



**Cold Blooded**

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### **Blurb**

Commander Davana Black hates being in the human realm, but when two rogue demon juveniles make it their place of hiding, it's her job to go in and retrieve them. If she'd had just the slightest clue she'd end up feeling the mating call of her kind while there, she might have requested a different assignment.

Things only go from bad to worse when she discovers it's a *human* male who sparks the rush of emotion ... and worse still, other demons have picked up their connection and made him a target. Now, not only must she contend with finding the juveniles, somehow she has to fight nature's call to him while reluctantly keeping him alive.

Quinn McVey never thought much of his heritage until the day the raven-haired

beauty drags his family's tragic secret into the light of day. It is because of it, and the lure she has on him, his once dull life is thrust into a battle between warring demon factions. In the frenzy of trying to stay one step ahead of their pursuers, he'll do whatever it takes to convince the Commander he's worthy of her ... and her love.

## Chapter One

Davana's back arched of its own volition, her muscles no longer under her control. The suddenness and intensity of it made her breath catch. Her knees buckled, but she managed to prop herself against the side of the building before she collapsed. She couldn't afford the luxury of reflecting on the cause of her ailment and instead scanned her surroundings for those who sought her harm.

If they caught just one whiff of a sign of weakness...

The thought made her shudder.

No one rushed at her with weapons, nor could she find anything amiss in the alleyway. She turned her focus to the heat cascading over her back. It didn't burn exactly. More like soothing warmth. Pleasurable, in fact.

Her eyelids fluttered closed as her breathing slowed. Very pleasurable.

She snapped her eyes open again.

*Too* pleasurable.

The air next to her shimmered. She pressed her lips together, pushed away from the wall and stood ready. Curled hands hung at her sides, ready to whip her blade from its sheath at a moment's notice.

Draven appeared and she released a slow breath. His jet-black hair gleamed in the daylight. Equally dark clothing hugged him tightly, leaving little space for even the wind to sneak through. Any movement he made highlighted the cut of muscles that came naturally to the males of their kind. His crimson-tinged eyes scanned their surroundings before his gaze fixed on her.

"Any sign of them?" she asked.

"No, Commander."

*Damn.* "Then get back out there and find them. They can't have gone far."

"Commander." He dipped his head, and then dematerialized.

She stretched, trying to shake the ripple snaking down her back, but it held strong. She had a vague sensation that she should know this feeling. That it meant something. But whatever the meaning, it hovered just out of reach of her recollection. At least the intensity had diminished. Now she could at least walk and breathe at the same time.

No matter. She had more important issues to deal with. If the two juveniles weren't found soon, the Others might get their hands on them and tip the scales in their favor. It was bad enough that demons fought against witches and werewolves on a daily basis, but they also had their own internal problems.

Others, Ha'fings, Purebreds ... the list went on and on. No one faction liked the other. None of the factions were willing to join forces. The fact two young Purebreds didn't possess the innate abilities of their kind and were subsequently cast out, made them tempting to everyone else. Not to mention the knowledge of Purebred-kind they could reveal, whether voluntarily or through coercion. Those gems of knowledge would be a coup for whoever caught the juveniles first.

She hated when her job forced her on assignments like this. How idiotic of them to take refuge among humans. Once they reached maturity in a few weeks time, all hell would break loose. Let's see ... their tails, their horns, their fucking Day-Glo red skin

would clue even the densest Terran that they didn't belong. They were Purebreds! Even the Ha'fings of her squadron had a hard time blending in. She was grateful that their latest sources indicated the juveniles were relatively close. Somewhere in a two-mile radius.

She didn't like it in this realm, and hated that she led a group here. She had a hard time understanding why humans even existed. Based on what she'd heard about them, most weren't worth the flesh they lived in. True, a few had come in handy in the war between demons, but the rest of them could be sucked into the void of space for all she cared.

It didn't matter. Find the juveniles. Get out. That's all she had to do.

As if on cue, a flash of red appeared in her peripheral field. Her hand dropped away from her weapon when she looked up. Another streak of red flew by as automobile traffic began to pick up at the intersection. Yet another reason she despised this place. All this technology. It wasn't natural.

She strode with purpose toward the main road, steeling herself to face crowds of humans and their metal carriages. Her long stride carried her a few steps before the heat flared down her back again. Her entire body tensed, her senses heightened. She searched the street and surrounding buildings, trying to determine the source of the waves crashing against her.

Why couldn't she see it? Was this some new form of defense one of the other factions had developed? Except, she wasn't hurting. It felt almost sexual. Like...

My Darkness!

She *knew*. But it didn't make sense. It didn't.

She was a Commander. A warrior who'd earned every accolade. One who demanded the respect of those she led. She'd killed. Maimed. Tortured.

It made no sense.

None.

And what about the fact it happened here in this realm? She had to be wrong. Because it just made no sense.

She shook loose the impossible thoughts, shrugged away the lingering doubts. The juveniles had to be the center of her attention right now. Everything else remained of distant secondary importance and could be dealt with later. Even what would happen to them after she handed them over was of no consequence.

Her leather boots made very little sound as she strode down the sidewalk, trying like hell to blend in with the locals. If she'd planned ahead, she would have worn blue jeans instead of black. Might have traded in the black corset for a T-shirt that proclaimed her a Labrador lover. Definitely would have ditched the leather trench coat for something a little trendier. Next time—Darkness forbid there be a next time—maybe.

As she approached a crowd waiting at the crosswalk, a clamor of heat scrambled up her back. Gritting her teeth, she gulped down the moan which threatened to erupt and lowered her head.

Please. Not now.

She forced herself to look up, to search the crowd for another like her hidden amongst them. Perhaps another Ha'fing found its way into this realm. Not likely, but not impossible. No one stood out though. As far as she could tell, she was surrounded by humans.

Her mind was a jumble of thoughts, flooded with questions she didn't know how to

answer. Perhaps that's why when the crowd started moving as one, she allowed herself to be carried away on the sea of bodies. She walked with them, fighting for a stronghold on her emotions. With each step she took though, infuriating warmth pulsed through her limbs.

If anyone saw ... if any of the other Ha'fings found out...

She couldn't focus. Her eyelids fluttered closed to counter the sensation. Biting down on her lip was another attempt at smothering the rippling tides of pain and pleasure. It was a flare of ecstasy so true, it existed for no other reason than for those of her kind, no matter how much she wanted to deny it. Her mate—the man she was destined to spend the rest of her life with—was near.

When she opened her eyes, she looked directly into the face of the man who sent her emotions through a whirlwind. He stood at the intersection, his gaze locked onto her. His handsome face was knotted into a mask of worry and recognition. As if he knew her.

Her body certainly knew him.

He was tall and lean. Intelligent eyes drew her attention from the smooth lines of his face. From this distance, she couldn't distinguish to which classification of demon he might belong; what she could tell from afar was that he was damned good-looking. Something about the way the shadows played with his features made him seem at once both stubborn and playful. His lips were firm, sensual. At the same time, there were touches of humor around his mouth and they danced just outside of his eyes. Dark, curling hair had been cut short, reminding her too much of the warriors in whose company she spent most of her days.

All in all, he wasn't bad at all.

That's when a cross between a gasp and a scream escaped her lips because the longer she scrutinized him, she recognized something else. He wasn't Ha'fing. Not from any of the other leading factions, either. Yet another example that the Darkness had a wicked sense of humor. There could be no mistaking the man for anything other than his true form.

*Human.*

## Chapter Two

Quinn McVey was dumbstruck. The dark beauty heading in his direction made his breath catch. She looked like walking sex. Everything from her long legs, slender torso and full lips called out to him. And her eyes—they were this amazing light brown color. Brown bordering on orange, really. Looking into them made his body feel like a bucket of ice-cold water had been thrown over it. He could hear his heart racing, feel the pulse of his neck, could almost imagine the raging river of blood racing through his veins.

All from looking at her.

They locked stares for a moment and she tilted her chin into the air. She seemed tempted to drag her gaze away from his, but beneath narrowed brows her eyes held a bit of intrigue in them. She saw something in him too, then. Good sign. Did he know her from before? No—he would never have forgotten any type of encounter with her. Yet, something gnawed at the back of his mind. A sense of belonging and an even stronger sense of possession whispered against his consciousness.

An eternity passed before the crowd she mingled with crossed to where he stood rooted to the spot. Errands and other chores could be damned. He wasn't missing out on at least getting her phone number, no matter how much patience he had to gather to wait for it.

When she tried to sidle by him without slowing, though, a flicker of confusion muddled his mind. She had been interested in him just seconds ago. No mistaking the lowered lids of her eyes or the subtle swipe of her pink tongue over a pair of delectable, kissable lips when she appraised him. And that's exactly what it was. A head-to-toe sweep that took in every inch of his six-foot frame.

