoa!” I shrieked. And I’m not ashamed to admit it. Hey, you face down a demented woman in a paisley wrap dress determined to gouge your face off, and see if you can keep from screaming!

The bitch came at me like a freak in a horror film and shouted, “Die, you cow!”

Cow?

Excuse me?

I grabbed the closest thing at hand—Sugar’s slobbery Frisbee—and pitched it at the woman, hitting her square in the throat with enough strength to dent the Frisbee and make her pause long enough to catch her breath. She gagged a little, and I used the distraction to jump *straight up* and over her. Like Wonder Woman, I’m leaping around the damn yard like I’ve got springs on my feet.

I heard the bitch snarl as she turned for a second go at me. She was bent over at the waist, running at me, and I hit her stomach with my shoulder, lifting her up and over me like she was a grain of salt I was throwing for good luck.

Damn, I was getting good at this. Suddenly, I wished for a video camera to capture my greatness and show to doubting Logan so maybe he’d believe me when I told him demons were running rampant in his little town.

A second later, though, I was through thinking and trying to stay one step ahead of the demon woman. She had grass clinging to her upper lip from where she’d hit the yard on her fall. She spit it out, narrowed her gaze on me and made another lunge. I swung from the shoulder, my fist hit her chin, and she flew back like somebody had a rope around her waist and gave her a good tug. Hell, my knuckles didn’t even hurt.

I was good.

“Stop playing with it and kill it,” Jasmine shouted from the sidelines. I shot her a look. Backseat Duster.

Demon Woman hit the ground hard a second time, and her ugly-ass dress hitched up over her legs to show off thigh-high

nylons. And she was wearing sandals. For God's sake, nobody had standards anymore.

She pushed herself up from the grass, wiped her hair out of her eyes with those dagger nails of hers, and spit out another mouthful of grass.

"Ew," I said. "Gross out."

"You're ruining everything!" the demon bitch spat. "He won't look at me until you're dead."

"Hey," I countered, "I didn't go into *your* backyard and call you a cow. I didn't even say anything about that ugly-ass dress or your tacky nylons."

Her eyes went wider and hotter. Hard to believe, but they did. Like I said, I have this effect on people. Apparently, even on demons.

"With your death, I'll have his attention again."

"His?" I asked, crouching and watching her every move, trying to figure out how she was going to come at me before she did it. See? I can learn. "You mean the judge, right? He's the one you want paying attention?"

"With you around," she snarled (and here I mean actually snarled—not a pretty sound), "he thinks of nothing but you."

"Isn't that nice?" Okay, that was enough. She was pissed, and the trick, I thought, was to make her even madder, so she'd lose control and I could win fast. Shouldn't be tough. I studied my fingernails with as much of a casual air as I could manage. "Gee, guess you're just not demon enough to keep him interested, huh?"

She spit again, and I made a mental note to hose down the yard. Demon cooties.

"I'll kill you and he'll reward me."

"What? You're doing this for credit?" I shouted, throwing both hands high. "I thought this was a demon jealousy thing."

She choked a laugh.

"So you get brownie points for killing me?"

Jasmine shouted, "Stop talking and kill it!"

But this was just getting interesting.

Demon Woman snorted and tossed her hair back. Pretty hair. Good highlights. "He'll give me San Diego for this."

I glanced at Jasmine. "They can have whole cities all to themselves?"

Jasmine only shouted, "Will you simply *kill* it? *Now.*"

The demon charged again, and this time, I remembered the demon spray on the patio table. I grabbed it and whirled around, dropping into a crouch as I moved. She sailed past me, landing right in front of Jasmine. The old woman kicked her dead in the face, tossing her back at me. She landed on her feet this time and was preparing another pounce when I gave her a long squirt of the bottle, the liquid splashing over her face and across the top of her head.

"You shouldn't have come here," I said, just before I slapped my hand through that ugly dress, ripped out her heart and watched her wide, surprised eyes as she poofed.

I was actually feeling pretty good.

Until I looked at Jasmine.

Her head was smoking.

Chapter Fifteen



"No. Fucking. Way."

Jasmine didn't move. She just stood there, her head smoking, twists of gray spiraling in the cold, ocean wind, her gaze never leaving my face. Was she afraid to move? Afraid I might leap at her and rip out her heart? Damn it, a part of me *wanted* to.

She'd lied to me. Made me trust her as the one person with answers in my strange new world, and now I find out she's one of the monsters?

"You're a *demon*."

"Yes," she said.

"That's it? Just *yes*?" Why wasn't she spilling her guts? Trying to explain away her lies and keep me from killing her?

Because she knew I wouldn't. A real pisser for somebody to know you that well. I tossed the demon spray at a nearby chair and yanked at my own hair in frustration. "For chrissakes, Jasmine, don't you think I deserve a little more than that?" I was shouting by then and didn't really give a damn who heard me. "Maybe an explanation? Something along the lines of 'Hey, did I forget to mention I'm from South Hell?'"

Her lips pursed. Serious lipstick lines. "You're becoming agitated."

"Boy howdy."

"There is no need."

"Hah!" I gave my hair another yank, then winced at the pain and told myself to knock it off. Being a Demon Duster was bad enough. Being a *bald* Demon Duster would just be ugly. So I walked off the mounting aggravation by stomping

around my backyard until Sugar slunk away up to the porch and huddled next to the door. Great. Now I was scaring cowardly dogs.

I stopped and faced the little old lady who looked more like a woman ready for a hot night of bingo than an ambassador from a Hell dimension. "You can't be a demon. That's not how it works. I can handle Devlin being a demon because, well, I just can, and the sex was pretty incredible—"

Jasmine shuddered.

"Hey, demon lovers are *acceptable*. It's even been on TV and in the movies. But not *you*. You're my *guide*. In the movies, you're the wise old man who can read all the weird books written in a language nobody's ever seen before! You can't be a demon. That's not how this is supposed to work. You're supposed to be on *my* side."

Jasmine sighed, pulled an embroidered hanky out of the cuff of her long-sleeved gray shirtdress and wiped what was left of the demon spray off her forehead.

"Cassidy, I am on your side," she said, moving over to perch gingerly on one of the lawn chairs. "I have been a guide to the women in your family for more than a hundred years."

"But—"

"I'm also a demon."

"So you're a good demon."

She smiled slightly. No more than a twist of her lips, really. "I wouldn't go so far as to say *good*, but certainly not evil."

Well, that had the ring of truth to it, at least. Had to admit, she'd never struck me as the Pollyanna, goody-two-shoes type. Anyway, Jasmine was no saintly figure. More like a really determined drill sergeant.

"Okay," I said, taking the seat opposite her. "That's honest."

"Of course it's honest. I haven't lied to you."

She actually had the nerve to look *offended*. Like I'd hurt her little demon feelings by not trusting her. Believing her. For God's sake, bizzaro much?

"I don't see why you get to be the cranky one. You know, *I'm* the one with the list of complaints here, Jasmine."

"As you insist on reminding me every day of your training."

Fine. So I whined a little once in a while. I thought I was due. "There's no reason to get nasty."

"You're only upset because this is coming as a surprise to you."

"You think?" I countered and heard the really annoying shrieky tone to my voice but couldn't seem to stop it. "So what you're saying is, I shouldn't be pissed or ripping out your heart because you didn't *lie* to me. You just didn't *tell* me stuff!"

I could pretty much feel the top of my head getting ready to fly off, so I took a deep breath and tried to calm down, because what good would that do me?

Sugar sneaked (at least, she considered it sneaking, but nobody could miss a dog of that size moving) down the steps and across the lawn to take a seat beside Jasmine. I glared at her. Apparently the dog had forgotten just who was in charge of the kibble around here.

Jasmine, though, blew out an irritated breath aimed at me and dropped one hand to the top of Sugar's head. The traitorous hug addict snuggled up to the old woman/demon and dropped her head in Jasmine's lap.

"I would have told you eventually," Jasmine said.

"Gee, that's great. Thanks," I said, flopping back in my seat and hitting the back of my head on the top of the Adirondack chair. I winced and straightened, giving her a glare. "That makes it all better. Hell, that's right up there with Noah treading water and God saying, 'I was going to tell you about building a boat eventually—and, hey, meant to tell you about the flood.'"

"You are a trial," Jasmine muttered, her black eyes narrowing a bit. "Your grandmother was never this much trouble."

"Excuuuuuuusse me."

"There is no need," she said, as if I'd actually *meant* that sarcastic apology. "It's not your fault entirely. You were unprepared

for your duty. Your grandmother should have prepared you, and if your mother had survived—”

“Back off, Bertha,” I snapped and got her attention in a flash. “Stop trying to make my mother sound like a deadbeat for dying and ruining your demon-killing plans.”

“I didn’t mean to—”

“Yeah, you did,” I said and pushed my hair back out of my eyes. “And it’s not the first time you’ve done it. Maybe Gram should have told me, but the point is, she didn’t. So as soon as you knew I was in the dark, *you* should have told me everything.”

I watched her for a long moment, wondering if she was actually going to try to defend herself, but finally, she nodded. “You’re quite right,” she said, and I wondered why in the hell a *demon* sounded like a Sunday school teacher. “I should have told you everything right from the beginning. I meant only to ease you into your duties.”

“Fine,” I said. Hey, I can be magnanimous in victory. “I’m officially *eased*. So tell me now. And start with why a demon is helping me to kill demons.”

The storm clouds were rushing in overhead. California didn’t have four actual seasons like most places, but when fall finally decided to arrive, it could get cool and rainy. Looked as if we were going to see a good storm for a change. All around us, the yard seemed to quiet, as though nature were taking a breath before the rain hit. As if maybe even the trees and bedraggled chrysanthemums in my garden were waiting to hear what Jasmine had to say.

“I do what I do,” she said softly, “because there must be balance.”

I blew out a breath and wished for a beer. “Oh man, are you going to go all Zen-like on me? Cause I don’t think I can handle a Master/Grasshopper talk right now.”

“You watch far too much television.”

“Guilty,” I agreed. “But not the point. Now explain what you meant.”

Jasmine's gaze caught mine. "Balance in all things is necessary. When demons attain too much power, that balance is disrupted and the world suffers."

This was just too weird. I was sitting in my backyard (it really needed mowing), watching a storm roll in and listening to an ancient woman talk to me about balance in the demon world.

"I chose this duty," she was saying in that plain, no-nonsense tone she always used, "because some of my kind feel it is important to maintain stable ties with the mortal world."

"Hah! And I'm stable?"

She smiled again, so briefly that if I hadn't been watching her, I never would have noticed it. "You have a good soul, Cassidy. A heart big enough to accept that not everything in the world is black and white, or good and evil."

"Oh sure," I said, calmer now as I admitted that though it was damn weird finding out my "guide" was a demon, I was pretty sure she was still trustworthy. Leaning back in my chair, I kicked my feet out in front of me and added, "You say that now so I can't get all frosted and rip your heart out without feeling like a jerk."

She smiled, and even her dark eyes glittered with humor and . . . relief? Maybe she felt good getting her secret out in the open.

"I will be with you for as long as you need me," she said, "which I must say, I fear will be quite some time—"

"Hey! No insulting the Demon Duster when she's just forgiven you!"

"—and," she continued, lifting her voice to drown me out, "when it is Thea's time to inherit her powers, I will be there for her as well."

"God," I muttered, thinking about that for a second. "Thea."

"Of course, we've talked about this. The Duster legacy is passed along from mother to daughter. Your own mother—"

"I know," I said, interrupting her because I really didn't want to think about my mom now and how we'd both been gypped

when she died too young. "I know it'll be Thea's turn one day. I already told her, actually, and let me tell you, if you think *I'm* a pain in the ass about this, just wait till Thea's up at bat."

Jasmine actually shuddered.

Me, I was worried. It gave me chills thinking about Thea going up against nasty-ass demons who wanted her dead. But the real scary part was, she'd never get to be a Duster at all unless I was able to protect her *now*.

Jasmine shrugged after a minute and scratched Sugar behind her ears, making the dog actually moan in ecstasy. "It may not be Thea, you know. If you have another child and it is a daughter, *she* may be the one to inherit the power."

"Oh, you can put a lid on that plan," I said hastily. I mean, sure, sometimes when Thea was being all sweet or we were laughing together, I halfway considered maybe someday, at some far-off point in the distant, still-foggy and ambiguous future, that I might, maybe consider maybe thinking about another child. But in case you didn't notice, the chance of that happening was real iffy.

Which meant, of course, that Thea would be the one stuck with this "duty" sooner or later. *Let's vote for later*, I told myself, and put that thought out of my mind for the moment.

"Besides," I said, with a sigh of great relief, "I'm practicing *realllllllyyyyyy* safe sex these days. I mean, interspecies sex has got to be totally safe. Can't reproduce if you're not even in the same gene pool—hell, same gene *ocean*—right?"

Jasmine didn't say a word.

"Right?" I repeated and heard the shrill, nails-on-a-chalkboard quality of my voice. "*Right?*"

"Our species are not so very different," she said. "At least, that can be said for a great many of us. There are, of course, many different types of demons. Each with their own quirks—"

I snorted. "Quirks? Like claws and fangs and wild, red eyes and, I don't know, trying to *kill* me?"

"Some of them are far from human," Jasmine went on, disregarding both my indelicate snort and my abbreviated rant.

"Others are very close to human, and until they choose to show their demon natures, you would have no way of knowing their true heritage."

Well, I'd seen that for myself, hadn't I? Look at Devlin, for Pete's sake. He looked like a guy. A big, gorgeous guy, but human through and through. And yet . . . Then I wondered what his "demon" self looked like and wondered again if I really wanted to know. Did I want to see him go all fangy and clawy? (Yes, not words. I know.) And the honest answer was, nope. Didn't really want to see the "real" him.

Hell, I didn't even want to know what Jasmine looked like when she was kicked back with a demon crowd.

"Okay," I said, turning my head on the back of the chair to look at her. "But we're talking about reproduction here. It can't be possible."

"Thea's friend Jett is only half demon," Jasmine went on, eyes gleaming with— Was that *humor*? "His father was human."

"I didn't know that. *Half* demon? Oh crap." So sex with the demon world wasn't exactly *safe*. The meaning of that sank in fast, and I immediately thought about my wild night with Devlin, but I was safe. For sure. We'd used condoms. Every time. So, unless demons had, like, supersperm or something, I should be covered.

Right?

"You're enjoying this," I accused.

"Is that wrong?" she asked, smiling.

Bitch.

Not that I was considering having sex with Devlin again, but when I did, I was going to make sure he was wearing *two* condoms. Hell. Maybe *three*.

I just couldn't take much more.



For the next couple of days, I carried that demon spray with me *everywhere*. If Jasmine could be a demon, everybody in town was suspect.

No matter whom I ran into, I gave 'em a squirt.

The paperboy—*no*.

The guy at the car wash—*yes*.

My favorite teller at the bank—*no*.

Joey Paretti's best mechanic—*yes*. When the little guy with the handlebar mustache started smoking, Joey jumped in front of him, arms wide in protection and shouted, "Don't kill him! Fabrizio's the best mechanic I've ever had. Besides, he's a Firenze demon—they're car specialists, not evil. He came here all the way from Italy. I paid his way over."

Car-specialist demons?

God, everybody had a specialty these days.

Truth to tell, ol' Fabrizio didn't look too dangerous. He was practically quivering. So, being brilliant and, oh yes, financially challenged at the moment, I proposed a deal.

"If I don't kill him," I said, liking the thrill of power, "I get free tune-ups and oil changes for a year."

Joey gritted his teeth. "Fine."

"*And*"—I was on a roll and kept right on rolling—"I don't have to pay for the bodywork you did on my Bug."

"Damn it, Cass!" Joey glared at me, glanced over at Fabrizio, who was looking a little worried, then finally caved and said, "Fine. You got a deal. But just so you know? This sucks."

Not from where I was standing.

Anyway, the squirt-a-thon continued.

Carmen—*no*.

Her cousin Yolanda—*yes*. (That was an eye-opener, but Carmen insisted that Yolanda was only half demon and that she was a really good worker.) Since phone calls for jobs were still pouring in, how could I dust a good worker?

But the half-demon thing was still worrying me—for all I knew, Devlin's sperm had found a way through that thin layer of latex and were already laying siege to my eggs! That thought creeped me out enough that I gave my hoo-hah a squirt just in case.

Then I took my spray over to the high school and, once

class was out for the day, squirted all of Thea's teachers. No point in taking chances.

