

Sundown International: Never Leave Me Cat Marsters

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**Editor: Sheri Ross Fogarty
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Chapter One

The girl lay still on the ground, her face and hands bloody, her dress torn. Nearby sprawled the dead priest, his crucifix half an inch from the hole where his heart used to be.

The demon was nowhere to be seen.

Reaver knew they never inhabited dead bodies. Which was why it was often his job to kill the demon host. The priest was clearly dead, and therefore no danger -- but the girl... the girl could be a problem.

No. Not a problem. A challenge.

Light rain fell in the clearing as Reaver ripped the crucifix from the dead priest's chest, nodding a silent apology to the man, and approached the girl.

She was tiny, barely more than a teenager by his guess. Her body was slim, the fabric of her pretty summer dress damp and clinging to toned curves. Her feet were bare. Her hair was long, dark, and tangled over her face, mixing with the blood, obscuring her features.

She was very, very still.

If she was dead, he was safe. Well, safe from the demon, anyway. The local authorities probably wouldn't be too keen on finding him here like this with two bloody bodies.

But if she was alive, the demon could still be in her. The clearing reeked with the rotten stench of sulfur, and the crackle of demon energy prickled against his skin. The familiar nausea washed over him. Bloody demons.

Reaver stood over her, looked down at the pale, exposed flesh of her throat, and held the crucifix ready to press against her skin. The holy symbol of a holy man, invested with belief, ought to burn the flesh of a demonic host.

He brought the cross down.

So quickly he couldn't even see the movement, her hand grabbed his wrist and her eyes slammed open, staring right at him through her tangle of hair.

"Hey, chica," Reaver said, his voice loud in the silence. "I ain't gonna hurt you."

She stared at him, her dark eyes frightened and fierce all at the same time. Her breath came in shallow gasps.

He repeated his words in Spanish. Then in French, for good measure. Still she stared at him, her gaze darting left to right, between his eyes. He made ready to let the crucifix drop onto her skin. One hand tightened on his gun.

A sudden flash of reflection was the only warning he had before she brought a knife up -- where the fuck had she hidden that? -- and aimed it at his gun hand.

For a long second he stared at her, eyeball to eyeball. She didn't blink.

He let the cross drop.

Her knife dug into his hand, but her skin didn't sizzle, and when he didn't move to shoot her, she relented. A little.

"You're not a demon," Reaver said.

She stared at him.

"So I'm not gonna kill you."

She said nothing.

"So would you mind taking that knife the fuck away from me?"

Slowly, very slowly, she lowered the knife. Apparently she understood him. Or maybe it was just a coincidence. Either way, Reaver holstered his gun and held his hand out to pull her to her feet. She took it, hesitantly, her eyes huge and terrified. But there was something behind the terror. A quiet sort of strength. Strange and intriguing.

She was beautiful.

She clung to his hand as she stood, her grip strong. Her skin was pale, the dark streaks of blood making her whiter still. Her features were fine, delicate, big eyes and high cheekbones. She had a pouty, down-turned mouth with a very full lower lip that did interesting things to Reaver's libido. Her eyes darted about, hardly settling on

anything, but he knew when she saw the dead priest. Her grip tightened to the point of pain.

"Easy, chica," Reaver murmured. "I'll take care of you."

She turned those big, silent eyes on him, and he had the feeling she'd understood and taken to heart each word he'd just said.

* * *

There was a motel on the interstate. One of those cheap, tacky places where the guy on the desk was watching porn as he checked them in. Reaver paid cash. He always paid cash. Demons knew how to track credit cards just like everyone else.

The moans and gusty sighs of the skin flick filled the small lobby of the motel, irritating him as the clerk took years filling out the registration card. The girl clung to Reaver's side, her fingers digging in his arm. She hadn't let go of him the whole time, not even while he was driving. Her skin was cold, but then she was soaked to the bone and the autumn air was chilling. He hoped to God the room had decent heating, because the lobby sure didn't.

"Room seven," the clerk said, handing over the key. His gaze slid greasily over the girl, whose eyes narrowed. Reaver noticed that with interest, but the clerk didn't stop leering.

"Fuck you very much," Reaver said, and tugged the girl away.

"Hey, fuck you, man. I was only looking. It's a free country."

He wondered if the girl might speak up at that, but she stayed silent, clinging ever closer to Reaver as he kicked open the door and went to get his duffel bag from the truck.

The motel room was small and badly lit, but it looked clean enough. There was one bed. Somehow he hadn't expected there to be two. The girl bent over and started examining the bedspread. Her wet dress clung to her, offering him a prime view of her tight ass.

She's a cheerleader, he told himself, but he couldn't quite manage to believe it. No cheerleader would ever be so silent. So tense.

"Hey, chica," he said.

Chica ignored him and moved onto the desk lamp.

"We need to get you out of that dress."

She glanced in his direction. There was nothing in her expression to suggest she'd just heard what he said, but Reaver played it back in his head and grimaced.

"I mean -- you're soaked. Frozen. You should get warm." He pushed open the bathroom door. "Take a shower."

She put her head round the bathroom door. Her movements were curious and quirky, like a bird, as she peered at the shower curtain. Poked at it.

"I'll, uh, leave you to it," Reaver said, and backed out. But he didn't hear the lock turn, didn't hear water drumming. He took off his jacket, kicked off his boots, and listened, frowning. More silence. He grabbed a tissue from the box by the bed and swiped at the blood on his hand where she'd stabbed him. Still nothing.

Hesitating, he pushed the door back open. Chica was leaning over the shower tray, running her finger round and round the drain.

Okay, she was just crazy. He should call the sheriff or something, call a hospital and have her committed. There was something very... not right about her.

But how the fuck was he supposed to give her into police custody in the state she was in? Wet through, her feet bare and her dress torn, not to mention the blood crisscrossing her skin. It was hard to tell how much of it was hers, although he couldn't see anywhere that was actually bleeding.

If he turned her in looking like that, he'd be arrested. At the least, questioned. And Reaver didn't like questions.

"You need to take a shower," he told her. "Get clean. I'll get some bandages, and you can wear a shirt of mine until we get you some more clothes. Okay?"

She turned her head slightly toward him, but didn't give any indication of comprehension.

"Do you even understand me?"

She looked up at the showerhead. He turned on the water, sighing, and she stared, wonder coming over her face. Holding out her hands, she let the water wash away the blood, and a smile came over her face.

There was a gap between her two front teeth, like a little girl. She grinned, then laughed, and turned to him, her eyes shining.

"You never saw water before?" Reaver said, and turned to go, but right then she tugged at her dress and peeled the ruined fabric away, and suddenly he couldn't move.

Chica had on a pair of tiny white lace panties and no bra. Her butt was high and firm, her breasts small, perfect handfuls. Her nipples were puckered against the cold. Her skin was pale and perfect.

His mouth went dry. His blood rushed south. He couldn't do anything but stare at her as she cupped one hand and filled it with water, then turned to him and carefully, gently, used her fingers to wipe away a smudge of blood on his cheek.

He got hard so quickly he couldn't see for a moment.

She took his hand, his bleeding hand, and stroked the blood away from the cut. It wasn't bad, not deep at all. Somehow when she touched it, it didn't hurt any more.

Chica reached past him and her breasts brushed his arm. Reaver closed his eyes desperately, but they flew open again when something cold pressed against his hand. She'd wet the hand towel and was using it to clean his hand, and then his face, his neck, dipping down under the edge of his T-shirt and swiping at his collarbone. Reaver hadn't even realized he was that dirty. Chasing demons had that effect.

She pushed the cloth further under his shirt, frowning, then eventually dropped it and pulled the hem of his shirt up. Up, up, and he couldn't seem to find the will to stop her as she stripped it away and left him standing there in just his jeans.

Okay, he wasn't that dirty. Not under his shirt. But she picked up the wet towel again and slid it over his chest, his arms. Reaver stared hard at a crack in the wall and tried to think of demon classifications and football scores. But he wasn't all that interested in football and the only kind of demon he could think of right now was the

one inside his head that was urging him to push this unknown girl up against the wall and fuck her ragged.

The damp towel caressed his skin. Her fingers dipped under his waistband. An inch or two more and she'd be touching his cock.

And then he'd never be able to stop her.

"No." He pushed her away, and she looked up, confused and hurt. "Chica, no. You're -- I don't know what the hell is wrong with you. You're in shock."

She reached out again with those small, strong hands, and Reaver suddenly got irritated. Maybe she was a cheerleader, and this was a bet or something. Fuck the moody English bastard.

"Or maybe this is some kind of game. Whatever it is, I'm not playing. Take your shower. I'm going to bed."

The darkness of her eyes shifted, changed. But she still said nothing. Reaver glared at her a second longer, then gnashed his teeth and turned away, striding back into the bedroom and throwing himself onto the bed.

Fucking cheerleaders.

Chapter Two

He finally heard the shower curtain being pulled across, and figured that meant she'd given in and was prepared to act normally for as long as it took to get clean. In other circumstances, Reaver would have been quite happy to help her with that, but not tonight and not with this girl. He still hadn't decided whether she was so severely traumatized by whatever she'd seen that she couldn't speak, or even react normally; or if she was just messing him around.

He sighed and pulled out his phone. Either way, he wasn't going to keep her around to tempt him.

"Sundown, Inc."

The voice wasn't the one he was expecting. Instead of Magda's smooth, efficient tones, it was a huskier, sultrier voice. A voice that implied danger, even though it had only spoken three syllables.

"Masika?"

"Yep. Whosis?"

Professional as ever.

"Reaver." He consulted his watch. Of course, late evening in Texas meant the middle of the night in London. No wonder the vampire was answering the phone. "I need a favor. Who do you know in America?"

"America?" She seemed to be considering this. "Haven't been there in years. Is Nevada a state yet?"

"Yes."

"How about Cuba?"

"No."

"Hmm. Well, I think Con might be in Barbados again."

"That's not America either." Besides which, Reaver had always found the cheerful wizard to be both irritating as hell and completely useless.

"Is it not?"

"No." Reaver ground his teeth. Masika knew perfectly well about Nevada and Cuba. She was winding him up. Clearly, she was in a good mood.

He wasn't.

"Babe," Masika said, her voice fading as she spoke to someone else, "do we know anyone in America?"

A deep voice replied. Hence the reason for her good mood, Reaver thought sourly.

"There's that fuckwit Fae and her friends."

"Oh yeah. Aura. Is New York American enough for you, Reaver?"

"American as apple pie," he said, "but do you know anyone further south?"

"Well, I used to know a plantation owner in Charleston, but the last time I saw him he still had two hundred slaves, so he's probably not there any more."

"Human?" Even as he said it, Reaver knew he couldn't leave Chica there.

"Well, officially, anyway. What do you want him for, anyway?"

"I don't want him. I just need... someone... who can take care of... someone... for me."

"I do love your plain speaking, Reaver. When you say 'take care', you mean..."

"I mean as in 'look after,' not 'assassinate'," he said. "She's --"

"She?"

He could *see* her ears pricking up.

"She's -- she's --" She's a cheerleader, he willed himself to say. She's screwing with me. But the words wouldn't come. "She's... traumatized. Can't speak. Or won't speak, one or the other."

"Isn't that a human issue?" Masika yawned. "Don't they have, you know, authorities and stuff?"

She had a point. Once Chica had got cleaned up and into new clothes, he could probably deliver her to a hospital without arousing immediate suspicion. But would they be able to do anything for her?

"She needs proper care, Masika," he said. "If I take her to a regular hospital they'll just chuck her in the loony bin."

"And you care because..."

He stared at the bathroom door. The water was still drumming.

"I don't care."

"Right. Well, then, take her to the Fae. Where are you?"

"Texas."

"Only a couple of days' drive."

"Masika, I --"

"Call Magda in the morning, Reaver. I've got nothing for you."

The phone went dead. Reaver stared at it a moment, then threw it across the room. Fucking vampires.

New York was three days' drive, minimum. Three days with a crazy girl who couldn't talk and liked to take her clothes off. Well. The not talking was a good thing, since Reaver hated conversation. And ordinarily, a girl who liked taking her clothes off would be just fine with him too.

Only, not this girl.

Dammit. He was clinging to the hope that she was a dumb cheerleader doing this for a bet, but he was having a hard time believing himself.

He sighed, and started getting undressed. He usually slept in the nude, but it occurred to him that this probably wasn't the wisest idea with Chica around. But he was already beneath the sheets when she opened the door and stepped out, also naked.

Oh, holy fuck.

She looked even better clean and scrubbed. She smelled of soap and shampoo, her damp hair curling around her face. Her nipples puckered in the cooler air outside the steamy bathroom.

Reaver snapped out the light and turned away hastily so she couldn't see the tented sheet over his erection.

Traumatized, he repeated to himself. Shocked. Out of her right mind.

Cheerleader.

She crawled into bed behind him, and nestled up against his back.

It was going to be a long night.

Reaver didn't dream much, because he didn't sleep much. Demons were mostly nocturnal, but only mostly. So he was pretty surprised to find himself standing on dry, cracked earth under a harsh, bleaching sun, staring at a figure with her back to him.

