

ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



Kenna's Cowboy

[Nicole Austin](#)

Hearts of Fire, Book Four

Cursed with unusual abilities, orphan McKenna Fulton has always been different, an outcast. But she's been Chosen. More accurately, she is one of the Chosen. Eight individuals—four women and four men—selected at birth to guard slices of crystal. The Heart of Fire.

The whole thing is more than a little farfetched. Kenna can handle the part of getting down and dirty with the bad dude. She's even okay with guarding a crystal. But losing her free will and being stuck with some guy, her destined mate, uh-uh. Not happening.

Local mechanic Ryker Thomas is more than he appears and has his own set of abilities. Kenna wants nothing to do with the Southern charmer. So what if he has a matching crystal and the damn thing hums and vibrates whenever they're close together. That doesn't mean she'll toe the line.

He can't be the one she's supposed to be with. Fate wouldn't be so cruel as to send her a cowboy when what she wants is a bad boy.

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Kenna's Cowboy

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KENNA'S COWBOY

Nicole Austin

Dedication

To Ci. You always come up with the best ideas!

To TJ & NJ. You both awe and inspire me.

Trademarks Acknowledgement

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Prologue

Slipping through the night, merging as one with shadows, she sought solace in the cloak of darkness. Quiet sounds of life provided a balm for her weary soul. Musical chirping of crickets, an owl's hooted inquiry, the deep-throated croak from a frog. This is where she was meant to be, where she thrived, far from the harsh realities of daylight.

Heavy wooden doors slid shut without the slightest whisper. Motionless, Kenna extended her senses to detect any potential threat. She breathed slow and easy. The distinctive sweet and slightly musty scent of ancient books combined with the familiar lemony tang of wood cleaner to create a comforting aroma.

Moonlight filtered through colorful stained glass windows to play over various surfaces before being absorbed by dark paneled walls. Her attention shot across the room, latching onto a small table before the altar. Three fat ivory candles on a silver tray cast a small halo of flickering light over the area, but failed to relieve the antsy feeling crawling up her spine.

The objects were out of place, not belonging there. She didn't belong here anymore either. Her bags were packed, and even though she hated the idea, Kenna was ready to go.

She'd felt out of sorts since the headmistress, Angela Raguel, had requested this midnight meeting in the chapel. But nothing had been right since her "sisters" had begun leaving the safety of the Gideon House—the orphanage where they'd grown up. Kenna missed the closeness of sharing her life with the others.

De'alla, Charlotte and Memory may not be blood relatives but where it truly mattered—in their hearts—they were her sisters. And one by one, on their eighteenth birthday, each had left home and headed out into world alone.

Okay, so all of her sisters were...different. Anglea said they were blessed. Kenna figured their abilities were more of a curse. But their unique differences had formed a deeply ingrained bond between the foursome. An unbreakable, lifelong bond.

The oldest, Memory, had been the first to leave. Bold and outgoing, she had the amazing ability to take an image from her mind and reveal it upon paper or film. She used the talent working as a photographer and was headed for great success.

Next to go had been wickedly smart De'alla. Dee had the incredible ability to control water and communicate with the forces of nature. Multilingual and business savvy, she was out there shaking things up in Japan. She'd gone the farthest from home and was sorely missed.

Then there was Charlotte, who had been gone for eight long months. She was closest to Kenna, not only in age, so her departure had hurt the most. Charlotte had the ability to sense the auras and emotions of others. Bombarded and overwhelmed, she preferred the solitude of writing and gardening. She was a loner, like Kenna.

Kenna was the youngest—the last. The baby. Not that she needed to be babied. Far from it. Her touch of intuition had always made her edgy, but her true ability was psychokinesis. She manipulated and directed energies with her mind and released them through her body, which made her one hell of an excellent fighter. Martial arts, street fighting, weapons, she'd trained in them all and become a lethal opponent. Too bad she had no useful career-type outlet for her unique skill set. Kicking ass didn't show up in many job descriptions.