I was really hoping the principal, Mr. Richards, was a demon, because I never had liked that guy. Such a wimp. But no . . . everyone was clear except for Mr. Mondaca, the biology teacher who had flunked me sophomore year. When he lunged at me across his desk . . . Gotta say, it was a real pleasure ripping out that particular heart.

Basically, I discovered La Sombra was so not the quiet little town I'd always believed it to be. There were freaking demons *everywhere*.

When I met Rachel for coffee at the Starbucks near Simon's dental office, I spritzed the barista who told me the perfume had a really cool "earth-vibe" to it. Probably the oregano. Then, when Rachel came out onto the patio and sat down next to me, I gave her a quick shot.

"What the hell was that for?" she asked, whipping a compact out of her Prada bag. (Rachel has excellent taste in purses.)

"Just a new perfume I'm trying out," I said.

"Well, it smells like pizza. Not a bad scent, but I think it's gonna clash with the Beautiful I splashed on this morning." She blotted her face with a napkin, shooting me do-it-again-and-I-slap-you looks.

"Sorry," I said, but inside I was sighing in relief. No smoke lifting off of Rachel. Which meant at least one little corner of my world was staying sane. Well, as sane as Rachel could get, anyway.

"So," she said, putting the compact away and picking up her cup, "Simon says I should get out of the office before Mrs. Eisen comes in for her cleaning, and I thought, 'Thank you, God.' That woman makes me want to pick up his drill and see how thick her skull really is."

"So you're free for a while?"

She grinned at me, took a sip of her mocha latte, then swallowed with a grimace. "God, how hard is it to mix a little chocolate with some steamed milk and a shot of espresso?" She pushed up from her chair and stalked away. "I'll be back."

My latte was just fine, so I picked at my chocolate doughnut, (give me a break—they're baked, not fried; Starbucks knows how to take care of female customers), took a sip of my hot coffee and idly squirted the guy sitting next to me on the patio.

Smoke lifted from the top of his head, and he looked at me, wide-eyed and horrified as he dropped the paper he'd been reading and bolted. I watched him run for it, slapping at his smoking head just as Leo had, what seemed years ago, now.

I let him go without bothering to chase him down like a dog. I'd figured out something in the last couple of days. Squirted everyone I came into contact with not only told me who was a demon and who wasn't, it also told me who was a *good* demon and who wasn't.

Pretty simple, really. The good ones took off running, hoping I wouldn't bother to chase 'em. (Which I wouldn't. I don't do exercise willingly, remember?) The bad ones attacked, trying to kill me before I could dust them.

It was sort of comforting in a weird way, to at least have that much figured out.

By the time Rachel came back to the table, muttering about teenage airheads working around hot machinery not being good for anyone's health, I was settled into my chair and ready for some good gossip.

"You had sex with him, didn't you?"

I choked on a sip of latte, and when I got my breath back, I managed, "Huh?"

"Don't make me have to kill you."

I laughed. Rachel really was good. "You mean Devlin."

"I'm reaching for my gun."

"Yes," I said and couldn't quite keep the sigh of reflection out of my voice. "I had sex with him."

"Oh dear God," Rachel said, doing a little sighing of her own. "The look on your face is making me so damn envious I can't stand it. Tell me everything. Don't leave out a thing. I can't believe it's been *days* and I don't know about this yet."

“Jesus, Rach. *You’re* the one who told *me* I would have sex with him. Why sound so surprised?”

“Not surprised. Crabby. I need details.” Rachel reached out one hand, squeezed mine briefly, then settled back. “I feel like I haven’t seen you in *years*. You’ve been so busy lately— Well, since Logan came back to town, we never talk anymore.”

It wasn’t only Logan. Every spare minute I had was spent training with Jasmine, but Rachel didn’t know that, did she? “I know. Things have been—”

“Weird?”

“Absolutely.”

That one pitiful word couldn’t come close to summing up what my life had turned into in the last week or two. There were some details Rachel would *never* hear. I was thinking she wouldn’t be too happy to hear about all the demons in town.

Rachel broke off a piece of her crumble coffee cake, popped it into her mouth and then set her elbows on the table, her chin in her hands. She was watching me as if I were the trailer for the next big summer blockbuster.

I caved pretty quickly. “It was *amazing*.”

She sighed again, and I grinned. After all the strangeness of the last couple of weeks, being myself with Rachel felt damn good.

“More,” she demanded.

“Six times,” I said.

“Jesus.” She fanned herself with a napkin.

“I could hardly walk after.”

“I think I just had an orgasm,” she said, eyes wide, mouth a perfect O.

“I know I did,” I said, taking another piece of doughnut and chewing despite my satisfied grin. “Several.”

Rachel slurped up some mocha, grabbed a new napkin and dabbed away imaginary sweat from her forehead. “Keep going.”

“He turned me every which way but loose,” I said, leaning in toward her, watching her eyes sparkle with imagination as

she mentally filled in the blanks. I ticked them off on my fingers for her. "On the couch, the floor, against the wall, on the terrace, over a table—"

"Wow." She sucked in a gulp of breath, blew it out and said, "That's only five."

I shrugged. "And the bed."

"After all of that? How disappointing."

Disappointing was one word I would never use to describe that night. Amazing. Electric. Overpowering. Orgasmic. Now, *those* were words. "Trust me. So not."

"God. When I go back to the office, I'm taking Simon for a ride in one of his chairs."

I laughed and leaned back, lifting my latte for a long sip. It was so good to be with Rachel. To feel—God help me—*balance* in my life. I could deal with the demons and Logan and Devlin and Thea, as long as I had Rachel. My one remaining thread to normal.

"So," Rachel asked, "is Thea still hanging out with that little demon?"

Chapter Sixteen



You know how many times I've read books where the heroine thinks, *I couldn't hear over the roaring in my ears?* That always sounded so stupid. So implausible. Until just that moment.

I blinked.

I had to shake my head to get rid of that roaring, which was making the whole world sound muffled and strange, before I could clear my throat and say, "Demon?"

"Come on," Rachel said, chuckling as she lifted her mocha in a salute. "Have you *looked* at that kid?"

So she didn't know. She was just talking about the weird bolt through Jett's nose and the spiky hair and, well, the whole package. "Yeah, but—"

"Oh God." She set her cup down and leaned back, staring at me in stunned surprise. "You didn't know about the demon thing, did you?"

Crap. She really did know the truth about the kid. How? How was that possible? Even *Rachel* knew about demons in La Sombra? What? Was I the only person in town who hadn't known? Wasn't I the Demon Duster? Wasn't I the *one* person who *should* have known?

The theme music to *The Twilight Zone* was repeating over and over in my head. Maybe Jasmine was right. I did watch too much TV. But you try to avoid watching *The Twilight Zone* marathon every year.

"I shouldn't have said anything. I just assumed that Thea told you." Rachel groaned, grabbed her mocha and took a long gulp. "God, I'm an idiot."

The roaring was back, and Rachel sounded like she'd been put on mute. "What do you mean, you assumed Thea told me?"

"Well, Thea told Zoe about Jett, and Zoe told me, so I thought for sure Thea had told you about that spiny-headed little creep being a demon. The kid tells you *everything*, Cass. Have I ever mentioned before just how jealous I am of that? I have to pry information out of Zoe with bribes and sheer trickery."

A cloud slipped across the sun, and a chill crawled up my spine. Okay, that was a little too horror movie-ish, but the truth was, I had a creepy feeling. I mean, I should have been feeling better, knowing I could talk to Rachel about this demon stuff. But in a weird way, it just separated us more. I mean, she knew they existed and, that was nice and all. But she didn't know that her best friend was the one assigned to *kill* 'em.

I wanted to tell her and almost did, but changed my mind at the last minute. If Judge Jenks, aka Head Demon, was trying to use Thea against me, what was to say he wouldn't use Rachel? Or Zoe? Or anyone else I cared about?

Damn it. Why did my life have to keep getting more complicated? Wasn't there a saturation point? Wouldn't I reach a level where the universe would say, *Okay, Cassidy, that's enough for one incarnation. You've done all you could. Live long and prosper.* I gave my head a mental slap. More TV quotes. From Vulcans, no less.

"Cass?" Rachel snapped her fingers in front of my face, and I jolted, startled. "Jeeezzz," she said, her eyes glittering with worry and frown lines working on her forehead. (The Botox must have been wearing off.) "You were, like, in outer space or something. I really messed this up, didn't I? You didn't know about Jett, or the whole demon thing at all, did you? Oh crap. I'm a rotten human being. I should be shot."

As much as I was enjoying Rachel's guilt-a-palooza, I couldn't let her think my zoning out was all her fault. (Although Rachel's skill with guilt was second only to my own.)

"You didn't mess anything up. I knew about Jett," I said, taking a drink of my now-lukewarm latte. "Thea told me." Of course I didn't add that she'd only told me because I'd squirted the little creep with my magic elixir.

Which made me a little pissy, now that I thought about it. Why *hadn't* Thea told me about Jett being a demon? We told each other everything. Always had. Thea and me. The Two Musketeers.

Was one little half demon really enough to split up the team?

I shook my head and put that question aside for later. At the moment, I wanted to find out what else Rachel knew. "Anyway, I sort of knew about the whole demon population before she told me about Jett."

"Really?" Rachel slumped dramatically and caught my attention. "Thank God." She slapped one hand to her cream silk blouse and grinned. "I mean it. Thank God. I swear, it's been so hard to not talk to you about this."

"Why didn't you?"

She tilted her head to one side and smirked. "I could ask you the same thing. Jeez, how'd you find out?"

"I asked you first," I reminded her, since I had no idea how to answer the question.

"I found out at work."

"The dental office?"

"Why sound so surprised?" she asked. "Do I work somewhere else?"

"Fine, fine. So, why didn't you tell me?"

"Simon." Rachel stuck her tongue out at her presently not-there husband. "He's so fussy about patient confidentiality."

There was that roaring again.

"Patients?"

"Well, yeah," Rachel said, her brows coming together over puzzled eyes. The Botox definitely was wearing off. "How else would we know demons are out there? Honest to God, Cass. You should see the *teeth* on some of those things. If it were up

to me, we wouldn't be working on any of 'em. But, you know Simon. He takes one look at a set of fangs and starts picturing a ski cabin in Park City."

I laughed. It surprised the hell out of me, but it all seemed so stupid and silly. Rachel knew about demons because her husband was drilling their fangs? "Simon is dentist to the demons?"

"Uh-huh," Rachel nodded and checked her watch. "He's really popular. Gets all kinds of referrals. Yeesh. I swear, there was a guy in the office last week—he was like a *shark*. He had *three* rows of teeth! Took Sandy nearly two hours to do a cleaning. I swear he ate one of the angelfish out of the aquarium while he was waiting. He says he didn't, but it's not like the fish could jump out of the tank and escape, right?"

Forget *The Twilight Zone*. We were skipping straight into *The Outer Limits*. (The old ones they play on Nick at Nite—not the newer ones. They were just stupid.)

Yep. *Way* too much television.

"God, honey, I've gotta go," Rachel said suddenly, grabbing her bag and her coffee before standing up. "Mrs. Eisen should be about finished, and we've got people lined up out the wazoo today. Not to mention a couple of *them*. If I'm not there to kick people around, they'll pick on Simon until he makes like the dentist in *Marathon Man*."

"There's an image." I shivered. Except for Simon, I hated *all* dentists. I'd rather face another red-eyed, pissed-off demon than sit in a chair—trapped—while somebody shoved a drill in my mouth. And, no, it wasn't, as Thea once suggested, because I couldn't talk while the dentist was working on me.

"You okay?" Rachel asked, staring. "You don't look so good. Are you *sure* you knew about the demon thing? I mean, I don't want to get Thea in trouble or anything, and if you go home and yell at her, she'll yell at Zoe, and then Zoe will shut me out and I'll never know anything again."

Strangely enough, I followed all of that. "No, I'm fine. Really. I won't let Thea know you're a weak link."

“Good. Thanks.” She swung her purse strap up onto her shoulder, took a step, then stopped. “So, are you going to be seeing Devlin again?”

“No way to avoid it. I am working for him now.” I knew that wasn’t what she meant, but what the hell. I can stall with the best of them.

“Right, because I was really worried about you not getting to clean his club. Are you going out with him again?”

Good question. He hadn’t actually asked me out again, so there was no way of knowing. Still, I flashed back to that brief moment with him in the hallway at Magic Nights and the feel of his hands on my breasts. Then in the next second I remembered demon sperm and fragile latex and had to talk myself down from a stroke.

“I don’t know,” I finally said and picked up my own camel brown fabric Fossil bag and stood up. “But I’ll keep you posted.”



I hit the grocery store next, since we were seriously out of all of life’s staples. You know, cookies, salad in a bag, Pop Tarts and milk to drink with ’em, of course. I actually *can* cook, and do a couple of times a week, but Thea and I both prefer just dumping salad dressing into one of those bags of lettuce and veggies and calling it dinner.

Before I went into the supermarket, though, I took the time to refill my little purse-sized spritzer from the big bottle of liquid I kept in the car. Once inside, I grabbed a cart and wandered up and down aisles, filling my cart with whatever looked interesting. There was something almost soothing about the Muzak spilling out of speakers and the ready availability of food.

Right about then, I needed some soothing. There was too much to think about. Everything I’d ever believed about my sleepy little hometown was just not true. How had I managed to live thirty-two years without ever noticing a *demon*, for heaven’s sake?

“What’re you thinking?”

A deep, really familiar voice spoke up from behind me, and I slowly turned to face Devlin, holding one of those little baskets with the wire handles.

“You shop?” I asked, glancing into his basket to notice a bottle of chardonnay, some crackers and a wheel of cheese. Somebody was going to be having a good time, and I seriously wished it was going to be me.

“And eat. And dance. And . . . other things,” he said, giving me one of those all-too-rare smiles.

Oh man, I knew all about those “other things” he did. Wasn’t I still having dreams about that one night with him every time I closed my eyes? Good thing I had the cart to hold on to. The man wielded some *serious* sexual power. At least over me.

Despite the excitement jittering through me, that annoying voice in the back of my mind started whispering again. *He’s a demon*, it said. *He’s admitted to working for Jenks. The guy who crashed into your car works for him. Sure, he’s sexy as hell, but is he after your body? Or your death?*

Stupid inner voice. I so didn’t want to listen to it. I wanted to believe that Devlin was trying to help me. Mostly because protecting Thea would be a hell of a lot easier if I had some help I could trust.

Yes, I could trust Logan. But he had laughed at me when I told him about the demon situation, so he probably wasn’t the go-to guy when it came to fighting one of them.

Boy, I needed a vacation from my life.

“You look worried.” He stepped up closer, and I could actually *feel* heat rippling off of him in waves so thick I could hardly breathe. It was like he was sucking all the air out of the store.

“I am,” I said and locked my knees, just so they wouldn’t give out and leave me sprawled in the bread aisle. Grocery-shopping women have no mercy. They’d have rolled their carts

right over my prone body in an attempt to get the chore of food shopping over with as soon as possible.

"About what?" he asked and lifted one hand to smooth my hair back behind my ear. Did he deliberately stroke my earlobe with a long sweep of his finger? Did he *know* what he was doing to me? Of course he knew. It was probably some weird-ass demon power—any minute now I'd start walking like Frankenstein's monster and follow him anywhere.

His lips quirked. "You're thinking about something else now. Me?"

I gulped and took a quick look around. Down the aisle from us, two women were grappling over the last box of Cheerios, but that wouldn't last long. Turning my gaze back to him, I said, "I was thinking about you and the judge. And how I can protect Thea."

Okay, so I lied.

Big deal.

At least it would get the subject changed to one I could deal with a little easier.

"I told you I would help you with that."

"Uh-huh," I said, scooting my cart over as the two women walked past us, both of them giving Devlin looks hot enough to set him on fire. "When're you going to start that helping?"

He blew out a breath. "I told you it wouldn't be easy. The judge has a lot of friends—human and demon."

"Yes, but I'm the Demon Duster, right?" I whispered, not sure who might be in the soup aisle right behind me. "I don't see why I can't just go to his courtroom and take him out."

"You'd never get close enough," Devlin assured me, moving in so that I could practically feel the buttons on his blue shirt pressing into my chest. "As crazy as it sounds, I don't want anything happening to you."

Oh boy. I really wanted to believe that.

"Trust me," I said on a deep breath, lifting my gaze to his. "I'll get close enough. Nobody threatens my daughter."