"Chica."

She was wearing the summer dress she'd had on earlier, but now it was clean and fresh. There were sandals on her feet. Her dark hair was caught loosely at the nape of her neck. She stood, gazing at the distance.

"Chica?"

"That's not my name."

Her voice kind of floated to him on an echo.

"She speaks. What is your name?"

There was a long pause, and just as he was about to ask again, she said distantly, "It's too far away and I can't reach it."

"What is? Your name?"

"The demon took it."

Reaver took a deep breath and let it out. So it was a demon possession. How the fuck had she survived that? He'd only ever heard of one or two other people who had, and they were both strongly religious and strongly... *strong*. Chica couldn't weigh more than a hundred pounds, if that.

"Is this my dream, or yours?" Reaver asked.

She glanced over her shoulder, but the sun was so bright he couldn't make out her face.

"It's *a* dream," she said.

Great. Helpful.

"Demons steal," Chica said. "They swarm and invade, crawl inside and start eating. Fire over the landscape, swallow it all, gone."

Right. She was crazy.

And yet...

"Who are you?" Reaver asked.

There was a longer pause, then she whispered something he didn't catch. Well, he thought he did, but it sounded like, "I am the bug spray," so he figured he'd imagined it.

"I'm going to take you to a safe place," he said, praying that was the case. "Somewhere they'll take care of you."

"You take care of me," she said.

"I can't. I have a job to do."

"We all have a job," she said. "We all have a place."

"Yeah. And yours isn't with me."

She turned then, and the light faded enough that he could see her face. Her luminous dark eyes weren't frightened any more. And they sure as hell weren't the eyes of a cheerleader. As he stared at her, as she moved toward him, the corner of his eye caught sight of armor on her body, weapons in her hands. But when he looked at her straight, she was just wearing her pretty dress.

Her hand touched his face. But she'd been miles away, and now she was here, in front of him...

"It's never what you see," she said.

"What else have I got, when you don't say a word?"

"What you feel. What you know."

Right then, he didn't know anything.

"What you have to do," she whispered, and kissed him.

It was a fleeting kiss, insubstantial, incorporeal. Reaver chased after it, but she floated away, miles away already, fading into mist. Her voice echoed after him.

“...won’t ever leave me...”

He woke abruptly to find her curled on his chest, her hair spread out over him. She had one arm stretched across his stomach, her hand curled loosely into a fist.

The dawn light gently illuminated her face, tense and sad even in sleep.

“Who are you?” he whispered, but all he heard was an echo.

He touched her face and she stirred, nestling her head against his neck. She was tiny, lithe; maybe not as young as he’d first thought, but young all the same. She had slender legs and wonderful high, small breasts that Reaver immediately wished he hadn’t thought about.

Clearly, it had been too long since he’d been with a woman. He didn’t generally form relationships -- not that he *was* incapable of intimacy, but the life of a demon-hunter didn’t tend to lend itself to domestic tranquility.

Okay, and he was incapable of intimacy. Reaver didn’t like people, and they didn’t seem to be fond of him, either. He especially wasn’t fond of the silly girls who got all excited by his scowl and stubble and truck full of weaponry. They talked too much and giggled too much. Hell, any giggling was too much.

Reaver liked his women quiet, and with enough intelligence to know that he wasn’t going to stick around. A night or two of mutual satisfaction, and then they were both on their way. It worked out fine.

Chica, on the other hand... well, she was quiet. He’d give her that. But she was also crazier than a sack of cats. And what in hell had that dream been about? *What you feel. What you know.*

Well, he felt horny. And he knew she was amenable.

But that still didn’t make it a good idea.

Okay, so she wasn’t a cheerleader. Her eyes were too old. She was a woman -- but she was also totally insane.

She shifted in his arms, her hand absently stroking his chest. Reaver stared at the cracked ceiling and tried to think about demon classifications again. Her leg was draped over his, perilously close to his cock, which was getting painfully hard. Her soft little breasts were pressed against him. Her nipples were hard.

Damn, he wanted her.

Frustrated, he started to move her off him so he could get out of bed. Maybe if he took care of this hard-on himself then he wouldn't want her so much. But his movements woke her, and she immediately tensed against him, her eyes flying open, the whites huge and pale in the pre-dawn darkness. Her thigh nudged his cock, and Reaver froze too.

For a second they were both still. Then Chica let out a breath and ran her hand over his shoulder, a simple caress that nearly had his eyes rolling back in his head. He started to move again, desperate to get out of the bed before he reached the point of no return, and then she kissed him.

She pinned him back against the pillows and kissed him, her lips soft and sweet, her smooth, hot skin pressing against him all over.

Reaver considered this to be the point of no return, gave in, and kissed her back.

She ran her tongue over his lips, and he parted them. Her teeth tugged his lower lip. She sucked it into her mouth, and Reaver groaned. Her legs moved restlessly, sliding against him, all that satiny skin gliding over his own. She straddled him, licked his jaw and nuzzled his neck.

Still she never said a word.

He flipped her onto her back, and she suddenly laughed, her whole face lighting up, like a child. But just like before, when she laughed she made no sound.

"Why don't you speak?" Reaver said, but instead of answering she pulled him down to kiss him again, winding her legs around his body, drawing him closer. He felt the wet heat between her legs. His head swam.

Tearing his mouth from hers, he sucked her nipple into his mouth and was rewarded with a gasp. Her fingers slid into his hair, caressing his scalp as he licked her

breast. Somewhere there was a censorious little voice telling him to cease and desist, but it was overwhelmed by the hollering of his desperate cock, which wanted her, badly.

He cupped her other breast in his hand and ran his thumb around the nipple in little circles. Her fingers tightened in his hair and her heel dug into his back as he kissed a trail down from that perfect breast to her stomach, heading lower. Her skin was soft and tasted sweet, so good his blood was thumping in his ears and his head was ringing.

Ringing?

Oh *fuck*. That was his phone.

Reaver hesitated, his lips a fraction of an inch from her delicious skin, and then he swore and reached over to grab the offending piece of machinery.

"This better be bloody important," he growled into it.

"Well, good morning to you, sunshine," came Magda's dry tone down the phone line.

Chica lay there on the bed, breasts thrust toward him, hair tangled in disarray, looking more desirable than any woman had a right to. She slid one silken thigh up and down against his hip. His cock throbbed in response.

"Magda. Do you have any idea --" He broke off, and swore beneath his breath. Then he heaved himself away from Chica, with an effort, and turned to sit on the edge of the bed, his back to her so he wouldn't have to look at her gleaming bare skin and heavy-lidded eyes. "It's early," he said abruptly.

"Thought you didn't sleep," Magda said. "Anyway. Masika said you called in the middle of the night. I had the mad impression it might have been important."

He rubbed his hand across his face. "Yes. It was. Is. I need..."

"Reaver, are you all right?"

He scowled at her motherly tone. "I'm fine," he said. "But I have someone here who isn't. Who do you know in America who could take care of a recently possessed girl?"

"Possessed? As in -- ghosts, demons --"

"Demon," Reaver said. He felt the mattress shift behind him, and then Chica's warm body pressed against his back.

"Oh, hell, Reaver, I don't know. An undertaker. I thought demon possession was always a killer?"

"Nearly always."

"She'd need... well, maybe a shaman or something?"

"Probably wouldn't touch her with a barge pole," Reaver said. "I'm not taking her to a regular psychiatric ward."

"But they're probably the best people --"

"No," Reaver said firmly. He closed his eyes, and images of white coats and test tubes loomed large and cold in his memory. "No." He opened his eyes again as Chica's arms came around him, her head resting on his shoulder. "They never believe this stuff. And besides, I'm in the good ol' South, where they're likely to try and perform an exorcism on her."

Magda let out a long breath. "Well, then... a parapsychologist? Maybe?"

"You know any?"

"I could find out. Where are you?"

"Texas. West."

"Don't make it hard for me or anything," Magda grouched.

"Masika suggested I take her to some Fae in New York --"

"Aura? Oh, I'm not sure..."

"Too unstable?"

"Well, no." Magda sounded unsure. He heard the clicking of computer keys. "I could probably find someone better though. How far are you willing to travel?"

"Got to be within the States. I don't even know her name, let alone passport details."

"Right. Shame, because I think I know someone in Rome..."

"Can you get a passport for her?"

"You don't want much, do you? It'll be expensive."

"It always is. Can you do it?"

She sighed again. "Yes, I can probably do it. But it'll take a few days, and you'll need to send me a picture. I tell you what. Are you driving to New York?"

"If there's nowhere else to go."

"It's probably the best direction. There must be a decent parapsychology department at one of the universities --"

"She's not a lab rat to be studied," Reaver said sharply. Chica stroked his chest soothingly.

"No, I mean, they're probably best qualified to help her. Jesus, Reaver, what's your problem?"

He stared hard at his feet, forcing himself to breathe evenly. "Nothing," he said tightly. "What's this Aura's address?"

She gave it to him, and he hung up, tossing the phone back onto the bed. Chica nibbled on his earlobe and slid her hands down his stomach, but he batted her away. He wasn't in the mood to play any more.

Not now.

Chapter Three

As always, Reaver had an agenda in mind. Today it was: dress Chica. Feed Chica. Try not to have sex with Chica.

It wasn't that she wasn't willing. She'd proved that this morning. It was that he couldn't trust that she was in her right mind. Didn't know what she was doing. Would probably regret it in the morning -- or whenever the hell she came to.

With that in mind, scowling like a thundercloud, he dressed her in his only clean T-shirt and herded her out of the motel. The guy on the desk, looking peeved, told him there was a general store across town that sold clothing, and Reaver propelled Chica into his truck to take her there.

But worse trials were to come.

Everything seemed to fascinate her. Last night she'd been shivering and terrified, clinging to him with her eyes closed, but today she bounced around in her seat like a little girl. A little girl with a really hot body that was nearly exposed by the short hem of the T-shirt, which rode up every time she twisted in her seat to look at a sign or a dog or a car. She nearly broke her neck staring at a woman with a giant teased beehive of hair, and she kept pointing all the time, smiling at children and trees.

Every time she moved, the T-shirt rode up and exposed another inch of smooth, delicious thigh. Reaver's hands gripped the wheel and he tried not to remember what it had felt like to have those thighs wrapped around his waist as her body writhed in his arms.

He failed.

A couple of kids with a huge Great Dane ran along the sidewalk, and Chica laughed delightedly -- silently -- at the sight, turning around in her seat and kneeling up to look through the back window as they went past. She stretched over the back of

the seat, and Reaver told himself sternly not to look down. Not to look to his right. Not to pay any attention to her almost fully exposed thigh and the tiny hint of curvy buttock the T-shirt was revealing.

"Sit down," he said hoarsely, and ended up glancing over anyway. Sweet Jesus, if anyone looked through the windscreen they'd see her pretty much mooning the town. "For the love of God, sit down, girl!"

Breaking into a sweat, he grabbed her arm and tugged her into her seat. "Stop doing that!"

Chica put her hand over his and caressed his skin. Reaver yanked his hand away, breathing hard, and he could have sworn he saw her shoulders shake with laughter.

He swerved to a haphazard halt outside the general store and leapt out of the car so he wouldn't have to look at her any more. "Get out," he said roughly, banging the door shut. "And try not to flash the street."

He tugged her into the store, which was small and rustic and filled with the presence of a cheerful woman in plaid who waved, chirruping in an accent so thick it could have been sliced, "Well, hi there!"

Reaver gave her a nod. He hated over-zealous shop assistants. Despised being sold to. He wanted to go in, pick up his shopping, pay, and get out with the minimum of human contact.

Reaver wasn't fond of human contact.

Except where Chica was concerned, in which case he seemed to be overly fond of it. Damn her.

There was a display of jeans and flannel shirts, which seemed to be the store's hot fashion items. Reaver thought it looked like a pretty good idea: the shapeless clothes would cover Chica from neck to ankle, thereby removing a whole lot of temptation. No one looked sexy in flannel.

Hopefully.

He started poking through the stacks of clothing, looking for something small enough to fit her tiny frame. Unfortunately, everything in stock seemed to have been tailored for a giant.

"Can I help you?" the plaid woman called cheerfully.

"No," Reaver said automatically. "Thank you." He checked a few more labels. Beside him, Chica was examining a display of socks with apparent fascination.

"We have more sizes if you can't find what you're looking for," the woman offered.

"I'm fine."

"Are you looking for something for yourself?"

Reaver sighed and looked up. The chances of him ever voluntarily wearing an item of clothing with more than one color on it were slim to none.

"No," he said, and indicated Chica. To get the woman out of his hair, he added, "Do you sell underwear?"

"Well, *sure*," the woman said, coming over. Reaver cursed internally. "Ain't nothing fancy though."

"Doesn't need to be."

"Pretty little girl like that ought to wear pretty things," the woman said, watching Chica poking at a stack of notebooks. "You know, there's a store over in Monteville that has some --"

"No," Reaver said. "Thank you."