"Excuse me. Miss?"

What the hell was he going to say to her? *Excuse me, miss. Do you know CPR? Because you've just stolen my breath away.*

Egads. Even he wanted to barf at that dog of a line.

She glanced back, but didn't slow. Like that was going to be an issue. If anything, it sealed the deal on his determination. Besides, what better way to imagine the sway of her ass beneath tight clothing? Too bad the coat hampered his view. Oh, but lovely imagination that he had made lagging behind her downright enjoyable.

Shoving aside the thought, he rushed to her side. He had every intention of only grazing her elbow with his hand when he reached for her. "Miss?" The moment they connected, a pulse of warmth traveled up his spine. He froze in place, slamming his eyes shut against the foreign sensation. Sweet heaven...

Between the glorious feeling and closed lids, the hand she clamped onto his arm caught him by surprise. He opened his eyes in time to watch her whirl with the grace of a dancer, and then back him against the side of a building with a vice-like grip and hypnotic glare. "What do you want, hu—Why are you following me?"

Those eyes. Those intense, beautiful eyes. Eyes meant for getting lost in.

It took a moment for him to rein in raging hormones. He swallowed against a dry throat several times, fighting off arousal. Erotic warmth rushed through him from where her hand still rested. "I know this'll sound like a line, but I really, *really* mean it. Do I

know you from somewhere?"

She removed her hand, but again gave him that cute little tilt of her chin. The warmth eased away. "No," she said tersely.

But he did. He would bet money on it. "Are you sure? I really think..."

"Go away."

They stood almost eye to eye, impressive for just about any woman. Even as she growled the command, her gaze traveled to his mouth. Her lips parted a fraction of an inch and she leaned closer to him. Mixed signals left and right. Still, Quinn felt a flush of embarrassment at the tips of his ears. "Uh, sure. Sorry."

She riveted him in place with another quick glance, a similar flush coloring her cheeks. This close to her, he inhaled her scent. She smelled different; a cross between leather and summer rain. He was torn between obeying her request or standing still and enjoying the moment a little longer.

The decision was made for him when she reached for him again, her grip tightening around his arm. The slow rise and fall of her chest picked up pace. It took him a minute to realize he was breathing heavily too. Panting almost. The warmth that snaked down his back began to crank up in volume. Stirrings which began in his belly traveled decidedly south, awakening a part of his anatomy that was unaccustomed to receiving attention in the middle of the day.

"I know you," he said quietly. If he didn't already, no way in hell was he letting her get away without finding out more. The conviction he did know her stuck with him though.

"No. You don't."

Her gaze traveled to his mouth again. Then, without warning, her lips were pressed to his.

Somewhere in the distance, someone whistled a cat-call. Smog from idling buses and smaller automobiles filtered down from the sky. Horns blared and cell phone conversations carried on. Had any of it been the world falling apart around them, it wouldn't be enough to pull Quinn away from the sensual kiss.

She moaned against him when he used his free arm to pull her closer. God, he didn't even know her name, but her tight body pressed against his felt so right. She was perfectly made for him and him alone.

Delicate but strong hands slid across his shirt, and clung to the material with a desperation echoed in her kiss. It gave him the opportunity to move his touch beneath her coat. To caress exposed skin at the small of her back. Another moan vibrated from her mouth as his fingers danced over smooth flesh. Warmth like he never knew before met him along every inch of the way.

His mind went fuzzy. All semblance of intelligence and common sense melted away into a rapid-fire barrage of obsessions: His mouth against hers. Tasting her. Breathing in her scent.

"Well, well, well. Even the mighty Commander Davana Black manages to slum it every once in a while."

She tore herself away from Quinn with the viciousness of a tornado. Orange eyes widened as she stared at him and then turned in the direction of the person who addressed them.

A curled lip made up the majority of his pocked face, but the wiry man a few feet



away condemned her with his very stance. With venom dripping from his every word.

His clothing reminded Quinn very much of the woman's, except his were threadbare. The poor relation to her casual elegance. His eyes glared with madness and Quinn stifled a shudder of disgust from looking into them.

The man smirked before he added, "Wait until the news gets out."

"No!" Davana cried out. She raised her arm in alarm before the man disappeared from sight.

### Chapter Three

One of the Others. How he made it here undetected would be a mystery set aside for later. Davana had to focus on damage control. How she was going to undo the consequences of the rumor which would spread through the demon factions at breakneck speed?

How could she have been so stupid? So *careless*?

A human.

She kissed a human. In broad daylight. And now an Other knew.

Darkness help her.

"Did you see that? He just disappeared!"

She shot the object of her ire an annoyed glance. "Dematerialized."

"Commander, is it?" He maneuvered until he could see her face. "I don't know where you come from, but around here, disappearing, dematerializing, whatever, is not an everyday occurrence. I feel like I'm hallucinating. What the hell is going on here?" His musing lapsed into muttering, almost directed at himself.

She brought a thumb to her mouth and nibbled on the skin. How was she going to fix this? Did she even need to? He was just a human.

Ignoring the worry creasing his face, she began to pace back and forth. Humans were of little consequence to demons. Everyone knew that. Just because she got caught sucking face with one shouldn't be a big deal. Sure, she'd get some elbowing about it from those who didn't know better. A broken nose here or there should shut that up in a hurry. Her own squadron wouldn't dare bring it up. Not in her presence, anyway.

A stupid human, of all things! She wanted to curl into a ball to hide or rewind time or scream her frustration into the air. What had gotten into her? One minute, she was going to tell him to fuck off and in the next...

She pulled her shoulders back and made a decision. Time to get back to what she was here for. The sooner she did, the sooner she could head back home and ignore stupid pangs of attraction that made no sense. Darkness knew she shouldn't risk staying in this realm any longer than necessary. The urge to do so much, *much* more than kiss, snaked through her with every second that passed in his presence.

She glanced over at him. "Been nice..." Human. She almost said human again. She really ought to find something else to call them. Terran? Walking monkeys? That last one probably wouldn't go over very well. "But I've gotta run. Things to take care of."

"Are you kidding me? Just like that? Shouldn't we, uh, talk or something?"

Or something. Her mind screamed at her to choose *or something* as the viable option. Or something could lead to more kissing. Or running her hands over his body. Or feeling his skin sliding next to hers as they... "Yeah. Just like that," she snapped.

A shrill whistle gave very little in the way of warning. It allowed her just enough time to shift her body, pretty much the only defense against the *inocver*, a poisonous blowdart. Nasty little things invented by none other than humans, but now a weapon of choice for the Bran'ons. Only demonkind took the almost benign weapon and turned it into a force to be reckoned with. A direct hit on skin was necessary, but once it penetrated, the engineered worm would burrow its way beneath the target's skin. Then

work its way around until the recipient had been eaten alive from the inside or driven, quite painfully, mad.

Before she stopped spinning, she shoved him—what was his name, anyway?—in case one headed his way too. If she'd put him in harm's way, the least she could do was make certain he didn't die because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time with her.

Compassion earned her a nick in her arm as another dart sliced over it. When she looked at the stinging area, a thin line of blood trickled from the raised skin. Not a direct hit and not severe enough to cause damage, but she knew from experience that it would be a long time before the pain it caused dissipated.

She didn't have time to focus on it though. She had to find the Bran'ons targeting them. If they felt bold enough to do it in broad daylight, with herds of people traversing the area, they were either well hidden or confident in killing their prey.

"What in hell was that?" He tracked her movements as she slapped a palm over the cut to stem the flow of blood.

A warning. "Your name, human?" She winced as soon as the question left her mouth. Slip of the tongue, but at least it was out there now. No way to take it back.

"Human?" His eyes narrowed. It was as if he saw her for the very first time and didn't like what stood before him. "Wait! Where are you going?"

*Any place that'll put a whole lot of distance between the two of us.* Better yet, use the crowds as cover while getting there.

First Others and now Bran'ons. The stakes in this search were heating up too quickly for her. She needed to find an edge in this race—and fast.

Perhaps a regroup with her squadron was in order. Maybe flash back over to the demon realm and report in. No. She couldn't even do that. Unless the juveniles had been found, and she would know by now if they had, bringing no news would make her superiors unhappier. They were never happy.

The concrete jungle muffled the sound of her boots against the pavement. Her lips still tingled with the memory of their kiss, but she couldn't afford the distraction. The human grabbed her by the elbow before she took half a dozen steps. The flare of heat that washed over her immediately afterward almost brought her to her knees. She stumbled, but he held her steady.

Concern flickered across his face before his brows drew in. "Why did you call me that? Human."

She yanked her arm away from him. "It's what you are," she hissed.

Another whistle and wisp of wind fanned next to her cheek. Insistent buggers, those Bran'ons. "If you value your life, *human*, we can't stay here."

