

ALLISON  
LEOTTA

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SPEAK  
OF THE  
DEVIL

A NOVEL

# SPEAK OF THE DEVIL

ALLISON LEOTTA

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*For my parents,  
with love and gratitude*



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*“The Mara Salvatrucha, also known as MS-13, is the world’s most dangerous gang.”*

—NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC EXPLORER

Anna fiddled with the napkin on her lap and willed her stomach to calm. *Get it together, Curtis.* In court, she was tough. She was fearless. As a sex-crimes prosecutor in D.C., she looked in the eyes of the city's most dangerous men, pointed at them, and described the worst things they'd ever done. But this was different.

This was her life. And tonight she had to execute the most important personal decision she'd ever made.

The Tabard Inn consistently ranked as one of the most romantic restaurants in D.C., which was why she'd chosen it. The evening was warm and clear, and she'd scored a table in the outdoor courtyard. Waves of ivy covered the brick walls; patches of dark sky peeked through a canopy of potted trees. Attractive diners sat around candlelit tables, swirling expensive glasses of wine. The setting was perfect.

Now if the guy would only show up.

Her phone buzzed with an incoming text. She glanced down hopefully, but the message was work-related.

Det. Hector Ramos: Parking near brothel. Heading in soon.

She texted back.

Good. Be safe.

She set the phone down and watched the door, wondering when Jack would walk through—and how it would feel to meet his eyes now that she'd made her decision. He was ten minutes late, which wasn't



like him. Maybe he wasn't coming. That wouldn't be surprising, given their recent history. She would either have the most romantic moment of her life or crushing humiliation. She felt like the Bachelorette, only with slightly less cleavage showing.



Two miles away, Tierra Guerrero counted the lines radiating from the circle of rotten ceiling. Seven. Not a perfect spider, then, but nobody's perfect. She was just glad to have something to look at. The ceilings she worked under became intimately familiar, and the spidery crack provided a welcome distraction.

It was distracting her, even now, from Ricardo's wet grunts in her ear. His red face bobbed a few inches above hers; his humid breath filled her lungs. The bed rocked with his relentless pumping. Most johns were limited to fifteen minutes, but the brothel owner could go as long as he wanted.

Her hips ached from being pummeled against the mattress all day. She wanted a hot shower, dinner, and a long night's sleep. "Ooh." She ran her fingers down Ricardo's back and tried to sound like a woman overcome with lust. "*Sí, sí, sí.*" To her ears, the moans sounded lame, but most dates responded to even the feeblest signs of passion. Ricardo was no different. He squeezed her arms and pumped faster.

The room was small and shabby, lit by a cheap bedside lamp. A sheet hung from the ceiling, separating two sagging mattresses. The privacy curtain was unnecessary at the moment, though—the other mattress was empty. Tierra was the only girl working today, which meant lots of money, but also lots of wear and tear. She glanced longingly at the stack of poker chips on the nightstand. She hoped Ricardo would be fair when she exchanged the chips for cash. She was supposed to get half the money from her tricks, but Ricardo seemed like the slippery type. She sighed and went back to watching the spidery crack. How much longer could he keep this up?

The sound of male voices drifted in from the living room. They were louder and angrier than the usual murmur of men waiting their turn. She glanced at Ricardo, but his eyes were squeezed shut, his face

scrunched in ecstasy. His body might be on top of hers, but his mind was far away.

The bedroom door burst open and crashed into the wall. Three young men strode in, all wearing trench coats, all carrying machetes. Tierra tried to sit up, but she was pinned by the brothel owner's body.

"Ricardo!" she screamed.

Too late.

One of the men hitched an arm around Ricardo's neck and yanked him off her. He slammed the owner against the wall, held the machete to his throat, and spoke in a low growl.

"This is for the Mara Salvatrucha."

• • •

The unmarked Jeep Cherokee pulled to the curb two blocks from the brothel. Three of the four officers wore bulletproof vests with the word POLICE stamped in white letters. Only Hector Ramos wore jeans and a black T-shirt. The only Hispanic detective on D.C.'s Human Trafficking Task Force, Hector played the undercover "customer" in many of the brothel busts in the city.

"She's not a lesbian," Hector said, tucking the transmitter into his front pocket.

"Of course she is," said Ralph. "I have proof."

"She said no when you asked her out?"

"Exactly."

"That'd make half the women in D.C. lesbians."

The guys in the back laughed.

"Your mother didn't say no."

"That's the best you got?" Hector said. "Mama jokes? No wonder she turned you down."

"Your mother loved my jokes." Ralph took a swig of coffee. "Seriously, though. Why won't she date police?"