The woman was silent a while as he sorted through the piles. He felt her gaze travel over his muddy, torn jeans and his bloodied T-shirt, then skip over to Chica's skimpy outfit.

"The airlines lost our luggage," he said tersely.

"Oh, honey, that's just awful! And all you have is what you stand up in? Well, then! You just tell me your sizes and I'll see what I can find." She bustled off to another display.

"That's really not neces --"

"Well, what else am I gonna be doing?" The woman spread her hands to gesture around the little store, which no one else had entered while they'd been there.

Sighing, he said, "Medium long."

"And what size does your girlfriend take?"

"I, er --" He glanced at Chica.

The woman chuckled. An honest-to-God *chuckle*.

"Lot of men don't know," she confided. "Sugar?" she raised her voice. Chica didn't respond. "Darlin'?"

"She's deaf," Reaver said.

"Deaf?" The woman's face creased in sympathy. "Oh now, what a shame! And she's such a pretty little thing. Can she speak?"

"No," Reaver said, relieved.

"What a *shame*," the woman repeated. "So how does she usually do her shopping?"

"Internet," Reaver said.

"Can you write down the question for her?"

Reaver almost said that she couldn't read, then decided it was a stretch too far. "Look, can't you just figure out what her size is?"

The woman gave him a slightly suspicious look, then turned her attention back to Chica, who was methodically working her way through a display of country & western CDs.

"Well now, here's the thing," the woman said in a conversational tone. Reaver gritted his teeth. "For a deaf person, she sure has some rhythm."

Reaver turned to look at Chica, who was dancing to the soft music playing in the background. Her feet moved, her hips swayed, the muscles in her bare thighs sinuous under her gleaming skin.

He turned back to the clerk and said, "Yes. She sure has."

She opened her mouth to speak, caught the look in his eye and said, "Right. Okay, well, why don't I find some things for her to try on?"

Reaver gave a tight nod and she escaped gratefully into a storeroom. He picked up some new jeans and T-shirts for himself -- he usually traveled light, but not this light -- then winced when he realized Chica would need shoes and he hadn't the faintest idea what size she'd need.

The store clerk came bustling back out with armfuls of clothing, which she presented to Chica.

Chica looked at them blankly, then at Reaver. He sighed and went over, picking out jeans and a shirt for her and holding them out.

"Put them on," he said, and pointed to the little dressing room which was no more than an alcove with a curtain over it. Trying not to think too hard about the items in his hands, he added underwear to the pile.

Chica picked up the pair of plain white underpants as if she'd never seen such an item.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Reaver said under his breath, and took her by the arm. He marched her over to the dressing room, closed the curtain, and yanked her T-shirt off.

Which proved to be a mistake.

She was naked underneath, which he really should have remembered sooner. All the blood in his body immediately migrated south and he closed his eyes, holding out her clothes like a talisman. She made no move to take them.

"Look, please get dressed," he said, opening one eye and focusing unhelpfully on her nipple. He hastily relocated to her face. "Put some clothes on. Please, Chica."

She frowned a little, and then her eyes seemed to come into focus. She smiled.

Then she started getting dressed.

Reaver blew out a sigh and leaned against the wall of the tiny alcove. Maybe this was some sort of test. Like the rest of his life. An extra trial to survive. Maybe if he got through this the gods and monsters tormenting him would give the fuck up.

Yeah. Right.

He pushed past the curtain and back into the shop, out of temptation's way. Unfortunately there were still no other customers, which meant that the plaid woman still wanted to talk to him.

"It is such a pity," she said in tones of the utmost sympathy. "Has she always been... different?"

"What?" Reaver stared at her a second before he realized that she thought Chica was some sort of mental patient. Which, based on the evidence, was fair enough. "Uh, yeah. Ever since I've known her."

"And she's such a pretty girl, too."

"Really, I hadn't noticed," Reaver muttered.

"Must be hard."

He hoped she wasn't referring to the bulge in his jeans. "Mmm."

She laid her hand on his arm. "The world needs more people like you," she said with every indication of sincerity, and Reaver very nearly laughed, because the world had never needed him, and certainly never seemed to want him.

Then Chica swished the curtain back and stood there in jeans, a plaid shirt rolled to the elbows, and sports socks, and he realized that *someone* wanted him, even if she did appear to be mildly insane.

And she looked sexy in plaid.

Damn her.

Dressed, and provisioned from the small supermarket next door, they set off in Reaver's ramshackle truck. Chica soon tired of looking out the window, especially as they left town and the landscape became repetitive. Instead, she turned her attention to the radio, turning the dial and listening to maddeningly short snatches of music. Reaver seldom listened to the radio at all, except for traffic news. He found most headlines irrelevant and wasn't really interested in music.

Unlike Chica, who was.

Her favorite kind seemed to be country and western. Maybe those CDs in the shop had given her ideas. Or maybe it was all the stations down here played. Whatever the reason -- and with Chica, it was entirely possible there was no reason at all -- she listened to song after song, switching stations if something she didn't like came on.

Reaver tried to tune out, but then something became apparent to him. Firstly, that she wasn't playing country music any more, at least not exclusively. And secondly, that there seemed to be some kind of theme going on.

He first noticed it with Fleetwood Mac's "Dreams." Then Natalie Imbruglia's "When You're Sleeping." Crowded House, "Recurring Dream." The Corrs, "Only When I Sleep." When they got to Joe Brown with "I'll See You In My Dreams," a frankly unlikely track for commercial radio anywhere in the world, he pulled over and turned off the engine.

The music abruptly stopped.

"Okay," he said, turning to face her. "What the hell is going on here?"

Chica stabbed at the radio, but without the engine on it didn't work. She frowned at him.

"I just listened to nine songs about sleeping or dreaming," Reaver said. "There is no way on this fertile green earth that all those songs by ridiculously diverse artists would just happen to be played within half an hour of each other while we travel fast enough through the middle of nowhere to only pick up one or two radio stations at a time."

Chica blinked owlishly at him.

"Don't you pretend you don't understand me," Reaver said. "I know you heard me back in the shop and I know you're playing those songs on purpose." To himself, he added, "I just don't know how the fuck you're doing it."

Chica gave no indication she'd even heard him.

"You are driving me fucking nuts," Reaver told her, and started the engine again. The radio burst into life with Garbage's "I Think I'm Paranoid."

"Ha bloody ha," Reaver said, and was certain he saw her smile.

Chapter Four

He drove from Nowhere, Texas, to Nowhere, Arkansas, and as he pulled off the highway in search of somewhere to spend the night, he glanced over at Chica, who'd been sleeping for a while. The radio, mercifully, was off, but as he watched her she woke up, smiled at him, and reached out to switch it on.

"Okay," he sighed, "what you got for me now?"

A burst of static, then a song he eventually identified as Shawn Colvin's "Wichita Skyline."

"But we're in Arkansas," he said. "Wichita is... Kansas, isn't it?"

Chica just smiled at him, and then he saw a sign for Lake Ouichita, and narrowed his eyes at her.

He found a modern chain motel and requested two rooms for the night. One thing he didn't need was Chica's warm curvy body next to his all night long. He'd bought a small bag and toiletries for her and handed them over as he unlocked her room.

She stood clutching it, looking small and lost.

"I'll be right next door," Reaver said. She glanced at the bed and the TV, looking uncertain. "Sleep well."

He closed the door on her unhappy face, closed his eyes for a brief second, then headed to his own room.

It wasn't incredibly late, and in fact he could have driven for longer, but he'd really needed a break from her constant presence. Every atom of his being wanted to strip that plaid shirt off her and have his wicked way, but his conscience, which had helpfully lain dormant his whole adult life, had chosen now to speak up.

Those songs, though. She was trying to tell him something. Well, not trying: succeeding. She clearly wasn't able to speak while she was awake, but she seemed to have some avenues of communication open to her.

Of course, it could all be a huge coincidence, which was what common sense told him. Those diverse songs had been played by different stations in different areas. And as for last night's dream, it was his subconscious telling him things he wanted to hear.

I'll see you in my dreams...

No. Stop it. It was all coincidence. She wasn't psychic, she was just crazy, and he couldn't take advantage of a crazy person. There was no such thing as psychic... ness. Not even a word for it, which proved he was right.

Reaver took a cold shower, then headed out in search of beer. And possibly a woman. He was just horny, that was all. It had nothing to do with Chica, personally.

The motel didn't have a bar of its own, but there was one just down the road a little way. He hesitated about leaving Chica, but he'd kept the key to her room and locked her in. She couldn't get out and couldn't get into trouble. Besides, she had a TV which she'd probably managed to tune into the *X-Files* or the *Twilight Zone* or something.

She'd be fine.

The bar was small and dark and noisy. Reaver had just ordered a beer when a prickle ran up the back of his neck.

A demon prickle.

The air was so full of smoke and sweat and perfume that he couldn't pick out the acrid scent that demons usually brought with them, but he'd been hunting the things long enough that he didn't need to smell them to know they were there.

He dropped some money on the bar, slid his hand to the knife at his hip, and made his way back through the crowd. He had more weapons in his truck, but since people tended to get nervous and call the police at the sight of a heavily armed man, he'd neglected to bring them with him.

Big mistake.

He didn't even get to the motel parking lot before he smelled the demon, felt the nausea rise in his chest, and followed his instincts to the back of the bar where the dark woods encroached.

He heard a grunt and a muffled scream and started running, unsheathing his knife and wishing like hell he had more sharp things. He skidded round the corner of the building where a dingy orange bulb above a garbage can illuminated the last thing on earth he'd ever expected to see.

Three demons, one in the body of a teenage boy wearing a letter sweater, one a middle-aged woman and one a huge scaly beast, were attacking and being rapidly, and viciously, repelled by a small girl in jeans and a plaid shirt.

Chica.

Reaver was so astonished that all he could do was stand and stare, his knife hand loose at his side, watching as she whirled and kicked and smashed her way through them. She was incredible. The best fighter he'd ever seen, graceful and swift, deterring those deadly creatures with no more than her hands and the work boots he'd bought her that morning. No weapons. No guns or blades.

She kicked the teenager in the stomach and brought her knee up into his head as the woman attacked from behind. Chica grabbed her, hauled her over her head and into a roll, stamping on the woman's neck and leaving her down as she somersaulted to her feet and whirled to shove the beast back against the wall with a crunch. The teenager leapt to his feet and came at her, but she skipped over the woman on the ground, leaving the kid to trip over her.

It was like a ballet. A ballet where people got hit. Reaver's kind of ballet.

Then the beast came at Chica, and Reaver was shocked out of his trance. On reflex, he threw his knife at the creature, seven feet of scaly, drooling, fanged menace, but it either saw him or heard him and moved, dodged back, leaving Chica in the way of the blade, her back turned.

He didn't even have time to yell to her, not that he was sure she'd have listened. And as it turned out, he didn't need to. Chica whirled, throwing up a hand behind

herself, and caught the knife mid-flight. Then, her body still turning, she lunged and slashed the knife across the beast's neck. It howled, rousing the woman on the floor, who grabbed Chica's legs and pulled her down. The demon woman was bigger, heavier, and she pinned Chica beneath her, pummeling and kicking and biting.

Reaver ran in, the beast spraying him with blood as he punched it to the ground, retrieved his knife and stabbed the top of its head, twisting the knife as he did.

The creature lay still, and Reaver whirled to save Chica from the demon in the woman's body, only to see her once more use the bigger woman's weight against her and heave her over onto her back, springing to her feet. She darted back, grabbing the knife from Reaver's hand without even looking, and stabbed it into the woman's neck.

Then suddenly everything was still.

Reaver only realized that the kid in the letter sweater had run off when he became aware of the silence. Somewhere in the background the thump of music from the bar could be heard, but in this little patch of orange light and blood and stinking demons, no one was making a sound.

He dragged in a breath, not from exhaustion but from incomprehension, and watched Chica slowly rise to her feet and stand, her back to him, the knife glinting in the dim light.

Then she turned, and he saw the blood on her face and her clothes, demon blood, and the strange light in her eyes, and knew two things. One, that whatever had gone on in that clearing last night, she hadn't been helpless.

And two, he was more turned on than he'd ever been in his life.

He wasn't even sure which one of them moved first, but one of them did or maybe both, because she was in his arms and kissing him, hard, her hands tracing the muscles in his back, the knife clattering on the ground, the dead, oozing bodies of the demons forgotten.

Her body was warm and soft against his, her hands everywhere, her mouth hot and welcoming. The hell with principles. For an awful second or two he'd seen her go down and thought she might be lost to him, and the idea was so appalling he couldn't

bear to think about it. He pressed her body closer to his and ran his hands over her arms, her back, her tight little buttocks frustratingly covered by denim. She wrapped her arms around him, clutching him. He realized just how strong she was inside that tiny body.

His hand slid under her loose shirt and he'd probably have taken her there and then if he hadn't felt sticky, hot blood on her skin and pulled back in shock. "Chica, you're hurt!"