He nodded. "Let's get off the street. I want to talk to you."

When he reached for her arm again, this time she was savvy enough to draw it tight against her body and away from him. She got it. As much as she wanted to deny it, she got it. The Terran male walking next to her triggered her mating call so violently, it could bring her down with a single touch.

Stupid way to find her intended, if anyone cared what she thought.

His eyes scanned the row of buildings before he pointed to one. "Here will be good. Work for you?"

No, it didn't work, but she had to do something about him. None of this was a part of the plan. Her directive had been to just find the stupid juveniles, who at this point had

better be wishing someone other than her found them. Between tightly pressed lips, she said, "Fine."

"Quinn."

"What?"

"My name's Quinn. Quinn McVey, if you care."

"I don't."

He grunted a rude noise, but held open the door before them. Shadows and musk welcomed them into the small shop. On either side, walls of books crowded shelves, the prime real estate. Magazines and newspapers had been relegated to piles on the floor. A bookseller's store, she imagined.

"Over here." Quinn paused near an opening she hadn't noticed. He started forward when she approached, but she made certain to squeeze past him and take the lead. Commanders never took the rear position; they were followed.

A few isolated tables and thin wooden chairs lined a wall decorated with pictures in frames. She scanned the room for other patrons, without finding any others in the common area. A wizened man nodded a greeting from a register at the rear, but that was the extent of people so far as she could tell.

She canvassed the entrance, looking for a similar exit. With the layout of the room in mind, she chose a seat which kept all options open and available. She arched her brow when Quinn held out the chair she reached for. Gallantry in a male? Nice.

When they were both seated, he leaned forward and spoke just above a whisper. "So what are *you* ... vampire, werewolf or demon?"

## Chapter Four

Her mouth dropped open in such a wonderful show of surprise, he almost grinned. In the dim lighting, her eyes morphed into an enticing blaze of color that made his pulse race. Sweet heaven above, she was beautiful. Long, dark hair framed a narrow face. Her expressive eyes gave away every emotion as they came to her: irritation, surprise, attraction, whatever. And he wanted to kiss those lips of hers until he didn't have the energy to do it anymore. What a way to go.

"What do you know of it?"

In a burst so swift he almost missed it, her eyes became a conflagration of more colors and he knew the answer. "Your true eye color is red, isn't it? The orange slash brown is just an attempt at hiding it. Demon, then."

Her silence confirmed his guess better than any verbal response could have. He scrubbed a palm over his face and exhaled forcefully. The chair didn't seem capable of supporting his weight anymore. All of these years they'd heard the stories and today, the truth of them sat before him in the guise of a goddess. His grandmother's craziness, what they chalked up to delirium, might not have been so crazy after all.

"What do you know of it, human?"

"What kind are you, Commander?"

"Ha'fing." Pride powered her voice.

"If I remember correctly, that's the group you want on your side in a fight. Fierce, dependable, loyal," he raked her torso and face with a heated glance, "the pinnacle of your species."

She shrugged. "Debatable."

How she said it suggested she would take on anyone who dared bring up the debate. Fortunately, he left off the part about Ha'fings ranking below Purebreds. All of the factions did, according to Grandmom. *Wow*. A Ha'fing in living color.

"So what do you know of it, human?"

"Quinn."

Little did she know how much the spikes in her temperament made his pulse quicken. She thought on it for a minute. "Quinn," she conceded.

"Just little things my grandmother used to tell me." He let silence hang in the air. He hoped she would supply all the information if he left a lot unsaid. What he knew for certain fitted into a thimble.

She wasn't biting. "Listen, *Quinn*, we don't have time for this. Purebreds, among others, are gunning for me, and as we speak, all of demonkind is learning of our little rendezvous out there." She pushed the chair back and stood. "In fact, I'm not even sure why I'm here."

"Sit down, Commander." He softened his voice because ordering one around was sure as hell one way to get killed by a Ha'fing. "Please."

He held his breath for the eternity it took her to make a decision and lower herself into the chair. He kept all recrimination out of his voice when he spoke. "I think you're here because we've got this thing going between us. The rendezvous, as you termed it. I don't know how it works for you, but what you saw—what we did—is not typical

behavior for me."

Davana waved an errant hand. "I'm not so concerned about that. All right, don't look at me like that. Yes, it was ... different from what normally occurs. But really, I'm more concerned about what it means for the task I'm here to undertake."

"Which is?"

Her gaze shifted away from his. "Looking for a couple of lost demons."

He knew about liars and she was lying. But he'd let the lie remain for now. For whatever reason, she didn't want him to know the truth and that was okay. Besides, what choice did he have, really? He had no reason to pry into her business other than his own morbid curiosity. "How's your arm?"

"Hurts. I'll live."

He reached forward. "Let me see."

This time her face was inscrutable. Her head cocked to the side as she sat blinking at him. It wasn't until he beckoned that she pushed through her hesitation and laid her arm on the table.

"Don't to—"

Quinn realized what she was going to say a second too late. *Don't touch*. Because if he did, another rush of pleasurable heat would travel over him until it held him paralyzed in its grip.

Not just him. Based on the way she threw her head back and drew in a sharp breath, it traveled over her too.

The little moan that escaped her mouth turned him on more than he thought possible. It was sex wrapped up in a bow and presented to him on a silver platter. His body responded in the only way it knew how, his growing erection restricted by the confines of his jeans. Images of them together rushed through his mind. He wanted—needed—to touch her all over. Press his body to hers. Find fulfillment in her.

She jerked her arm away and the connection was lost.

His chest heaved as he struggled to catch his breath and slow his racing heart.

"Wha—what the hell is that? And why does it keep happening?"

A flush colored her cheeks. Her breathing seemed as ragged as his, her shock evident. "I have to go, Quinn. Don't leave the safety of the shop for a little while. I'll lure any of the others away and they shouldn't bother you."

When she stood, he almost reached for her again. The alarm on her face startled him into throwing his hands in the air, palms spread. "Just tell me what that was."

She lowered her gaze. "Mating call." Had there been a single conversation in the room, or had the air conditioner chosen that precise moment to kick in, he wouldn't have heard her reply. Her voice shriveled beneath an unfathomable weight, too broken down to find the strength to become a whisper.

"What does that mean?"

"For my kind, it's the way you identify your lifemate, your intended. It means we—you and I—are supposedly meant to be together." When she looked up again, defiance blazed in her red eyes. "But I don't believe it. And neither should you."

"Davana, wait." Had he said her name before? He didn't think so. The horrified expression on her face was new.

"I will not be mated, Quinn McVey. To human, demon, no one." Her tone chilled the room several degrees. "In any event, I don't have time for this foolishness. I have a job to

do and I intend to do it."

"Well, is there anything I can do to help?" The odds were slim to none, but what did he have to lose? If he helped her complete her task, then maybe they could explore this mating call thing a little further.

She snorted. "Doubt that, human. About the only thing that can help me right now is a very specific type of demon who can sniff out the missing ones."

"What kind?"

She pursed her lips, but said nothing.

"Humor me, Commander."

"Purebred."

He leaned against the wooden slats, settling himself comfortably in his chair. Telling her this was going to be so good. So very, very good. "Well, today's your lucky day, Commander."

"And why is that?"

"It just so happens that not only am I willing and able to help, but I'm part demon. My grandfather was one. Purebred, in fact." He leaned forward. "I just may be your saving grace, after all."

## Chapter Five

Her mouth refused to close. Every time she shut it tight, it fell open of its own accord all over again. The back of her mind tried to tell her it made sense now why he knew about demons and other unnatural beings. She shut it down without listening.

Quinn was part Purebred?

The human was not *just* human. He was Purebred?

"T-that's impossible," she sputtered. "Demons don't mate with humans." She winced at the chagrin on his face.

"Is that why you're having such a hard time with the whole you and me thing? And now that you know I'm part demon? What now?"

He nailed it, didn't he? She had no idea. All this time she thought she raged against the idea of mating with a human. She should have known good old Darkness would have things its way. What excuse did she have now? The fact Quinn's touch, his kiss, brought her senses alive, made it difficult to fight the temptation of him.

She clenched her jaw tight and pulled the chair back out. Plopping down in it, she said, "Just tell me about your grandfather."

He loved this. She could see it written in the smirk on his face. Even if she wanted to ignore the triggered mating call, she should have known those dark brown eyes of his hinted at his hidden lineage. She'd been too caught up in them to notice whenever he stared at her.

Could she behave just a little bit more like a wanton breeder?

She shuddered.

*Darkness.*

*Forbid.*

"Truthfully, I don't know much. Just snippets that I've overheard. Some ramblings of an old woman on her deathbed."

The wistful note in his voice forced her to pay closer attention to him. Whatever was in this story hurt him through and through. She softened the harsh tone she'd been using. "Tell me."