"Lady like that wants a hero." Hector put his real wallet into the glove compartment and stuffed the decoy wallet into his back pocket. "Not a bunch of children."

He knew the guys would talk about Anna Curtis the whole time he

was gone. The prosecutor was beautiful, friendly, and single. She was both a diversion and an enigma to the police who worked with her. Hector was considering asking her out himself—he might stand a better chance than most. If this bust went well, maybe he'd ask her to go to the firing range or grab drinks after work one night.

He reached around and patted his lower back. His fingers rested momentarily on the Glock, solid and reassuring, tucked into his jeans. He opened the door.

"You boys gonna be okay in this big car all by yourselves?"

"Get the fuck outta here," Ralph laughed.

"Good luck," called a voice from the backseat. The UC work was the riskiest part of the operation.

"I don't need luck." Hector stepped out of the Jeep. "I got you guys watching my back." He shut the door and walked toward the brothel.



## 2

Anna watched the restaurant's inner door swing open, and Jack finally strode into the Tabard Inn's courtyard. Broad-shouldered, a couple inches north of six feet tall, Jack always made an impression when he walked into a room. He had smooth brown skin and light green eyes, and wore his head cleanly shaved. Tonight, he'd traded his usual suit for dark jeans and a white linen button-down shirt, allowing her a glimpse of the dark copper skin of his chest.

He walked with easy grace across the brick patio to her. She noticed some other diners—mostly women, but a few men—watching him. Anna stood nervously, causing her napkin to fall off her lap. She leaned to pick it up; when she stood again, Jack was next to her. She tipped her head up to meet his eyes, wondering what kind of reception she would find there. He smiled at her, warily, but with real warmth, and her heart did a happy little dance.

"Hello, Anna." His voice was a deep baritone, incredibly sexy when it was this soft.

"Hi." Being this close to him made her feel a little shaky, in the best way.

They paused, unsure how to greet each other after all this time. She closed the space between them, put her hand on his bicep, and leaned up to kiss his cheek. It was freshly shaved smooth, but his scent was what really got to her. Soap, clean linen, and the fresh peppermint that his daughter put in his pocket every morning. He was the one who pulled her the final few inches into a hug. She rested her forehead against his jawbone, closed her eyes, and let her nose almost graze the side of his neck as she breathed him in.

"It's good to see you," he murmured.

“Yes.”

When she opened her eyes, much of the conversation on the patio had stopped. People were looking at them. She cleared her throat and stepped back, feigning nonchalance. She was used to the stares. Jack was African-American, born and bred in D.C., street-smart with a professorial edge. She was blond and blue-eyed, slowly learning to tamp down her earnest Midwestern smile. Even in the diverse District, they drew the occasional double take.

“You look beautiful,” Jack said. “Tall.”

“You too,” she laughed. The four-inch heels she wore with her little black dress were a departure. Even with the extra height, she was two inches shorter than Jack. She felt both glamorous and unsteady.

They sat at the round iron table, the candle throwing soft light onto Jack’s angular cheekbones. A waiter came and gestured to the wine list. She didn’t know wine, so she just chose a bottle of champagne in the middle. It cost more than she’d normally spend on groceries for a week, but what the hell, it might be the biggest night of her life. Jack raised his eyebrows but didn’t comment.

“Thanks for coming,” she said.

“Of course. Your call was unexpected—but welcome.”

Welcome was good. Welcome meant she had a chance.

During their big fight, Anna had been furious at him. But with the passage of time and the perspective that came with it, she realized that she’d been at least partially wrong. Okay, mostly wrong. But that fight was just a symptom of a much larger problem: that Jack had wanted a long-term commitment, while she remained uncertain.

After they broke up, she was heartsick—but knew it was pointless to rekindle their romance unless she was certain she would stay forever. That was only fair to him and his six-year-old daughter. Now that Anna was certain, she didn’t know if he still felt the same way.

The waiter came back with a chilled bottle. He popped the cork and splashed an inch of the bubbly into Anna’s flute, then stood looking at her expectantly. It took her a moment to realize she was supposed to taste the champagne. Growing up, it had been a big deal when her mom took them to Denny’s. She took a sip and paused, as if making

a truly discriminating choice. “Excellent,” she pronounced. The waiter bowed slightly and poured champagne into both flutes.

Jack was fighting back a smile. He was ten years older and, it sometimes felt, decades wiser.

“How are things on the ninth floor?” she asked.

“Okay.” Jack was chief of the Homicide unit, one of the most prestigious positions in the country’s largest U.S. Attorney’s Office. He described the challenges of a recent hiring freeze. But Anna found it difficult to process his words. She was staring at his mouth, wondering how he would respond to her Big Question. What if he said no? What if he said yes? She couldn’t make it through an entire dinner without knowing.