She didn't seem inclined to let that stop her, and went after him again, kissing his neck in a very distracting manner. Reaver held her away from him, blood pounding in his ears at the thought that she could still be in danger. Although considering that she was standing there kissing the life out of him and not gasping for breath on the ground gave him an inkling that she wasn't badly hurt.

He dragged her back to the motel, making a fast stop at his truck to pick up some bandages, then locked the door and stood looking at her for a second, his heart pounding. Her hair was loose and tangled and there was a tear in her shirt, dark with blood, just above her hip. Her jeans were torn and dirty, but he couldn't be sure how much of that was demon blood and how much was hers.

"Take off your shirt," he said, and his voice came out lower than he expected it to.

She unfastened one button, then another, then pulled the whole thing over her head. Reaver fought the urge to race over there and start kissing her again, and instead surveyed her torso. There were bruises on her arms and body, some claw marks on her arm and the small cut on her side, but that seemed to be it. He let out a breath. "And your jeans."

A hint of a smile on her face, she reached out and gestured at his T-shirt. Reaver frowned at her, and she folded her arms, waiting.

He let his eyes travel over her bare torso and skimpy bra, his cock hardening, then realized what she wanted him to do. His mood lightening considerably, he peeled off his shirt.

She smiled a bit more, then kicked off her jeans. Reaver did the same, and then they were both standing there in their underwear. She reached for him, but he put out a hand to halt her and stood back to check her legs for injuries. He found a few bruises, then got distracted by the smoothness of her skin and moved in to see if it felt as good as it looked.

Chica pushed him away, grinning, and unhooked her bra, which made Reaver go dizzy. Her breasts were so perfect, round and soft and high, tipped with tight nipples. He bent to lick one of them. She gasped, and he looked up at her and smiled, running his hands over her waist just to feel the curve of muscle there. Then she flinched, and he remembered she was hurt and that was really why he'd asked her to take her clothes off -- yeah, right -- and he should probably clean her up before licking her all over, as previously planned.

Besides, he didn't really want to lick up any demon blood.

He took her hand and led her to the bathroom, switched on the shower and started washing the blood and slime from her body. Demons started to disintegrate when dead, even the ones in human bodies. Which was why he wasn't worried about the two behind the bar. In an hour or two they'd just be ooze.

He stripped her plain white cotton panties off her, telling himself it was the practical thing to do and getting very distracted anyway. He concentrated hard on cleaning her wounds and wiping the grime from her smooth, hot skin, and then he gave in and pushed her against the wall of the shower stall and kissed her until he couldn't breathe any more.

She laughed and pushed down his boxers, which he'd forgotten he was wearing and which were now soaked, freeing his enthusiastic cock and stroking it. Reaver saw stars. Desperate to slow down, he kissed her neck, her breasts, but she didn't stop stroking him. One slick thigh curled around his, then slid up and wrapped around his hips, pressing her wet pussy lips against his aching flesh.

Reaver lifted his head and saw her eyes dark and heavy-lidded as she lifted her other leg, her whole body supported by his now. She kissed him, a hot, blinding kiss

that very nearly distracted him from the slide of her body down his until the very tip of him rested inside her.

That woke him up, her hot, slick folds caressing him, her body pulling him in. Even though he'd known deep down that this moment was going to come ever since she'd taken off her dress the night before, he still felt a shock of amazement that it was actually happening. Her body sank down and she took him all the way inside her, her head back and her eyes closed. Reaver dropped his head onto her shoulder, resting for a second before he lost his mind.

Then he figured he didn't need his mind so much anyway, and started moving.

Fuck, she felt good. So tight and hot, pulling him in deeper and deeper. She moved with him, her body slick with water and soap. Her skin gleamed under the water pounding down on them. Her hair trailed all over him, her mouth hot as she pressed fleeting kisses all over his face, his neck, his shoulders.

When she came she tensed and shook and laughed, and Reaver stopped moving just to watch her come undone, writhing and clenching around him.

I need to make her do that again. She opened her eyes and smiled, and he swore he felt her purr. She slid her hips languorously against his, moving on him, and the friction felt so good he started moving again inside her. When he came she held him until he stopped shaking. Until the blinding pleasure sank away. Until his brain started working again, and he opened his eyes to see her smiling and peaceful in his arms.

Peaceful. It was the strangest concept to Reaver.

They washed each other under the cooling water, wrapped up in towels and went back to the bedroom, where Reaver sat her down and attended more properly to her wounds.

He'd figured that maybe, having tasted her, he might be able to concentrate better but if anything the reverse was true. Every brush of his fingers against her skin reminded him how soft she was, how warm, how good she'd felt coming apart in his arms.

He cleaned and dressed the cuts and rubbed arnica into her bruises, which was terribly distracting because rubbing her anywhere was hugely enjoyable. And even though he wasn't hurt, she returned the favor by massaging his shoulders, his chest, his back -- which pretty much meant that she had to pull him into her arms, and while he was there she kissed him senseless.

They fell to the bed together, kissing and stroking. Chica found the old scars on his shoulder, his stomach, his hip, and kissed each one solemnly. She had similar marks, he realized, and was about to open his mouth to tell her they needed to talk about this whole fighting-like-a-superhero thing when she lost interest in the scar on his hip and started kissing his penis instead.

Which effectively killed off any brain cells he still had active.

Her mouth was a miracle, hot and wet and perfect. She sucked him deep, let him go and licked him like an ice cream. When she licked the base of his cock and swirled her tongue up to the top he got so hard so quickly he nearly blacked out.

She looked up at him and grinned, her eyes sparkling, and he yanked her back up his body to kiss her mouth and feel her softness against him. She twined her arms around him and he savored the feel of her there, this incredible woman with so many secrets who was giving him so much.

He slid down her body, licking her neck, paying attention to her breasts, kissing a meandering trail across her stomach and down to the dark hairs between her legs. She tasted salty and spicy, and when he slid his tongue inside her pussy her hips shot up off the bed.

Reaver laughed for possibly the third time in his life.

Chica saw him and looked down with a mixture of surprise and amusement. With only the strength in her thighs she flipped him over then wormed down his body until she straddled his hips, sitting up straight and looking down at him triumphantly. He raised his eyebrows, ran his hands over her thighs and shifted his hips so his hot, hard cock slid against her pussy lips.

The smugness left Chica's face and she bit her lip, her muscles tensing, her hips bucking. She slid down onto him, leaning forward with her damp hair trailing over his chest, and her cheek brushed his jaw, nuzzling him like a cat.

For a second everything seemed to stop for Reaver. Time crystallized, his heart didn't beat, and all he could do was marvel at the tenderness in her gesture, the tenderness he wanted to reciprocate. For one moment Reaver felt love beat through him, so powerful it wiped out everything else.

Then Chica sat up again, and the friction reminded him that he was inside her, and she grinned mischievously at him and wiggled her hips, making him groan and smile as her fingers walked up his chest.

"So you're in charge now, are you?" he said, his voice coming out rather husky, and she tossed her head and sparkled at him.

He raised his hips and thrust into her. She undulated on him and he let out a harsh breath. Sliding his hands around, he fingered her clit. She squeezed her pussy around him. He moved. She moved. He stroked. She laughed.

Reaver couldn't remember the last time he'd had this much fun with a woman. The last time he'd had this much fun at all.

He rolled her onto her back and grinned down at her, and her mouth dropped open in indignation. Tightening her thighs around his hips, she rocked him back, impressing him with her muscle control and the way her breasts jiggled when she moved. She sat back up, victorious, and he sat up too and leaned in to suckle her nipples.

She sighed and held him to her, and just like before everything changed, from fun to tender again as he kissed her bare breasts and she started moving on him, holding him to her. She felt so good, so tight and hot and soft and just *right*. Reaver forgot about everything else and lost himself in the heat and pleasure of her body.

They came together, holding tight as the world fell apart around them, falling back to the bed in a heap of tangled limbs, trembling and breathing hard. She curled

against him, warm and sleepy like a kitten, and he fell asleep holding her, more content than he'd ever been.

Chapter Five

She watched him in the moonlight, the hard planes of his face, shadows of stubble and dark locks of hair. Sleep didn't soften him. He still frowned, scowled, tense and angry even in repose.

She'd made him laugh, though. She smiled softly, her fingers playing in his hair as she remembered the dawn breaking over his face when he'd started to smile.

Hard to know what to make of him, this man. The others -- on the phone -- they'd called him Reaver. Not a name so much as a description, a tag, a job. Hard and distant. Not a man who had friends, family. A home. He moved from place to place, finding the invisible evils and slaying them, moving on, leaving no trace of himself. Maybe there were no traces left to leave.

She frowned, watching the rise and fall of his chest as he slept. Last time he'd been himself he'd been a child, a small boy with a home and a family, until the demon had crashed in and broken it all. A little boy who heard his parents' screams and saw the blood, saw the monster who stole everything from him. Like the one he'd killed tonight, scaly and fanged, not remotely human.

The police hadn't believed him. Had told him he'd imagined it, or was traumatized, or had made it up. Gave him counseling. Stuck him in an institution. Labeled him disturbed. Spat him out at sixteen with no preparation for the world but a knowledge that evil existed and people who knew about it were considered crazy.

She felt the anger beating inside him, the fear and confusion of that one childhood night that was twisted and hammered into a burning vow to see every demon on the earth removed.

She felt and knew more about him than she did herself.

Strange, the dreaming state she'd been in. The things she couldn't remember, couldn't understand. The words that wouldn't come. She was submerged in something that cloaked the sense of it all. Hid the language from her. Disguised the words so she couldn't comprehend what was spoken and couldn't find the things she wanted to say. She tried so hard to concentrate, to remember how to do things, but nothing would connect up, and then it all slipped away again.

Sometimes it was clearer, like a dream she could direct, like the fog parted and the words made sense. The music on the radio, familiar to her, but she didn't know how she'd pulled it in and made it play. The menace of the demons, the familiar crackle against her skin, the stench that told her evil was close by. The instinct to fight that had surprised even her.

The clarity that came when Reaver touched her, kissed her, made love to her. The words still wouldn't come, still slipped away, but the world made a little more sense and things... things seemed... clearer.

* * *

Reaver opened his eyes to see a stark moon overhead and tensed, wondering when the hell he'd fallen asleep outside. He was lying on sand, silky smooth sand, and heard the swish of the sea, but couldn't smell it. In fact all he could smell was the faint trace of spice and hot skin that came from Chica.

Right. Another dream.

She was lying across his chest, as naked as she'd been last time he was awake, her chin resting on folded hands as she watched him.

"Another crazy dream where you speak in riddles?"

"Depends what you hear."

Right. He'd take that as a yes.

"Okay, riddle me this," he said, propping his hands behind his head and regarding her. "What kind of girl can psychically tune a car radio and beat seven kinds of shit out of a bunch of demons, but can't talk?"

She looked down at his chest and smiled.

"Unless you can talk, and you're just fucking with me."

She looked up then. "I can't find the words," she said. "They keep sliding away. And when I find them I..."

"You... what?"

"I lose my voice," she said, frowning. "But I found it on the radio." She slid up his body and tucked her head under his chin.

"Right. Which is why I was treated to nine songs about things that only happen when you're asleep. How come you can talk to me here?" Reaver asked, thinking that it was a lot more likely she wasn't, and he was only dreaming this randomly.

"I found my voice here too."

Her weight was gone from his chest, but he never saw her get up. Standing a few feet away from him, wearing the torn summer dress she'd had on when he first found her, she was beautiful. And unreal. And so confusing it made his head ache.

"Who are you?" Reaver asked, sitting up.

She tilted her head. Her lips never moved, but he heard the words as clearly as if she spoke them in his ear. "A scream in the dark. What the monsters have nightmares about. A silent killer, never there."

A flicker of light caught his eye, and he turned to see the demon in the letter sweater. Leaping to his feet, Reaver darted in front of Chica, slamming a fist out to hit the demon, but his hand went right through.

What the hell?

The kid lunged, went through Reaver like a ghost, and Chica started fighting it, moving in that graceful ballet of death he'd watched only a few hours ago. Reaver realized he was seeing a memory and stood back, uneasy.

"You're a demon hunter."

"Restless souls without bodies. Banished from their rotting flesh. All they seek is bones to carry them."

The demon kid landed a punch on the side of Chica's head that sent her flying backwards, hitting the ground and lying still. But her voice continued.

"Dogma's wrong, the lines are tangled. Can't capture something and hold it." Her eyes snapped open. The demon circled, and Reaver stepped out of its unseeing way. "Got to fly. If it's alive, it's got to fly."

Chica rolled to her feet, but there was something a little clumsy in her movements. That blow to the head had hurt her more than she wanted to show. The demon kid taunted her, his mouth opening wide and black, silent insults flying out. Her face remained impassive.

"Shouldn't meddle in things you don't understand." Then something grabbed her attention. The kid's, too.

"No!" Chica cried silently, eerily, under her own narrative.

Reaver squinted through the gloom, but all he saw was the calm, tranquil beach. The demon laughed, his eyes running with blood, as a shadowy figure appeared on the edge of Reaver's vision. A priest.