"I don't know how the relationship started out. How this demon found her or anything. I just know that it spanned years, starting when Grandmom was a child. Her fantastical stories were dismissed when she was young. As she grew older, she stopped talking about him, because who would believe her? An imaginary friend is common for a five-year-old; not so much for a teenager.

"Basically, she met a man who treated her as his confidante for quite some time. He came in the wee hours of the morning at a time when she could be as easily dreaming as awake. It's why she didn't pay attention to the color of his skin. Some odd red color, if I recall correctly."

He drew in a deep breath. "It was just a dream. She said as the years progressed, he became more interested in her as a young woman. And this was where I would usually tune out." He met her gaze with his own. The smile on his face didn't lighten the somber mood. "Nobody wants to hear this about their grandmother, you know? Anyway, long story short, the relationship turned less friendly. As she became older, he became more



... forceful with her. She didn't know what triggered it, why he changed the way things were, but that's what happened. Nine months later, she had my dad."

That sounded like a typical Purebred male. A sense of entitlement followed them around like a shadow. His face was full of anguish and she couldn't help but feel a tug on her heart, but she forced herself to ignore it. His sorrow could not be her own. Because she knew he at least deserved the words, she said, "I'm sorry, Quinn."

"No one believed her. Her own father thought she'd been fooling around with some neighborhood kid and didn't want to name him. She was made a pariah."

"But Quinn—" She wanted to reach out and touch his hand, but again, resisted the urge. "Your father would have been born with some of the innate abilities of demons. Did any of them ever manifest to your knowledge?"

"Good old Granddad had an answer for that too, I'm told. When my father was born, he visited my grandmother one last time. He wanted to see what he'd created and he wanted to make sure he bound his abilities. He told Grandmom it would keep him safe from other demons and who knows, maybe it did."

So if his father was bound, it meant Quinn had been bound through his birthright, too. It made sense. It certainly explained why she didn't recognize the heritage within him. Whether or not they realized it, his grandfather had done a huge favor for them with the simple twist of magic.

Only now she was in a conundrum. She needed to find those juveniles. The simplest and fastest way to do it would be to get a Purebred to track them. With the lineage running in his veins, Quinn had the ability to do just what she needed. She only had to unbind him.

And therein lay the problem.

"Why are you studying me like that, Commander?"

"Sorry." She wasn't, of course. She just didn't like being caught in the act.

She needed him unbound, but did he have any idea what that meant for him? For his future? Demons didn't mate with humans for a reason. She'd heard a rumor or two about those who'd done it and managed well, but they were just that—rumors.

Find the juveniles. It had to be her foremost thought. Do it and go back home, leaving this place and better yet, a faulty mating call, behind.

If only he wouldn't look at her like that with such blind trust in her. If he only knew.

With the heavy decision finalized, she said, "We've spent too much time in here. Time to go."

"Wait—you actually want me to come with you?"

She stood while releasing a sigh and walked to the closest bookshelf. "Yeah. You're right. You're as close as I've got to a Purebred and I need your help."

The place needed a window. No telling how many Others or whathaveyou stood in wait outside the shop's exits. She could dematerialize elsewhere, but taking him would be problematic until he had some sort of magical protection.

His chair scraped against the battered floor when he stood. The sound etched on her nerves and made her want to take her admission back. There had been a plan for finding the juveniles before she'd met one Quinn McVey. For Darkness sake, why did she need him with her now?

Because she liked looking at him, seeing his smile, being around his easygoing manner...

"Ready?" She turned to face him again.

He shook his head. "No. We haven't discussed what I get out of this."

She choked out a laugh. Mr. Easy Going had balls too. "I'm sorry?"

"You may not like it, but there *is* something going on between us. Let's make a deal. I do this for you and you give things between us a chance to play out as it's meant to be."

"There's nothing—"

"A chance, Davana. That's all I'm asking for."

There was that innocent expression on his face again. He would believe everything and anything she said. "Fine, Quinn. I will give you—"

"Us," he interrupted.

"*You* a chance, but as you humans like to say, don't hold your breath."

His mouth turned up in half a smile. "Starting with a show of faith then, Commander?"

She didn't have to ask what kind of show he wanted. The way he crossed the room, fire in his eyes, arousal in the very way he looked at her, said it all. Funny how she'd never noticed the scent of him before. Now, her attention focused on the masculine spice of his cologne. So caught up in it, by the time she remembered herself, he had her trapped between him and a bookshelf.

"Do we have a deal?" His warm breath caressed her cheek. He spread his arms and gripped the two shelves behind her head. Not many could tower over her, but he filled the room with his presence.

"What kind of show?" Did her voice just crack?

His gaze dropped to her mouth. "Just this."

## Chapter Six

When his lips touched hers, her weakened legs threatened to buckle. Quinn pulled her against him and held her rock-steady. She could have melted against him or just curled up into a ball of pleasure and floated away. Threading her fingers through his hair kept her grounded for a moment, though.

His tongue slipped into her mouth, past parted lips. The clean taste of him rocketed a bolt of desire straight down to her sex. And the familiar warmth, the one she knew to expect when he was near, soared over her and wrapped itself tightly until she could combust from the heat of it.

Her body ached for him. No matter how loudly her mind screamed at her that he wasn't her kind, that he couldn't be for her, her body knew better. Between her thighs grew slick, her breasts heavy with longing. His passionate kiss teased them into awakening.

By the time he pulled away, doubts that seemed so sure before began to crack.

"My Darkness." She sighed. The sound of her own voice seemed subdued beneath the heartbeat threatening to gallop away.

His eyes searched hers. "There's something there, Commander. We *will* explore it."

She ducked beneath his arm, his dark gaze too intense to look at any longer. "We have to go," she mumbled as she walked away. Her thoughts whirled on each other, battling for supremacy. Everything she thought she knew raced headlong toward an inevitable collision with what she learned about herself with each passing moment she spent in his company.

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He really hadn't meant to scare her, but what else could it mean when her eyes widened each time she glanced at him? The kiss had been an impulse, a stupid way to seal the deal, so to speak. In any event, every time he tried to get closer, she bolted. Just like now.

What was it she saw when she looked at him? What terrified her so badly that she couldn't stand his touch, his kiss? She'd been annoyingly relieved when she found out demon blood ran in his veins, but that had vanished as quickly as it had arrived.

Women. Who would ever understand them?

Quinn followed her to the exit at the rear of the store. "What's the plan, Commander?"

She still wouldn't look at him. "We need to get to some place a little more private. I can unbind you there." She ran her hands along the seal of the doorway. "But first, we have to get past the Bran'ons waiting for us outside."

"And you're certain they're waiting?"

"I sense them there. Besides, it's what I'd do."

He had a feeling *waiting* never fit into any of her plans when she led. "What are we up against?"

"So long as it's just Bran'ons, and that's all I think it is, we're pretty safe. Just keep moving and we'll be fine. Do you know someplace we could go? We'll need that, at least."

"Any specific requirements?"

She shrugged and finally looked at him. "Just something private. More than one way in and out if I can have my preference."

"My studio is only two blocks over."

"I'm not sure I know what that is, but I'll trust your judgment." She laughed, joy evident in each breath. "Don't look so surprised, Quinn. I didn't get to my current rank by not listening to those around me." Her hand turned the knob a quarter inch. "Now, it's your turn to listen to what I'm telling you. They're fairly cowardly and won't draw attention to themselves. Their attack is almost always from afar. Stay inside crowds, stay by my side and listen to every word I say as we make our way to your studio and it'll be fine. Okay?"

"You're the boss."

She winked at him before turning around. "You know it." When she pushed through the door, he took a deep breath and followed.

Davana moved with grace through the streets, as if she owned them. In her Goth outfit, she blended in a little too well with the hustle and bustle of city life. His heart swelled as he watched her. Her long, elegant strides screamed confidence. Intelligent eyes scanned their perimeter, always alert for the slightest danger. He, on the other hand, bumbled along and hoped for the best. The extent of his military training ended when he left the Boy Scouts, somewhere around age ten.

As they ambled along, he kept looking for anyone who might have stood out from the crowds rushing around them, but damned if he could find the demons she claimed were nearby. Once, he heard a whistling sound, but Davana turned him to face her and it—whatever *it* was—flew by. By the time they got to his studio, he wondered if the pursuit even existed.

He licked dry lips when he punched the key code on the wall. This particular exit had been designed for his use alone, for the days and nights he wanted to escape in peace. Pride usually filled him whenever he walked through its doors, but bringing her here made his heart flutter. A slight tremor in his hands reminded him of the first time he'd groped puckered nipples beneath a girl's bra and that had been at least fifteen years ago. Damn that she could make him behave like a teenager all over again.