Jack seemed to sense her distraction. He stopped talking about budget cuts and asked, “What’s on your mind, sweetheart?”

The endearment kindled her courage. She took a deep breath.

“Jack, I—” She’d tried different versions of her speech all day. But now the words evaporated. Only the core emotion remained. “I love you. My days don’t really seem to happen until I tell you about them. I hate every night we’re not together.”

She reached into her purse and pulled out the little red box from the Tiny Jewel Box. She slid it across the table.

“Open it,” she whispered.

He looked at her for a long moment before sliding the box open. Inside was a men’s dress watch. It was the single most expensive item she’d ever purchased. Jack looked up again, his face inscrutable. She plowed ahead.

“I—I know this isn’t how this is usually done. But I couldn’t come back to you, and Olivia, without being able to tell you that I want to spend the rest of my life with you. So I got you a token. To show you how serious I am.

“I know I’ve made mistakes. And I’m sorry. I never saw how a good relationship works. But I promise I’ll do whatever I can to be a good partner to you, and a good mother to Olivia.”

She reached over, pulled the watch out of the box, and turned it around so he could read the inscription on the back: I WANT TO SPEND ALL MY TIME WITH YOU.

“Will you marry me?” she asked.

A breeze ruffled the ivy on the wall next to him. The candle on their table danced, sending a shadow flickering over Jack’s face. He rocked back in his chair, opened his mouth, and closed it again. It was rare to see the formidable Homicide chief speechless. She became aware of the stares from the other people on the patio, as the silence stretched into an eternity of heart-pounding, stomach-clenching anticipation. Finally, Jack took the watch from her hands and slowly returned it to the box.

“Anna,” he said softly. “No.”

### 3

Tierra curled up on the mattress, trying to cover her naked body with trembling arms. She watched the man holding the machete to Ricardo's throat. The brothel owner was skinny everywhere except his belly, which was so round and fat, it looked like he'd swallowed a basketball. He wore a white undershirt, black socks, and a purple condom, which shriveled and splatted to the floor.

"Gato, please," Ricardo croaked. "Stop."

"Oh, am I hurting you?" Gato replied in Spanish. "Pardon me." He threw an elbow into Ricardo's face. Ricardo's nose crunched, bent, and spouted blood. The two men standing by the bed laughed.

"You think you're hurt now," said the one nearest Tierra. "We haven't even gotten started." This man wore a crazy grin, which widened as he looked down at her. He grabbed a handful of her hair and yanked her across the mattress toward him. She yelped in pain.

"Where are the other girls?" Gato asked. He shifted the machete so the blade lay on Ricardo's chest.

The brothel owner opened his mouth, but nothing came out. Gato sighed and put his weight into the steel; it sliced through Ricardo's undershirt and drew a diagonal red line across his chest.

Ricardo shrieked, "Their car broke down on I-95! Please, stop!"

Gato eased up on the blade. "How unlucky. You believe him, Psycho?"

"It doesn't matter. The unlucky one is this *puta*."

The grinning man called Psycho tightened his grip on Tierra's hair and ran the blade of his machete softly up her thigh. The room tilted and swayed; Tierra thought she might faint.

“Can I go first?” asked the third man. He appeared to be the youngest of the three. “I never get to go first.” Like the others, he spoke Spanish peppered with English. His eyes were glassy and unfocused.

“You’ll wait your turn, Bufón,” said Psycho. “Gato, you want the honors?”

Keeping the brothel owner pinned to the wall, Gato glanced over at Tierra. Instead of the cruelty she expected, she found sympathy in his face. Desperate hope flashed through her. This Gato might actually help her. She pleaded with her eyes. But Gato blinked and looked back at Psycho.

“No, man. I’m handling this *cabron*. You do it.”

“My pleasure.”

Psycho unbuttoned his pants, letting go of her hair as he fumbled with his zipper. Tierra forced herself not to run. She wouldn’t stand a chance if she fought or struggled. No, she’d do whatever these men told her, whatever it took to survive. She’d been screwing strange men all day. Three more wouldn’t kill her. She hoped. She looked down submissively, preparing herself for the worst. But she wasn’t prepared for what happened next.

A fourth intruder stepped silently through the bedroom door. In his right hand he carried a bloody machete. In his left, he held up the severed head of the *cuidador*, the doorman who was supposed to be guarding the brothel. The *cuidador*’s face was frozen mid-scream; his ragged neck dripped blood onto the floor.

Tierra shuddered at the head, but the beast who held it terrified her even more. He was dressed like the others, in a trench coat and jeans, but Tierra understood that he was not human. His skin was entirely covered with dark hieroglyphs. His nose was just two nostrils sunken into his face. He had long black hair—and two fleshy horns protruding from his forehead.