"I know." Devlin lifted one hand again and cupped the back of my neck. His fingers were warm and strong, and damned if I didn't remember exactly how talented they were. How he could make me feel, just by skimming those fingers over my skin with a featherlight touch.

Damn it.

As his hand tightened on my neck, I remembered something else. Devlin was a demon. He had plenty of strength, and if he wanted to, he could snap my neck like a twig right here and walk away. There was no one who could stop him. No one to catch him. If he killed me, there wouldn't be another Duster until Thea came of age, and then *she* would have to deal with him—or someone just like him.

"You're a strong woman, Cassidy," he said, his voice little more than a hush. "And I find that really sexy."

"Lucky me?" Oh God. I moved away from his touch and he let me go. I just was so not prepared for him or for anyone like him. As much as I had enjoyed that night with him, and as much as I daydreamed about trying out a few of those rooms he had at the club, I had to keep reminding myself that he was a demon. Technically, the enemy.

"You look worried again."

"Shouldn't I be?"

"About the judge?" he asked. "Yes." Then, as if reading my mind, he said quietly, "About me, no."

I wished it were that easy. But it just wasn't. I didn't really know Devlin. His demon power could be lying convincingly for all I knew. And Thea's safety was at stake here. I couldn't afford to trust the wrong person—er, demon.

"I want to believe you," I admitted.

He bent down, and I opened my eyes to look directly into his. His black eyes swam with emotions—some I could read; some I couldn't—and maybe that was just as well. I was having enough trouble sorting out *my* emotions at the moment.

"I already told you, Cass. I really like you. And I'd like to see you again."

Oh boy.

I swallowed hard and fought down my urge to shout, *Yes! Great idea! When? Where?* Every single one of my hormones was jumping up and down and demanding I pay attention. But . . . “I can’t think about that. About *us*, until Thea’s safe.”

“I understand,” he said grimly, his gorgeous face turning to stone. Even his eyes shone with a glassy, stoic glimmer. “We’ll take care of it. Together.”

“When?” I asked when he let his hand drop away and took a step back.

“Soon,” he promised. “It’ll have to be soon. He’s losing patience with you, Cass.”

Another woman clattered past, pushing a cart with a broken wheel, making a *whacketa whacketa* kind of sound. Enough to shatter whatever was left of the sensuous moment I’d been having. Maybe that was for the best.

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve been getting rid of too many demons lately,” he said. “The last couple of days, you and your squirt bottle have been pissing off the demons, and word’s getting around that La Sombra’s not the safest place to be anymore.”

I should have known that all of my squirting the last couple of days was going to make some waves. But, hey, I was just doing my job.

“There are a lot of demons unhappy about it. They want the judge to take care of you. He’s promised to do just that.”

“How’s he going to do it?” I asked, and silently congratulated myself on the steadiness of my voice. I mean, it’s not every day somebody tells you that there’s a hit out on you.

These weren’t your ordinary, everyday mafia-type hit men we were talking about here. These were *demons*. Instantly, I flashed back to Rachel telling me about Shark Boy and his three rows of teeth.

Yikes.

I so didn’t want to run into that guy.

"Not sure yet," Devlin admitted, and he looked irritated by that fact. "I've been asking around, but there aren't many willing to talk about the judge. Don't want to risk pissing him off. Like I said, he's been the big man in La Sombra for decades."

Which meant I was in deep shit.

A brand new Demon Duster going up against a guy who'd been alive for who knew how long? With all kinds of connections? Not to mention *lots* of minions willing to fight me to protect him.

Even as I thought that, I knew it didn't matter. Nothing mattered but making sure Thea was safe. If that meant I had to go up against the demon big shot, then so be it.

"Will he come after me himself?" I asked, tightening my hands around the handle of the cart, just for something to hold on to.

"Probably not. He doesn't usually go out in the field himself. Doesn't have to," Devlin said and took my elbow to get me walking. We strolled down the bread and cereal aisle and looked like nothing more than a couple, shopping together.

"He's got enough demons and humans on his payroll. He never has to get his own hands dirty."

"*Humans?*" I repeated and stopped dead, staring up at him like he was suddenly speaking Russian. I could almost feel my eyeballs skittering in my head. I'm sure I looked lovely. "He has *humans* on his payroll? *People* work for a demon? On purpose?"

He dropped his basket into my cart, then grabbed me and held me close, murmuring in my ear. "Keep your voice down, Cassidy. The people in this town who work for the judge wouldn't be happy to hear you know about them."

My own voice was muffled against his chest, and it was all I could do to concentrate on the problem at hand rather than focus on the feel of his broad, hard chest pressed up against me. "Fine. I'll be quiet. But who are these people? And why would they do it?"

"Why else?" he muttered, his breath brushing my ear, his words dropping like stones into the pit of my stomach. "Money. Power. Greed for more of both."

"And you don't want that?" I had to ask. Yeah, I know. Pretty stupid. Like he'd admit anything to me if he *was* working for the judge against me.

He pulled his head back, dropped a quick, hard kiss on my mouth, then smiled. "I've already got money and power. I don't need to kiss the judge's ass to get them."

I winced. "Thanks for the visual."

He grinned. "Damned if I don't enjoy the hell out of you, Cass."

"Glad somebody's having a good time," I said and reluctantly stepped out of his arms.

He steered me on again, walking right beside me. "Once we get rid of the threat to Thea," he said, his voice dark and filled with promise, "we'll both have a good time."

Woo-hoo!

"And until then?"

"Until then," he said, lifting his own basket out of my cart, "we'll do what we have to do. We'll keep Thea safe, and we'll find a way to take out the judge. I've got a line on his lair."

"His lair? He has a lair?" I shook my head and stopped in front of the dairy case. Lifting out a jug of milk, I set it in the cart and shot him a look.

Devlin shrugged and nodded. "Down on the beach. One of the caves out near the point. The judge is old-fashioned. He doesn't do meetings at his house. He prefers taking care of business from his lair."

An old-fashioned demon.

Swell.

Devlin left me in the frozen food section, and I took that as a sign. I grabbed a few pints of Coney Island Waffle Cone ice cream; then, still shaken, I headed for the cookie aisle.

The last of my frozen Samoas were gone, and I was going to need some cookie therapy. Fast. I grabbed some Double Stuf

Oreos and a bag of pink and white iced circus animals, then turned to snatch a giant bottle of chocolate syrup off the shelf behind me.

My stomach was jumping, and my head pounded hard with every beat of my heart. It felt like I'd been scared and/or worried now for days. Probably because I had been. Thea's sweet face floated to the front of my mind, and fear washed over me like an incoming tide.

"Excuse me."

The pissy voice came from right behind me. I glanced over my shoulder at a woman in running clothes, her long, black hair in a ponytail, pushing an empty cart. Ah. A woman who *started* her shopping in the cookie aisle. I liked her style. "Sorry."

She glared at me as I yanked my cart out of the way. As she came up alongside me, I'm not really sure why I gave her a good squirt. Instinct? Now, wouldn't that be nice? But most likely, it was because of the surly look she gave me.

Anyway, I shot her dead in the forehead, and she hissed as smoke curled around her head like a lazy Olympic wreath. Then she swept out one hand, trying to gouge my eyes out with her French-manicured nails.

"Whoa!" I leaped back, hit the shelf behind me and knocked down what felt like an avalanche of chocolate, strawberry and caramel syrups, not to mention boxes and boxes and, oh, *boxes* of ice cream cones.

The clattering noise almost covered up the woman's voice saying, "*He* can't help you. No one can."

He who? Devlin? She had seen Devlin and me talking? Great. Demon spies in the grocery store. Well, screw needing Devlin's help to dusting *this* bitch.

I shoved my cart into her stomach so hard she doubled over the edge and landed with her face plastered up against my Oreos. Before she could get up and try at my eyes again, I held her head down with one hand and went for her heart

through her back. Turns out, it works just as well from that angle.

The bitch exploded into a cloud of dust, and before I left the cookie aisle, I kicked cones and syrup out of my way and grabbed an extra bag of Oreos as backup.

I was thinking *lots* of cookie therapy.

Chapter Seventeen



I took Sugar with me on “patrol.” Yes, yes, I can hear you all laughing, and let me assure you, I didn’t have her along for protection. Oh, she’s big enough to scare anyone who doesn’t know her—until she hides behind me and cowers. Nope, the reason I took her was simple. She was getting fat.

Now, I don’t mind a chubby dog, but Sugar was quickly moving on to hippo size, and you’ve got to draw the line somewhere. Since we *both* hated exercise in any form, I decided that if I had to suffer, so did she.

Sugar did not approve of the plan.

“Look,” I said, dragging on her leash as she planted her big butt and stared out at me through her hair with a pout, “we’re not walking to LA, okay? Just once around the block.”

The street was pretty quiet, considering it was only about six thirty. Yes, I know that taking a walk around the block wasn’t what Jasmine had had in mind when she told me to go out and patrol the city. But you know what? I’d about had it with demons by then. I figured I’d do my part to make my one little corner of La Sombra safe and leave the rest of the city to its own devices until I was sure Thea wasn’t in any danger.

No way was I going to look far and wide for demons while leaving my kid alone in a house that already had had demon rocks thrown in and demon mail dropped through our slot.

The houses I passed were familiar and should have made me feel safe. Unfortunately, since I knew that there were demons hidden all over town, that feeling of safety was long gone. Still, once I got Sugar moving (with the promise of a cookie—and,

yes, I know that was defeating the whole purpose of the walk), I almost enjoyed the cool evening air and the quiet broken only by the sound of Sugar's reluctant claws on the sidewalk. Almost.

My grip on the spray bottle of Demon Dew tightened reflexively while Sugar stopped to sniff at a nice-looking patch of grass in front of the house on the corner. Streetlights shone down in puddles of pale yellow. Didn't really need the light yet, but at twilight, they all clicked on, making the neighborhood look cozy, friendly.

I took a breath and let it out slowly, telling myself to relax even as my gaze swept the street and the sidewalks. The old trees created wide, green arches over the street, and at night, the shadows born beneath them suddenly looked a lot less friendly than they did during the day.

Sugar covered every square inch of the grass with her nose, looking for just the right spot to pee. I waited, getting a little antsy with every passing second. Not sure why. Jasmine would probably say it was my Duster instincts kicking in, but I was pretty sure my instincts were still buried deeply. So what was it? What was making the back of my neck itch and my heart start jittering in my chest?

Finally, Sugar squatted to get down to business. At the same time, one of the shadows under the trees separated itself and stepped out into street, away from the puddles of light. I sucked in a gulp of air, held it and swallowed hard.

It wasn't even completely dark yet. A demon was going to attack me? Right out here? Then I gave myself a metaphorical kick in the ass. Why wouldn't they attack now? Hadn't I just dusted some chick in the cookie aisle?

"I've been waiting." A deep voice, somehow as dark and scary as the demon itself.

Sugar whimpered, and I was right there with her.

Just a block from my house, and a demon was going to challenge me. My finger slipped to the trigger on the demon spray and caressed it. "How long?"

He took a step and stopped, surprised by my question. "Uh . . ."

"Never mind," I said and dropped Sugar's leash. "Stay," I ordered quietly, though I didn't really expect her to obey me. She never had before.

This time, though, the dog must have sensed something was up. She dropped to the ground, buried her face between her paws and did everything she could to disappear.

Meanwhile, I stepped off the curb and walked into the street, passing through light into shadow as I went. God, it felt like every Western showdown I'd ever seen in old movies. All we needed was the background music and a clock pointing to high noon.

Except this was real. It was night. And I was more scared than I wanted my opponent to know. Hell, I told myself, I was getting better at this. I'd dusted a few demons and clearly, my rep was growing in Demon-land. So what did I have to worry about, anyway?

Oh yeah.

Dying.

He walked slowly to the middle of the street, taking a few steps closer as he did. "You killed a friend of mine, Duster."

"Really?" I asked, walking closer myself, hoping to get within squirting range. "Who?"

"Thomas. You killed him in his own house." He walked through the soft yellow glow of lamplight. He looked like a banker. You know the type: middle-aged spread, balding. Not exactly who you expected to jump out at you from the shadows.

But I felt a little better knowing he wasn't young and vigorous.

"Ah." I nodded. So Thomas had been my "customer" in that old Victorian. "You know, he tried to kill me first."

"Yeah," the demon said, "and I'm about to finish that job for him."

Almost, I thought. Another step or two and I'd be able to

squirt him dead in the eye. Right about then he coiled into himself and sprang at me.

Pretty good moves for an older guy.

I jumped back and he hit the street, face-first. Sugar barked. I squirted the back of the guy's head and smiled when smoke curled into the slight breeze. My smile faded fast when the demon rolled over, swung his legs up and back over his head, then jumped to his feet.

It was a move I'd seen Buffy make dozens of times. Let me tell you, it's way scarier in person.

As soon as he straightened up, I punched him dead in the face and then followed up the hit with another long squirt. He howled, Sugar joined him, and I pulled my right leg back and kicked it out, up and into his groin. I figured if he looked like a human, then his nuts were probably just as fragile as any other male's.

They were. He shrieked, went to one knee and sent me a look that should have fried me on the spot. But remember, I've got a teenager. He didn't have a dirty look to show me that I hadn't already seen, delivered by an expert.

He swiped one hand out in an attempt to grab me. "Whoa! Look out!" Sugar barked again, a little late, but I give her points for trying to warn me. I jumped over him, stomped one foot into the middle of his back to hold him in place, then reached through his spine and grabbed his heart.

Yanking it free, I took a deep breath, watched him pop into a cloud of dust, then brushed my palms together to get rid of what was left of Thomas' friend.

My own heart was pounding, but there was a sense of satisfaction, too. I'd done it. I'd been scared, but I'd done it. Every time I dusted somebody, it got a little easier.

Was that a good thing? Or a bad thing?



"I brought chicken."

"Why am I not surprised to see you?"

Logan grinned, slipped past me and walked into the living

room, carrying a bucket of chicken that smelled like fried heaven.

"Because you were born under a lucky star and have always wanted me back in your life?" He set the tub down onto the table, plopped a white bag, no doubt filled with mashed potatoes and extra gravy, beside it and gave Sugar the death glare.

The dog whimpered and plopped down on her too-wide butt.

I closed the door and leaned back against it for a minute. I'd had quite a day already, with Rachel's tales of demon dental problems and then, just a couple hours ago, Devlin telling me about the judge's *lair*, just before having to brush dead demon off my Oreos. And let's not forget the "patrolling" with Sugar. God. I'd already shampooed three times trying to get the last of the demon dust out of my hair. That was just too gross to think about for long.

Anyway, I was pooped. I really wasn't in the mood to chitchat.

On the other hand, there was fried chicken on the table, and I never had been one to turn down food.

"Yeah," I said wryly, looking at him. "Born under a lucky star. That must be it."

"Thea home?" he asked.

"She will be soon. She's with Zoe."

"Good." He grinned and lifted one eyebrow. That action still did some funny things to my insides, but I managed to get a grip. "Then we get some time alone."

"Why do we need to be alone?"

"Because I'm still winning you over. Stunning you with my charm. Seducing you with kisses and . . ."

Mmm. Logan kisses. Mental eye roll. *Get a grip, Cass. For God's sake, try for a grip.*

"How's that working for you?" I wasn't so much interested in his charm as in the scent of that chicken and how it was making my stomach growl appreciatively. I walked toward him, following the aroma that was filling the room.

“Too early to tell.”

I moved past him, and he didn't make a move to get out of the way, so our bodies sort of brushed together. Instant sizzle. What can I say? Let's face it. It had been so long since my hormones had had anything to do but whimper and complain, these little rushes were a good time. And let's not forget to give Logan his due. He really *was* a great kisser. Plus, his Mr. Happy always leaped to attention whenever he got near me. Hard not to be flattered.

Besides, Logan always did look great in a faded pair of jeans. The man has a terrific butt and really long legs.

Then again, it could just have been the whole slut-puppy issue rearing its ugly head.

He stopped me with a hand on my arm, and when I looked up at him, he gave me one of those lopsided smiles that men must practice in front of mirrors. You know, the ones that say, *Hey, don't worry about me. I'm harmless.*

He'd used that same smile sixteen years ago, and look where that had gotten me.

“You look nice,” he said, stroking one hand up and down my arm.

Mmmm. Goose bumps. Dry mouth. Hoo-hah hallelujah dance. Honestly, I was really just pitiful. “Logan . . .”

He let me go and lifted both hands in mock surrender. “Just an observation.”