Her arm slipped beneath her coat as they entered and he scanned her back for any telltale bulges. No telling what she might have hidden beneath the leather flapping behind her. As much as he liked baiting her with the use of her title, this was a military woman. Or was that demon?

He almost paused in their trek to the open area. Demon. He'd accepted it without reservation. And it made no difference. The mating call, or whatever she'd called it, pushed him into falling for her, and in the short time they'd been together, he went willingly along the way. Not that it mattered. He wouldn't have had it any other way.

Davana entered the darkened studio without hesitation. Even though he knew the layout by memory, he wanted light. Besides, he wanted to see the look on her face when she saw his work. Skimming his hand across the wall, almost without thinking, he flicked the first switch and then slid another two up.

Her eyes shone like diamonds in the resulting effect. "You did this." Not a question. A statement of awe said with a reverence that made Quinn smile.

Sculpting was his life. Having her here pushed its status to a new level. He held his

hand out to her. "Let me show you."

"We don't have time for this, Quinn."

"It'll be quick, I promise. Please?"

She still hesitated, but slipped her hand in his, dropping her other arm by her side. Again, the warmth emanated from where they touched. His eyelids fluttered against the erotic sensation, but oddly enough, he was getting used to it. On the other hand, if it was going to happen every single time they touched, she was going to find herself having a hard time keeping him away.

He guided her through the rows of artwork. Neither spoke, but he listened to her soft murmurs when they reached a piece she seemed to like. Her hand tightened around his once or twice and he knew those particular pieces called out to her. She had good taste. They were some of his favorites too.

"That was spectacular, Quinn," she said when they'd finished the quick circuit. "I'm amazed that humans could have such talent hidden in them."

He grinned. "I'll take that as a compliment, Commander."

"You should." She half-turned and searched the room. "Thank you for the tour, but we're wasting time we don't have. If you don't mind, let's go over here."

She picked the small leather seat pushed against a side wall. A few of them had been placed in strategic places around the room, but this one offered a view of the exits.

"What now?" he asked when they stood next to it.

She released a deep breath. "I'm going to unbind your abilities."

"Will it hurt?"

"One particular way I know of involves a lot of blood and screaming. What I'm thinking of now is decidedly different."

"Different how?"

She shrugged off her coat. His breath caught in his chest when it dropped to the floor. "A little more fun."

"Commander?" When she tugged on the tie crisscrossing the front of her blouse meant for keeping it closed, he thought his heart would stop.

"Just sit back, human. We're about to go on one hell of a ride."

## Chapter Seven

It made the most sense. Of all the ways she could open up his demon-born abilities, this one might stop the mating call from announcing itself on a continuous basis. Besides, it'd been a long time since she made room in her life for the male gender.

Privacy had been essential for this reason alone. Since it was bound to be a one-time occurrence, she wanted to enjoy it—no inhibitions, no fear of reprisals from nosey humans or demons—just simple, pleasurable sex.

Oh yeah. She'd unbind him too.

"Are you sure this is what you want to do, Davana?" His brows seemed to have developed a permanent arch to them in the last hour. She seemed to have acquired a little quiver in her belly every time he said her name.

She leaned forward and pressed a gentle kiss to his lips. "Shut up and take off your clothes, Quinn."

He didn't hesitate to comply.

When he finally stood before her, proud and erect, she saw in him what she'd missed all this time. Broad chests, flat, defined stomachs and narrow waists made demon males worth looking at. Quinn's body made her whisper a word of thanks to the genes he'd managed to pick up from that side of the family.

"Lie down," she murmured. She shimmied off the last of her clothing, facing him in complete nudity.

His eyes darkened as his gaze traveled from her feet up to her face. He took a step forward, leaving an inch of space between them. "In a minute. No need to rush this."

*No, no need at all*, she thought before his mouth descended on hers. Her mission could be shoved aside for a few minutes. Technically, this was part of the same mission.

The sacrifices she made for demonkind.

His lips whispered over hers, touching, teasing, learning. Of the times they kissed before, this kiss, his worship, made her forget everything else but the feel of him. She sighed when he wrapped her in his embrace, his hard length flattening against her belly.

Gentle hands kneaded her shoulders, stroked down her back. Pleasure followed his trail, each touch sparking a flame within her that would not be tamed. She cupped his strong jaw and kissed him back with the same fever he kept alive in her.

His hand slid between their bodies, eased between her thighs, and she held her breath. Already she was slick with anticipation. Had been for some time now. She just waited on his touch ... there...

And there...

And for the love of Darkness, right *there*.

Something deep within her belly coiled, wrapping tighter, and once squeezed with no place else to go, it bubbled up and over. It—this magical, wonderful sensation—reluctantly spilled outward, spreading and swallowing her insides, almost drowning her in its rapture.

Quinn's fingers worked magic against her body. His expert strokes were confident. Little cries that escaped her lips encouraged him to focus on the bundle of nerves that would make her world explode on itself. When she died from the exhaustive pleasure of

it, a grin splitting her mouth, there would be little doubt that her last moments alive had been worth every blessed moment.

By the time he pulled her onto his lap, she felt boneless. She sank onto his length, pulling his hardness inside until she thought her senses would never return. Her body knew his. Knew her mate. Every slow roll of her hips, every thrust he made ... with every time he suckled from her breast, or circled her pearl ... every second that rushed them toward ecstasy reinforced her knowledge.

Quinn was her mate. Her intended. Her future.

Hazy with lust and roiling with impossible feelings, her body tightened one last time. One final tremor overtook her, and everything that was Commander Davana Black began to soar toward the heavens. Her mind. Her body. And her soul.

Somewhere through the fog that kept her suspended, she heard him call her name, a low moan of pleasure. When his release surged into her, the rightness of it undeniable, for the first time in a long time, she felt alive.

\* \* \* \*

She shivered.

"Cold?" he murmured.

He dropped a kiss on her shoulder and cuddled closer. His mouth traveled lower, tracing down the path left by the mating call. He must have been feeling the same path on his skin because he licked over it with the precision of a ruler.

Based on the fine sheen of sweat covering their bodies, the last thing in the world she should have been was cold. Sex magic could be draining, though. Between it, the intense glow emanating from her satisfied body and Quinn's lean length stretched next to her, she wanted to just close her eyes, bask in bliss and drift to sleep.

They had business to take care of first.

Groaning, she pushed herself upright. "We have to go. I have to find the juveniles."

"Juveniles?"

She shook her head. "That's what we call them. Demon years don't match human years, so it's not based on age, technically. We call them juveniles because they haven't yet matured enough to reach their full magic potential."

"I see. What about unbinding me?"

"Trust me, lo—Quinn, it's been done." *Love*. She'd almost called him by the unfamiliar endearment. What was that about?

He elevated himself on one elbow. "How will I know?"

"You don't, but I do. What will happen is it'll come in bits and spurts. You might pick up the presence of other demons, first. Then later, be able to narrow it down to different factions. You'll be able to dematerialize too. And a few other sundry tricks of the trade."

"Even though I'm mostly human?"

She frowned. "That's the part I'm most uncertain about. I'm really not sure how diluted you've become."

"Diluted? You make me sound like a bad cocktail or something."

Her mouth turned up at the corner. "Something like that."

Quinn opened his mouth, undoubtedly to toss out a sharp retort of his own, but his lips twisted into a grimace. He froze in place, the grimace stretching into a mask of pain.

"Quinn?"

He doubled-over, then hissed between clenched teeth. "Dav—"

She scrambled to her knees, placing a soothing hand on his shoulder. She rubbed in small circles, the gesture futile, but perhaps sending a small sense of comfort his way. "It's happening, Quinn. Don't fight. Just let it flow over you. It'll be over before you know it."

He curled into a ball, a strangled cry escaping from him. His eyes were clenched shut, his arms wrapped around his stomach.

"Take it easy, Quinn. Breathe through it. Let it happen."

She'd been torn on whether or not to tell him *all* of the details—that this part couldn't be avoided. The sex magic made unbinding him pleasurable. The dark magic that they unleashed would be owed penance too.

He cried out again, the sound so full of anguish, it sent a chill through her veins. She pulled him into her embrace, rocking him, cooing soothing sounds. Just a few more minutes. He only had to bear it a few more minutes and the reward would be immeasurable.

Davana tightened her grip on his sweat-slickened arm and back several times, and as she predicted, within minutes, his shudders eased. The dry heaves that wracked his body slowed to a stop and his breathing calmed. His dark eyes were shadowed when he looked up at her. "You could have warned me," he said before licking dry lips.

Certain he wouldn't revert to a painful state, she pushed away and shook her head. "No. Like I said, I don't know how diluted you've become. The fact it happened so quickly," she mused, placing a hand beneath his chin to study his face, "makes me think you've got some strong demon blood within you. That could be very good ... or very bad."

