

# DEMON SONG

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## Chapter 1

You can't turn off intuition after you've spent years developing the sense, honing it to a razor's edge. I could feel *something* gathering among the seemingly innocent racks of clothing. The voices of my two best friends in the world faded into a background buzz, and I found myself shifting the way I was holding the shirts I'd planned to take to the dressing room so that I could use my hands if needed.

My eyes moved from person to person in rapid succession while my feet backed toward a wide aisle that could be easily navigated. The bored but patient father of a tween girl wasn't a threat. Neither was the mother with one child in a stroller and another held by the hand. Clerks moved among the holiday-festooned racks like ballerinas performing the Nutcracker; I tracked them briefly. The best sales people are often empaths or psychics. They're attuned those shoppers who want approval—co-dependants in the process. They weren't the cause of my alarm either.

Or were they?

Nothing I could see accounted for tingling of my skin. It forced me to raise the bar and start checking the area over again, which made me noticeable.

“What's wrong, Celia?” Dawna had taken one look at my face and begun to spill panic from her pores. The whisper from her perfectly colored and edged lips held an edge of fear. Things didn't use to bother her as much, but she had been attacked recently and was still a little skittish.

She wasn't the only recent victim. The part me that had been transformed by a vampire bite could feel her fear, taste it, smell it. While my reaction wasn't as strong as it might be closer to sunset, it still made my vision go into the sort of hyperfocus that makes vampires one of the apex predators in the world. Dawna wasn't going to be my victim, though. Not ever.

Then I spotted him. I shook my head slightly and transferred the hangers from my hand to Dawna's exotically tanned one, motioning her toward the dressing room. She obeyed instantly, grabbing a few additional random skirts before pulling the third member of our group, Emma Landingham, toward the sheltered hallway. Emma was obviously reluctant. Dawna was practically having to drag her away. It was unlike her—usually she was very practical about avoiding danger—and made me wonder just what she was up to. Emma had obviously been trying to get up the nerve to tell or ask me something all day. But even when I'd asked her directly, she'd changed the subject and acted evasive.

Whatever her problem was, it would have to wait. Trouble was brewing.

I'd believed the teenaged boy in the next department to be the older brother of the bouncing tween girl—just like he'd planned. But once I concentrated my vampire sight on him, I could see that his energy was all wrong. He wasn't a bored sibling. He was following them, just at the edge of their comfort zone . . . not so close as to be noticeable, but enough that he became invisible, part of a family unit.

Was he after the girl? I watched where he looked whenever eyes weren't on him. No, he had no interest in her, which relaxed me just a bit. His focus was on the jewelry counter. Instead of being cluttered and difficult to reach like in most department stores, this one offered a straight

shot to an exterior door and worse, was being restocked, so the display cases were open. The girls' clothing department was a short straight walk down the aisle from jewelry, which made his choice simple.

I started scanning for store detectives, but saw none. Was it shift change? Were they cutting back on personnel? That seemed stupid this close to Christmas. Maybe the boy knew something I didn't, because he started dissolving his act. His hand moved instinctively toward the pocket of his hoodie as he started looking for threats. Either he didn't see me or he didn't consider me worrisome. His mistake. The rectangular lump I spotted in his pocket was similar to the one under my jacket, but I was betting he didn't have a concealed carry permit in his wallet. The weapon turned a simple, impulsive snatch and grab into armed robbery with possible injuries.

The problem was that I wasn't a police officer, nor an employee of the store. I was just a self-employed bodyguard who happened to be at the wrong place at the right time. Even under a broad definition of citizen's arrest, I couldn't detain him, disarm him, or hurt him without risking arrest myself . . . and the possible loss of my license.

But I also couldn't let him rob the store and possibly shoot someone.

I hate my life sometimes.

I started toward him, hoping I would think of something between misses' petites and jewelry. Without making my movements obvious, as I neared the shoe department, I let my face light up at a particularly sparkly dress sandal—which actually *was* really cute—and headed for it. The shoes were directly between the would-be robber and the slender young clerk crouched behind the open display cases, oblivious to her predicament.

My entire focus was on the teenager as I increased my speed. I might not be able to pull my gun or throw him to the elegantly-patterned tile with a flying tackle, but I could intercept him and strongly suggest he find another way to occupy his afternoon. His every movement seemed like frames of stop-motion animation thanks to my supernatural sight, so I didn't worry that he would pull his gun before I could react. But I hadn't expected that when my vision slipped into vampire mode, the rest of me would, too. In fact, it wasn't until I stepped directly in front of him and put out a hand to stop him that I realized my skin had taken on a pale green glow. A glance into a nearby mirror showed me that my lips had pulled back to reveal fangs.