And a big fat lie. I knew just how I looked. Barefoot, jeans and an old T-shirt from a Tim McGraw concert that Thea and I had gone to the year before. Only I'd washed the thing so much, the shirt read IM GR W.

Yeah, I was just a vision of loveliness.

I scooted past him, opened up the bucket and got down to the only reason Logan was still in my living room. I inhaled deeply. “This smells great.”

“I remembered how much you like it.”

I shot him a look filled with mocking disbelief.

“Okay,” he said with a shrug. “I took a shot. Who doesn't like KFC?”

I grabbed a napkin then a chicken leg, and sat down on the floor, leaning back against the couch. "Good call." I took a bite, sighed a little as I chewed, and after I swallowed, I said, "But Logan, you've got to cut this out."

"What? Bringing you food?"

I paused and thought about that for a long minute. "Hmm."

He smiled.

Laughing, I shrugged. "Okay, I admit it, bringing me food is really a smooth plan."

"Thank you."

"But it's not going to change anything between us."

He sat down on the floor next to me and frowned when I handed Sugar a piece of my chicken. What did I care if he didn't like it? My dog loved me.

"I get that," he said. "But I want you to know that I'm not going away again." He reached for me and gave my hand a quick squeeze, then let me go as if he knew I wouldn't be happy if he sat there trying to hold my hand like we were still together. "Since I'm home to stay, I want us to get to know each other. To . . . connect again."

I couldn't help smiling. It sounded like he'd been reading some self-help books. You know the kind: *How to Get That Old Girlfriend Back in Ten Easy Lessons*. That was just so unlike Logan.

He was more the caveman type. *See girl. Me want. Me take*. Which, I've got to say, was usually a pretty big turn-on. I don't know about all the other women out there, but I was pretty sick and tired of all the whiny, emotional men wandering around. I didn't want to hear about their "feelings." I didn't want to see their "feminine" side.

Hell, I wanted to be the one having PMS in a relationship.

"Connect, huh?" I grinned at him.

"A little too far?" he asked with a shrug. "I thought so too. Felt stupid saying it."

"If it feels stupid, it probably is," I said, and felt very Zen-like.

"The point is, I want to see you," Logan said, his blue eyes fixed on mine, his fingers trailing up and down my arm as if to remind me just how well my body responded to his. "And not just as Thea's mom."

Dum de dum dum *dum*. Treacherous ground here. I mean, I was still attracted to Logan, but wouldn't starting something up with him now feel like going backward, not forward? And then there was the whole complication of Thea.

He was staring at me through those beautiful blue eyes, and all I could think was how truly tempting Logan Miller could be. Why hadn't he gotten fat? Or bald? He was waiting for an answer.

"Trust me," I said. "I know what you want."

"And?"

"And, I don't know." *Coward*, my brain screamed.

"I'm not the kid I was back then." Logan pushed himself to his feet and walked into the kitchen, familiar enough to help himself to plates and silverware. When he came back, he set everything on the table and took his seat beside me again. "I've changed. Grown up. I wasn't happy in LA. Wasn't happy in my marriage."

"Poor Spiffy."

His mouth twitched, but he let it go. "Maybe I've finally realized *who* and what it is I've always wanted."

Okay, had to admit, this kind of talk really does something for me. I just never get tired of hearing a man admit he was wrong. Like I said before, whiny men don't do a thing for me. But a man who knows how to apologize is worth his weight in moisturizer. Besides, having a man who looked like Logan interested in you could give your ego a real boost.

Still . . . "I've changed, too, Logan. I'm not looking to be rescued by a white knight. There's nothing to rescue me *from*." Well, except for the whole demon thing, which he didn't even believe. "I've got a great kid, a nice house, a business I'm proud of. All in all, I'm pretty happy with the way things are."

Like I said before, except for the whole demon situation,

but I'd already tried to tell him about that, and he'd laughed at me. So not going there again.

He nodded and helped himself to a breast. He always was a boob man. "Just because things are good, doesn't mean they couldn't be better."

"And you could make it better?" I plopped mashed potatoes onto my plate and drowned them in gravy. Beside me, Sugar whimpered, but she'd just have to deal. The potatoes were *mine*.

"I could try."

"I don't need you to."

"I didn't say that," he reminded me. "Maybe it's not about you. Maybe it's about what I need to do."

I snorted. "You've *got* to quit reading whatever it is you're reading."

"Hey," he said, laughing, "it got you talking to me. Can't be all bad."

He had me there, but I didn't want him to know it.

Logan took a bite of chicken and reached for the television remote. "Mind if I check the score on the game?"

Typical. I wasn't even sure which sport season it was. But I had fried chicken and mashed potatoes, so I was feeling generous. "Sure, go ahead."

He turned on the TV just in time to hear the local news anchor winding up his report on the missing-person cases stacking up in La Sombra. Inwardly wincing a little, I heard the reporter mention the names of some of the demons I'd dispatched over the last couple of days. The police had found no connection between a homeless man, a florist and a certain biology teacher. I could have told them there was most definitely a connection, but I wasn't looking for a private suite at Hotel Nutso.

Deliberately, I lowered my head, keeping my gaze on my plate and my mind on eating. It didn't work.

Game forgotten, Logan punched the TV off and turned to look at me, his features looking like they were carved out of marble.

“That’s the other reason I came here tonight, Cassie. Some weird shit is happening in town, and I want you and Thea to be extra careful.”

I tried to laugh off the warning. “Please. We’re fine. There’s nothing to worry about.”

He waved a hand at the TV. “Weren’t you listening? People are coming up missing around here. Some woman who worked at the manicure shop—”

Must have been the evil blonde with the ugly dress and good nails.

“Mr. Mondaca—remember him? Biology teacher at the high school?”

“Yeah, I do—” And I remembered a sense of satisfaction as he littered his own desk after I was finished with him.

“Today, some bag boy at the market went out to collect carts, and nobody saw him again.”

I took a bite of chicken. I’d left Devlin in the grocery store, gone to my car and squirted that kid as he took my cart from me. The nasty little junior demon had sprung at me, dropping his human “disguise” in favor of dagger nails and sharp teeth. I was so surprised, I’d dropped my *Fossil* bag onto the dirty parking lot and would probably never get the gunk off it.

The bag-boy demon had shouted something like “You bitch”—not very original, but he was under stress. Still, he’d made me ruin one of my favorite purses, which totally pissed me off. I admit, I actually enjoyed slapping my hand through his chest, and I even remember sticking out my tongue as his ashes drifted to the ground.

Truthfully, I hadn’t given the kid another thought until just this minute. Now Logan was watching me, waiting for a reaction, and I didn’t know which one to give him. So I went for vague.

“Really?”

“Yes, really,” he snapped, cop face slamming down onto his features. “Jesus, Cassie, if you’re not going to read the papers, at least watch the news once in a while.”

"Logan, there's nothing to worry about."

"You're wrong."

"This isn't LA."

"No, right now it feels *worse*. There's something . . ." He shook his head as if trying to search for the right words to describe what he was feeling.

I felt bad for him, but, hey, I'd already tried to explain the demon situation, and he hadn't wanted to hear it. No way was I going to get laughed at again. Crappy day, remember? So let him work this one out on his own.

After a long minute or two, his breath left him in a rush. "All I'm saying is, you and Thea should be careful."

"We always are," I assured him.

Thankfully, Thea came bursting into the living room in the next second, ending the conversation.

"Hi, Mom," she called, apparently now officially speaking to me again. Then she spotted Logan, and her face froze up a little. "Hi, um . . ."

Sugar lumbered to her feet, reluctantly left the food and went to greet Thea with the traditional nose to the crotch.

"Logan," he said to Thea, picking up on her indecision quickly. "If you can't call me Dad, and that's okay, you could call me Logan."

Thea shot me a look, and when I smiled, she looked back at her father and nodded. "Okay. Hi, Logan."

"Hungry?" he asked.

Honestly, the man was very good. He already knew that the way to the Burke women's hearts was through the stomachs.

"Yeah," she said and came right over, grabbing up a chicken leg and a napkin before flopping down onto the couch and folding her legs up under her.

In the lamplight, her black hair shone like night, and her eyes, so much like Logan's, pinned us both with curiosity. "So, what's going on?"

"Dinner," I said bluntly.

Logan grinned. "I just wanted to come and see you guys."

"You weren't doing anything . . . gross, were you?"

I waved my chicken wing at her, then shot a look at Logan that said, *See? She wouldn't be happy about us hooking up, so just keep your tiger caged.*

"Okay," she said, reaching out one hand to pat Sugar. Since there was no chicken in that hand, the dog whimpered. "Mom going on dates with Mr. Delicious is one thing, but . . ." She shuddered.

"Mr. Delicious?" I asked and pretended I didn't hear Logan muttering something exceptionally unflattering under his breath.

"Yeah, Devlin Cole is sooooo cool," Thea said on a sigh that I'm sure irritated her father on many levels—which made me smile. I never claimed to be a good person.

"Zoe and I were talking about what we're gonna wear on Saturday," Thea said, grabbing my attention.

"Saturday?" Logan looked at me.

I was blank for a second or two, and then it hit me. Damn, I'd been so busy the last couple of weeks, I'd forgotten all about the annual "end of summer" block party. "Is that this weekend?"

"Well, *yeah*," Thea said. "Last weekend in September, just like always."

"What?" Logan asked.

Thea explained, so I just kept eating, listening with only half an ear as I thought about all the opportunities for demons to do some party crashing. This just wasn't fair. Our street's annual block party to celebrate the end of summer was a rite of passage. A time when we shut down the street to cars, pulled tables out onto the road and piled them high with all kinds of food.

We always attached strings of lights from the trees, and the Marchetti boys provided the music by setting out their incredibly loud speakers. (It was the only day of the year when no one complained about them.) There was dancing and drinking and laughing and a generally great time, giving summer a send-off.

Now I wouldn't be able to enjoy it, because I'd be wandering around with my damn squirt bottle. Or keeping an eye out for thugs sent from Judge Jenks. Damn it, I couldn't wait much longer to take care of this threat on Thea. I couldn't protect her every day—especially when I didn't know *whom* I was protecting her from.

"Sounds like fun," Logan said, shifting his gaze from Thea to me. "Is everybody invited?"

I glanced at my darling daughter, and she was giving me that "Please, can I have a puppy?" look that had, years ago, brought Sugar into our lives. Now I knew she was wanting me to invite her father to the party.

Somehow, Thea managed to look grown-up and like a little girl all at the same time. No way could I disappoint her, even if I'd rather not have Logan hanging around—just in case I had to dust some demons. But hell. If she wanted him there, why not?

"Sure, Logan," I said, forcing enthusiasm I didn't really feel into my voice. "Party starts around five on Saturday."

He reached over and tugged at my hair. "Sounds great."



I spent the next couple of days doing ordinary things. You know, cleaning houses, dusting demons, the usual. But the more I tried to just lead my life, the more the threat of the judge kept bothering me. I mean, I'm the Duster, right? That should have gotten me some respect from the demons. A little fear wouldn't have been out of line.

But so far . . . nada.

The judge wasn't worried about me.

So maybe it was time to give him a little something to think about.

After I finished the last of my houses for the day, I went home and changed into some black slacks and a dark green, long-sleeved shirt. Then I put on some makeup—when heading out to make a threat to some hotshot demon, it's best to go

in with all the ammo you've got—and stepped into my black half boots. I threw my wallet and keys into my small Coach bag, then gave myself a good squirt with the demon spray. If Devlin didn't like the smell of it, I was guessing the judge wouldn't be real fond of it, either.

Like I said. Ammo.

Then I hopped into my VW Bug (on which I no longer owed a million and one easy payments) and drove to downtown La Sombra. I passed the bakery (silent applause for me, because I really could have used a cinnamon roll at the moment) and hardly noticed the last of the lingering tourists wandering the coast highway.

On my left, the ocean was gray and roiling with whitecaps. Seagulls dipped and spun in the wind that tossed the fronds of the palm trees into a wild dance. On my right, shops sat crowded together, doors open, tempting the last of the summer dollars into their stores.

But my mind was focused on the courthouse just up ahead. Inside, Judge Jenks would be presiding over the bench he'd ruled for years. He would be handing down sentences (no doubt still stripping innocent teenagers of their licenses) and in general enjoying being in charge of so many lives.

After today, he wouldn't be able to get any shits and giggles out of torturing me. I was going to call him out. Let him know that he didn't worry me. That if he didn't back off my daughter, I was going to send him into the giant dust-ball universe.

I am Duster.

Hear me roar.

Chapter Eighteen



The courthouse was pink.

Not *pink* pink, but that soft pastel color that blossoms on old adobe buildings after years of weathering in the sun. More than a hundred years old, it was built in the old California style, looking more like one of the missions than a courthouse.

Heavily carved double doors opened onto a cool, brick red tiled floor that glistened in the late-afternoon sunshine streaming in through leaded-glass windows. Silence hung in the air, almost daring you to speak above a whisper.

It sort of felt like that depressing pall usually found in funeral homes. *Great, Cassidy. Think about funerals. Way to go on the positive-thinking front.*

Only a handful of people were in the hall. In the late afternoon, most of the court's business was finished, and these few lingerers weren't going to stop me. I'm stubborn, in case you hadn't noticed. Once I finally made up my mind on something, I pretty much stuck with it until it was done. I was *going* to talk to the judge. Get him to call his dogs off of Thea, even if it meant ripping out the old fart's heart right there in the courthouse.

The doors to the three courtrooms were closed, and small brass plaques announced which judge was on the bench in which room.

But I knew where Judge Jenks was without looking. He'd been lording it over everyone from the same bench for years. The room had his personality (or lack thereof) stamped on it. No other judge would be able to work in that courtroom without holding an exorcism.

My boot heels sounded overly loud, and a man in a black suit looked up as I passed. I nodded and kept walking. Didn't know who he was. Didn't care.

Nervous?

Oh yeah.

But I wasn't going to let the judge know it. Grabbing hold of one of the doors leading into the courtroom, I gave it a yank and stepped inside. Here, too, there were only a few people. I glanced at them all quickly, trying to decide without benefit of my squirt bottle who might be a demon.

I checked out both attorneys seated at tables opposite each other, and wondered. Lawyers, demons—probably not much of a difference. Then I let my gaze linger for a long minute on the defendant. I'd been at that table once, and it wasn't a comfortable spot to land in. The guy sitting there now, though, looked as comfy as though he were sitting on his mom's couch.

Clearly, he'd been there before. It would have taken me a week to read all the tattoos covering his body in a variety of colors. His eyes were flat and black, and I was pretty sure he, at least, was a demon. Reminding myself to keep an eye on him, I checked out the four other people in the courtroom. There were two bailiffs: One, short and thick, looked like a tree stump standing beside the defendant. The other was tall and gray haired, positioned before the bench like a statue, hands clasped in front of him.

Demons? Who knew?

Then there was the stenographer. Red hair, blue eyes and a great black suit with white pinstripes. She looked too tidy to be a demon, but she worked for Jenks, which meant she was a woman of *unbelievable* patience, or . . .

Finally, I looked at the judge and jolted. He was staring at me. His blue eyes looked pale in his George Hamilton-tanned face. His thick white hair was swept back from his forehead, and his mouth was flattened into a grim, disapproving line.

Reaching out blindly, I grabbed the back of the closest bench seat and slid down into it. My hands were suddenly

shaking, so I grabbed hold of my Coach bag and tightened my grip. The attorneys were talking, but the judge's gaze never left me.

It felt like he was trying to see *inside* me, which was a really creepy feeling. Devlin hadn't said anything about the judge having superpowers, though, so I was guessing that his usual creep factor seemed magnified since I knew what he really was.

He smiled then. A brief curl of his lips that sent an icy jolt straight down my spine. Evil seemed to ripple off him in thick waves that swept out from the bench in ever-widening circles.

Fear tasted like old pennies. Sort of coppery.

My heart jolted in my chest, but I kept my gaze locked with the judge's. I wasn't going to let the old bastard know I was scared.

The room felt shadowy, despite the weak spill of sunlight filtering through the window. A chill crawled through me, and the small hairs at the back of my neck stood straight up.

Maybe this hadn't been such a good idea after all.

"Gentlemen," the judge announced, his voice sonorous, his gaze still locked on me. "It seems we will not be reaching an accord this afternoon."

"Your honor—" the defense attorney protested.

The prosecutor didn't bother. He was already gathering up his papers and stacking them in his leather briefcase. Obviously, he'd been up in front of this judge before.