"*Jesus*, is there anything else you're leaving out?"

That seemed as good a time as any to locate her discarded clothing. Standing, she pulled on her pants, ignoring Quinn's watchful eyes ogling her breasts as they swayed with her movements. "Put on some clothes and then we need to get started. I'll need you to focus. Close your eyes and concentrate on locating other demons. I'll help you try and sort the different factions in your mind should you pick up on more than one type."

"But how will I know?"

Losing patience, she gritted her teeth. "Quinn, I need fewer questions from you and more listening to me. Just do as I ask."

His face grew serious, then pensive, before he nodded. In the few minutes it took them both to finish dressing, she sent a mental message to Draven, informing him of the change in plans. She could feel the questions surfacing in her lieutenant's mind, but she disconnected the contact before he could form them. It was not his place to question his commander, and even though she allowed it on occasion, this could not be one of those times.

"Commander?" She looked up from sheathing her blade into place because of the concern in Quinn's voice. "What does it mean when I keep hearing this hum? Like something calling me?"

Her breath caught. It meant on his first try he'd found them. The other Purebreds.

She didn't answer him, but sought the connection with Draven again. He and the rest of the squadron needed to get to her current location, on the double.



Before she could send the message, the air beside her shifted. She reached for her blade, pulling it out by the time the materializing demon could fully emerge.

She dropped the blade to the ground and held her hands in the air, noting with grim satisfaction that Quinn followed her lead. She stared into the eyes of their leader, hating that she recognized him almost immediately. The pock-marked demon, the Other who'd run to spread gossip, had felt the need to return.

With a small army.

## Chapter Eight

"Commander. Still slumming, I see."

The demon inhaled deeply, taking in the scent of sex still lingering in the air. Quinn shuddered in revulsion. Something about the lewdness in the demon's mannerisms, the way he seemed to relish the evidence of their coupling, made his stomach turn.

Davana took a step forward. "Why are you here, *Other*?" She said the last word like it left a bad taste in her mouth.

Quinn racked his brain, trying to remember what Grandmom had said about Others' rank as compared to Ha'fings'. He suspected Davana outclassed the group, but their sheer numbers kept him frozen in place. How had they managed to just appear without warning? A little late, but he could feel their presence rattling somewhere in his bones.

A humming sensation from Purebreds. Rattling from Others. Something he'd definitely want to tuck away in his memory for later.

"Who are you?" she sneered at the demon leader. "And why are you here?"

The demon circled Davana, its feral gaze raking her over, and Quinn's muscles flexed. The heat path that had become as familiar as breathing by now, reacted by prickling with such force, Quinn moved in between them. He stared the demon down until it took a step back. It tried to sidestep him to address Davana directly, but Quinn maneuvered into its way again. Only her hand on his arm calmed the ire vibrating through him.

"You know why we're here, Commander. We seek the same juveniles you're after. Imagine my surprise when a Purebred sparked our radar. Except, unlike the two we expected, the radar showed only one ... in the presence of a Ha'fing, no less." It looked at Quinn and, for the first time, he noticed the elongated pupils in marbled eyes. "But when we arrive, all I see before me is a human."

He opened his mouth to pipe up about his lineage, but one glance at Davana's face made Quinn hold his peace. He'd have to trust she knew what was best for them both, and apparently, keeping their intel to themselves fitted into that plan.

She moved forward with the grace and menace of a hunter. Quinn could see enough of her face to note the contempt blazing in her eyes. Her voice low, she said, "Choose wisely, Other. Turn and leave this place *unharm*ed, or face the blades of the Ha'fings at my call. This is an offer that will expire on my whim."

Almost on cue, the air beside them shimmered. For a split second, Quinn thought she had brought down the wrath of her squadron on the Others as she'd threatened. But when she turned to face the materializing demons, a mixture of disbelief and shock frozen on her features, his relief faded.

She spun on her heel and shoved Quinn, causing him to stumble. He only managed to see a flash of—was that *midnight-black* skin?—before skidding to one knee. The humming rattled around his mind, almost disorienting him. He found a light plate on the wall and used it to anchor himself visually, otherwise he had a feeling he'd end up on his ass. *Vertigo, meet crack high*.

He forced his eyes open, not realizing when he'd closed them. Wrong move. He yawned to the right. Two quick sounds, like a matchstick on sandpaper whipped past his

ear, heading straight for where he'd been kneeling only moments ago. Davana shoved him again.

"What the hell?" he shouted after he hit the ground with enough force to knock the wind out of him.

Davana dropped next to him, blade in one hand, the other reaching blindly for his sleeve. "Out! Out! We have to go, *now*!"

The Other nearest Quinn began to squeal. It clutched at its chest, gripping both material and skin so tight Quinn thought he would pull them off if possible. Its comrades glanced at it with the barest hints of sympathy, but scattered to the far sides of the room without offering aid. Some drew weapons like Davana's while others raised small shields in front of their torsos.

Quinn tried to turn his head to see what everyone else readied themselves against, but Davana continued to shove him. Prodding him into moving so that he did a cross between a crab-walk and a shuffle away from the latest demon addition.

"Inocvers," she hissed. "I don't know what's compelled that particular demon to come out into the open like this, but I promise you, its dart is a bad way to die, human. Move, move, move!"

Whatever inocvers were, he didn't have to think long about whether or not she wanted to face them head-on. For the first time since he'd met her, Davana lost some of the detached coolness she wore like a skin and downgraded into a frenzy just short of panic.

She kept her arm protectively near him and her attention on the Bran'on—it had to have been a Bran'on based on the looming stature and coal-black skin—who'd materialized and wreaked havoc on the room. Together, he and the Commander managed to shuffle toward the corridor separating his displays from the studio where he worked. For some reason Quinn didn't quite get, the Others left them alone to flee to safety. Although, on second thought, they spent a lot of time staying out of the way of the inocvers which flew through the air. The Bran'on stood in the middle of the room, heedless to any danger it faced and blew something dart-like through a long tube. Every time one of those things landed, the recipient howled in agony. Davana said it was a bad way to die, and he believed her.

By the time they stopped to rest, his chest heaved from the exertion of getting away. And the damned humming filled his mind. It reminded him almost of what it felt like to be near Davana. The pleasurable warmth that wrapped around him. The hum seemed to whisper into his ears, sending a message meant for him alone. Without thinking, he cocked his head to the side, trying to sort out the words hovering just beyond his reach.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Davana regarding him. "What is it?" she asked, reaching for his arm again.

He searched the room, trying to come up with the best explanation. "Someone's calling me, I think."

"Pay attention to it, Quinn."

She seemed quiet. A little troubled. He almost turned to gauge her face, but she glanced over her shoulder toward the commotion from the other room. Whatever happened in there seemed to be slowing down, but even he was not naive enough to believe that meant they no longer faced a threat. Why had the Bran'on shown up in the first place?

The hum continued to grow stronger before fading away to almost nothing again. Then it ratcheted in volume. The distraction hiked up his fury almost before he recognized the fluctuation in his mood.

His face felt too heated, beads of sweat starting to form on his brow. Quinn wiped them away with a quick swipe of his hand, but he might as well have left them there for all the good it did. Trails of perspiration ran down his back in annoying tickles. The cool moisture should have been a relief to his sensitized skin, but it fueled his fluctuating anger even more.

"Davana," he choked out. Her name felt thick on his tongue. *Christ*. He was panting now, his throat drying with each breath. He had to force himself to swallow before he could speak again. "Some—something's wrong with me."

"Look at me, Quinn." She used two fingers to tilt his chin in her direction. Her face blurred and he had to blink away the fuzziness. "I think the juveniles are near and you're sensing them. I need you to focus—"

"The humming, Davana. Make it stop—"

"Yes, love. Focus on the humming. Follow it until you find the source. When you find the source, I promise, the humming will stop. All of it will stop."

Beneath the humming, he could finally discern it; what had eluded him since it began. A woman's voice said his name on a breathy whisper. The sound of it as seductive as sex. Distant screaming and the crash of metal in the next room tried to distract him away from the beautiful voice. But he could hear her calling his name as if she stood right next to him.

He started trotting toward the source of that wonderful, sweet sound.

## Chapter Nine

Her mind wrenched in two directions. In any other circumstance, Davana would have gone back to face the Bran'on head-on. Too many players had made finding the juveniles their priority too and now demons were being crucified left and right as a result. She had a responsibility to her faction to find the juveniles first, though, and put a final end to the resulting bloodshed.

Right now, Quinn trotted ahead of her, his attention focused on something ahead of him, not behind where the others still either cowered or fought. His skin glowed an ominous red hue which was no doubt a direct result of his lineage.

