



The Devil Inside (Morgan Kingsley, Exorcist, Book 1)

By Jenna Black

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Posession. Murder. Mayhem.
Let the games begin...

Exorcism isn't a job, it's a calling—and a curse. Just ask Morgan Kingsley, a woman who has a stronger aura than any Demon. Or so she thought. Now, in a pair of black leather pants and a kick-ass tattoo, Morgan is heading back to Philadelphia after a nasty little exorcism—and her life is about to be turned upside down...by the Demon that's gotten inside her.

Not just any Demon. Six foot five inches of dark, delicious temptation, this one is to die for—that is, if he doesn't get Morgan killed first. Because while some humans vilify Demons and others idolize them, Morgan's Demon is leading a war of succession no human has ever imagined. For a woman trying to live a life, and hold on to the almost-perfect man, being possessed by a gorgeous rebel Demon will mean a wild ride of uninhibited thrills, shocking surprises, and pure, unadulterated terror. . . .

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Though demon possession is bad enough for the average Joe, Black's new heroine, native Philadelphian Morgan Kingsley, is a professional exorcist—making her possession by a powerful demon all the more infuriating (and embarrassing). Worse, the demon inside her, Lugh, is next in line to become king of the demon realm, and factions are hard at work to off him before he takes the throne. As neither of the standard options for demon killing appeal to Morgan (exorcism, which usually leaves the human host a mindless wreck, or burning at the stake, with predictable results), Morgan and Lugh (who communicate in dreams) must race against time to discover how he was implanted into her and, while keeping the rival demons at bay, how to get him out without killing her in the process. Although Black doesn't break any new ground, she's got a winning heroine, a well-crafted contemporary world where demonic possession is just a part of life and a nice balance of mystery, action and sex, making this light but engaging novel an urban fantasy series kickoff full of promise. (*Dec.*)

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About the Author

Jenna Black is your typical writer. Which means she's an "experience junkie." She got her BA in physical anthropology and French from Duke University.

Once upon a time, she dreamed she would be the next Jane Goodall, camping in the bush making fabulous discoveries about primate behavior. Then, during her senior year at Duke, she did some actual research in the field and made this shocking discovery: primates spend something like 80% of their time doing such exciting things as sleeping and eating.

Concluding that this discovery was her life's work in the field of primatology, she then moved on to such varied pastimes as grooming dogs and writing technical documentation. She writes paranormal romance for Tor and urban fantasy for Bantam Dell.

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Chapter One

Topeka, Kansas.

Demon capital of the world. Not!

Demons, the illegal ones at least, tend to like the biggest cities. More anonymity. More prey. But every once in a while, one would pop up in the most unlikely place. Like Topeka.

I flew into Kansas City, Missouri, then had to rent a car for the ninety-minute drive to Topeka. I live in the suburbs, but I'm a city girl at heart. Driving ninety minutes on toll roads out in the middle of nowhere is my idea of Hell. But wait, it gets worse—no one bothered to tell Kansas it was spring, so it was snowing.

I can count on one hand the number of times I've driven in the snow. If I hadn't known they might burn an eleven-year-old girl to death if I didn't show up, I'd have ridden out the storm in Kansas City.

The speed limit was seventy, but I drove about thirty-five, squinting out the windshield, hoping there weren't any cows grazing on the interstate under cover of the blizzard. Okay, so maybe it wasn't a blizzard by Midwest standards, but it's all a matter of perspective. Kansas is one of ten states—including my home state, Pennsylvania—that allow the execution of humans hosting illegal demons. I called from the airport to let them know I'd be late. I almost choked when I noticed the area code for Topeka was 666. Gotta love the irony. Luckily, they weren't anxious to put a cute little girl to flame, despite the fact that she was allegedly possessed by a demon who'd murdered at least three people, so they agreed to wait for me.

The demon containment center-cum-execution chamber was in the basement of the courthouse and had more guards than most maximum security prisons. Why the idiots used legions of armed guards was beyond me. What were they going to do, shoot the host to death if a demon escaped? Yeah, that might solve the immediate problem and leave the demon without a body to inhabit, but if it found another host, you can bet revenge would be high on its to-do list. The only way to kill a demon is to exorcize it or burn its host alive. Lovely, huh?

I'd read little Lisa Walker's case on the plane. She and her parents had been visiting New York. They'd gone to a Broadway show, and when they were leaving, Lisa got knocked down by some thug who was running from the cops. Probably they thought it was exciting, because, hey, things like that just don't happen in Topeka.

It wasn't until they'd gotten home that they'd noticed anything wrong. She didn't do a Linda Blair and spit pea soup, but she definitely wasn't herself. It was the little things that gave it away—a suddenly more sophisticated vocabulary, a hint of attitude, the occasional expression in her eyes that was too old for her age. They'd called in a priest, and he'd immediately declared her possessed.