"Mr. Denison," the judge interrupted, "we'll reconvene tomorrow morning at nine." The judge picked up his gavel and smacked it hard on the round wooden disk sitting on his desk.

While Tree Stump dragged the defendant out of the room in shackles (which I was glad to see), the attorneys packed up their gear and started out of the room. They walked past me, chatting like old pals, and in just a minute or two, I was alone in the courtroom with the judge, his stenographer and the tall bailiff.

The quiet stretched on and on until I was pretty sure I was

going to snap with the strain of not being the first one to talk. My dad always said that “he who speaks first loses power.” So what the hell: Let the judge get the ball rolling.

“That’s all, Margaret,” he said finally, and my breath wheezed out in relief as the stenographer picked up her stuff and nodded at the judge. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

“Yes, your honor,” she said like a good little zombie and walked down the aisle and out the door, sparing me only a quick look.

So, now it was just the judge, his trained ape and me.

“The Duster,” Judge Jenks said with a nod so small and so brief it was almost as if it hadn’t happened at all. Since he’d announced me, I had to figure at least this bailiff was a demon. Sliding him a quick look, I saw his jaw tense and his fingers slide to the hilt of his billy club.

“I wondered when you might come to see me.”

His voice was scratchy now, as if he wasn’t worried anymore about sounding like a distinguished judge—or human. I glanced at the bailiff again. He looked seriously big and mean. Substantially more so than he had just a minute or two ago. Demon? Or stupid human?

Only one way to find out for sure. I stood up and stepped into the aisle. “Hi, Judge,” I said, keeping my grip tight on the Coach. Poor bag would probably never be the same. “I got your message. You know, the one tied to a rock? Oh, and the other one shoved through my mail slot.”

His mouth smiled, but nothing else on his face did. I got another chill. As a Demon Duster, I was pretty new at all this. As a mom, though, I was ready to do battle with the devil himself to protect Thea. So I forced a smile and pushed through the little swinging gate to stand in front of the bench. Had to tip my head back to look up at him, and I had the feeling he was enjoying that.

“A bit dramatic,” the judge conceded in his nails-on-a-chalkboard voice, spreading his hands out as if in a shrug, “but effective.”

The bailiff took a step closer, and I shot him a sideways look. He was big, but I had my spritzer in my bag and, hey, a hand that could whip through his chest, so I figured I could hold my own. Probably.

Okay, so I was outnumbered. We were still in a courthouse—attached to the police station. There were way too many people around for them to try to kill me. I hoped. For now, anyway. In a weird way, maybe I *was* the one with all the power.

Looking back to the judge, I kept the giant in my peripheral vision while I quietly unzipped my bag and wrapped my fingers around my atomizer of death. Made me feel better just holding it. I'd gone there to force things into the open. To let the judge know I wasn't going to back down and no *way* was he going to lay a single claw on Thea.

"Look," I said, pretty reasonably if I do say so myself, "I'll make you a deal. You leave Thea the hell alone, and I won't dust you."

A second ticked past. And then another. I was just starting to congratulate myself on reaching a truce when the judge started laughing. Not some little amused chuckle, but a flat-out, *you-crack-me-up* roll of laughter that filled the room with an almost-solid darkness.

Okay. I swallowed hard, curled my fingers around my handy-dandy spritzer, then dropped my bag and back-stepped, keeping some distance between me and the bailiff, who was looking as if he'd like to do a little Duster kicking.

I flicked the judge another glance and saw that all traces of laughter were gone from him now. We were going to get down to business.

Why the *hell* hadn't I brought someone along with me? Who was I all of a sudden? Wonder Woman? Uh . . . *no*. I was too new at this to be facing down a guy like the judge, and as every second ticked past, I felt my confidence dribbling away in a slow but steady stream.

"You are becoming too much of a pest, Duster," Jenks said,

folding his hands on his desktop and pinning me with those icy blue eyes. "You're interfering with the flow of my business concerns, and I'm afraid I can't tolerate that." He tipped his head to one side. "I have run this town for more than forty years. And you are becoming a nuisance."

I couldn't seem to look away, and that really pissed me off. Maybe that's just what I needed. A little blast of pure mad to get under my skin enough to wipe out the nerves still scraping me raw. Then the color of his eyes shifted, swirling with different shades of darkness, shadows danced, flames burned, and just for a second, I was pretty sure they went blank and empty.

Way creepy.

But enough to snap me out of my "hypnotized rabbit in front of a cobra" mood.

"Well," I said, trying for bravado and hoping to hell my voice didn't crack. "Any little thing I can do."

"You can't stop me," he said, as if I hadn't spoken. "This is my city. And it will continue to be so long after you're gone."

"What're you? *King*?" I laughed, and he didn't like that. Well, yay for my side. "You're just another demon with delusions of grandeur."

His eyes narrowed. "You're a fool. Do you think you're the first to try to end me? You're not." He slapped his palms flat on his desk, and I was pretty sure the windows rattled. "I've survived longer than you can imagine, and I've left the bodies of my enemies strewn behind me like so much trash."

"*Littering*?" Oh God. Have I mentioned that when I'm nervous I tend to say the wrong thing at the wrong time? Well, I do.

"This is no joke, Duster. You aren't the first of your kind who's come against me. Your own grandmother tried and failed."

Yikes.

He steeped his fingers and tapped his chin. "I see you're beginning to understand. I should have killed you—along with your mother."

My vision went wavery as shock slammed into me, along with a stabbing pain that seared my soul. "My mother?" I managed to say. "You . . .?"

"She wasn't as reasonable as your grandmother was in her time. She actually had the effrontery to *threaten* me."

Just like I was doing now.

He stood up behind the bench, and his black robes made him look like a damn vulture. Just what he was. "Your grandmother was wise enough to choose to leave me alone in order to protect her child." He smiled again. "Irony that her child then grew up and refused to back off herself. One wonders why she didn't put you first, doesn't one?"

I was quietly pissed. And sad. And depressed. And furious. Well, mostly furious.

"Your mother swore to kill me when she came into her powers." He shrugged and watched my eyes as he smiled again. "So I made sure she didn't. And I'm still here. Still ruling the underground with no one to challenge me."

God. Too much information. Why had no one told me? Jasmine? Gram? Devlin? This monster had destroyed my family once, and now he wanted to do it again. Pain washed through me, over me, and I knew I would be mourning my mom all over again. But I couldn't grieve now.

My mom was gone, and there was no bringing her back. Thea, though, was alive. I meant to keep her that way. I took a breath, settled myself and sneered at the judge.

"Nothing to say, Duster?" he asked, clearly amused. "No barbs? No quips?"

"No," I said, keeping Too Tall Bailiff in my line of sight. "Just this: You stay the hell away from my daughter."

"Or you'll do what, exactly?"

I watched as the bailiff walked slowly, trying to come up on my left. Not easy to keep an eye on both the judge and his muscle, so I knew I had to either start dusting or get the hell outta Dodge. Fast. Still talking, I turned in a small halfcircle, following the path of the bailiff. He seemed to be getting even

bigger. I didn't think that was just my fear talking, either. He was actually *swelling*, like some huge demon toad—which, if such a thing existed, I soooooooo didn't want to know about.

I tightened my grip on my little spritzer. Not that it would stop the guy cold, but I knew if he was a demon, it would at least hurt him like hell, which could buy me a couple extra seconds.

"Listen," I said, glancing at the judge over my shoulder to make sure he was still standing behind the bench. He was. Apparently, I wasn't a big enough threat to get him to leave his precious throne. "I didn't come here for trouble. I don't give a rat's ass if you run the underground around here." Mental apologies to my mom and all the other women in my family. "Until a couple weeks ago, I didn't even know you guys *existed*. So I'll leave you alone to do your business, whatever the hell it is."

The judge snorted his disdain.

The bailiff peeled his lips back in what he probably thought was an evil smile, but it reminded me of a chimp asking for a banana.

"Why did you come here, then, Duster? Into my territory without invitation?"

"I *told* you," I said. "To protect Thea."

The bailiff stepped closer, and I was suddenly tired of the whole damn situation. I owed the judge a lot of grief. I'd been willing to talk this out. Press me too far, though, and I don't bend. I snap. Most times, it ain't pretty.

"Fool," the judge spat.

Tall, Gray and Swollen made his move. He came at me, arms outstretched, eyes narrowed. I yelped, pumped the spritzer and hit him square in the eye.

Instantly, smoke rose up from his head, swirling around his eyes as he *howled*. The judge was still behind me, shouting now at his smoking minion to finish me off. To give Swollen Boy his due, he probably wanted to kill me more than he'd ever wanted anything else in his life. But he couldn't see me.

His eyes were streaming, a gray haze of smoke poured from his eye sockets, and he kept pawing at them, trying to clear his vision. Even blind, he made a try for me. Thank God I'd worn pants. In a skirt, I might have been toast. As it was, I scrambled onto the prosecutor's table and leaped off the other side. One of my boot heels snapped off, and I lurched heavily to one side, nearly toppling over.

But I caught myself just as the still-smoking demon toad charged me again. I picked up the glass pitcher of water and tossed it at him, but all that did was wipe away some of the demon liquid. The smoke was thinner now, and I could see fury glittering in his eyes. He gave me that chimp smile again, and I knew I was in trouble.

From his bench, the judge was watching the show like he was at the circus. All he needed to complete the picture was a bag of popcorn and a cone of cotton candy.

The demon charged a third time, and as he flew at me, I ducked low, crawled under the table and kept going as fast as my hands and knees would take me, straight across the room and under the defense's table. He was right behind me, and I felt claws grab at my bare ankle. I kicked out of my broken shoe and hit him square in the nose. Small consolation. When I got out from under the table, Toad Boy was waiting for me.

He snarled something in a language that sounded more foreign than anything I'd ever heard, but what do I know about languages? Most times I have trouble with English. He reached for me, the judge shouted "Kill her!", and I ducked under the demon toad's arm, popped up like a jack-in-the-box and smacked my hand to his chest.

He knew what was coming. I saw it on his face. And in that split second between life and *poof*, he made one last try, scraping his clawed hands across my chest.

Pain slapped at me, but now I was pissed. My Coach bag was ruined, my shoes were broken and one of my favorite blouses was hanging in tatters, announcing the fact that I'd worn my oldest bra.

Was *nothing* sacred?

"That's it, brother," I said and yanked out his heart.

He dissolved right in front of me, and while I was brushing my palms together to get rid of the last of him, I turned and looked up at the judge.

"Another mistake, Duster," he said, voice tight and scratchy, eyes laced with fury that seemed to bubble and froth.

"Seemed like the thing to do at the time," I told him, picked up the hanging pieces of fabric that had once been my blouse and held them clutched to me with one hand. "You're the one who started that. I didn't come here to dust anybody. I wanted to talk."

Even knowing he had had my mother killed, I would have dealt with him to save Thea. Now I realized that the only way my daughter would be safe was if the judge was dead.

Worked for me.

"I don't talk to your kind," he said.

"My *kind*?" I asked. "You mean Dusters?"

"I mean women."

Oh, he really was a prick. For the good of women everywhere, this guy was going to have to go.

Behind me, the courtroom door was pushed open with such force, it slammed into the wall behind it. I whirled around, expecting a demon cavalry to come charging to the judge's rescue.

Devlin stood in the open doorway, features tight, hands fisted at his sides.

Well, it was a demon.

The question was, whose cavalry was he?

Mine?

Or the judge's?

"Devlin," Jenks said, pleased to see him. "Get rid of her."

Devlin's gaze burned into mine. "Right away."

Well, I had my answer.



An hour later, I was at Devlin's place, wearing one of his black silk shirts (and a couple of bandages on the scrapes the demon gave me—hopefully he wasn't carrying some hideous disfiguring demon disease), curling my bare toes into the rug beneath my feet as he paced like a wild man.

"Are you completely insane?" he shouted. "What the hell were you thinking going up against the judge alone?"

"It felt like the right thing to do," I said, my gaze following him on his crazed stalking path. "Besides," I pointed out in my own defense, "I was holding my own. I took down the demon toad, and I could have gotten the judge, too, if you hadn't interrupted."

I hadn't been sure whose side he was on until we left the courthouse. He'd had a grip on my upper arm, and he'd pretty much *dragged* me to my car in the parking lot. I'd been prepared, still holding on to my demon spray, waiting for my shot to kill him if it came to that.

But as soon as we were out of sight of the courthouse, he'd pulled me in close to him, wrapped his arms around me and kissed me so hard and so long, my head was still sort of spinning. In a good way. He'd brought me here, to the private apartment over the club, and for the last half hour, he hadn't stopped yelling at me long enough to kiss me again.

Which was a damn shame from my perspective. I could really have used a good kiss. I'm a firm believer in the reward system. Survive the judge; get a kiss.

"Why were you there, anyway?" I asked, suddenly suspicious, despite that first great kiss, the hope for more and the fact that he'd loaned me a shirt.

He stopped short, glared at me and stabbed his fingers through his hair. "One of the bailiffs called me."

"Tree Stump," I said, nodding, "must have called when he took the prisoner out."

"He said the judge was in danger from the Duster."

"So you went trotting right over to protect the boss?" I asked, and didn't bother to hide the disgust in my voice.

"I went over there because *you* were in danger." He crossed the room to me, grabbed my shoulders and gave me a shake that sent my eyeballs rattling in my skull. "I couldn't believe it when he said you were there, in the courtroom. Damn it, Cass, the judge is an *ancient* demon. He has strength you wouldn't believe. And minions ready to die—or kill for him. You're lucky you got out of there in one piece. You can't just walk onto his turf and start giving orders."

I grabbed hold of his shirt front and tried to do a little shaking of my own, but it was like trying to rattle Mount Everest. "I didn't give him orders," I argued. "I offered him a deal. I told him I'd back off and leave him to do whatever the hell he wants to do if he leaves Thea alone."

"He doesn't think he needs your permission, Cass," Devlin muttered, his voice thick with repressed anger. *Well, join the club.* "Going there was like waving a red flag at him. Don't you get that?"

I let go of his shirt and narrowed my eyes. "I don't care. Don't you get that? I'll do whatever I have to do to protect my kid."

"You're dangerous."

"You don't know the half of it." I stepped back, looked into his eyes so I could see his reaction and asked, "I found out something else while I was there. Something I didn't know before the judge told me."

He waited.

"Did you know the judge had my mother killed?"

A heartbeat passed, then two. He shook his head slowly. "No," he said. "I didn't."

I believed him. He looked as surprised by the knowledge as I had felt when I first heard it. That was something, anyway. "Well, he did. Apparently, my grandmother backed off to keep Mom safe, but my mom wasn't willing to play the game."

"Does that tell you something?" he asked, his voice soft and low and filled with shadowy emotions that felt as raw as what I was feeling myself.

"Yeah," I said. "It tells me as long as he's alive, Thea's at risk."

"True."

Hmm. I had thought he'd argue with me. Try to convince me to play the judge's game the way my grandmother had. I wasn't trying to make a call on how Gram had handled things in her time, either. I figured as mothers, we all made the choices we had to. She'd chosen to pull back. My mom had chosen to stand and fight, though she'd never gotten the chance.

I guess I was more like my mother than I had ever thought.

"I told you I'd help." His grip loosened a little. "You should have told me you were going in there."

I shook my head. "Couldn't. You would have tried to stop me."

"Damn straight." One of his hands slid down my back and cupped my butt.

"I had to face him, Devlin. Had to look that old bastard in the eye and tell him he couldn't have Thea. I appreciate the offer of help, but she's *my* kid."

"I know," he said and squeezed my behind.

"Not fair distracting me," I told him, but moved against his hand like a cat wanting to be stroked.

"You need distracting," he said. "I don't want you dead."

"Me, neither," I said, stifling a moan as he undid the hook and zipper of my slacks and slipped one hand down across my abdomen and lower still, until he was cupping me, rubbing his palm across skin that felt suddenly as sensitized as raw nerves. "Big no to dying."

"You're making me crazy, Cassidy," he said, his gaze moving over my face while his hand did some amazing things to my body.

"It's a gift," I said, then hissed in a breath. How the heck did I go from pissed off and defensive to all gooey and needy in a couple of lousy seconds?

How could I feel the same way about two different guys?

Logan could make me feel just like this. All twisted up with wants and needs I shouldn't have had. And now was so not the time to try to figure it all out.

"I need to touch you."

"So touch," I said, despite the groan rippling up my throat.

He did. For several long, completely fabulous seconds. He really had amazingly talented fingers.

"I knew you were going to be trouble the first time I saw you." He nibbled on my throat. His tongue drew a line of heat up to my earlobe.