As they made it outside, humans on their daily routine stepped with ease out of his way, not paying attention to the man drenched in sweat jogging past them. A few narrowed their eyes at him as he passed, but none stopped him. Thank Darkness for small favors. A male Purebred on the scent of a female Purebred would kill anyone in his way without hesitation.

Just another one of the small details she'd failed to mention to Quinn.

What could she have done, though? They didn't have time for complete explanations. Everything he needed to know about his parentage couldn't be summed up in a matter of minutes and that's all they had to work with.

She made a vow to herself to tell him everything when her current mission had been fulfilled. For right now, she needed his attention on that juvenile female.

For about a mile, he kept a slow, easy pace. By the end of ten minutes, she had also warmed, perspiration starting to slide down her neck and face. She almost shrugged off the coat flapping around her, but decided against it. Exposing the blade strapped to her back could only bring them trouble. With a grunt, she settled for loosening the ties across her breasts, almost moaning in relief when a breeze managed to make its way beneath the material and dry some of the moisture gathered there.

Quinn picked up pace until he ran at full speed. She lengthened her stride, making sure she kept him within a few feet.

*Draven. To me. Stay out of sight, but bring the squadron to me. Now.*

She felt his acknowledgment before disconnecting from him. When Quinn met the juveniles, especially if the other male was close, she'd need the full support of her team to handle the explosive confrontation.

As if he'd heard her, Quinn slowed to a stop next to a pile of wood planks outside of a construction site. The small strip mall a few feet away would soon be completed. Most of the stores had large plate glass windows installed, but a quick look inside gave them a perfect view to the store's skeleton. Here and there, wood shavings and discarded implements littered the sawdust-covered floors.

Despite running to get here, he didn't seem out of breath. His sweat-drenched hair curled at the nape of his neck. If she'd only glanced at him, she might not have noticed his color or just assumed the flush had to do with exercise. When she took a longer look at the back of his neck though, the flush no longer seemed a natural color for him. No human could match the color of a Purebred, no matter how hard he tried. Not that she'd ever, but if she'd had an inkling of a doubt before about his lineage, it had been wiped

clean away now. Quinn was Purebred, through and through.

He lifted his head, and drew in a deep breath. He sniffed the air twice before releasing a long breath. His pose relaxed and he turned toward one of the open doorways. Curled fists hung at his sides, his chest expanding and contracting from the force of his breathing.

"Quinn, wait." Even as she said it, she knew the futility of trying to reach him. His attention would be for the female. If he knew Davana stood near him, it would be a source of wonder.

She hadn't felt the shift in the atmosphere signifying that Draven or the others had arrived yet, but she didn't have time to wait for them. Quinn's pace increased. He walked through the construction zone without hesitation, turning corners as if following a map. When he pulled his shirt over his head, dropping the sodden material onto the ground, her pulse began to race. If her squadron didn't arrive in the next thirty seconds, things were going to deteriorate rapidly.

"Quinn," she called to his retreating back. "I need you to stop. Listen to me, love."

He didn't slow.

She saw the movement at the same time he did. She barely had a chance to register the frail-looking girl before Quinn started to run toward her. The redhead's eyes widened, but then softened when she recognized the heated Purebred-human hybrid. Her hand dropped to the sash keeping her wrap secured, working it loose.

Davana's heart lurched in her chest when she heard Quinn's possessive growl. "Davana." The way he said her name while looking at the Purebred sent a chill through her veins. He thought she stood before him, instead of behind. She forced herself to bite her bottom lip, hard enough to draw blood, instead of pulling out her blade and driving it through the wench's dark heart.

*I'm here*, she wanted to call to him. She wanted to tell him the girl in front of him fed a sexual urge because of *what* she was, not *who* she was. In a breed where the males outnumbered the females almost twenty to one, the instinctive draw to her came from the species' need to procreate, regardless of any formed attachments. At this moment though, Quinn's mind would never listen to reason—only to the searing need to be with the juvenile.

Quinn inhaled sharply when the female exposed her nudity. Davana's stomach turned as she gazed on her too. The smooth, perfect skin of the young woman kept Quinn mesmerized. Davana couldn't help but do a quick comparison to her own body, battle-weary and scarred in places from abuses heaped upon it over the years. Where the juvenile was soft and inviting, Davana's body was firm and muscled. She could hardly blame him for wanting to be with that female.

A growl to her left pulled Davana away from her self-pity. *There he was*. The other juvenile. The male who ran away with the female with the hopes they would be forgotten by demonkind. Bad enough he was flawed, unable to draw upon innate ability. Worse, he had taken from his faction a female whose potential as a future breeder made her invaluable. Not just young, he was very, very foolish to believe they would be left alone.

He barely spared Davana a glance before he leaped toward where Quinn had the female pressed against a stack of drywall. Davana forced her mind to ignore the hungry look in Quinn's eyes as he gazed on the female, and focused instead on protecting him from the juvenile's attack.

*Where the hell were her men?*

## Chapter Ten

She drew her blade, running to intercept the irate youth before he could connect with Quinn. She didn't want to have to hurt him, but would without hesitation if he left her no other choice. Whirling on her feet, she danced in front of him, distracting him. She swung her right arm wide, flipping the blade in the air at the same time, and brought the hilt of it down on his neck.

His eyes unfocused for a second before he grunted and turned on her. She flipped the blade again, holding it ready to defend herself. It would only take a few quick swipes to his torso to slow him down without killing him. Widening her stance, she stared him down. She wanted to look past him, to see what Quinn was doing, at the same time dreading to see.

The female made a soft noise, pulling the male's attention away. When he glanced over his shoulder, Davana lunged forward and brought the hilt of her blade down again on the fleshy portion of his neck. This time, she hit the right spot and he crumpled.

Wildfire in her veins, Davana raised her gaze toward Quinn. His clothed body ground against the juvenile's nude body. Her hands were gripping his arms, pulling him closer, encouraging his fervor.

"Comman—"

"Stop him!" The moment she recognized Draven's voice, she issued the order, trying to ignore the relief of not having to witness Quinn continue to touch another woman.

Two men stood over the unconscious juvenile male, dragging him into their grip. Another four of her men hustled toward Quinn, pulling him away from the juvenile while a fifth dragged her away. Quinn held his own for a few seconds, punching at them with an enthusiasm that almost made her believe he could be Ha'fing, before they managed to throw him to the ground. Three of the demons wrestled with Quinn while he roared her name.

"Davana!" Something larger, more sorrowful than agony could be heard in his hoarse cries. "Davana!"

She felt Draven's large form at her side. She wouldn't spare him a glance. Her attention remained on the human who called her name as though she was his last hope for life.

Draven's deep voice broke through her mind. "What would you have us do with him, Commander?"

Her heart pounded each time Quinn screamed her name. She wanted to comfort him, to let him know that she was right there, waiting for him, but he still seemed blinded to her presence. "Take the juveniles, now. Get them away from here." She reached up, further loosening the ties of her corset. "When they release him," she said, gesturing toward Quinn, "head back to our realm. I'll meet you there ... later."

She caught the way Draven's jaw tightened, and she tensed, ready for a confrontation, but he dipped his head before replying, "Commander."

One of the men holding Quinn watched for her signal. When she nodded, the four men released him, standing quickly. They dematerialized the moment he was free, but she couldn't pay attention to them. Wild-eyed, Quinn scrambled to his feet and faced her.



"Davana?"

He seemed to recognize her now, and relieved, she said, "I'm right here, Quinn." She opened her arms to him and he rushed straight into them. The force of his impact almost caused her to stumble, but Quinn was right there, holding her, enfolding her in his embrace.

He held her close, kissing the top of her head, her face, her nose. "Davana," he murmured between kisses. She nuzzled against him, loving the feel of his coarse chest hair sliding against her.

His arousal rubbed against her belly and she fumbled for the fasteners on his clothing. He caught her fever and tugged at her clothing too. They worked hurriedly, urgently, not pausing until they stood nude before each other.

His hands caressed her breasts, her stomach. They moved lower until he could slide his fingers over the wet folds of her sex. She reached behind him, touching, massaging the fine ridge of skin down his back. Heating his desire, flaming hers.

By the time he lifted her onto the pallet of construction material, not just her body, but also her heart ached. She spread her thighs, ready for him, and held her breath as he nudged her entrance. He surged forward, her body welcoming his invasion and she closed her eyes. If this was her last time to be with him, she would savor the feel of him, enjoy the pleasure of him and revel in what could only be her love for him.

He took her twice. The first time, frantic and primal. The second time, slow, sensual and sweet. He was so gentle, so caring, her eyes misted while she trembled in his arms.

For the last time.

\* \* \* \*

"When were you going to tell me?" He tried to keep his voice level. It took everything within him to remain still and not find something to crush or throw against a wall. She had used him. The harsh reality of what transpired in the last hour couldn't be ignored.

She *used* him.

She wouldn't look at him, but said softly, "I didn't know for certain it would work."