He was the Devil.

She was vaguely aware of the warm wetness spreading on the mattress, as she lost control of her bladder.

“I am first,” the Devil said.

He tossed the severed head across the room to Psycho, who caught



it with a grunt and a grin. A line of scarlet droplets spattered the wall. The Devil rolled the machete in his hand and looked down at Tierra. He licked his lips and smiled, revealing a row of gleaming white teeth, each sharpened to a point.

She screamed and screamed, but no sound came out.



Hector Ramos walked down the quiet street of row houses. Although the sky was dark, the night was warm. It had been a hot day for early October, and heat still radiated from the pavement, releasing the scent of asphalt and motor grease. The usual urban activity buzzed from a distance: cars honking on Thirteenth Street, sirens peeling a few blocks over. A man in a suit hurried past, engrossed in something he was texting. This street was a few blocks from Tivoli Square, a historic complex whose renovation had recently caused a wave of gentrification. But many of the longtime Hispanic residents remained, and this was now a diverse and vibrant neighborhood.

It still had some blemishes, though. The brothel operating on Monroe Street was one of them. The redbrick row house looked like all the others on this street, although it hadn't been fixed up like some of its neighbors. The shutters were peeling, the porch sagged, the windows were caked with filth. Weeds clumped in a mostly dirt yard.

The brothel was small but a nuisance on the block. The neighbors didn't appreciate the stream of men going in and out in regular fifteen-minute intervals. Complaints had been made; a quick investigation launched; a confidential informant reported four girls working ten hours a day in the basement apartment. Last week, Hector had conducted an afternoon of surveillance. Based on the number of men he saw, each girl might be handling a hundred customers a week.

Hector could have brought his anticipatory search warrant to any sex-crimes prosecutor in the U.S. Attorney's Office, but he preferred to knock on Anna's door. Not just because she was pretty. Anna was kind and respectful, even when she was correcting some flaw in his warrant. If this bust went well, he'd have a chance to work with her more.

For now, he focused on the row house. There were two things he

always worried about at this stage. First, had the informant lied to him, and was he about to raid some innocent family's home? Second, would someone inside try to kill him?

The "Eyes" of the operation would watch with binoculars, and Ralph would listen through the transmitter tucked in Hector's pocket. A fifth officer was waiting in the back alley, securing the rear door. But the arrest team was a block away, and they couldn't see what went down in the brothel. Once Hector was inside, he was on his own.

He would be quick. Go in, hand thirty dollars to the doorman, establish that he would be getting sex in return for the money. Take his poker chip. A real john would give his chip to the next available girl, who would give him fifteen minutes in return. But Hector would "have to go to the bathroom" first. Then the team would raid the place, arrest everyone inside, and search the house for more evidence. It wasn't easy work, but Hector and his team had the routine down. They did it several times a month.

Of course, another brothel would soon pop up a few blocks from here, part of the game of Whac-A-Mole the police played with pimps and prostitutes. But the good citizens of Monroe Street would be appeased. At least for a few months.

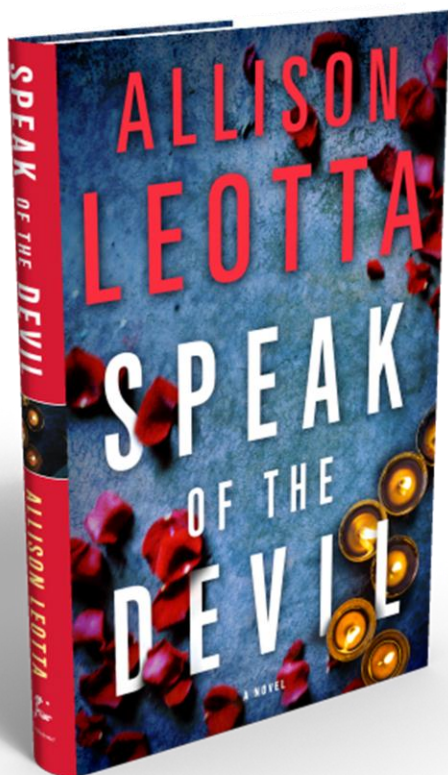
Hector trotted down the concrete steps to the front door of the basement apartment. A couple of dark-haired kids were putting up Halloween decorations on the stoop next door, talking in mixed English and Spanish. Hector made eye contact with a boy who was holding a little plastic skeleton on a string.

"*Hola.*" Hector smiled at the boy as he knocked on the door.

"Shhh." The boy brought a finger to his lips. "The Devil is inside."

The hair on the back of Hector's neck stood up.

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