Bells chimed twelve, the stroke of midnight. Her eighteenth birthday. She was now a woman and would have to leave home. Go out and make her place in the world as her sisters had. A terrifying prospect because Kenna didn't have the faintest idea of what to do with herself. Her chest ached as she imagined herself to be a tiny rowboat set adrift on a vast, turbulent sea without an anchor.

"Come, child. Avoiding the future will not make it go away. It is time."

She glanced at Angela, taking in her ethereal beauty as the headmistress moved into the golden arc of candlelight. Pale blonde curls framed her sweet face and accented crystalline blue eyes. The flowing ceremonial gown and robes added to her angelic appearance.

"Happy birthday, McKenna. Your last night at home. The last one of my girls to leave." Angela sniffed and batted away tears. "Before you go, I have something for you."

Kenna shuffled her feet. She'd always been awkward when receiving gifts, never knowing what to do with her hands or what to say.

Angela drew something from her pocket and extended her hand. "Come closer, child. It's not going to bite."

Reaching out, Kenna held her breath as she touched the warm links of a silver chain like the ones her sisters wore. She knew about the gifts each girl received on her birthday but nothing more. Had seen them around her sisters' necks. They'd never kept secrets from each other before. In this one thing they'd kept quiet, which made her feel as if the necklaces drove a wedge between them.

She lifted the necklace, careful to hold a hand beneath it in case she fumbled. The irregular-shaped crystal dangling from the end captivated her. Candlelight refracted off sharp angles to reveal something within the heart of the pink shard. She detected indistinct shapes or spots within the cloudy depths of the rose quartz, an elusive blending of energy.

Kenna gasped as what she'd noticed clarified, taking on form. Within the crystal were four imperfections. Dark red drops that looked suspiciously like blood.

"Oh great. The other girls got pretty, shiny crystals and I get a cloudy pink one that's bleeding." Apropos as it may be, it still sucked.

"Rose quartz is strong. The red drops make it a powerful warrior's crystal to help you master control and to calm your fear of enemies."

"I'm not afraid of anyone."

Angela continued to speak, only Kenna didn't hear the sound with her ears. The voice whispered softly through her mind as her focus remained locked on the crystal.

"In the world outside our sanctuary you will be seen as an outcast. A lost, forgotten soul of little consequence or worth. Keep the truth sheltered in your heart, child. You are special. Blessed. You have unique gifts and have been selected to protect the future of all mankind. You, McKenna, are one of the Chosen."

What the hell?

Kenna could only stare and wonder what the woman was babbling on about. Nobody would choose a misfit orphan to defend the future. The world was in a heap of trouble if it was relying on her. But she'd never seen the headmistress this solemn. Angela believed what she was saying, that Kenna would somehow save the world. She put the necklace back in Angela's hand.

There was no holding back. Laughter started in her belly, built in her chest and erupted from her throat. "Save the world. Me? Yeah, right. Good one, Ang. You been hitting the ceremonial wine?"

Angela sighed. With a tired smile, she placed the necklace around Kenna's neck.

Gathering her long hair, Kenna moved it from beneath the links, feeling as if her shoulders bore a hefty weight. The damn thing was a burden, an albatross to drag her down. Yet as the crystal settled between her breasts something strange happened. An electrical energy vibrated from the core of the gem, gathered strength and slammed into her with the force of a Mack truck hitting a brick wall.

Ouch!

Her knees shook and she had the sudden urge to run. From what she didn't know. Restlessness surged and she itched for a good fight. Her hands dropped to the daggers strapped to her thighs.

Angela gripped Kenna's wrists and stared into her eyes, doing that funky thing again, talking in Kenna's mind. "*Hear me well, child.*"

A series of images streamed through her brain, her own private movie screening. Shame she didn't have any popcorn or Raisinets. Kenna shifted, hating the inaction, longing to have something to focus her energy on. An opponent to fight.