The priest he'd seen dead.

The man was holding out a Bible and a crucifix and chanting. The whole thing was silent, like a newsreel.

"What's going on?" Reaver said. "An exorcism?"

"Got nowhere to go," Chica's voice informed him. She redoubled her efforts, attacking the demon with her bare hands, strangling and punching, but she wasn't quick enough, she'd been dulled by the fall, and the kid was getting the better of her. The priest advanced despite her repeated entreaties in his direction, silent but clearly warning him off, and Reaver realized what was going to happen. What already had happened.

"Stupid old man," he muttered, "when will they learn it never works?"

Or that it worked too well. Chica had the demon in a headlock when the priest finished his exorcism, and just as it should, the demon's foul, stinking spirit flowed out of the body of the teenage boy. Chica's mouth opened in silent horror, a scream Reaver felt rather than heard, and the demon roared into her body.

The priest blanched, and suddenly it was as if someone turned up the volume. The hideous screech of the demon filled the still air of the tranquil beach as the teenaged kid slumped to the ground, unconscious. Chica's beautiful mouth opened in a howl of laughter that made Reaver's skin crawl.

The thought of that disgusting entity polluting her beautiful body nearly made him retch. What he saw next had bile rising in his throat.

Her face twisted with malevolence, Chica whirled on the priest, who was praying, gibbering, his words running together and making no sense. The demon laughed, balled up Chica's fist, reached way back, and planted the other hand on the priest's shoulder.

Then the fist plunged into the priest's chest, just went right in as if he was made of putty. A hideous wet, cracking sound echoed around the beach, and Chica's hand came out bearing the priest's heart.

Reaver stared at her, holding it up like some sort of trophy, pulsing and oozing and shockingly red, and really thought he might be sick.

The heart fell, the priest slumped lifeless to the ground, and Chica started convulsing. Her body shook and writhed. She fell to her knees, clawing at her throat.

"Chica?"

Reaver ran to her, but her body was insubstantial. The memory. She was choking in her memory. Screams filled the air. Things bulged and writhed under her skin.

"I will! Not! Hold you!" Chica screamed, and then her mouth was flung so wide open he thought her jaw would crack and the demon came flying out, howling like the thousand tortured souls it had swallowed.

Her body went limp. Reaver tried to touch her, but she was made of mist. "Chica? Chica, wake up." Shit, it was his dream. "Wake me up. I really don't want to be asleep any more."

She didn't move, but her voice floated to him. "Look," she said, and he glanced around the clearing.

The kid in the letter sweater was rising to his feet. He glanced at Chica's unconscious form, then the dead priest, and laughed. The hyena-like cackle of a demon.

Then he ran, and vanished from the memory, leaving Reaver kneeling there with two wraith bodies.

"I'd really like to wake up now," he muttered, and then he was back in the motel room, Chica huddled in his arms, clinging to him and sobbing silently. He held her close, held her sweet, strong body that had been so horribly polluted.

He'd never known anyone who'd survive a demon occupation. The spirit corrupted the body so that it died within days or weeks, and the demon had to find a new host. The spirit of the possessed person was swallowed by the demon, and died.

Only an exorcism ever banished a demon from a human host, and Reaver had just seen first hand how that usually panned out.

Just who the hell was the girl in his arms?

"Shh," he repeated, over and over. "Shh, it's all right. You're safe now. You're safe. I'm here. You're safe."

He closed his eyes as Chica shuddered and shook, and in his mind saw the kid in the letter sweater.

Unconvincingly, he repeated, "You're safe now."

And Chica's distant voice echoed in his head. "What from?"

She was quiet the next day. Well, that was to say she didn't mess with the radio and she didn't leap about in her seat. She was as verbose as she'd been since Reaver met her.

He drove on from Arkansas through Tennessee, uneasy the whole way. He'd woken her early and left the motel while it was still quiet, watching everywhere for signs they were under surveillance.

The demon in the letter sweater was still out there, and he'd followed Chica across two states already. Chances were he was still following now. So Reaver took alternative routes, doubled back occasionally, drove fifty miles off the highway and

found a second-hand car dealership where he swapped his old, beat-up truck for another one in similar condition.

Through it all Chica sat subdued beside him, no traces of the wonder she'd shown at everything yesterday. Reaver enjoyed the silence for an hour or two, then it started freaking him out, so he switched on the radio and listened to the quiet burble, hoping it might rouse Chica. It didn't.

He couldn't imagine the horror of the demon possession. No wonder she was silent, strange, detached. He'd been thrown in a mental hospital as a child for exhibiting far lesser symptoms, after what was a considerably smaller trauma.

An image of the rotting, shambling, fanged and scaled beast that had killed his parents flashed before his eyes. It was so horrible they told him he'd imagined it, and after a while he'd started to believe they were right.

Then some kid was admitted to the hospital, screaming and cackling, and Reaver smelled the sulfur and felt the crackle of foul power, and knew he hadn't imagined anything. That kid had killed an orderly and paralyzed two nurses before he escaped into the night.

When Reaver was set free from the endless institutions a month later, he tracked down the demon who'd been in that kid, and then the beast who'd killed his parents, and ended them both.

He hadn't looked back since.

His phone rang midmorning, and he saw the Sundown number displayed there. "Yeah?"

"Reaver, it's Magda. How's it going?"

He glanced at Chica, who was staring dispiritedly out of the window. It was going horribly. "Fine."

"Where are you?"

"Uh." He peered through the truck's dirty windows. "Possibly Tennessee."

"Possibly?"

"Yes."

Hearing his tone, she let it go. "Well, if you can get to New York tomorrow there'll be a passport waiting there for you. I've been talking to a guy in Rome who thinks he can help this girl of yours. Padre Gabriel."

"Padre? No. No prie --"

"Let me finish," Magda said in a voice that reminded him she had three small children. "He's also known as Professore Gabriel. He's a world authority on parapsychology and he's helped several people who've suffered demon-related trauma."

"Demon-related trauma? What the hell does that mean? We're not getting into daytime TV speak here, are we?"

"Don't get sarcastic with me, Reaver. I have two children and a fiancé with chickenpox, and you *never* want to see a werewolf with any kind of disease; one child who is sulking because he *doesn't* have chickenpox; a wedding in two weeks that is still entirely uncatered because my pack leader announced last week that too much raw meat is bad for his heart and he's now a vegetarian, a vegetarian *werewolf*, for Christ's sake; and, oh yes, a wedding dress that doesn't entirely fit because either I've put on a lot of weight or I'm actually pregnant. And I've spent the last two days trying to remember the Italian for 'parapsychology' which, believe me, is not easy. So *really*, don't get snarky with me."

Reaver held the phone away from his ear and said nothing.

Magda took a deep breath and appeared to calm down. "Demon-related trauma refers to people, not to put it too bluntly, like you, Reaver. People who've been possessed rarely even survive, which I'm sure you know, but there are lots of other people -- who've been attacked by a demon, or who've witnessed an attack. Padre Gabriel deals with a lot of people who've only just found out that what they always thought was a load of Hollywood bollocks about monsters is actually real. I'm told it's very traumatic."

Reaver nearly laughed at that. Very traumatic. It had been twenty-five years since he found out that monsters existed and he still occasionally had nightmares about it.

"And how does he deal with them?" he asked. "Does he give them lots of drugs and tell them in a soothing voice that they've just imagined everything?"

There was a small silence, and when Magda spoke again she'd lost a little of her waspish tone. "Things have moved on since then, Reaver. Padre Gabriel knows the monsters are real."

Reaver sighed and looked over at Chica again. She reached out and adjusted the air vent in front of her, then slumped back in her seat, staring blankly ahead once more.

"Right," he said. "Rome it is."

"Want me to book the tickets?"

"You really do everything, don't you?"

"I make the sun rise in the morning," Magda said briskly. "When do you want to fly?"

"ASAP. And, Magda?"

"Yes."

She sounded pissed off. Well, he was pissed off too. "Demon hunters in America. Do you know any others?"

"Unlike you to need assistance."

"I don't need assistance. I just need to find someone."

"Someone in particular?"

"A girl."

A minor pause, then with laughter in her voice Magda said, "We're not a dating agency, Reaver. Although actually, I do know a website that sets up paranormals --"

"I do not need a dating website," Reaver growled, rousing some interest from Chica. "And I'm not 'paranormal.' I just want to know who she is."

"All right, all right. Got a description?"

Reaver looked sideways at Chica, who was regarding him impassively.

"She's small. Probably not much more than five foot. Dark hair, long, wavy. Green --" He peered closer, then swerved the car back onto the road. "Green eyes." Down turned mouth. Small, high breasts. Slender legs that felt fucking perfect wrapped around a man's waist. A pussy that tasted like nectar.

He bit the inside of his cheek and kept quiet about those bits. "The picture I sent for the passport," he said. "That's her."

"Pretty girl. Not Fae, is she?"

"No." He frowned, looked back at her. Then again, it might explain those powers... "No. But she does have mad skills."

"Demon hunting skills," Magda said, amusement rich in her voice.

"Yes. Do you know anyone?"

"I have to say I don't. There aren't a lot of demon hunters in America, as you know, because there just aren't as many demons."

"Yeah." He knew that. Demons preferred places where it was easier to slip under the radar. There was too much regulation in America. Eastern Europe and Asia were packed with them, however, and you could hardly move in Africa without stepping over one.

But there were enough in America. And few enough hunters that Reaver was seldom bothered by them.

"Offhand I can't think of a single one," Magda said. "They're mostly grizzled old woodsmen anyway. But I'll ask around and get back to you, okay?"

"Yeah. Thanks."

"I'll call you with the flight details."

She signed off, and Reaver looked over at Chica. "Hey," he said. "Ever been to Rome?"

She fiddled with her seatbelt and sighed.

"What about London? You been to England?"

Nothing.

"There's a company there called Sundown, Inc. They deal with all kinds of paranormal stuff. I used to do work for them over there before I came here. Magda -- that was her on the phone -- occasionally calls me with an assignment."

He wondered why the hell he was telling her this. Why he was talking at all. Usually he could go whole days without uttering a word unless he really had to. He couldn't stand people who chattered just to fill the silence, and yet here he was, doing just that.

"Sometimes places get demon infestations and they get me in to clean them out. Then they have to make up stories as to why everyone went mad and died. There was a demon infestation in England in the 1660s that they tried to cover up by calling it a plague epidemic. They got most of it cleared up except for a small pocket in London, and one of the hunters just got pissed off and set fire to a demon nest. Which was a bad plan in a city built almost entirely of wood and thatch. Burned down half of London. Cue more stories, about a fire in a bakery. I reckon half of Sundown's work is spreading stories to cover up the truth."

Chica lifted her gaze to his face.

"Because people would go mad if they knew the truth, wouldn't they?" Reaver said. "If they really knew that demons inhabit the bodies of ordinary people, or that vampires really exist. Hell, I can't imagine the other parents being very happy if they found out that Magda's kids are werewolves."

Still Chica said nothing, and Reaver eventually gave up.

Chapter Six

It was late when he stopped the car and got out. She got out too, just following him and paying no attention to their surroundings. Vaguely, she was aware of bright lights and lots of people but she wasn't interested in them. She wasn't interested in very much.

Reaver spoke to someone for a while, then led her to a bedroom where he set down his bag and spoke to her.

It was hard. She heard his voice, the deep, smoky timbre of it, and that was distracting enough. But the words... they were so blurred, so hard to understand. She'd been distant all day, unconnected, listless, and now she couldn't summon the concentration to understand what he was saying.

He repeated it several times, made gestures she couldn't connect with, and then gave up and went to the door.

That she understood. He was leaving, and she couldn't let him go.

Running over, she grabbed his arm and tried to tell him to stay. But her voice was miles away, she still couldn't find it. It was back in the place she'd been all day, far away and painful. She didn't want to go back there. Not ever.

Reaver tried to shrug her off, but she gripped harder. He spoke to her, and this time the sounds were more familiar. Clearer.

"Chica, let go of me. I'm not going far."

Why did he keep calling her that?

"I'm going to get some food. You might not be hungry, but I am."

He was still moving toward the door. She dug her heels in and shook her head.

Reaver sighed, and let the door close. "Okay, all right. I'll stay here and starve."

She didn't know what that meant, but he was staying, so that was a good thing. She followed him back into the room, then when she was sure he wasn't going to bolt, she let go of him. He looked at her and shook his head, then he picked up a card from the desk and read it. She watched him warily, starting when he crossed the room again, but all he did was pick up the phone and talk into it.

He wasn't leaving. Good. That was all she wanted.

When he was there, things were clearer. They made more sense. She could understand, sometimes, when she was with him. Outside, the world was a frightening, densely confusing place. Even in her dreams, where she'd felt safe before, the fear intruded. Made her remember things. The veiled place between the real world and the world where she lived got thinner in her dreams, and the memories...

The memories were so awful she retreated again.

Reaver sat on the bed and pulled off his shoes. She watched, fascinated by the movement of muscles under his clothes. Focusing on Reaver made the bad things go away again, so she stared at him, concentrating hard.