"Hah! And you think I was prepared for Demon Sexcapades?"

He smiled against me. I felt it. "I think we need to stop talking," he said and took my mouth with his.

Good point.

His mouth covered mine, and his tongue tangled with mine in a frenzied dance of anticipation. My nerves were taut, my body humming, and when I parted my legs for him, he pushed one finger into me, sliding it in and out of my slick heat, making me move into him, fighting for balance, fighting for control, and losing. I rode the crest of sensation, always seeking more, always finding it.

He stroked me deeply, intimately, and I groaned into his mouth, silently demanding more. Yet even as I eagerly raced toward the climax hanging just out of reach, a part of me wondered if the face I was currently lip-locked with was Devlin's real face. I mean, I'd seen that guy on patrol who had dropped his human-looking appearance and become the demon within in a blink of the eye.

What if Devlin could do the same thing? What if he was hideously horned or fanged or bright blue or something?

Then his fingers drove higher, and I forgot about thinking. As long as he kept taking me on this ride, I didn't want to wonder what image he might be hiding.

So exactly what kind of Duster did that make me? One

touch from my mysterious demon lover and I was ready to throw the job to the wind in the hopes of another orgasm?

Oh yeah.

“Next time you take on the judge,” he muttered, tearing his mouth from mine and lifting his head to look me square in the eye, “we do it together.”

“Right,” I said, wondering what the hell we were talking about. “Together.”

Then his tongue tangled with mine again, and his fingers pushed me over the edge of need and down that slippery slope to oblivion.

Chapter Nineteen



I wasn't going to think about what happened with me and Devlin two days ago. Okay, fine. I was thinking about it a lot. Though a part of me still worried that maybe he was playing both sides of the demon/human fence, another part of me was delighted to let that worry go and shout woo-hoo! I've accepted that I have slut-puppy issues, and I've moved on. So should you.

All I'm going to say about that afternoon is, a double layer of condoms didn't slow Devlin down any. I only hoped his sperm weren't as energetic as he was.

Anyway, I'd made my challenge to the judge, and despite the fact that the demon had practically laughed me out of his courtroom, I felt I'd made my point. After all, he was down one bailiff, wasn't he?

Score one for the Duster. Right about now, I figured Judge Jenks was feeling pretty pissy. No more than me. The more I thought about what the bastard had already taken from me, the more determined I was to stand up to him and make him pay.

He'd had my mother killed. Growing up without a mom was hard. My dad had done his best, but he couldn't do the first-bra thing, or the period talk—Rachel's mom had stepped in and included me when she'd taken Rachel for her first training bra and box of tampons. God help us both, Dad had skipped the sex talk altogether. (Thinking back, maybe that's why he'd been so understanding when I told him about being pregnant with Thea. He'd probably half blamed himself.)

Of course, the real person to blame was Judge Jenks. Killing my mother had cheated us both out of the very relationship

Thea and I shared now. I wasn't going to let that miserable demon get close to my baby girl. He'd taken all he was going to take from me.

On that cheerful thought, I had another glass of cold white wine and let my gaze sweep the crowded street. The party was in full swing. The multicolored strands of tiny Christmas lights were twinkling in the trees and hanging across the street like high-tech banners. Four tables were set up in the middle of the street, literally groaning under the mountain of food provided by all of the neighbors.

Needless to say, I was in Heaven.

U2 pounded from the stereo, and the kids made fun of any parents brave enough to try dancing in front of an audience. Between the wine and the brownies, though, I was content to hang on the fringes and watch everyone else.

Especially Thea and Jett.

I picked up a brownie, took a big bite and chewed while I watched the neighborhood party from the sidelines. With chocolate in hand and a wine chaser, the world was looking pretty good.

"I do not understand how you can eat as much as you do without weighing eight hundred pounds."

Trust Jasmine to toss the first wet blanket.

I looked down at her. Man, it was good to be taller than *somebody*. "Metabolism," I said around a second bite. "My dad said I got it from my mom. Must be all those Duster powers, huh?"

Jasmine gave one of those "Dear God, why did the Duster have to be you?" sighs and rolled her eyes. "Have you made a sweep of the surroundings?" she demanded.

"A sweep?" I took a sip of wine and choked down the brownie.

A sharp wind came up out of nowhere and was actually strong enough to ruffle a couple of Jasmine's gray curls. Amazing. I would have bet money it was plastic hair. "I know everyone here, Jasmine. There are no demons at this party."

"There's me."

Ah yes. I kept forgetting that. "Yeah," I said around another bite, "but you're on *my* side." At least, I was pretty sure she was. I thought about that for a minute. What the hell? I was sure.

"And there is another."

I followed her pointy finger straight to where my darling daughter was smiling up at Spike-and-piercings Boy. "Okay, sure. There's one. But he's only half demon, and even you said that he was good."

"I said *some* demons are good."

"MY POINT," I said, loudly enough to be heard over a classic Stones song just starting up on the stereo, "is that this is my day off."

"Dusters don't get days off," she said, sniffing. "Especially when they've been foolish enough to beard the lion in his den."

"Oh, for chrissakes," I whined. Yes, *whined*. I'd thought Devlin was pissed off about my little meeting with the judge. But he was nothing compared with Jasmine's fury when she found out about it. "There's no more room on the Guilt Train, so just pull the hell out of the station."

"I beg your pardon?"

Now it was my turn to sigh, so I let her have a big one. "I only did what my mom would have done, didn't I?"

At the mention of my mother, Jasmine's shoulders actually *slumped* for the first time since I'd known her. Shaking her head, she said softly, "Cassidy, you must believe me. We never knew. Your grandmother and I. We had no idea your mother's death was anything more than a tragic accident."

"I do believe you, so chill," I said and gave her an awkward pat on the back.

Naturally, when I got home from Devlin's, Jasmine was there, feeding Sugar a cookie, the one way to make sure my dog loved her forever. I had faced her with the judge's boast, and just the look on her face had told me all I needed to know.

She hadn't been aware of this at all. Everyone had been in the dark about this, and I wasn't looking forward to Gram's next visit when I would have to tell her the whole truth. Hopefully, though, by then I would have done away with Jenks, and we could all go spit on his grave together. Nothing like a family outing.

"Hell, Jasmine, you should be glad I faced him down. Isn't that why you've been training me?"

Her bony shoulders snapped straight, and she moved quickly to stand right in front of me. Hands clasped at her waist so tightly her knuckles were white, she stared up into my eyes and gave me the same speech she'd been giving for the last two days. "Your training has just begun. You are in no way able or qualified to confront a demon like Judge Jenks. Perhaps in a year. Or two."

"Two years?" I shook my head, bit into the brownie again and said, "Thea's being threatened *now*. No way am I going to wait."

"You were fortunate to get out of there alive."

Even more fortunate after I got back to Devlin's place, but that wasn't the point here.

"Yeah, yeah. I've already heard the speech. Look, I did what I had to do, and you know, Jasmine, you're just going to have to lighten up."

"Excuse me?"

I glanced at her, then shifted my gaze back to where Rachel and Simon were boogying to "Brown Sugar." Now there was a great old Stones hit. Smiling, I said, "I don't take orders well. Never have. I'm willing to train and rip out the hearts of demons—never thought I'd say that, much less *do* it—but don't try to stop me from protecting my daughter."

Her mouth worked like she was chewing on words she really didn't want escaping. Fine by me. She wanted to chew words; I wanted another brownie. I stepped past her, heading for the table, when her voice stopped me.

"You're right."

I whirled around so fast I sloshed some of my wine over the rim of the glass. Oops, needed a refill. Eyes wide, mouth hanging open like a moron, I gaped at her for a beat or two. "I'm *what*?"

"Right."

"I'm right. Wow." I grinned, slugged down the rest of my wine and toasted her with my empty glass. "God, I love hearing that. About what am I so right?"

"Your first duty is to your child," Jasmine conceded. "Thea is vulnerable, it's true. But should you wish to confront the judge again, I would ask that you take me with you."

"Ask? Wow. Didn't know you knew how." Hmm. Devlin had said the same thing. Going to be quite the party. "I will," I said, leaning over the table to grab another brownie. "Thanks. That means a lot."

"Good." Then she shook her head and muttered, "I will do a sweep of the area. Please. Don't allow me to interrupt. Continue to eat."

So I did.

"That woman gives me the creeps," Rachel said as she came up behind me. "Even if she is your Gram's friend."

"She's okay," I said, though it felt strange to be defending Jasmine. Still, I was beginning to think that maybe we were going to actually find a good working relationship. As long as, you know, she stopped giving me orders every ten seconds.

"Whatever," Rachel muttered, dismissing Jasmine. "On a different subject . . . I swear I don't know why you don't make Thea stop hanging with that kid."

"Because," I said, now focusing my gaze on my daughter and the little demon looking at her like I looked at a brownie, "the minute I do that, she'll want him even more."

Jett had one arm around Thea's shoulders, and it was all I could do to not go pluck it off and toss it in a trash can. I don't know about mothers of boys, but those of us with daughters are on hyperalert at all times. Of course, those skintight jeans

and cute little crop tops she wore weren't helping me out any. Did she really have to be so pretty?

"True. God, kids'll kill you." Rachel took a drink of her own wine, then waved the glass at a crowd of men standing in a circle laughing and talking. "Logan looks like he's having a good time."

"Uh-huh." I tore my gaze reluctantly from Thea and Jett to focus on Thea's dad for a minute. Logan had been Mr. Charm all evening. And trust me when I say Logan charming is something that is hard to stand against. For the last hour, he'd been ingratiating himself with the whole damn neighborhood. He'd joked around with Thea, glared at Jett and practically *ignored* me. What was up with that? Not that I cared or anything.

"Simon likes him."

"Simon likes everybody."

"I know. Irritating, isn't it?" Rachel laughed and nudged my shoulder. "That's why he and I make such a good team. He's a people person, and I'm a *kill* the people person. But enough about me—why don't you tell me why you invited Logan if you didn't want him here?"

I flicked her a quick glance. "Who says I don't want him here?"

"Please. What am I, blind?"

"Certainly not mute."

"Oh, that's a good one." Rachel took a sip of wine. "You've been avoiding him since he got here."

"*He's* the one doing the avoiding," I pointed out, although, fine, I'd done a little Logan ditching from time to time during the course of the party. Couldn't help it. I just didn't know how I felt about him. The old magic was there, for sure. Logan got anywhere near me, and I could feel the buzz of a chemical attraction shooting through me. But I was already involved with somebody else. I couldn't start up something with Logan at the same time. My brain might explode.

"Still haven't answered my question. Why's he here?"

I sighed and shifted my gaze from Logan, laughing with my

neighbors, to Thea, smiling up at Jett. Hiding a shudder, I said, "Thea wanted him here."

While I watched, the Fergusons' cat chased Sugar across our yard and into the street. The big dog's eyes were wide and horrified as she charged up to Thea for protection from the evil calico, knocking Thea into Jett. I laughed until Demon Boy's arms wrapped around my little girl and held on tight.

"Killer dog," Rachel said, chuckling, then added, "Okay, now I understand why Logan's here. Still, I really wish you would have told me you were inviting him."

The calico cat stalked off into the crowd, chin high, tail wagging in triumph as he left Sugar a quaking mass of nerves. "Why?"

"Well, let's just say things might get a little interesting."

The tone of her voice caught my attention, and I turned to look at her. "Rachel, what did you do?"

She flipped her hair behind her shoulder, grinned and took another gulp of wine. Then her eyes went wide, and she pointed past me, still smiling. "That," she said. "I did that."

I turned around and felt my jaw drop. "Devlin?" I hissed out the word. "You invited *Devlin* and didn't tell me?"

Rachel shrugged. "Figured it was my only shot at meeting him."

"You are dead. Totally dead."

"Completely dead, then."

"Oh yeah, as in, Ding Dong."

"*Very* nice," Rachel murmured, then held out her right hand and smiled as Devlin walked up to us. "Hi. You're Devlin Cole. I'm Rachel Cohen."

His hand enveloped hers, and I was pretty sure I heard her sigh.

"Thank you for inviting me," he said, then shifted his gaze to mine. "Hello, Cass."

"Devlin. Rachel didn't tell me you were coming." Otherwise I might have been wearing something other than a sweat-shirt and jeans. And, gee, I might have even worn shoes. No.

Wait. Probably not. But I sure as hell would have put on some makeup. Oh, best friend or not, she was going to have to pay for this.

"It sounded like fun," he said, his gaze catching mine before sweeping over the crowd.

He looked . . . different. He was wearing jeans—black, of course—and an open-collared, charcoal gray knit shirt. It was the first time I'd seen him out of a suit—well, except for seeing him naked.

"Oh," Rachel assured him, winking at me, "we're lots of fun. Speaking of fun, think I'll go make Simon dance with me again. Zoe could use a good laugh. Nice meeting you," she called out as she walked away.

"Nice to see you." He dipped his head and kissed the corner of my mouth.

"You missed."

He grinned at me. Man, that man has some serious smile power.

"I'll do better next time."

He sure had the *last* time. God, I could feel my skin humming at the memory.

"You keep looking at me like that, we're going to have to leave the party."

Oh boy.

"Okay, then," I said, looking away from him fast. Hey, I was up for another ride on the orgasm train, but I wasn't finished eating yet. Not to mention Thea and Logan were here, and how would I explain disappearing to *them*? I took a step away, just in case my hormones decided to take charge again. "So, what do you think of our party?"

He shoved both hands into his pockets and looked around. "I like it."

"It's a tradition. Started when I was a kid, and every time a new family moves onto the street, they just get swept into it. Like a big good-bye to summer, you know?" I didn't wait for him to speak, just kept talking, picking up speed as I went. Hell,

I could hear myself going and couldn't think of a way to shut myself up. "The Marchetti boys take care of the music. I swear it's the only night of the year they're not under one of their cars. The Butlers always donate the lights because Bob is just a *nut* over decorating for Christmas; you should see the place then—I swear he owns half the Edison company or something, because his bill must be tremendous in December. And then there's the food. You can see there's, like, a truckful or something, and there's dancing, if you can stand to humiliate yourself in front of the teenagers—"

"Cassidy?"

I sucked in air. "What?"

"Do I make you nervous?"

On so many levels I couldn't even count them all. But no way did I want to give any man that much information. "No, *I* make me nervous around you."

He reached out and ran the tips of his fingers along the side of my breast, and I actually *felt* both of my nipples jump to attention.

"I like knowing that."

I smiled wryly. "You would."

The music pounded out around us, and snatches of conversation rose and fell like the tide. Wind rattled the branches of the trees and tossed Devlin's hair across his forehead, giving him a dangerous, pirate look. Ah, fantasies, alive and well in my head.

"Are you going to dance with me?" Devlin asked.

"In front of these kids? Are you nuts?"

"The Duster is scared of teenagers?"

I laughed. "Everyone with a brain is afraid of teenagers. Where've you been?"

"Cassie."

Damn it. My fault. I should have been paying attention, but truth to tell, I was so busy looking at Devlin, I'd forgotten all about Logan. I turned around. "Hi, Logan. Having fun?"

"I was," he said, his eyes narrowed, his mouth grim as he

looked Devlin up and down as if Devlin were standing in a lineup. "Who's your friend?"

He knew damn well who Devlin was.

"Devlin Cole." He held out one hand toward Logan, and when they shook, I could see lines of tension erupt on both their faces. Apparently there was some kind of testosterone battle going on. Perfect.

"Logan . . ." Nothing.

"Devlin . . ." Nada.

Both men were glaring at each other as if I weren't there. Their hands were locked in a silent battle of one-upmanship, and the strain was beginning to show. Logan's eyes were all squinty, and Devlin's jaw was locked as tight as his grip. Logan would never quit. I knew that about him. He'd stand there until his hand broke. Devlin—him I didn't know so well, but demon or not, he was *male*, so I figured he'd be just as stupid about this as Logan.

Finally, I stepped up between them, put one hand on each of their chests and gave a hard shove. This time, Duster power came through for me, and both men backed off a few steps, though neither of them acted as though their hands hurt. Idiots.

"Logan, Devlin was invited to this party, just like you were."

"By you?" he demanded.

"Who else?" Devlin challenged before I could say that Rachel, my soon-to-be-dead ex-best friend, was the instigator here.

Logan gave me a look that promised we'd be talking about this later. Gee, can't wait. A moment later, he turned that glare on the man watching him.

"What the hell are you doing hanging around Cassie, anyway?" Logan walked in close, giving Devlin his most imperious cop stare.