She saw a great city built on a foundation of sparkling crystals in a rainbow of colors. The residents were in danger. A dark magic rocked their world with a massive force, creating a great tidal wave that swamped the city and killed its people. The story resonated in her heart—part memory, part Angela's voice narrating the tale.

"Everything in the universe must have balance. For light to exist there must also be darkness. There must be good to counteract the bad, male to complement female, and so on.

"Back when the world was new, the ancients foresaw the death and rebirth of their race. To maintain balance, they created the Heart of Fire. Born of the earth, created from the elements, the Heart represents all that made Atlantis. Each of the eight pieces balances the others. Apart, the individual pieces are innocuous. When combined into four pairs there is great strength. Unite all eight pieces and the power is infinite."

Oh no way. Kenna had an inkling of where this all led and she didn't want to go down that path. As if sensing her thoughts, Angela confirmed her suspicions.

"De'alla, Memory, Charlotte and now you, each have a piece of the crystal octagon for safekeeping. Your counterparts have the other pieces."

Kenna held up a hand. "Wait, let me guess. The real reason you're kicking me out on my birthday is to make me go out and find my counterpart—a man. Once we all find our guys then we'll bring the eight crystals together, unleash the awesome and incredible power. We'll start our own Atlantis, procreate and live happily ever after, right? That's the way these sappy kinds of stories always go, isn't it? You want me to go find my yin so we can make some little yangs. I get it...but I don't want it."

Kenna intended to remove the necklace and give it back but her fingers refused to follow her commands. She struggled to breathe and her entire body shook. Sweat coated her skin and her stomach did wild flip-flops.

"You cannot remove the crystal. It is both your weakness and a source of strength. It will amplify your abilities when you battle the enemy and calm them at other times." Angela's expression became shuttered, all hint of emotion hidden, and her lips thinned into a grim line. "It will help reveal your enemy."

Jesus, Angela had really lost her mind. How did she expect anyone to buy this tall tale? "I have an enemy?"

"Asmodeus. He's often referred to as a prince of hell or demon of lust. His strongest power is the ability to twist sexual desires."

"Great, he's a freaky pervert." She might as well go with it and humor Angela. "Ooo-kaaay. Unite the crystals, battle the demon. Got it. Anything else?"

"Asmodeus will attempt to seduce and trick you into believing he is your counterpart. Your mate. He will profess love and even possesses a crystal. Be careful. He will feed off your life energy, draining you to sustain his corporeal form. The crystal can tell the difference between Asmodeus and your counterpart. It will resonate when close to your true mate."

"Uh-huh." She had no idea how to respond. "And what if I don't want to fight the sexy demon or hook up with a hero and make the new Atlantean race?"

"You have no choice, child. You are Chosen by birth. By the spirit that inhabits you. You are one of the eight. There is no escaping your destiny. Look into the crystal."

This was all insane but she trusted Angela with her life, with her sisters' lives. The woman had always been honest and caring, never before having shown any signs of having gone round the bend.

Kenna cupped the crystal in her hand and stared past the pink quartz to the spots. White light flashed and her mind cleared of everything else. A frightening truth took shape. One Kenna knew she could never turn her back on.

Her sisters were depending on her. Angela's story was real.

Aw crap!

As she left the chapel, Kenna wrapped her hand around the crystal and was hit with a jolt of pure energy. A connection opened up between her crystal and her sisters. Then an image flashed briefly in her mind. An image of Dee, buck-ass naked and soaking wet in the shower.

Kenna threw her arm up to shield her eyes but it was too late. The damage was done. "Jesus, Dee. My poor eyes. What the hell? You trying to blind me?"

It was time for a heart-to-heart with her sisters. She was sick and tired of being kept out of the loop. Since she had her crystal now, she expected them to finally give her the four-one-one.

They hadn't discussed the Hearts with her before. Now they damn well better get to talking. Fast!

Chapter One

"The new guy is gay."

"No, he can't be."