He pulled off his shirt and she bit her lip, looking at the muscles flexing under his gleaming skin. Last night, before the dream, she remembered how those muscles had felt under her hands. How his skin had tasted. The heat of his body.

She moved toward him, but a sound at the door made him stand up and turn away.

She didn't mind so much though. The view from behind was pretty nice, too.

He opened the door, and a man came in with a table on wheels. Reaver gave him money, and the man went away again.

The table smelled good. It smelled really good.

She ventured over, peered at the plates and boxes on it. Reaver said something, but she wasn't concentrating enough to understand. He opened a box, and the most heavenly smell came from it.

He picked up a triangle of the food inside and put it to his lips, and she watched, utterly enchanted, as his strong white teeth took a bite, the food disappeared between those wonderful lips of his, and then his jaw moved as he chewed.

When he swallowed, the complex movements of his throat nearly undid her. She'd never seen anything so beautiful as this man eating.

He ate the whole piece, then gestured to the box. "Pizza's good. You sure you're not hungry?"

She glanced at the pizza, which had seemed so tempting just a few seconds ago, and then back at him. No. She wanted him more.

"Eat something," Reaver said, and picked up a piece of the food. He held it out to her. "Come on, you must be starving."

It did smell really good. She sniffed, and he smiled at her expression. He smiled! She looked up in surprise. He looked wonderful when he smiled. Younger, happier. She wanted to keep him looking like that, so she ate a bite of the pizza.

And it was good. Chewy and greasy and strongly flavored. Really delicious. She chewed and swallowed, licked the grease from her lips, and opened her mouth for more.

That made Reaver laugh, which made her smile. He fed her some more, and then some more, until she'd eaten the whole piece. He moved to get another piece, but she saw the grease glistening on his fingers and moved in to lick it off.

Reaver caught his breath and stood very still. She licked his index finger, tasting the food she'd just eaten, dipped her tongue into the crevices around his nail and worked out every last bit. Then she sucked his finger into her mouth.

Reaver groaned, and she looked up and saw the blissful expression on his face.

Blissful. From sucking his finger.

Well, he had plenty more of those.

She licked and sucked each of his other fingers in turn, even the ones that had no grease on them, and then she started tracing the lines of his palm with her tongue.

There was no trace left of the pizza, but he tasted so good underneath it that she kept on licking.

“Chica, you’re killing me,” Reaver groaned, and lifted up his hand, bringing her head with it, so she was looking at him. There was naked lust in his eyes.

Reaver took his hand away, and replaced it with his mouth. Damn, that tasted of pizza, too! But she wasn’t interested in food any more, so she made sure to lick away every trace of it, all the better to enjoy Reaver’s own delicious taste.

He pulled her into his arms, pressing her body tight against his. He was still shirtless, and the heat of his body seeped through her clothes. She pressed her hands against the hard muscles in his back. He felt so wonderful, so big and strong, solid in her arms.

He chased the darkness away, made her feel safe again. He was wonderful. Everything about him was wonderful.

She wanted to feel more of him, more of his hot skin under her palms, so she slipped her hands under the edge of his jeans.

Reaver moved her hands away and stepped back, and she looked up at him in confusion. Why was he stopping this now?

But he wasn’t stopping anything. He was unfastening her shirt, and then her bra. He moved to cup her breasts, but she stepped back into his arms, wanting to feel his bare skin against hers. To catalogue the differences. He was hotter, his skin warmer than hers. His body was harder, bigger. The ridges of muscle along his stomach fascinated her, the hair on his chest caressing her skin quite wonderfully.

His arms were big with muscle and the palms of his hands were rough where they rested on her shoulders. She frowned. Her palms were rough, too, but that was the only thing they had in common. Next to him she felt so much smaller, softer, insubstantial.

He ran his fingers over the sore skin on her arm, and she flinched. He’d cleaned that wound for her last night, bandaged it. Such kindness in a man who was so hard-edged.

She lifted her head and rubbed her cheek against his. His jaw was rough with stubble that scraped her sensitive skin, but she didn't mind. In fact she liked it. She kissed the stubble, then his mouth, and he wrapped those wonderful arms around her and kissed her back.

She clearly wasn't paying attention enough, because almost without her realizing it, she was lying on the bed, naked, and he was standing there taking off his jeans. This was a good thing, she thought, remembering what had happened last time they were naked together. Just the thought of it sent heat rushing through her body, tingles in places she didn't have names for, and she reached for him impatiently.

He came to her, lying between her legs, and kissed her some more. She'd never get tired of his kisses, but right now she wanted more, and flipped him over onto his back to get it. He laughed, then held up his hands as if surrendering to her.

I love it when you laugh, she thought, and smiled her appreciation as she sank down on him, remembering that yesterday it had felt so good it had blocked out everything else. He filled her up; there wasn't anything else but him, nothing but this glorious feeling. She couldn't breathe, it felt so good.

Reaver slid his hands up her back, drawing her down toward him, and kissed her, and that together with the heat and slide of him inside her made her completely insensible to everything else. She found herself on her back again with his whole length against hers, his hot skin, the hairs on his legs, the muscles under her hands... so much sensation she was blinded by it. And when she saw again, it was his eyes blazing down with such passion and intensity that it nearly made her weep.

Then he moved, sliding deeper inside her, filling her up. She closed her legs around his waist to hold him there but he moved anyway, and the flex of his buttocks was so nice that she let him. Besides, he was creating the most glorious friction inside her, sliding almost fully out, then back in again. Each time making her hotter, making the pleasure build and build inside her until it almost hurt, and then it all exploded.

She fell apart, her whole body in pieces, glorious hot, molten pieces that fused back together slowly to find Reaver still there, still inside her, holding her close and smiling. His eyes were so gentle.

I love you, she thought, but her mouth couldn't shape the words so she tried to tell him with her body, holding him and caressing him as he moved and exploded inside her.

I love you.

They drove into New York City late the next afternoon. Chica had seemed brighter all day, Reaver thought, probably because there had been no horrible dreams last night. And also maybe because of the sex.

He smiled, which in itself was rare enough. Here he was, stuck in Manhattan's own form of hell -- the traffic jam -- with a girl who was almost certainly crazy, and yet he actually felt... happy. It was completely mad, but it was the truth.

He looked over at Chica, who gave him a sunny smile. They'd made love again this morning, and then again in the shower. No wonder he was feeling happy.

But it wasn't just the sex. He'd spent lost weekends with women who did amazing things to his body, and then parted from them and never spared them a second thought. They'd made him feel good, but they'd never actually made him feel happy. Not like Chica did. Chica, who only seemed to hear one word in ten and understand one in fifty, who thought pizza was the food of the gods, who could dispatch three demons in short order without breaking a sweat, who laughed in delight at big dogs and small children, who kissed him as if he was providing oxygen and looked at him like he was the entire world.

She was a headache in a suitcase, but she made him happy. Go figure.

Eventually, about seventy years after they emerged from the Lincoln Tunnel, he pulled up outside Aura's tall, handsome townhouse, overlooking Central Park. At this time of year the park was bleak and stark, the trees bare, the sky threatening.

"Come on," he said to Chica, getting out of the car and ignoring the disgusted looks the well-heeled passers-by were giving his hideous old truck. She scrambled out and took his hand, which warmed him wonderfully, and they went up the steps of the big old house.

The door was answered by a man who seemed to be wearing all his clothes at once. Snow boots and three sweaters, scarves and gloves and an earflap hat. Indoors.

He peered out at them wildly from under the hat's fur lining. "Oh, my God," he said, staring at Reaver in a way that made him distinctly uncomfortable.

"Hi," he said.

"Hel-lo."

"I'm -- we're -- looking for Aura."

"Oh, honey." The heavily dressed man reached out and ran the backs of his fingers across Reaver's jaw. He flinched away, making Chica giggle silently.

"Maybe we have the wrong address." He started to leave, but was instantly called back.

"No, darling, you have the right address! I'm *so* sorry. I was just too bewitched by your charms."

Chica bit her own knuckle.

"You must be the demon hunter!"

"You want to say that a little louder?" Reaver muttered.

"What, demon hunter?" The weirdo opened his mouth. "Hey, everybody! This guy's a demon hunter! Yeah! He tracks 'em down and smacks 'em up! And we're all faeries! Inside this house! I'm a *faery*!"

"Yeah, don't we know it," called a guy on the other side of the street.

"You see?" the faery said. "No one cares. Come on in."

Glowing, Reaver followed him inside, Chica still clinging onto his hand. She looked the extraordinary man up and down as she passed him, and he winked at her.

"I know, I know," he said, pulling off his hat to reveal pale pink hair, "but it's just so damn cold out there and I couldn't disturb the others." He shivered theatrically. "I don't know how you people stand it."

Inside, the heating was turned up to tropical temperatures. Given that the outside climate was fairly mild for winter, Reaver thought this a touch dramatic. He was ushered up a grand flight of stairs with the faery following behind, directing disconcertingly longing looks at Reaver's backside, which made Chica laugh even more.

Upstairs, they were shown into a handsome parlor decorated with exquisite furniture and two of the most beautiful people Reaver had ever seen, reclining on a sofa together. The man was big, really big, so much so that he made Reaver feel small. He was holding a woman who dozed against his chest, covered by a cashmere blanket, looking tiny and fragile.

He squinted at her. Tiny, fragile, and familiar. "Aura?"

She came awake with a start, which earned Reaver a scowl from the man-mountain. Brushing red-gold curls from her eyes, she blinked once or twice in a fetching way and frowned delicately at him. "Reaver! Oh honey, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to fall asleep."

He noticed she wasn't making any effort to get up, though.

"How have you been, darling?"

"Human," he said. "How about you?"

She gave a tinkling laugh. "Didn't I tell you I was Fae?"

"No."

"Oh. Well, guess what?"

He narrowed his eyes at her. Beside him, Chica clung to his arm and sent dirty looks at the Fae.

"You two know each other?" asked the pink-haired man in delight.

"We've met," Reaver said shortly. As he recalled, she'd never given him her name. At the time he hadn't cared much.

"We spent the most wonderful night together a few years ago," Aura said, shivering delightfully. The blanket fell around her shoulders and the man-mountain tucked it back around her. She sent him an adoring smile. "I don't think I've ever known someone quite so in need of my services."

"Your services?" Reaver asked tightly.

"She's a sex faery," the man-mountain said, sounding amused. "Helps people with... sexual problems."

"I don't have sexual problems," Reaver said. Chica stroked his arm soothingly.

"No, no -- I don't mean like that," Aura said, seeing his expression. "You were wonderful, darling. Honestly spectacular." She turned to the man-mountain and said, "He does this wonderful thing with his tongue --"

"I don't really want to know," he said.

"I could stand to hear a little more," the pink-haired guy said.

"Anyway. What I meant was, I've never met anyone who quite needed the release as much as he did." Aura looked him up and down, sadly. "You were so tense. Just this quivering ball of anger."

"Can't imagine why," Reaver said. "Look. Magda said you had something for me? A passport."

"Oh, yes, darling. Arrived this morning. Just wait here a second and I'll get it. Oh -- you know Ell and Tadgh, don't you?"

"No."

"Oh." She beamed, seemingly impervious to his curt tone, and pointed to the pink-haired faery who was shooting such lustful looks at Reaver. "This is Ell. Ignore the get-up. He's moaning because we made him come back to the northern hemisphere in winter."

"I'm Seelie," Ell whined, "I'm not meant for winter! Can't we go back to Australia?"

"Not until I've seen that babywear sample sale," Aura said. "This is Tadgh." She indicated the giant who'd been holding her, and stood up, letting the blanket fall and revealing a swollen belly.

Babywear sample sale. Reaver went cold, and then reason tapped him on the shoulder and reminded him that it had been years since he'd slept with Aura. Besides, she was looking pretty cozy with the man-mountain, Tadgh.

"Congratulations," he said, and she gave a smile that lit up the room.

"Thank you, darling! And aren't you going to introduce your friend?"

Reaver looked down at Chica, who was clinging like a limpet.

"She -- her name's on the passport," he said, knowing Aura would have peeked at it.

"What, she really is called Jane Smith?"

Crap. "For all I know," he said. "I don't actually know what her name is, okay? She can't speak."

"Oh, darling!"

All three of them regarded Chica with expressions of dismay that had the effect of making her shrink even closer to Reaver. Their next barrage of questions made her try to hide behind him.

"She's never been able to speak?"

"I don't know."

"Well, how long have you known her?"

"Not long, look --"

"It's so unfair! She's such a pretty thing. Are you sleeping with her?"

"None of your --"

"Is she a demon hunter too?"

"How did you meet?"

"What made her lose her voice?"

Reaver was about to bellow at them all to shut the fuck up when Ell, who'd been creeping closer, touched Chica's face and leapt back, shrieking, as if he'd been burned.

"Merciful fucking Zeus," he yelped. "What happened to her?"

They all fell silent.

"Demon possession," Reaver said quietly, and the three Fae all stared at Chica with expressions of mixed awe and revulsion.