"Cassidy and I enjoy each other's company."

"Sure, you do."

"Is that so hard to believe?" I asked, and Logan never even glanced at me. Men are so stupid, really.

"Not that it's any of your business," Devlin said, "but Cassidy and I are working together on a project."

The judge.

Yeah, you could say he was a project.

"Right. The demon thing." Logan snorted. "She told me about it. About you being a 'good' demon. Well, she might have fallen for that shit, but I don't buy it."

"Logan, lower your voice." For God's sake, did I really want all of my neighbors to hear about *demons*? My head was like on a swivel, spinning back and forth, making sure no one was close enough to overhear this bizarre little conversation over the roar of the music. Thankfully, the three of us were far enough away from everyone else that only *I* was forced to keep listening.

"Cassie's going along with your 'I'm a poor, tortured demon' line," Logan said, his gaze sweeping up and down Devlin dismissively, "but I know what you are."

"Logan, you are being a moron," I said.

"Stay out of this, Cassie."

"Yes, Cassidy, stay out of this," Devlin said, and his voice was just a low rumble. Like the far-off sound of a freight train.

"Just what am I, according to you?" Devlin asked.

"A lowlife," Logan said. "The owner of a club that will be shut down for good as soon as we figure out a legal way to do it. You don't have any business hanging around Cassie, and if you think I'm going to stand back and let you move in, you're nuts."

"My place of business is perfectly legal. Neither you nor anyone else in the police department will ever be able to prove otherwise."

Ooh. Bad call. Never challenge Logan. Now he'd be like a bloodhound. Of course, he probably would have been anyway. I shook my head and concentrated on what Devlin was saying.

"As for Cassidy, you had your chance with her sixteen years ago," Devlin said, and his mouth twisted into a half smile. "You were stupid enough to walk away."

Logan took a step closer, the tips of his battered cowboy boots slamming into the toes of Devlin's expensive loafers. "You don't know me."

"Don't care to."

"Cassie and I have history."

"Cassidy and I have *now*."

Oh, wasn't this just fabulous? I looked around, smiling and wincing at the faces that were finally beginning to turn toward us. Swear to God, I was going to have to kill Rachel for this. Or maybe Logan. Or Devlin.

Hell.

Kill 'em all.

"You stay the hell away from Cassie and my daughter." Logan was doing a little snarling all his own. "I don't want you anywhere near them."

"You have no say over Cassidy."

"Yeah? You keep moving in on her, and see how much I have to say."

"Back off," Devlin said tightly.

"Like hell," Logan countered and balled his fists as if getting ready for a first strike.

Hell. How was I supposed to stop this before it got completely out of hand? Shriek at both of them? Punch them both out and walk away from their unconscious bodies? Hmm. Tempting.

"Oh, for God's sake." Rachel came up out of nowhere, clearly ready to make the decision I was still angsty over. She carried a pitcher of iced tea, and as the two morons circled each other like bears, she tossed the contents onto both of them. "This is a party. Behave or go home."

Stunned, both men stared at her in stupefaction. Hell, even I was speechless, and by now you should know how seldom

something like that happens. Both men were dripping, but they weren't snarling and snapping at each other anymore. A lemon slice was stuck in Logan's hair, and a couple of seeds were clinging to the front of Devlin's shirt. Looked like the brewing fight was finished.

I glanced at Rachel, smiling smugly, and had to smile back. "Okay, I won't kill you after all."

"Thanks. You want some cake?"

"Oh yeah."



The rest of the party was pretty uneventful. I managed to have a good time in spite of Logan and Devlin. Neither of the men had left—not wanting to give the other guy the satisfaction, probably. So they wandered the crowd, avoiding each other and slowly drip-drying. I avoided both of them.

But, after a couple of hours of sugar consumption, I was feeling magnanimous. They couldn't help being idiots. It was a chromosome thing. Besides, I think it's a proven fact that testosterone makes idiots out of all males. Apparently, even in the demon world.

Still, I wasn't ready to forgive either one of them, so when it was time for the fireworks, I went looking for Thea, instead of the two men in my life. Spotting Zoe, talking to one of the Marchetti boys (and wouldn't Rachel have a heart attack if *she* saw that), I went up to her and asked, "Hey, sweetie. Seen Thea?"

Zoe turned big brown eyes on me and grinned. "Yeah. She was with Jett. They went over to your house to get Thea a sweatshirt."

"Thanks." I headed off that way at a quick march. Not that I didn't trust Thea alone with that kid. But I sure as hell didn't trust Jett. And I wasn't talking about him being a half demon here, either. I wouldn't trust *any* teenage boy with my daughter, alone in my house. Hey, I was in a better position than most

moms to know *just* what could happen when hormones were left unchaperoned.

I kept looking for Thea in the crowd as I went, but didn't see her anywhere. So, she was probably still at the house. I'd just go in and get her and slap Jett around a little if he needed it.

"Thea!" I walked into the house, called her name and frowned when there was no response. Lights were on, but the rooms were empty. You know that feeling you get in a deserted house? Like it's holding its breath, waiting for its people to come home? That's what my house felt like.

I *knew* Thea wasn't there, but I kept looking. I went from room to room, my steps getting a little faster, my breath hitching a little more in my throat. Where was she? A dark, terrifying feeling started scratching in the pit of my stomach, filling me with dread and an inescapable sense of darkness.

She wasn't at the party.

Wasn't at the house.

Backyard?

I ran out and checked, but there was nothing. Only the dark. More emptiness.

I couldn't breathe. Couldn't feel my own heart beating. I fought desperately to find a flicker of hope. To argue with myself silently. *She's here. Somewhere, she's here. She wouldn't just leave. She loves fireworks. She loves this party. She wouldn't go anywhere without telling me. She's probably just lost in the crowd out there, and you didn't see her.* But she wasn't. I knew she wasn't.

Bolting through the house, I staggered out onto the front porch and swept the crowd again, my gaze seeing every familiar face and reading new meaning into their innocent expressions. Did one of them know where Thea was? Had one of them done something to her? Someone I'd known my whole life? A person I trusted and thought I knew?

Thea.

My brain was racing and my stomach lurched.

"Oh God."

“Cassidy?” Devlin approached at a run. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“Thea.” I looked up at him and knew by the sudden jolt of tension in him that I hadn’t managed to hide the desperation I was feeling. “I can’t find Thea.”

He instantly swept the crowd, as if hoping he could find her where I hadn’t. Then he looked at me and asked, “Does she have a cell phone?”

“Yes,” I muttered, trying to focus my blurry vision on the people in the street. Then his words hit me, and I grabbed for my own cell, tucked in my jeans pocket. Why hadn’t I thought of that myself? Of course. I’ll call her and she’ll answer and tell me she went on a little walk with the Jett demon, and then I’d only have to throttle her and hug her to death and then bitch-slap Jett until I felt better. Good, good, I thought, flipping my phone open and hitting the speed dial. I waited for what felt like forever to hear Thea’s phone ring.

“What’s going on?” Logan came up and stood at the bottom of the steps, looking from me to Devlin and back again.

I shook my head. I couldn’t talk. Could hardly breathe. Had to listen. Had to focus on the ringing phone and telepathically force Thea to answer it.

“Damn it, Cassie,” Logan demanded, shoving past Devlin to come to my side. “What the hell’s going on? You look like you just saw a ghost.” Comprehension dawned on him as his eyes narrowed and his jaw clenched and flexed. “Thea? Is something wrong with Thea? Damn it, answer me.”

“Logan, wait,” I managed to say around the hard knot of terror lodged in my throat.

“We can’t find Thea,” Devlin said.

Logan shot him a glare, then focused on me. “It’s that damn kid. I know it is.” He flashed a quick look around the crowd as if he could spot Jett and set him on fire. Then he looked back at me. “You calling her?”

Impatient, I nodded and held up a hand.

A phone rang.

In the flower bed.

I turned my head slowly to look toward the sound. I stumbled off the porch, stepped into the chrysanthemums and reached down to pick up my daughter's phone.

"It's Thea's," I said, looking at the two men watching me.
"She's gone."

Chapter Twenty



"Gone?" Logan demanded. "What do you mean, gone?"
I glared at him, too furious, too scared to be patient. "How many things can I mean, Logan? She's not here."

He frowned, glanced around at the party still raging in front of us and said, "She could be anywhere out there in that crowd."

"Her phone's here," I pointed out, shaking it at him like a maraca.

"So she didn't take her phone. Doesn't mean anything."

See, this just proved that he hadn't been a parent for long.

"It's a physical impossibility for a teenage girl to leave her phone behind," I muttered and looked at Devlin. His black eyes glittered in the soft glow of the porch light. He knew where Thea was—and looking at his tight, furious features, I suddenly knew, too.

"Oh God." It came out as a whisper as the realization that the judge really had snatched Thea settled into me.

"What?" Logan looked from me to Devlin, saw something he didn't like and charged Devlin like a bull on drugs. Grabbing hold of Devlin's shirt, Logan pushed his face into the other man's and shouted, "Where the hell is my kid?"

"What's happened?"

I looked at Jasmine as she hurried up to us, and for the first time since all this had started, I was grateful to see her. She had the experience I was so going to need. "Thea's gone. Her phone's here, so she didn't leave willingly."

"What the hell does *that* mean?" Logan shouted, still clutching Devlin's shirt like he wanted to drag him down to the station and book him for something.

"For God's sake, let go of him," I snapped and took the steps down to meet Jasmine on the lawn. "You know where she is."

"Yes." Her mouth was grim, her eyes steely. "He's taken her."

"He who?" Logan asked as Devlin brushed away his hold on him.

"A demon." I didn't have time to explain or to listen to Logan laugh me off again. He didn't want to believe, fine. I could give a shit. But if he got in my way, I'd dust *him*.

"Demons again," Logan looked like he wanted to bite through a stick. Well, join the club.

"We can get her back," Jasmine said.

"From the *demon*?" Logan asked, sarcasm so thick it was impossible to miss. "For God's sake, Cassie, she's probably just off with that little thug."

Jett.

"Damn it," I muttered, wishing I'd dusted the little twerp the first time I'd squirted him. "Of course it was Jett. She'd go with him. Wouldn't question it. Damn it, when I find her . . ."

Jasmine walked to Devlin, and the two of them whispered something I couldn't quite catch.

"Are you trying to tell me Thea's been kidnapped?" Logan asked. "By that creep I *warned* you about?"

"Good time for I-told-you-sos, Logan. Thanks."

I dismissed him and turned to Devlin. "Where would he take her?"

"The lair."

"Lair?" Logan repeated, shifting his gaze among the three of us. "Who the hell are we talking about?"

"Judge Jenks," I said tightly and saw the man's icy blue eyes in my memory. Just the thought of that bastard anywhere near my little girl made me want to shove my hand into somebody's chest.

"Jenks?" Logan said on a wild laugh. "*Judge* Jenks? *He's* your 'demon'?"

"Yeah, he is," I said, staring him squarely in the eye and daring him to argue. "He's the one who threatened Thea. And he's the one who's got her now."

"You have totally lost it, Cassie." Logan's mouth was a thin slash of disapproval, and his eyes flashed with disgusted fury. "I can see where that little creep might sweet-talk Thea into going with him somewhere, but there's no way the judge is in this. For chrissakes, he's a *man*, not a demon."

Jasmine faced him. "You don't believe. You don't *have* to," she said. "But if you want to help save your daughter, you will have to do as we say."

"Bullshit, lady," Logan growled, reaching for his own cell phone. "I'm calling this in. I can have a couple of units here inside ten minutes."

"And then what?" I whirled on him, and I know I looked scary, because he backed up a step instinctively. "You don't know what we're dealing with here. You don't *want* to know. The cops can't fix this, Logan. I have to."

"*You?*" He looked from me to Jasmine to Devlin and finally to me again. Grabbing hold of my arm, he pulled me away from the other two and said, "This is no time for your crazy-ass stories about demons, Cassie. If Thea's in trouble—"

"She is—"

"—then we need the cops. I don't buy this demon crap. We need backup and a plan and some manpower."

He was just getting started. I knew he loved Thea. I knew he was a good cop and believed in his job and what he was sworn to do. I also knew that if I let him drag the cops into this, Thea was lost to me, and no way was that going to happen.

"Logan, *listen* to me." I lowered my voice, but my fury, I think, came across loud and clear. "You're just going to have to trust me on this. Either help us, or get the hell outta the way."

A couple of long minutes ticked past with us glaring at each other. Sort of like when I stared Sugar down to convince her who was in charge of the kibble. Finally, Logan caved. I wasn't sure why and I didn't care.

"Fine. We'll do it your way. For now. I'm going with you," Logan said. "I won't call for backup. *Yet*. But only because you're wrong about all of this, and I want to see your face when we find Thea somewhere making out with that little thug. Next time, maybe you'll listen to me. Demons. Jesus, Cassie."

"Whatever." I shoved him away from me, turned to Jasmine and Devlin and said, "Come on. We'll need supplies."



The caves on the beach were pretty during the day. But at night, the cave entrances yawned black and empty—like the gates to Hell. Of course, that could have been my mood.

Moonlight shone down from a clear, star-speckled sky and didn't even make a dent on the darkness waiting in those caves. I should have been scared. God knew, I was worried about Thea, but I wasn't *scared* scared. Couldn't afford to be. Besides, fighting the judge was starting to sound more and more like a good time. *Nobody* hurts my baby girl.

Behind us, the ocean roared. The damn tide was in, which meant the ice-cold water was rushing for our feet and trying to drag us back into the open sea every time it receded.

My sneakers were soaked and so were the hems of my jeans. I was so damn mad I didn't even feel it.

"Okay." I looked at Devlin. "How far back in the cave will they be?"

He shifted a look at the biggest cave, as if he could see through the shadows to where Thea was being held. "It's all the way back. The cave is narrow up front, but it stretches for nearly a hundred yards, and at the back end, it's big enough for him to have a whole cadre of demons with him for protection."

"He's gonna need 'em," I muttered.

"This is all bullshit, Cassie," Logan whispered, still uneasy with not calling the cops. "This guy"—he jerked a nod at Devlin—"is probably in on this. He's trying to get you into the caves with the tide coming in. Christ, we could all get trapped in there."

I took a second I didn't really have and looked up at him. I could see he was worried. Well, join the club. "Logan, Thea's in there, and I'm getting her out. Come or don't come. Just don't get in my way."

"You couldn't stop me," he said.

"The ground rises." Jasmine spoke up for the first time since we left the house. "The cave entrance is low, but the farther in you go, the higher. The water will not reach the back of the cave."

"And you know this *how*?" I asked, pinning her with my world-famous death glare, which bounced off her like bullets off Superman.

She actually *smiled*. Widely. And that might have been the eeriest part of the whole evening. Trust me on this, Jasmine smiling is not something you want to see. The words *curdle milk* sprang to mind. "I've been in La Sombra many times over the years. The judge is not the first demon to claim these caves."

"Right." I nodded, then scowled at her. "Next time, *share*."

Devlin gave me a smile and a supportive hand on my shoulder. Logan was giving me a headache. Still, I could see his point. A few weeks ago, if someone had told me demons were alive and well and living in my hometown, I would have thought they were nuts, too.

"Everybody got their spray bottle?" I asked, not bothering to lower my voice, since the pound of the waves was loud enough to cover the invasion of Normandy.

"Got it." Logan held the spray bottle in his left hand, his .38 caliber in his right. "But the gun seems like a better call."

"Trust me on this," I said. "The window cleaner will work way better."

He snorted.

"The judge will have most of his minions with him, but he'll have two or three sentries posted at different intervals in the cave," Devlin said, already heading toward the mouth of the biggest of the three caves. "I'll go first. They won't try to stop me because the judge still thinks I'm working for him."

"He's not the only one," Logan muttered.

"Whatever," I said, falling into step behind Devlin and sparing only one quick glare at Logan. "But when the spray hits the wind, you hit the dirt."

"Don't worry about me," Devlin said.

I wasn't. He was a big demon. He could take care of himself. Besides, all of my worry was being used up on Thea. I didn't have any worry left for anybody else. They'd have to take a number.

Jasmine was bringing up the rear, and it was good to know she had Logan's back. The man was ready to fight—he just didn't believe what he'd be fighting and that could get ugly.

The walls of the cave and even the ceiling seemed to be pressing down on me. The roar of the ocean was muted, like we were trapped in a giant conch shell—the kind you hold to your ear to listen to the sea. Now that we were inside the cave and close to the demons, I was trying to walk quietly, slowly, though every instinct I had was telling me to knock Devlin on his ass and sprint toward my daughter. Good thing I waited.