"Sorry, 'fraid so. No straight man would be caught dead wearing a leather vest and chaps."

"In my fantasies they do."

"Then your fantasies are fucked up."

"Well, he does ride a motorcycle. Isn't that an exception to the rules?"

"Nope, makes it worse."

"I'm crushed, although he does kinda give off a creepy vibe."

McKenna Fulton didn't usually pay much attention to the continuous and at times cruel chatter among the waitresses at Joey D's Bar & Grill. Not unless it involved her personally. Since the distinction of being the "new guy" in Indian Pointe had belonged to her for the past five months, she figured that made this her business.

Wes Martin had rolled into the small Missouri town a few days ago to claim the title and would bear the label until another newbie came along to take over. She'd heard rumors one poor sap had been stuck with it for more than three years. When you were the "new guy" nobody called you by name. It also made you the prime target for the gossipmongers.

"I swear, he could be Kenna's long-lost relative."

Hmm...the girls had something there. She and Wes did have a lot in common. And the man was a wet-dream-on-a-stick. Tall, dark and dangerous. Bad to the nth degree. In her opinion there was nothing hotter than a man who wasn't afraid to kick some ass.

"He's a loner. I haven't seen him talk to anyone except to give his order."

"Yeah, just like Kenna. She's always alone too."

She glanced out the pass-through between the kitchen and the waitress station to where Wes sat in a booth. No one would call him handsome. Not to his face if they wanted to live. He did it for her though. And then some.

She'd be willing to bet an entire month's pay that under the black T-shirt stretched across his broad chest and all that fitted leather lurked more than one erotic body piercing. He had jet black hair, dark brown eyes and topped out somewhere around six-feet tall, every divine inch covered by ripped muscle. His dark skin had the cinnamon tones of a Native American heritage. And all the skin she could see bore either vicious scars or elaborate tattoos.

I wonder if he'd be into comparing battle wounds.

By far the most arresting thing about Wes was that every time she saw him, erotic images flashed through her mind and heated her body. The images were dark, distressing scenes of harsh, savage sex. Taboo sex. She clearly pictured him fucking her ass, hard. She saw herself on her knees, arms restrained, Wes shoving his dick down her throat while she gagged and sobbed.

The brutal images confused the hell out of her. Kenna enjoyed strong partners but violent, demeaning sex, uh-uh. Not her cup of tea. Still, she had to wonder if Wes were her counterpart, the man Angela had said she had to join with. She did find him incredibly gorgeous, breathtaking even.

"Both of them wear only black."

"Sure, but she may have more scars than him."

"True, but he's scarier."

"Eh, maybe..."

Kenna covered her laughter with a cough as the two women scrutinized Wes and compared the two of them. While they may share some similarities there was something off with him. An odd pulse emanating from deep within. A distinct

malevolence. She didn't have to glance up to know when he drew near either. All the fine hairs on her body stood on end, she broke out in gooseflesh and her crystal turned cold. That alone made her wary of him. Her sisters had all been through this and warned that the demon would create warped feelings you couldn't trust.

Cold chills raced along her spine just thinking about her reaction to Wes. She shivered and tuned out the conversation, returning to cleaning the grill—her final task of the day. Thankfully last call for food occurred long before the last call for alcohol, allowing her to finish cooking and leave before the rest of the staff.

She tossed her apron into the laundry bin and stepped out into the back alley, taking a deep breath of crisp, clean mountain air.

Damn, she loved that.

Out of all the places she'd roamed, the Ozarks felt like home. The eclectic town had everything she enjoyed — mountains, lakes and a miniscule population.

She turned the corner and stepped out onto Main Street, nodding when the man closing up the hardware shop waved hello. As was the way with small towns, everyone knew everyone else. That meant there were few surprises. Kenna didn't like surprises.

Hesitating for only a second, she crossed the street and headed for the sidewalk in front of the mechanic's shop. Feeling the crystal nestled between her breasts heat up as she passed by no longer startled her. Still, Kenna always gave the gregarious mechanic a wide berth, partly because of how the local women all swooned over him. She didn't need that kind of drama in her life.