"I didn't know it was possible to survive that," Tadgh said.

"It isn't. Usually." Memories of Chica screaming at the demon to be gone flashed through Reaver's brain. "That's why she -- at least, I think that's why..."

There was silence while they all digested this.

"I'll get that passport," Aura said, and fled the room.

Tadgh gestured for Reaver and Chica to take a seat, whereupon she tried to crawl into his lap. Ell mumbled something about coffee and escaped after Aura.

The clock ticked.

"Congratulations," Reaver said into the silence, as Chica buried her head in his shoulder. "On the baby."

"Thanks," Tadgh said, "but actually it's Ell's."

Reaver blinked, and tried to reconcile the pink-haired supergay faery with someone who could possibly get a girl pregnant.

Tadgh smiled. "Yeah, I know. He needed some help. He gets put off by girls and their 'squishy bits.' But he had to provide an heir -- he's Seelie royalty."

"Ah," Reaver said, although it still made no sense to him. Faeries rarely did.

"It's complicated," Tadgh said, his eyes lifting to Aura as she came back in bearing an envelope, "but basically it has to do with lots of threesome sex."

"I do not want to know," Reaver said.

"Didn't think you would."

He took the envelope from Aura and opened it. Inside were tickets for a direct flight from JFK to Fiumicino that evening, directions from the airport to Padre Gabriel's address, and a British passport in the name of Jane Smith. It carried the photo Reaver had emailed to Magda after several irritating hours of buying a camera and laptop and introducing them to each other, and a birth date that put her at twenty-one. He

wondered for a moment at the nationality of the passport, then figured it would be less hassle to get into Italy with it, and there would be less scrutiny if her passport matched his.

"Incidentally," he said, looking up at Tadgh and Aura, "do you know anything about a Padre Gab --"

Chica sprang to her feet, interrupting him.

"What? You don't like Italians?"

"Are you okay?" Aura said. "Is she okay -- whoa!"

Chica suddenly sped past her, almost too fast to see. Reaver dropped the passport and raced after her.

"What's going on?" Ell's voice floated from the next room as Reaver followed Chica down the stairs. As he ran, he pulled the knife from his hip and noticed with some disquiet that she was doing the same. Where the hell had she got a knife from?

She threw open a door and zoomed down another set of stairs to the basement, which was dark and gloomy, the only light from a small window up by the ceiling. Chica flew over to it and grabbed something that seemed to be climbing in. It squealed.

Reaver closed his eyes, hoping that she hadn't just tried to kill the neighbor's cat. But cats didn't whimper like that. Nor did they smell so bad.

The faeries piled into the room behind him, and one of them switched on a light. The swinging bulb illuminated Chica crouched by the window, holding a knife to the slimy throat of a small, gray goblin.

"Pleasse, no kiiill," it begged in a sibilant voice.

"Goblins, again?" Aura said. "What is wrong with this house?"

"This happens often?" Reaver said, not taking his eyes off Chica and the ferocious expression on her face. How the hell had she known it was there?

"Every now and then," Tadgh said, reaching up to steady the bulb.

"Sometimes the Unseelie send them to bug us," Aura said.

"I told you we should have stayed in Australia," Ell said.

"Sure, 'cos there are no lethal creatures there at all."

"The bargain with the Unseelie was rescinded," Tadgh said to the goblin, which squirmed in the light and blinked its big, pale, froglike eyes at them. "Who sent you?"

"I cccome by myssselfff," the goblin hissed.

"Kill it," Ell said, and it squealed like a stuck pig.

"No, wait," Aura said. "It might just be a messenger or something. Why are you here?"

"Killlll the High Cccourt Fffae," the goblin hissed.

"Well, that was stupid," Reaver muttered.

"Okay, kill it," Aura said, and turned to go. "Hope you boys don't mind, but I have a delicate stomach right now."

Reaver stepped forward. Goblins could be hard to kill if you didn't know how. Besides, he was capable of being a gentleman. "Chica?" he said. "You want me to --" She slid the knife into the creature's eye, and green slime bubbled out. "-- Or apparently you're okay with that. Why am I not surprised?"

She looked up at him, and her expression was almost wry.

"There's a garbage can out back," Tadgh said, pushing the door open. "I'll go get a plastic bag."

He loped up the stairs after Aura, and Ell turned to Reaver and Chica.

"That was pretty impressive," he said.

"Yes, it was," Reaver agreed. They both regarded Chica, who stood there holding the dead goblin with two fingers, at arm's length.

"That creature could have killed any one of us," Ell said, quietly. "Could have hurt the baby."

There was pain on his face. Reaver knew that children were the one thing the Fae prized above everything else.

"Little Jane Smith here just saved the future Seelie heir," Ell said, smiling at her. She gave a small smile back. "Do you realize how important that is?"

"I have an inkling," Reaver said.

"If there's any way I can help her," Ell said, "anything I can do. It's yours. I mean that."

"That's very kind of you," Reaver said, "but really --"

Tadgh came back into the basement with a black plastic sack. "The Seelie heir has just offered you an unlimited obligation," he said. "For the love of God, take it."

Reaver glanced at him, then back at Chica. She held out the goblin corpse, which smelled even worse now, and dropped it into the bag.

"Can you -- can you heal her?"

Ell narrowed his eyes thoughtfully, went over to Chica and gently put his hands on either side of her face. He flinched. She looked up at him with those huge eyes of hers, and Reaver felt his own nails digging into his palm.

"No," Ell said eventually, and Reaver sighed. "She has to heal herself." He glanced back. "If I gave her back her voice now, she'd just be screaming."

"Right. Well, thanks anyway."

"Anything else you need?"

"Not right now," Reaver said.

"Future claim, then." Ell held out his hand, and Reaver shook it. "I wish you well."

Chapter Seven

Chica was fascinated by everything the airport had to offer. When they reached the gate, she knelt on one of the chairs with her nose pressed up against the window, watching the planes in awe. When they came to board, he had to drag her down the aisle between the seats as she lagged like a child, staring at everything.

It was a night flight, hell in a tin can, and Reaver intended to try and sleep away as much of it as he could. But Chica, squirming around in her seat, wriggled so much that he didn't get a second's rest until they were in the air and the lights were dimmed. He pulled the blanket over himself, ratcheted his seat back, and closed his eyes.

And felt Chica's head resting on his shoulder, her hand creeping across his chest.

"Get some sleep, Chica," he said. "We're losing six hours tonight."

She nuzzled his neck.

"Seriously," he whispered, "stop that."

She frowned at him, but didn't try anything else. Curled up against his side, she nestled in close. Reaver drifted off wondering how he'd ever been able to sleep without her there.

* * *

He wasn't surprised to find himself dreaming vividly almost straight away. He was lying on a bed in a darkened room, the sheets silky against his naked skin, the mattress soft. Chica lay beside him on her side, her head propped on her hand, watching him.

"Hey," he said, and she smiled. "You talking to me tonight?"

"If I have anything to say." She reached out and stroked back a lock of hair from his forehead. Her fingers were cool, her touch fleeting. His body reacted to it as if she'd

just stroked him all over. Her voice echoed in his head. "Actions speak louder than words."

"They do when you're around."

Chica leaned in and kissed him softly on the lips, rolled into his arms and pressed all that lushly soft, smooth skin against him.

"The faery said," Reaver murmured against her mouth between kisses, "that you have to heal yourself."

She nodded, her lips feathering across his jaw.

"Do you know... I mean, is it something you... can you do it?"

She smiled, and again her voice arrived in his head without going anywhere near her mouth. Which was just as well, since he was very much enjoying what her mouth was doing instead.

"I can do anything."

He was beginning to think that was true. "How did you know the goblin was there?"

"I... knew."

"Yeah, but how?"

She frowned, lifted her head and regarded him a while, looking puzzled, before replying, "Can't say."

What a surprise. "You're a demon hunter?"

"Shh." Chica placed a finger gently over his lips. "You talk too much."

Reaver would have laughed at that if she hadn't stroked his lips, very effectively distracting him, then slipped her finger inside his mouth.

Heat flashed through him as he remembered her licking the pizza grease from his fingers the night before. Hell, he'd been reciting demon classifications inside his head to keep from coming, and all she'd been doing was licking his finger.

Well, that wasn't totally true. She'd been making love to his finger. To his whole hand. Dear God, she had a talented tongue.

He decided to return the favor, sucking her finger deep into his mouth and swirling his tongue around the tip. Chica's eyes closed, her lips tilting in a smile. He licked the sensitive bit of skin between her fingers, then moved down across her palm. She let out a gasp, then a moan, and shifted her body against his.

Her legs were astride his waist, and she was totally naked. As her body writhed, her hot cunt rubbed against his cock and Reaver groaned around her fingers. She was slippery wet, her folds stroking him as she moved. He sucked her finger deeper into his mouth and watched her heavy-lidded eyes as she gasped and sighed.

Her hips rocked against his. She was so wet, and so hot, Reaver got harder and harder with every brush of her soft flesh against his. He moved his tongue in small circles on her palm, and she moaned, the first time he'd ever heard her make such a sound.

He liked it.

Thrusting his hips gently against her, he massaged his cock against her clit, feeling it harden as he stroked against it. She started breathing faster.

Let's play a little game, Reaver thought. It's called Make Chica Come Without Using My Hands. He ran his tongue up her second finger and used his erection to stroke between her legs. Rubbing the head of his cock against her labia, he thrust up gently, never entering her, just stroking her flesh with his.

The temptation to sink into her was overwhelming. Her heat beckoned him and memories of how tight and wet she felt flooded his mind. He sucked her finger deeper into his mouth and tried to ignore the desperate intentions of his cock, moving to rub it against her clit again.

The pressure was almost unbearable. Determined that she would come before him, he closed his eyes and tried to block out the sighs and moans Chica was making. Even though they were damn sexy and he wanted to hear more of them. A lot more.

Every night.

Every day, too.

Oh, hell.

The creeping realization that he didn't want to leave her shocked Reaver into losing his rhythm. His hips stilled, his tongue faltered, but Chica didn't seem to notice and rubbed herself against him more and more insistently, harder and harder until any emotional thoughts were driven from his mind by the heat and slickness of her. Just when he thought he couldn't hold back any longer she cried out, her whole body tensing, and he heard her orgasm for the first time. Watched her fall apart. Held her as she collapsed, quivering, on his chest. Stroked her hair and kissed her mouth.

She smiled at him, and the heat in her eyes doubled. Before he knew what was going on, she'd slid off his body, nuzzled his hip with her cheek, and sucked his hard, aching cock into her mouth.

Reaver came immediately, exploding into her heat, cursing even through the power and the pleasure that he hadn't got around to being inside her yet. But then she did something amazing. She swallowed down all his come and carried on sucking.

His penis was soft, shrinking, but she licked and kissed and swirled her tongue around it, bringing it back to life with her mouth. Her breasts rubbed his side as she moved, and Reaver started getting hard again. How could he not?

He stroked his hand down her back, grasped her hips with both hands and pulled her over him so her thighs were either side of his face, her wet, plump pussy lips above his mouth.

"Don't stop." He proceeded to lick up every last drop of moisture from her delicious pussy. Of course, the more he licked the wetter she got, so he carried on licking, plunging his tongue deep inside her, licking her from cunt to ass, sucking her labia between his lips.

She whimpered around his cock. It was a new experience for Reaver, and the tiny vibrations thundered through him. Oh, hell yes. She tasted so good, spicy and sweet all at the same time, and her flesh was so plump and responsive. He ran his hands up the backs of her thighs, stroking the soft skin, loving the curve of thigh into buttock. As he licked her clit he slid one finger inside her pussy and she moaned, which was definitely a good sensation around his cock.

Her mouth sank down further, taking more of him. He was fully hard now, thrusting up into her heat, wishing he was inside her pussy, not her mouth.

In fact, why wasn't he?

He rolled her onto her back, pulling his cock from her mouth with a pop and grinning at the heavy-eyed, hard-nippled, spread-legged degenerate image she presented.

"More," she murmured huskily, her lips swollen and wet, and he kissed them just because it had been far too long since he'd tasted her mouth. They rolled together, and he honestly wasn't sure if she thrust down onto him or he slid inside her, but her heat enclosed him and he shuddered with the glory of it.

Moving inside her, her skin sliding against his, slick with sweat, her body so soft and strong. She was incredible. Her hard nipples scraped his chest. Her hands clutched at the muscles in his back as he drove deeper into her. He heard her whispers and moans and realized he could live forever in this moment, hearing her, feeling her.

He felt the ripple of muscle around his cock an instant before she started coming, her body shaking, her hips bucking, and her pussy clamped down on him. She was crying out, "Yes, Reaver, yes!" and clutching at him, and he lost himself in the ecstasy on her face for an instant before he came too, a glorious release of light and stars. And when he came back down to earth, she was there, holding him, stroking his hair, murmuring in his ear.

"I love you, Reaver. I love you."

But of course, he was only dreaming.