Me, I'd have been skeptical. Demons usually prefer strong adult bodies to inhabit, not delicate eleven-year-old girls. And no matter what they claim, priests aren't qualified to declare a person possessed. Yes, some of them are sensitives, and can see auras, but it's not a job requirement like it is for an exorcist.

So if I didn't think the kid was possessed, why had I flown all the way out here to bum-fuck Kansas to perform an exorcism? Because the court had ordered it, and the parents had approved it—and if the kid really was possessed, they'd barbecue her if an exorcist couldn't cast the demon out. The parents had demanded the best, and they could afford me, so here I was, freezing my tailfeathers off in Corn City, USA.

I had to clear two checkpoints before I even got close to the containment center. I'm sure I'd have made it through faster if I'd dressed the part, but if I'd wanted to wear suits, I'd have gone to business school. My uniform was a pair of tight low-rise jeans with a clingy sweater and a pair of kick-ass pointy-toed boots.

The director of the Topeka Containment Unit was one Frank Jenkins. He was a short, pudgy guy who looked harmless at first glance. He came out from behind a steel-barred door, smiling until he got a good look at me. Then the smile faded from the outside in until it morphed into a frown of disapproval. The frown didn't look anywhere near as harmless.

I put on my best hail-fellow-well-met smile and held out my hand. "Morgan Kingsley," I said, sounding almost perky. "You must be Mr. Jenkins."

He shook my hand and nodded, but he didn't look happy about it.

"I suppose you came straight to the courthouse without stopping by your hotel," Jenkins said, the frown still

firmly in place.

That was true, though I wouldn't have changed clothes even if I had checked in. "I thought it would be best for everyone involved if we got this over with," I said. Which was also true. I couldn't imagine what the parents must be going through. Not to mention Lisa, trapped inside a body she could no longer control, a helpless passenger while the demon rampaged.

The theory was that the thug in New York had been hosting an illegal demon who was on the run, wanted for three murders. When he bumped into Lisa, the demon thought it had found the perfect escape. Just hitchhike out of New York in an adorable little girl's body and hope to find a more suitable host later. The police had caught the fleeing thug eventually, only to find his brain fried.

"Well, let's get to it," Jenkins said, still frowning at me. At five foot nine, I was about three inches taller than him. I got the feeling he didn't like that much. Actually, I got the feeling he didn't like much of anything about me. Maybe I was a little too big-city for him.

Without another word, he led me through the steel doors into the heart of the containment center.

Why, you might ask, would a small-time burg like Topeka, which hadn't had more than one or two illegal demons in the last five years, need its own containment center? Because Kansas didn't take well to demons, legal or otherwise. Enough of their citizens believed in the Biblical view of demons as minions of Satan to keep execution legal, and they wanted to be prepared in the event they had a chance to rid the world of one more evil.

What did this mean to me? It meant that while the personnel had all been trained for the job, they had little or no practical experience. And I saw evidence of that every step of the way as we walked to the execution chamber.

"Mr. Jenkins," I said when we stopped outside the chamber for him to key in the passcode, "why are your people not wearing gloves when you have a known illegal demon in custody?" An incorporeal demon needs an invitation to possess a human body, but one that already has a host can transfer from one to another through skin-to-skin contact. No one within a hundred yards of an illegal demon should be showing more skin than absolutely necessary.

Jenkins glared at me, liking me even less. "I can assure you, Ms. Kingsley, the demon is contained.

"I bit my tongue to stop myself from reminding him of several incidents of "contained" demons escaping and wreaking havoc. He didn't strike me as being open to constructive criticism.

The door mechanism made a few clicking and ratcheting sounds, then Jenkins swung it open. It gave a sigh when it opened, as if the room behind it had been vacuum sealed.

I'd thought the containment center staff not wearing gloves was unprofessional. Brother, I hadn't known what unprofessional was until I stepped into that room.

Lisa Walker was strapped onto a sliding steel table. At one end of the table were a pair of heavy metal doors that led into the oven. She was positioned so that her feet faced the doors. So that she could stare with her wide little-girl eyes at the oven that would burn her alive if I failed to exorcize the demon.

Tears had matted her eyelashes and the fine yellow hair that framed her face. Her whole body was shaking with terror, and pity stabbed through me so hard I had to fight not to put a hand to my chest. I reminded myself that I could very well be looking at a demon giving an Oscar-worthy performance, but the pity didn't go away.

If the child wasn't possessed, she might never recover from this trauma. If she was possessed, then this was a new low for demon-kind.

But Lisa Walker's pitiful little frame wasn't what horrified me the most. No, what horrified me the most was that her parents sat huddled together on a bench at the other end of the room. Mrs. Walker's eyes were swollen with tears, and Mr. Walker's face was pale and tense.