A demon stepped out of the shadows to greet Devlin, then noticed *us*. He opened his mouth to shout a warning, and before I could move, Devlin squirted a stream of the liquid into the guy's mouth. That shut him up quick and sent him into a gagging fit. I stepped around Devlin just long enough to do a little dusting.

Logan came up behind me. "What the hell happened? I can hardly see a thing in here."

Devlin shrugged.

I said, "Nothing. Thought I saw something, that's all."

"Well, let's concentrate, huh?" Logan said.

I shot him in the face with my demon spray. It didn't burn him, but it made me feel better.

Then we were moving again, and my legs started to ache. Definitely walking uphill. Damn, I'd been training for two weeks and was still in rotten shape. Good thing I'd had all the brownies. At least I could ride a sugar rush.

The next sentry was taken out just as quickly, and as we went forward, Devlin held one hand up for quiet. My breath was coming in small gasps, and it was just as well. The cave smelled like rotting seaweed. Ew.

"He's just ahead," Devlin whispered, his mouth so close to my ear it felt like he was talking *inside* my head.

I nodded and stepped around him. Staring off down into the shadowy blackness, I noticed the walls of the cave glistening with damp. My heart was pounding so hard it felt like it was going to pop free of my chest. I moved forward carefully and felt Devlin just behind me. I was really hoping that he was just who he said he was. A demon on *my* side. I didn't want to have to fight the judge *and* Devlin.

Up ahead, I noticed the shifting glow of candlelight first. In the incredible blackness of the cave those faint lights shone like the promise of sunshine.

I swallowed hard. Here it was, then. Time to have a dust-off at the OK Corral.

Turning around to face the three people watching me, I said, "I'll go first."

Logan tried to argue, but Jasmine gave him another squirt, and I think she enjoyed it.

"We'll be right behind you," Devlin said.

"Good to know." I started walking, not bothering to hide my presence now. What would have been the point? When I stepped into the heart of the cave, I had to stop for a second, to let my eyes adjust to the sudden rush of light—which felt nearly as bright as midday.

The judge saw me first. In the pale, flickering light, his tan was even darker, making his teeth, as he smiled a welcome, gleam in contrast like an orthodontist's wet dream.

"I've been waiting for you, Duster," he said, opening his arms wide.

There were three more demons/humans/creeps standing in the center of the room, and they looked a lot less happy to see me and my friends. There was a fire burning in a circle of

volcanic beach rock, and the candles I'd noticed were standing in puddles of their own wax on rocky ledges on the wall. There were a couple of chairs and a small table that held a thermos, of all things, but that was about the size of it.

"*This* is your 'lair'?" I asked, shaking my head in disappointment. "Have you considered a decorator?"

"Is this the entertaining banter portion of the evening?" the judge countered, frowning now. "If so, I must say I'm not really interested in trading insults with you. I already have what I wanted."

Thea.

Keeping one eye on the judge, I let my gaze sweep the shadowy edges of the cave, searching for Thea. I didn't see her, but that didn't necessarily mean anything. From where I was standing, I could see at least two more tunnels off the main cave. She could be down one of those dark, slimy places, just waiting for me to find her.

Finally, I turned my gaze back on the judge and let the others behind me worry about his little pals. "Where is she?"

"Close," the judge admitted, walking toward the fire with his hands out, as if seeking warmth. "Very soon, she'll be boarding a plane."

"Thea hates flying."

"Do you think I care?" he asked, smiling again, and his teeth flashed even whiter in the firelight. "She's going to be very popular with my friends in Ohio."

"*Ohio?*" I couldn't keep the dismissive laughter from my voice. Hadn't Devlin said once that he'd left Europe for Cleveland? Apparently there were demons everywhere. "Please. A hotbed of demons in Cleveland?"

"Actually, in a suburb just outside the city. Brecksville. Lovely place. Quite . . . welcoming to my kind."

"Uh-huh. Well, Thea's *not* your kind."

"Variety is the spice of life, after all," he said, his eyes narrowing on me in that cold, hypnotic way he'd used in his courtroom.

A curl of something hot and ugly unwound in the pit of my stomach. He was talking about handing my baby over to his demon pals. I didn't think so. While I started a slow walk around the fire toward him, I said, "Teenage girls aren't the easiest people in the world to control, you know. Especially Thea."

"Your daughter was just a tool to deliver you to me," the judge said softly.

I wondered what Logan was thinking. If he was convinced yet. But I couldn't waste too much time on anything but the judge.

"Once she's gone and you're dead," he said, "I can implement the rest of my plan to enslave humanity—starting with La Sombra. My 'connections' will take me far, and with the Duster gone, there'll be no one to stop me."

"God." I blurted out an amazed laugh. "You sound like Lex Luthor."

He frowned at me. "Your attempts to distract me are wearying." Shooting a look at his demons, he shouted, "End this!"

For a split second there was silence in the cave, and then all hell broke loose. A couple of the demons screamed, and behind me, I heard the solid smack of fists meeting flesh. The scent of oregano rose up and filled the room, and even the judge choked and coughed as the spray of demon mixture filled the air.

I kept my gaze on the judge. He was all that mattered. I had to take him out to get to Thea. I jumped across the fire and felt the heat singe my thighs just before I landed in a crouch in front of him. "You know," I said tightly, letting my anger rise up to fill me, "I was willing to live and let live. I wouldn't have taken you out if you'd just left Thea alone."

Okay, maybe I would have, but the point was, I'd tried to avoid this confrontation. He's the one who had insisted on it.

"You're a fool," he said with a sneer of contempt.

"Yeah?" I countered. "I'm not the one getting my cave invaded by enemies. This is all your own damn fault, you know."

You just *had* to kidnap Thea—so now I’m gonna have to dust you.”

He laughed at me. “I’ve lived too long to be concerned about a bimbo cleaning lady.”

“*Bimbo?*” I screeched the word. “Could you *be* more out of date, you jackass chauvinistic demon? I’m no bimbo. I’m your worst nightmare. A pissed-off mom with Duster powers.”

I crouched again, swung out my right leg and swept it in a circle. The judge leaped straight up, just like I’d seen Jasmine do that first time. When he landed behind me, I think he was expecting me to be surprised. *I so* wasn’t. In fact, I was waiting for him.

To make myself feel better, I slugged him in the nose, and he staggered backward, astonished, as blood poured down his face. Disgusting, but satisfying. His back hit the wall of the cave, and I made a leap that made me feel like I was flying. When I landed, the judge’s eyes were as big as saucers.

“*Never* underestimate a mother,” I said and shoved my hand at his chest.

He was fast, though. I had to give him that. He caught my right hand and gave it a vicious twist. I shrieked at the unexpected pain, then shut up fast when the judge shimmered. One second he looked as he always did, then his features blurred, and in the next instant he was something *way* different.

His skin was dark blue—almost midnight—and there were white whorls etched into his face in dizzying patterns and squiggles. His nose was broad, his lips peeled back from teeth that were now several inches longer than they had been a moment before. His eyes flashed red, and his long-fingered, clawed hand wrenched my arm up and behind my back.

“You’ve been trouble for me long enough, Duster,” he whispered, and his voice scratched at my mind like nails on a chalkboard. “This ends tonight.”

I was afraid and in pain since he had my arm up so high he could break it with just a little extra pressure. Enough already.

“It really does,” I said and slammed the back of my head into his nose.

Shock loosened his grip, and I jumped far enough back that he couldn't grab me again. Damn, Devlin had been right. The judge *did* have some serious strength. My arm felt broken, the ache reverberating through my bones. But I didn't have time to surrender to the pain. This demon was determined to kill me, and if he won, Thea was lost.

Jenks lunged at me across the fire, and the flickering shadows made his ugly-ass face even scarier. Instinctively, I backed up, and when he crashed into me with a bellow of rage, we went down in a tangle of bodies. All around I heard the sounds of battle. Fists smashing into flesh, groans and a single gunshot that blasted into the cave mouth and echoed with a wild abandon that nearly deafened me.

But I had bigger things to worry about. The judge grabbed my throat, and his fingers closed around the base of my neck like a noose, slowly tightening. "Stupid woman," he whispered, and his red eyes quickened as if a fire was building within.

I gasped for air as his fingers tightened even more, and the edges of my vision went swirly black. Terrified, I felt myself dying and realized that the others were fighting their own battles. I wouldn't get help from that quarter. If I was going to live, I'd have to manage it on my own.

I reached up for the judge's red eyes and managed to gouge him well enough that his grip loosened. Then with all my Duster strength I gave him a shove that had him landing on his back in the center of the fire.

He howled and rolled out of the flames, but he was still smoking. I staggered to my feet, tossed my hair out of my eyes and faced my enemy across a wall of flame.

"You can't win," he promised.

"I won't lose," I answered, and have to say, that bravado was probably ruined by the way I was staggering like a drunk after a long night. As my breath came back, so did my determination. This had to end. Here and now. I jumped over the fire like I'd been shot from a cannon.

My nails stabbed at the judge's eyes as we fell in a roll on the

damp sand. Still rolling, locked together, we smashed up against the cave wall, him on the bottom, momentarily stunned from his head bouncing off the rocks. I straddled him, looked him dead in the eye and said, "You never should have touched my girl."

Then I slammed my fist through his chest.

"You—" he started to say something, but then I yanked his heart out, so his final statement to the world ended in a burst of demon dust sparkling in the firelight.

I fell to the sand without the judge's body beneath me, and then I took a luxurious whole second to catch my breath. Brushing my hands off, I turned around to look at the people who'd walked into the lair with me.

Logan, Jasmine and Devlin were fine. A little battered, but still standing. There were only two demons left—the third either having been dusted or taken off for the hills—and they were tied up and sitting on the cold, damp sand. Smoke lifted and twisted around the heads of the two demons, and they looked damn unhappy about the whole situation.

"What is in these bottles?" Logan asked nobody as he watched smoke rising and swirling in the wind. "Acid?"

Nobody answered him.

Jasmine gave me an imperious nod, like from empress to peasant. "Nicely done."

"What the *hell* is going on?" Logan demanded, shaking his head as if he still didn't quite believe what he'd seen. "Where'd the judge go?"

He'd seen what happened. I know he had. But I figured by the time we walked out of the cave, he'd have come up with some weird-ass explanation to cover up watching the judge burst into a handful of instant soup mix. Hey, whatever helps him sleep at night.

But, first things first.

"*Thea!*" I shouted and heard my voice bouncing off the walls of the cave and slamming back to me like a damn boomerang.

"*MOM!*"

I grinned and felt my heart kick-start back into a normal rhythm. I kept a tight grip on my demon spray, just in case there were any other lurkers around, and headed down the tunnel to the right, following Thea's furious voice with a smile on my face.

By the time I got her untied and on her feet, she was all talked out, complaining about Jett, demons, grown-ups and the fact that her new Juicy sweatshirt was probably ruined forever.

I hugged her hard, grateful as all hell to have her alive and complaining, then I slung one arm around her shoulders and walked back to where the others waited.

Logan gave her a big hug, and Thea was glad enough to see us all that she hugged him back. Devlin came up to me and smiled. "Nice job."

"Thanks." I watched my daughter and her dad grin at each other, then looked at Jasmine and Devlin. "I'm pretty proud of myself, I guess."

"Yes," Jasmine said. "It was well done, but this is no time to relax your guard. The judge has been defeated, but that doesn't mean there aren't more demons out there."

I just stared at her. "Do I get *five minutes* to enjoy the thrill of victory?"

"There's no time for complacency."

I sighed. "Nag, nag . . ."

Logan led Thea back to me and said, "I still don't see how the judge got past us. Pretty damn fast for an old guy. When I get back to town, I'll put out an APB on him."

I shrugged. "If it makes you feel better."

Logan was happiest with logic. Control. Apparently, I was happiest when things were wild and crazy. Because right then, I felt like a million bucks.

Thea came up to me, gave me a hug and said, "Jett told me there was a big party down here, so I thought, okay. I was going to call you, but I couldn't find my phone, and then Jett brought me here, and then he just, like, *left* me with that weird old guy."

Smart of the little shit to ditch Thea's phone. Smarter of him to get the hell outta Dodge before I could catch up to him. Otherwise, he'd be nothing but a dust bunny.

I hugged her back, then cupped her face in my hands and said, "So, Mom was right about him after all."

Thea's mouth worked, and her eyes rolled up white, but she finally blew out a breath and admitted, "Fine. You win this one. Jett was a creep demon."

"God, I'm right *again!*" I shouted and loved the echo as Devlin laughed beside me. "This week just keeps getting better."

We started out of the cave, the five of us, leaving the tied-up, still-smoking demons behind.

"What about them?" Thea asked, glancing back over her shoulder.

"Eh. I'll come back tomorrow. If they're still here, I'll dust 'em." I was just too tired to worry about them at the moment, and besides, with their boss dead, I doubted they'd be too much trouble. They were just minions, after all, not the head cheese.

Logan and Jasmine were walking ahead of us, and Thea was in between me and Devlin as we walked toward the sea and the beckoning moonlight. The tide was still rushing into the cave, and our feet slapped through an inch or two of water.

"You know," Thea said, "just because you were right about Jett doesn't mean I'll always *listen* to you."

I wrapped one arm around her waist and gave her another hug. "Honey," I said, glancing up at Devlin, "I so know that. Just remember, if you want to date demons, you've got to be prepared to do a little dusting sometimes."

"You dust. I'll date," she said and leaned her head on my shoulder.

Devlin winked at me in the shadowy darkness and, ooh, I felt that rush right down to my hoo-hah again. Apparently, Thea wouldn't be the only Burke woman dating demons.

As we walked out onto the beach and felt the cold ocean

air hit our faces, I realized that, complicated or not, my life was pretty damn interesting. And that wasn't such a bad thing, right?

Sex, dusting and demons.

Had to be safer than sex, drugs and rock and roll.

Epilogue



A whole week with no dusting. God, it felt great having my world nearly normal. Not to mention my *arm*. Apparently Duster strength includes quick healing, because the damage Judge Jenks did to it only hurt for a day or so. Of course, there were big write-ups in the newspaper about the disappearance of Judge Jenks. But no one seemed to miss him much. I certainly didn't. I admit I had a couple of nightmares, where those red eyes were spitting hate at me, but I could handle them.

I spent my mornings training with Jasmine, my days cleaning, my afternoons with Thea, enjoying having my girl safe and sound, and my nights with either Logan or Devlin hanging out at the house. I was sticking close to home since I wasn't ready to leave Thea alone just yet, not even for an exciting night of orgasms.

Both of the men in my life were doing a lot of hovering and avoided each other somehow—guy radar? But how many women are going to complain about two gorgeous men hanging around?

Not me.

Still, it was nice to have a night to myself. Thea was across the street with Zoe, and Sugar was on the floor at my feet, waiting for me to toss her some pretzels. I had a glass of cold white wine on the table in front of me, a *Buffy* DVD playing (my favorite episode, about the love spell), and cotton balls between my toes as I slapped on the last coat of OPI Nantucket Mist nail polish.

When the doorbell rang, I actually groaned. When it rang *again*, I shouted. "What am I, deaf? Give me a minute."

I hobbled to the front door, walking on my heels so my freshly painted toes wouldn't pick up any stray dog hair off the floor and, still muttering curses on the head of whoever was interrupting my "me" night, yanked open the door.

And stood there with my mouth open. Apparently there had been a big breakdown in the Guy Radar Network.

"I brought pizza," Logan said, waving a pepperoni-scented box from Tully's.

"I brought flowers," Devlin said, extending an amazing, mixed-flower bouquet that looked bigger than Thea.

"Um . . ." I looked from one to the other of them and didn't have a clue what to do.

They were glaring at each other, and each of them shot me looks that clearly said I should be choosing *him*.

Whom to welcome? Whom to send away?

Logan's blue eyes warmed me, and Devlin's dark gaze intrigued me. Both men pulled at different corners of my heart. Both men attracted me on *way* too many levels. And both men were waiting for me to say something.

So I did the only thing I could think of at the moment. I took Devlin's flowers, then snatched the pizza box from Logan.

Grinning like a loon, I said, "Thanks, guys," and closed the door on their hopeful expressions.

Cassidy Burke, master of postponing decisions.

About the Author

Maureen Child is the award-winning author of more than ninety romance novels, and often says she has the best job in the world. A five-time Rita nominee, Maureen lives with her family in Southern California.