"Bullshit!" He slammed his fist into a piling. "From the minute I told you about the humming, your mood lifted. Because you knew I could find them, right?"

"Why does it matter, Quinn?" Davana crossed her arms over her chest, almost shrinking into herself.

He didn't want to feel this way. He wanted to focus on their relationship, on being with her, but the way she could betray him so easily ... it hurt. "It matters because," he said after releasing a slow breath, "I don't know how far you would have let it go."

This time she looked up. "What do you mean?"

"Do you have any concept of how badly I wanted her? That I would have done *anything* to be with her?"

She glanced away again. "I do. It's instinctual among Purebred males to procreate with any female of their faction. You couldn't control the urge any more than you can control your urge to breathe."

"Then at what point would you have stopped it? *Could* you have stopped it? Aw, Jesus, Davana ... would you have just sat by while I had sex with her in front of you?"

She didn't hesitate with her response. "If I had to."

She might as well have punched him in the gut. The air left Quinn's lungs until his torso burned from the need to breathe. He couldn't respond. Could only stare at her in horror. A minute passed before his brain kicked in. "You would have just served me up on a silver platter, huh? Are you really so cold-blooded, Davana?" He waited another minute, but she didn't reply. He shrugged then. "But it doesn't matter, right? Whatever you needed to get the job done."

His temples were throbbing and he couldn't think straight anymore. In less than twenty-four hours this woman—this demon—had seized his heart and crushed it in her hand.

Without looking at her, he started gathering his clothing from the dusty floor. Silence stretched between them as he dressed. When he was done, he gathered her clothes and piled them next to her.

"I have to get back to my studio and see what's left of it." He still couldn't look at her face. He wanted to let go of the anger, but if he did look and saw the indifference he knew would be waiting there, it would spike again.

Quinn turned to leave, but thought of something else. "That mating call thing doesn't seem to bother either of us anymore. I guess you got your wish, Commander. But should you need to *use* me for anything else, you know where you can find me."

He didn't mean to say that last piece, but it slipped out. The tight rein he thought he had on his anger had a slipknot. At least he only sounded tired now, which seemed apropos. Drawing on a reserve of strength, he started to walk away.

"Quinn—"

His back to her, he froze in place, expectant. "Yes?"

"Your magic... I need to show you how to use it."

So not the words he wanted to hear. He forced himself to count backward from ten. He glanced over his shoulder, but then faced forward almost as quickly. "Next time, Commander."

Feeling like shit for it, he ignored the tears he'd seen streaming down her face, and left.

## Chapter Eleven

"Commander."

She dragged her gaze away from the scrolls and looked up. Not that she could have said what she'd been reading anyway. She couldn't concentrate on much of anything these days. If anyone required anything that went beyond her normal routine of waking up, doing drills with her team and then going to sleep, she was useless.

Draven approached her desk, his red eyes clouded with concern. He would be mortified if he knew she could read the emotion in his face. Every day that passed, though, the concern grew. It didn't matter. There wasn't much she could do about it.

She had a feeling she knew what he wanted and addressed him warily. "Lieutenant?"

"You've missed another meeting, Commander. The council is not happy," he said as he sat down in the chair across from her. "Permission to speak freely?"

Davana mentally shrugged. The fact he managed any restraint thus far was kind of impressive. Surely her superiors had noted her change in attitude and motivation, but had yet to confront her. If someone was going to dress her down, at least let it come from someone she considered a friend. "What's on your mind, Draven?"

"It's been over a month since we caught the juveniles. They've reached maturity and been debriefed ad nauseum. But since we've returned, you've been distracted. Different. This can't go on."

Like she needed him to tell her. Over one month since she'd seen Quinn. Stupid human. Fighting the burning in her eyes, she said, "You wouldn't understand."

She hated that he could still dredge up such intense emotions within her. She couldn't even say his name out loud without bursting into tears. She fought hand to hand with men twice her size, had once heard the harsh snap of her bone breaking during training and didn't slow down. On top of that, she stared down the face of death every other day. But that stupid human name *Quinn* ... that could do her in every single time.

Draven sat down in the available chair and then leaned forward. "Then explain it to me until I do."

"I didn't believe in predestined mates. Someone who is meant for each one of us ... that perfect someone. Then I found him. My mate. And I used him for what I needed." She picked up the leather skin of water on her desk, twisted open the top and took a swig. She swallowed down the cool liquid and said, "The worst part of it though? When he'd been presented with the opportunity to be with someone else—against his will I might add—it was me he thought about. It was my name he kept calling. Me."

"Then why not go back to him now?"

She sighed. "Draven, if you'd seen how badly I'd hurt him, you wouldn't ask me that. Besides," she shook her head, "I don't deserve him. Not after I betrayed his trust like that."

Draven reached across the table and, after a moment's hesitation, clasped her hand in his. "Commander, you've won more accolades than most demons I know. You've fought hard most of your life. You've risen faster through the ranks than anyone thought possible. You live hard and you'll die hard. If anyone deserves a little happiness somewhere in all of that, I don't know who else it would be. Go. Find your mate. Find

your happiness and fight for it like the warrior I know you to be."

She bit down on her lip and fought the urge to smile. Was it any wonder he was her most trusted, best team member? "Do you think he would have me?"

"I saw the way he looked at you, Commander. Believe me when I say I doubt you have anything to worry about." His face hardened. "And we can always have a man-to-demon conversation about it, if necessary."

This time she did laugh at the consternation in his voice. Because she knew Draven so well, she also knew he would have no qualms about dragging Quinn to the demon realm for that conversation.

Before she could gather her belongings for a trek back to the human realm, a commotion outside her quarters caught their attention. She and Draven stood at the same time, both drawing their blades.

"Commander Davana Black!"

Her heart hammered when she heard her name being called. The echo of it bounced around the buildings surrounding hers, but it failed to disguise the voice calling. But it couldn't be...

*My Darkness.*

Could it?

"Davana!"

More shouts could be heard, these coming from others. Davana shot around the desk, almost shoving Draven to the side in her hurry to reach the door. Something crashed against it at the same time she reached for the handle. Yanking on it, she pulled the door wide-open.

Quinn tumbled inside, wrestling with two demons on the ground. Upside-down, he searched the room and when his gaze landed on her, a grin split his face. "Commander!"

Someone's muscled arm reached into the fray and grabbed Quinn by the collar. Draven pulled the human upright, separating him from the demons still trying to subdue him. Her lieutenant barely had time to remove himself before Davana threw herself against Quinn, pressing her mouth against his.

She clasped his face in her hands, searching it, trying to make sure he was real. Her mouth found his again and again before she pulled away long enough to speak to him. "How? How did you get here?"

He pressed his body against her, hugging her tight. "It took a while, but damn it, I was going to figure it out sooner or later. Do you have any idea the kinds of places you can wind up if you don't know what you're doing?" A flash of humor crossed his face. "I stumbled across two, uh, beings doing something I'd classify as both insanely vulgar and at the same time intriguingly naughty who were not pleased *at all* when I popped in. And this place! I've been here twice before and never knew I was so close to finding you. But once I did ... anyway, I'm just sorry it took me this long to get here."

"I was coming to find you," she said, her voice trembling. "I'm so sorry, Quinn. I shouldn't—"

His mouth crashed against hers, cutting off her apology. By the time he pulled away, she was breathless. He murmured, "You feel that?"

Caught up in his stare, she almost had to ask what he was talking about. Then she felt it—the warmth that climbed up her back and spread through her limbs. She hadn't realized how much she'd missed its comfort until it returned. He kissed her again.

Beyond where they stood, she heard Draven's low voice order the other demons out. Then the door clicked with a soft sound when it shut.

"Quinn?" she whispered against his mouth. His lips met hers and nibbled on them until she had to force some space between them. "I need you to stay with me. Stay by my side. Every time a chill threatens to overtake me, remind me with your presence how nice it feels to be warm."

"You don't mind slumming with a human?"

Davana took his hand, and shivered from the heat in his eyes. She kissed him again. "Quinn, there's no such thing. And just so we're clear, I couldn't live without being mated to one human in particular. Let me show you what I mean."

She led him to her small bedroom where she would indeed show him what it meant to be mated to a demon Commander. What it meant to be demon. And what it meant to be loved.

## **The End**

### **About the Author:**

Dee Carney began writing short stories in middle school, but did not attempt completion of a novel until almost ten years later—which, despite good intentions, she never finished. Almost ten additional years later, she challenged herself to begin writing again, and her love for storytelling was rekindled. Now, Dee is a best-selling, award-winning author who lives at home in Georgia with her husband, two dogs and a cat. When not writing, Dee is usually curled up on the couch with a good book!

To learn more about all of Dee's books, please visit her at <http://www.deecarney.com>

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