Grudgingly she admitted Ryker was okay if you went for clean-cut good ole Southern boys. She didn't. Ryker represented the exact opposite of what Kenna looked for in a man. He was tall with light brown hair and the lean build of a runner. A pretty boy with loads of charm to spare. The man tipped his ever-present cowboy hat and opened doors for women.

She shook her head. The one time she'd gotten near him at the Quickie-Mart and hadn't waited for him to grab the door, Ryker had been offended. As if by virtue of having ovaries she was too weak to fend for herself.

Give me a friggin' break!

She was no fragile damsel. In fact, Kenna was more than capable of holding her own with guys twice her size, *fuck you very much*.

And then there was the whole freaky thing that had happened with her crystal to consider. The damn stone had hummed and gyrated all over the place when she'd been standing near Ryker, which is why she stayed away from him. Far away.

Her sisters, Dee and Memory would eat up that kind of gallant treatment from a man. Well, before they'd found the loves of their lives they would have. Even shy, quiet Charlotte had succumbed to the draw of their cursed crystals, accepted her destiny and hooked up with a man.

Not just any man either, one of the Chosen.

Bullshit! The whole thing made Kenna want to barf.

She had not wanted to believe Angela's story about having been selected at birth to guard slices of the Heart of Fire crystal. They were supposed to find their male counterparts then get together to defeat a perverted demon. Once finished saving the world, they were to happily fuck like bunnies and repopulate some ancient race.

Pshaw, right.

For sixteen years she'd worn the stupid crystal and absolutely nothing had happened. Not until recently with Wes and Ryker. But the story had started coming true. Memory, Dee and Charlotte had all found their guys, their crystals had fused and they'd fended off Asmo. Now everyone waited for her to get on the ball.

Well, they'd be waiting a long time. Kenna had no intention of getting with the program. To hell with falling in line and doing the expected—surrendering to destiny. She was hanging on to her free will with both fists.

A shrill scream cut through the peaceful serenity of the night and stopped Kenna in front of the bookstore. Slowing her breathing, she concentrated on pinpointing where the sound originated. Muted cries and shuffling noises seemed to come from the alley.

Palming her daggers, she blended into the shadows alongside the buildings, moving with quiet ease. When she reached the alley she remained behind the wall as she peered around the corner, quickly assessing the scene.

Three men were trying to force a woman into a vehicle. Outnumbered and overpowered, the victim didn't stand a chance. Kenna knew the statistics. If an attacker managed to move you to another location your prospect for survival took a nosedive.

Not that she'd stand by and let that happen. No way.

She sheathed her daggers and strolled around the corner, casual as could be, kicking up dust with her shitkickers. "Oh my. What's going on?" She ignored the freezing cold chills coming off her crystal.

The woman's head spun in her direction and Kenna recognized her from the beauty salon two buildings down. "You know these guys, Velma?"

"Kenna," the woman gasped. "Run. Get help!"

With the attention of all three goons focused on her, Kenna moved closer instead of turning away. The car was an older model Buick. A real piece of shit rust bucket. It didn't have a license plate. "Damn, boys. That is one butt-ugly car."

"Who cares? The backseat is big and roomy," one man taunted. "Want to check it out with me? I bet we can make this old car rock."

Nice try, scumbag, but not in this lifetime.

"Yeah, what do you say, sweet thing. Wanna go for a ride?" The second moron rubbed his crotch suggestively. As if his small bulge would entice her to join the fun and games. *Not!*

"How about you guys ditch Velma there and take me on? I've always fantasized about having a ménage."

The one who had remained silent moved into the shallow pool of light cast by a security light. Kenna barely suppressed a gasp as she recognized him. His heated gaze slid over her body in a slow perusal that made her feel dirty and desperate for a shower.

"I've seen you at Joey D's. You're the stuck-up new bitch."