The look on his face was priceless when he finally turned his attention from the glittering gold and diamonds to see who had bumped straight into his chest. “Holy Crap!” His eyes went wide and his face got nearly as pale as mine. He backpedaled so fast he stumbled against a display of boots and spilled to the ground, taking the whole carefully arranged stack of red and green boxes with him. The battered 9mm fell from his pocket and was lost among the boxes of size eights.

Before he could react, I was crouched down next to him and reaching for his arm. With a smile on my face, as though I was helping him up, I pulled him close. The scent of his fear made me remember that I hadn't had a nutrition shake before we came to the mall. But I had to ignore that and concentrate on what I was doing. I'd love to say it was easy, but it wasn't. Blood lust is nothing to be casual about. I found myself staring at his neck, watching the warm glow of energy trapped under supple skin. So much energy, and my stomach was so very empty. I shuddered and forcibly moved my eyes from his neck to his face.

His wide eyes took in my fangs and probably now red eyes before coming to rest on the forty-five Colt nestled under my arm, revealed when my jacket swung open as I reached for him.

Oh, and let's not forget the long line of drool dripping onto the plush carpeting. Mustn't forget the drool.

He struggled to pull away but there's really no way to break a supernatural grip unless you also have super-strength. My voice became a hiss normally reserved for bad things in dark alleys. "I know what you're planning, and I'm sick and damned tired of guys like you making my clothes cost more so the store can recoup the losses from theft. You are going to get your lazy ass out of this mall right this second and find a legal way to make a living, or I swear on everything holy that I'll find you some cold, lonely night and make you regret it." I parted my lips so he could get a good look at what would be chasing him. No, I wouldn't really eat him or drain his blood. I don't plan to *ever* try human blood. It could be that one straw that breaks me. But I could scare him really well.

In fact, I already had. His blood had retreated so far from his face that he didn't even smell good anymore. His white lips opened, but only a squeak came out.

I raised my brows and leaned close enough to smell the scent of liquid courage on his breath. "Got it?"

He nodded, slowly at first and then in a rush of movement that gave him the appearance of a bobblehead doll. "Yeah. Got it."

Leaning back, I pulled him to his feet as I stood. "Good."

He didn't so much run out of the store as scamble, using both hands and feet. The guard who had finally come to investigate the commotion noted his guilty exit and raised a walkie-talkie to his lips. Whatever he said caused the security cameras to spin in the boy's direction and follow him out of the store.

I was so busy watching all this that I didn't notice the father of the tweenage girl shooting holy water at me until the stream hit me in the face. Sadly, I've come to expect being doused in holy water at me and having crosses shoved against my chest in the past few weeks. The fangs sort of give the impression *I'm* the threat, rather than the punk I'd just stopped. Fancy that.

"Hello! How rude was that?" Dawna had arrived and was at her touchy best. She tends to translate adrenaline into confrontation once she forces her way past her fear. She simultaneously pushed away the man's water gun and handed me a stack of tissues from her purse. "Do you see anyone on fire here? She just stopped a robbery. A little gratitude would be nice."

"A robbery? What robbery?" The man's eyes went wide, moving from the doorway where the kid in the hoodie was having his hands cuffed by the boys in blue, to the guard using a hankie to pluck a semi-auto pistol from among the boxes of boots. Finally, his gaze landed on me, the pale lady with red eyes and fangs—the good guy who was patting her face carefully to avoid smearing her makeup.

"Jeez, dad." The girl at his side rolled her eyes and crossed slim arms over her chest. "It's broad daylight. How could she be a bat? And don't you watch the news or anything?" She turned to me. "You're Celia Graves, aren't you?"

Her father lowered his eyes to the floor and grabbed her elbow, guiding her away from me with a reddened face. At least he had the dignity to mutter a soft "Thanks, sorry." as he walked past.

"Please don't leave the store, sir," the guard called after him. "We might need to talk to you later."

I was already pulling my wallet out of my purse. Before the guard even asked for it, I'd handed over my bodyguard license and carry permit. He raised brows a little at that and only then noticed the slight bulge under my arm. I obliged by discreetly opening my jacket. He wrote down

my information on a pad before handing back the two documents and then dipped his head toward my arm. “Nice tailoring . . . and I appreciate the discretion. We’ll call if we need a statement. Thanks for your help.”

The shrug was automatic as I tucked my wallet back into the messy depths of butter-soft leather. “Discretion keeps people like you handing *back* the permits.” It’s why I pay big bucks for custom blazers. Nobody’s supposed to notice the gun, and I keep it holstered until needed. It wasn’t needed today. “Oh, and you might consider junking up the aisle next to jewelry. It’s a pretty attractive target.”