I whirled on Jenkins. "You're letting the parents watch? Are you nuts?"

Exorcisms are never a pretty sight. There's usually a lot of screaming and cursing. From the demon, not from me. And about seventy-five to eighty percent of demon hosts end up dead or catatonic when the demon is cast out. So far, no one has come up with a reliable method of predicting which hosts would survive intact.

"She's their daughter," Jenkins said, drawing himself up to his full, not very impressive height. "If you fail, they'll have to sign the consent form."

I looked at Lisa Walker and a very unpleasant lump formed in my throat. I hate demons with a passion. And I don't like the legal ones much better than the illegal ones. But even I wasn't sure I could sign the order to burn an eleven-year-old girl alive to destroy the demon. Especially not if the girl was my daughter!"

You could have had them sign the consent beforehand," I muttered, disliking Jenkins now as much as he disliked me."

They'd want to say goodbye."

I glanced over at the parents, who hadn't said word one to me. They couldn't even bear to look at me. Can't say I blamed them. I wished I'd worn a conservative business suit after all. I don't think my jeans and sweater gave them great confidence in my competence.

But the worst thing I could do now was make them wait and worry any longer, so I settled my shoulder bag on the floor and slipped out of my full-length leather coat. I glanced around for somewhere to put it, but there wasn't anywhere, and Jenkins didn't offer to take it for me. He was being juvenile, but then I'd insulted his facility more than once. I'd probably have been juvenile in his shoes, too.

I laid my coat carefully on the floor, which was spotless white tile anyway, then unzipped my bag. A muffled sob from Mrs. Walker made my shoulders hunch. There were only three times in my career when I'd faced a demon I couldn't cast out. But none of those three had been in execution states, and none had been inhabiting adorable little girls. If I failed, this was going to suck on so many levels . . .

The execution chamber was so spare and sterile there was nowhere to put my candles except on the floor. I could have asked Jenkins to get me a couple of tables, but it didn't matter where the candles were, and I was betting all of us wanted to get on with it.

Every exorcist has a ritual he or she performs to get into the trance state. Some are really elaborate, with

chants and special clothing and incense—the works. Mine is disarmingly simple. I place vanilla scented candles all around the room, then turn off all the lights. Then I stand over the demon-possessed body with my hands about six inches above it and just close my eyes.

Usually I'm already starting to slip into the trance after my first deep breath. Today I was having a harder time. Jenkins had taken to fidgeting with his ID badge. The noise was slight, but annoying. And I could hear Mrs. Walker's persistent sniffles. I imagined the table sliding into the oven with little Lisa Walker on it. I imagined hearing her screams.

I took another deep, vanilla-scented breath and reminded myself that, in these enlightened times, they'd anesthetize her before sliding her into the oven—there would be no screams. But that didn't make the image any more bearable.

The pressure was like nothing I'd ever felt before, and something akin to panic stirred.

Then Lisa Walker spoke. "What's happening?" she asked in a quivering little-girl voice. "Mommy?"

It broke what little concentration I had, and my eyes popped open. I met the gaze of a pair of red-rimmed eyes of cornflower blue. So innocent-looking. But her words and her voice were so patently pathetic, so manipulative, that they gave me pause. So I watched closely, and something stirred behind those eyes. Something not so innocent. And I knew that they were right, that there was a demon inside this little girl. A demon who had no qualms about using the body of a child like a disposable plastic cup. When it found a more suitable host, it would slither out of her body, not caring that it might leave her dead or brain-damaged.

I gave the demon a nasty smile. "Fatal error," I told it in a low whisper that I hoped to God the parents didn't hear. "You should have kept your mouth shut."

The Cupid's bow mouth widened. I closed my eyes. And the trance took me immediately, fueled by my anger. Distantly, I was aware of that little-girl voice making pathetic noises, pleading with me and with its mommy, but I was too far gone to hear the words. In my trance, I see with my otherworldly eyes. Everything looks different. Simpler. I can't see things. All I see are the living, and I see them as patches of primary colors. People show up as blue in my otherworldly vision. Jenkins was a dark, solid blue, like a person at rest. If he felt any strong emotions about this whole procedure, I couldn't sense it. The parents, on the other hand, were a mess, their auras roiling with every shade of blue imaginable.

But on the table under my hands, the aura glowed blood red. A demon aura, so overwhelming there was no sign of human blue beneath it. The aura squirmed, and I realized that the body was struggling against the restraints. The demon saw its destruction coming and was making a last-ditch effort to escape. I hoped they hadn't gotten squeamish when they'd secured the restraints. The supernatural strength of some demons is enough to bend steel, but even an inexperienced staff would know that.

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