Chapter Eight

Rome was cold and unusually bleak. Reaver wondered dully if this was because of the weather, or the suddenly unsettling knowledge that he'd soon be leaving Chica.

Magda had booked two tickets to Rome, but only one back to America.

All I'm doing is delivering her, he told himself as their taxi hurtled, lemming-like, through narrow streets of impossibly beautiful buildings. *Just taking care of someone helpless until we get to someone who can look after her properly.*

He glanced at Chica, who was leaning against his shoulder, asleep, and snorted. Like she'd ever been helpless.

His phone rang as the taxi orbited the Coliseum at lightning speed. He squinted at the number, feeling more than a little travel sick. "Yeah?"

"Reaver, it's Magda. Are you in Rome yet?"

"Yep." The car took a corner at about a hundred miles an hour. Chica's eyes came open, and she stared around in wonder, smiling at everything. The insane speed of their clearly psychotic driver appeared to leave her entirely unconcerned.

"Right. How's Echo?"

"Who?"

"Your girlfriend. I asked around, emailed her photo to a few people. Eventually I got a response from a yeti in Saskatchewan --"

"A what?"

"Yeti. You know. Big guys, covered in fur. Don't ever call them snowmen."

"Right," Reaver said, and reminded himself that he fought demons on a daily basis.

"He said she was almost certainly a demon hunter called Echo. She operates mostly out of Canada, but she sometimes dips down into the northern US. Montana and

places. I don't know, I don't do geography. What the hell she was doing in Texas is anyone's guess."

Reaver watched Chica, who was peering excitedly out of the windows at anything and everything.

"Echo?"

She didn't respond.

"Yeah. Yeti said you never see her, only where she's been. Seemed to imply she was some sort of sanity-challenged... mentalist."

"Right," Reaver said again, because that about figured.

"Is that any help to you?"

"Yeah. Actually, it is. Thanks."

"Are you at Padre Gabriel's yet?"

"No. We're in a taxi."

Magda whistled. "A Roman taxi? I'll light a candle for you."

Five minutes later the taxi ricocheted to a halt outside a very pretty building overlooking the Piazza Navona, and Reaver climbed out gratefully. Handing over an outsized handful of Euros, he yanked Chica out of the way of the cab as it hurtled off again, feeling distinctly worse for wear. And he still had a return journey to make.

More depressed than ever, he rang the ornate doorbell, and stood looking at Chica. She looked back, her face unreadable.

"Are you Echo?" he asked.

She touched his face and smiled. Yeah, he thought. Echo. Only the memory of her remains.

The door was opened by an older man wearing a cassock and white collar. He had a gray beard and a kindly smile, and Reaver tried to feel good about leaving Chica with him.

"Padre Gabriel?"

The man gave a graceful nod. "Reaver?"

"Yeah. This is..." He looked at Chica, willing her to speak up and introduce herself. But she just stared at the priest, her eyes roaming over his face. "I don't know her name," he said, giving up. "She won't speak."

"Ah." The priest regarded Chica for a long moment, then he nodded. "Please, won't you come in," Padre Gabriel said, his voice accented with Italian. "Did you have a good journey?"

Reaver's groin tightened as he remembered just how good. "Yeah. Fine. Thanks."

"Please come and sit down, and we will have some tea. I know those red-eye flights from America are exhausting."

"You travel a lot?"

"My work takes me all over the world," Padre Gabriel said, leading them up a flight of stone stairs and into a sunny library, every inch of the walls covered in books. "But it is only in Rome I find the solace I need the most."

"Magda said you're also a professor of parapsychology," Reaver said, watching Chica wander around the room, poking at the books.

"Yes." Padre Gabriel gestured to several certificates on the walls. "A man must study evil in order to fight it, don't you agree?"

Reaver was still watching Chica, who was spinning a bronze globe around on its axis. "I'm not one for studying," he said.

"But you know your prey." He followed Reaver's gaze. "The demon who possessed her. Is it still living?"

"Yeah. It was in the body of a high-school... kid..."

He broke off. Chica had gone very still.

"Chica?"

"Chica?" Padre Gabriel raised his eyebrows.

"Have to call her something," Reaver muttered. "Spent too much time in southern Texas. Chica, are you all --"

In one of the blurring, ferociously quick standing starts he was getting used to, she took off, flying across the library in a straight line that had her leaping over a table

and slamming through a small door in the far wall. Reaver was on his feet in an instant, chasing after her.

It'll be a relief not to have to go chasing after her all the time, he thought, even as his blood pumped and the adrenaline flooded his brain. She's so unstable. Time to pass her on to someone who has the time and patience to put up with her.

The small doorway led to a flight of stairs going down, and he got there just in time to see Chica leaping out of a window halfway up. "Chica, no!"

Reaver raced to the window, his heart hammering, and stared down into the street below. It was a smaller back street, not much more than an alley, and she was already disappearing around the corner, out of sight.

Reaver leapt out of the window without even thinking, and took off after her.

"Reaver!" Padre Gabriel's voice came from above. "Are you all right?"

Reaver didn't waste time or breath replying. He had to catch up with Chica. She could get lost, get hurt -- Rome was a confusing place, and she didn't speak the language. There were demons around wherever you went, and those drivers were maniacs. It wasn't safe. He couldn't let her go.

He couldn't let her go.

"Chica," he yelled, seeing her vanish around another corner, and another. She didn't slow down. "Chica!"

He rounded the last corner, and saw her leaping into the air in a flying kick, her sturdy boot slamming into the chest of a middle-aged woman. She looked vaguely familiar, but he couldn't think why.

"Chica, what the hell are you --"

Then he smelt it. The rotten stench of sulfur, the crackle of demon energy prickling against his skin. The familiar nausea washed over him.

The woman thudded back against a wall and cackled. Her mouth was black. Her eyes gleamed with darkness. Reaver's gut twisted with revulsion and he reached for his knife, only to remember it was still in his bag after the plane journey.

But then, Chica could handle herself.

She grabbed the demon by the throat and threw it on the ground, standing over it with one foot on its neck. Her face was hard, her jaw tight, her lovely eyes steely. She balled up one fist, reached way back, and planted the other hand on the demon's shoulder.

Then she punched right through the breastbone of the demon and it howled, a hideous, soul-twisting shriek that made Reaver flinch. When her hand came out, it was squeezing the rotten human heart the demon had taken over.

She threw it on the ground.

Chica stood tall, her hand dripping with blood that was altogether too dark to be human. The demon could only have been in that body a matter of hours, but already it was polluted, decaying.

Footsteps in the mouth of the alley announced Padre Gabriel's arrival. Reaver didn't turn. Chica didn't move.

The priest didn't say anything. He slowed to a halt beside Reaver and stood watching her.

"It followed her here," Reaver said quietly. "Its old body was dying so it took a new one and it was so new, I didn't feel it."

"But she did?" Padre Gabriel murmured, watching Chica who stood with her back to them, her shoulders heaving slightly with effort.

"She did."

The alley was silent a moment longer as they watched her. *Say something*, Reaver willed her. *Anything. Make a quip about slaying your demons. Cry. Tell me it's over.*

But she didn't say anything. She just turned, walked to him, and took his hand in hers, blood and all.

Chapter Nine

It was turning dark when the taxi called at Padre Gabriel's to take Reaver back to the airport. Chica had been sleeping all afternoon while the two men talked about her. The priest seemed to know what he was doing, and he was confident that now Chica had killed the demon who'd possessed her, she'd start to recover. "She'll be herself again in no time," he assured Reaver as they stood up and went down the stairs.

Yeah, Reaver thought, but she doesn't have any use for me.

"Do you want to say goodbye?" Padre Gabriel asked.

"No." It would hurt too much. "She hardly knows I've been here anyway."

Padre Gabriel opened his mouth to say something, then closed it again. He nodded, and opened the door for Reaver, who went out and threw his bag into the back of the taxi. Back to the airport -- if he ever survived the journey, anyway. Back to America. Back to the Texan demons.

Back to nothingness.

He opened the cab door, a heavy weight in his chest, and glanced back at the house. The doorway was a beam of light in the dark piazza. The symbolism was killing him.

Just as he started to step into the car, a small figure hurtled into the light of the doorway. Chica, her hair tousled from sleep, wearing her checked shirt and not much more. His gut tightened. His throat closed over.

He nodded goodbye to her, and turned away.

"Don't leave me."

Reaver froze.

That was her voice. The voice that had whispered riddles in his dreams and moaned ecstasy just last night. He was hearing things. She didn't speak. Not yet. Padre Gabriel had said it might be years before she did.

He couldn't look at her. Didn't want to see at her for the last time.

But his body turned anyway, and his treacherous eyes found her face.

"Don't leave me," she said again, her voice a whisper, her eyes big and trembling with tears.

"You said she didn't speak," Padre Gabriel said in tones of disbelief.

"She didn't." Never taking his eyes off her, Reaver walked the few steps back to the door and reached out to touch her. His fingers stopped short of her cheek. "Am I dreaming?"

A small smile crossed her face. "No."

"Are you?"

Her smile grew a little. She shook her head.

"Chica --"

"Echo."

"Echo..." His eyes traced every feature of her beautiful face. "I have to leave."

"No," she cried, her voice breaking. "I -- I can only... things are clearer when you're here. It's... *better*. I -- I can't find the words. I got my voice back and now I've lost the words."

"You'll find them," Reaver said, and made himself take a step back. *Go now*, he told himself, *or you never will. You don't need to stay here. Don't need the hassle. Don't need the involvement. Isolation has worked just fine your whole life. No need to go changing things now.*

"Never leave me," she whispered as he got in the taxi. He felt like lead. He felt like shit.

"Goodbye," he said, and closed the car door. The taxi roared off, and Reaver felt tears burn his eyes.

* * *

"You will see him again," Padre Gabriel said comfortingly as he closed the door and led her back up the stairs. "Perhaps your paths will cross one day in America."

Echo said nothing. Reaver had taken all her words away with him.

"He's a very solitary man," the priest said, and she looked up at him and saw nothing but kindly intentions there. He was telling the truth, as he saw it.

Reaver was a solitary man. A solitary man who needed her to make him smile. Who needed her to help him fight his demons. If he was left on his own, one day they'd kill him. Eat him from the inside out.

"Come and have some supper," Padre Gabriel urged, but Echo shook her head and turned to go back to her room. She didn't speak. There were no words any more.

She washed her face, dropped her shirt on a chair, and fell dully into bed, staring at the ceiling. Outside, a bell tolled. A dog barked. The city moved on.

You have to heal yourself.

She didn't know how to do that. But she could heal Reaver.

Footsteps sounded outside her door, and then it was opening. Echo turned her back on it, too depressed to deal with anyone at all, and then a voice said, "You know, I reckon we've probably sent out a powerful message to demonkind this week. You certainly have. I could probably take some time off without the whole of the United States becoming overrun with demons."

She turned, and Reaver was silhouetted in the doorway. He dropped his bag with a thump.

"Besides, when we get back we're going to destroy them," he said, and she broke into a grin and threw herself out of bed, right into his arms. He crushed her against him, his skin cold from being outside but his body warm, hard, big and wonderful. Her mouth found his, his tongue traced her lips, and she kissed him, taking the passion he licked into her mouth and returning it tenfold.

"Isolation's overrated," Reaver said, and Echo laughed, and he smiled and kicked the door shut, falling with her to the bed. She shoved at his jacket, pawed at his

T-shirt, yanked down his jeans in her impatience to get him naked. He had so much wonderful tight golden skin and she wanted to see it all, feel it against her own skin.

His clothes kicked to the ground, she pinned him down and surveyed him.

"Are you sure we're not dreaming?" Reaver asked, looking up as she traced his nipple with her fingertips.

"I'm wide awake," she said.

"When *did* you get your voice back?" Reaver asked, and she sat back, considering it. When the demon died, the veil was lifted. Things were still strange, voices and impulses in her head that were stronger, but now she knew what they were. Knew who she was.

"When I found something to say," she said, and kissed him. Reaver's hands moved up her back, his wonderful strong hands, and he stroked her breasts as he rolled her to her side, her back. She wrapped her legs around his waist, wanting more, wanting everything.

"I want you inside me," she whispered, and Reaver looked at her for a second before smiling, laughing softly, and pressing his forehead against hers.

"Anything you say," he said, and obliged.

Cat Marsters

Cat lives in a village in south east England, which, while not quite a fairytale setting, is nonetheless very pretty and was mentioned in the Domesday Book of AD 1087. She shares a house with only slightly batty parents who hardly ever tell her to get a real job, and a musician brother who knows there's no chance she'll ever get one if he doesn't. Life is kept from being boring by the often hilarious antics of three geriatric cats and a dog who thinks she's Marilyn Monroe.

Cat has been writing all her life, but in order to keep herself rich in shoes and chocolate, she's also worked as an airline check-in agent, video rental clerk, stationery shop assistant, and laboratory technician. She's aiming for a fairytale cottage, and asks all potential Prince Charmings to apply in writing with pictures of themselves and their Aston Martins.

Visit Cat's web site at <http://www.catmarsters.com>.