He nodded and started to walk at a brisk pace toward the exit, probably to turn over the gun to the cops.

I turned to where Emma was swearing under her breath, apparently realizing that she hadn’t predicted the robbery attempt—a hard thing for a clairvoyant. But hey, not every event is worth a vision. I don’t know why she stresses over it. “I’m going to need something to eat . . . and soon. I got a little twitchy just now. Let’s hit the juice bar when we’re done here.”

The three of us have started using *twitchy* to signify that I wanted to chomp on someone’s neck. It sounds a little less threatening to people on the street. “Here you go.” Dawna, bless her heart, pulled a bottle of a meal replacement shake from inside her tiny purse, where it should never have been able to fit. But she always manages to find handbags that resemble TARDISEs in their ability to hold more things than they should. Sadly, the drink was banana-flavored. I loathe bananas.

“Thanks, but I’d rather wait for something not so . . .”

“Eww, banana. How can you stand those things?” Emma and I shared more than a few tastes, which I was discovering now that I was getting to know her better. We’d been friendly acquaintances for a while, but it wasn’t until our shared friend Vicki Cooper was murdered recently that we’d gotten close.

“Maybe you’d prefer chocolate.” The voice behind me froze me in my tracks and the appearance of a bottle of chocolate Ensure over my shoulder made me shudder. The man who owned the bland, helpful voice was neither bland nor helpful. People disappeared when he was around. Unfortunately, I owed him for saving my life. He managed to make sure I wasn’t staked and beheaded after the bat attack and covered my butt later when I needed it.

I still didn’t know why.

“Thanks, Jones.” I kept my voice blandly pleasant. I didn’t trust the man as far as I could throw him, and had no plans to ingest anything that had ever been in his possession. But I took the bottle, over the wide-eyed objections of my friends, who were vigorously shaking their heads and mouthing the word *no* at me.

I wanted to prove a point. Smiling, I gave the bottle a little squeeze, just a little gentle pressure. Just as I expected, one side sprung a leak. What a shock. I turned to see Jones smiling at me. He’s not much to look at—not handsome or ugly, neither tall nor short, he moves with easy grace that’s not threatening. He’s the kind of man who would easily disappear in a crowd. Literally. Not only did he have mind magic, I’d actually seen him disappear—a trick only the strongest mages seem to be able to manage. I returned his smile and handed back the soggy bottle. “So, what’d you inject into in it, Jones? Would I keel over dead in a few minutes or just pass out in traffic and roll the car?”

Emma was glaring at him now. She didn’t like him, even if her brother Kevin worked with him.

He put a hand over his heart and offered a hurt puppy face. “You wound me, Graves. Can’t you believe it’s just a defective bottle?”

I let out a small chuckle. “That depends. If I pour it on a potted plant, will it sizzle like stir fry?”

“Ooo,” he said appreciatively. “No, but that’s an interesting image. All this would do would make the plant damp.” At my raised brows he added, “Well, honestly, plants don’t really *sleep*, do they?”

Knock-out drug. Okay. “So, why are you here, Jones? Or is this something you do for entertainment on the weekends--take time off of killing to wander around the mall offering women mickeys?”

He smiled and it made him actually stand out. He would probably clean up well. He noticed himself in the mirror behind me and turned the smile off like he was flicking a switch. “I shouldn’t find you as entertaining as I do, you know. Dangerous for both of us. But you should already know why I’m here. Unless . . . Emma hasn’t done as she promised.”

Dawna and I turned as one to stare at Emma. “You’re working with *Jones*? What the hell, Emma!”

She glared at him again, but he was nonplused. Then she turned back and met my eyes. “I’m not working with him. And I didn’t make any promises. I asked him for help. I wanted to ask you, Celia, but I . . . I was afraid.”

Okay, that hurt. “I’ve worked really hard so you would never be afraid of me, guys.”

Her slender arms crossed over her chest and her eyes went to the floor at my feet. “I know, I know. It’s just . . .”

Jones let out an annoyed sound. “He’s going to be dead before you finally get around to spitting it out, you know. We’re already hours late and sneaking in is only going to get tougher after dark.”

His words were soft but utterly serious. I turned my head and my friends did as well. “Who will?”

His hands were tucked in his pockets, casually. But his eyes . . . those eyes held anger, worry, and something dark and dangerous that I wouldn’t want to cross. Ever. He raised his chin toward Emma and I felt my stomach tie in knots. “Her brother. Still want to shop?”

Oh, fuck a duck.