"Actually, Wes, that's your title now, isn't it?"

He glared at her. The other two grew antsy and moved toward the open car door. "Damn it, Wes. She knows who you are. Let's dump the whore and get outta here."

Wes' gaze never left hers. "I don't know about that, Dwayne." He took a measured step in her direction, shot her a cruel grin. She shuddered, wondering why the hell she'd thought him attractive. "I think she wants to party with us."

Hell yeah. My fist wants to dance on your conceited face.

She would thoroughly enjoy adding some new scars to his impressive collection.

"What d'ya say, Kenna?"

The other two released Velma, shoving her back in the direction of the beauty shop. As one, the trio formed a semicircle and advanced on Kenna. She rocked forward on the balls of her feet, flexed her hands and waited until Velma was safely away before responding.

"Sure. I've got nothing better to do at the moment. Let's dance."

Chapter Two

After making a few final adjustments to the monstrous V8 engine of a nineteen-seventy Cadillac Deville, Ryker closed the hood and smiled in satisfaction over a job well done. His gaze slid over the distinctive grille, caressed each fine line and angled plane. Original fire mist red paint reflected the garage bay. The vehicle boasted lots of shiny chrome and a pristine white leather interior.

Joey D loved his Caddy, treated her like his baby. Even named her —Scarlett. It was easy to understand why. Scarlett was a thing of beauty. And Ryker would know. He'd spent a lot of time poring over every gorgeous inch, ensuring she was perfectly conditioned.

He carefully wiped down his tools and put them away, remembering what his father had told him many years ago. *"Take care of your tools and they'll be there to take care of you."*

He'd learned his appreciation for cars from his father. On Saturdays they would go down to the drive-in for a hot dog and to check out all the cars and motorcycles. Dad had been into the pre-World War II coupes and roadsters with rumble seats that opened out of the rear deck.

For Ryker it had always been the muscle cars with their souped-up engines. He loved tinkering under the hood to get that extra few horsepower, listening to the throaty roar when he cranked the ignition and riding along, feeling the power vibrate right through the steel chassis.

Working on Joey's car made him yearn to spend some time with his own ladies. A trip out to the old homestead and a cruise in one of his restored beauties — Candace, Roxie and Louise — was definitely long overdue.

No one in Indian Pointe knew about the big house and garage full of fine Detroit steel. They saw what he wanted them to. An easygoing and uncomplicated blue-collar man. His fifteen minutes of fame under the bright spotlights had taught Ryker to value privacy and anonymity above all else.

He whistled while scrubbing the grease and grime from his calloused hands then turned off the lights and went out the side door, locking it behind him. The commute to his apartment was a short one, around the corner into the alley and up the stairs to his small room above the garage.

He heard raised voices before entering the alley. They came from a block to the south. Three hard men taunting one bold woman who gave back as good as she got. Ryker stuck to the shadows and moved silently closer to the confrontation.

"I don't know about that, Dwayne."

"I think she wants to party with us."

"What d'ya say, Kenna?"

Kenna? The cook from Joey D's. Aw, shit. From the sound of it she was hip-deep in trouble.

"Sure. I've got nothing better to do at the moment. Let's dance."

The last bit carried an ominous edge. And damn if the woman wasn't egging them on.

As Ryker stepped into the alley his heart stuttered and then pounded wildly in his chest. The pendant around his neck went ape-shit, heating up and humming. What the hell? That had happened only once before. The one time he'd gotten close to Kenna Fulton.

The situation he walked into was worse than he'd thought. Kenna was surrounded by three meaner-than-hell junkyard bullies. Yet while she may be outnumbered, she stood her ground and met the challenge head-on.

Crazy woman! She's gonna get herself killed.

"Well howdy there, folks. What're y'all doin' congregating in the alley. Doesn't seem like a very good spot for socializin' to me."

He poured on the Southern drawl thick. And as usual it worked. Four sets of irritated eyes shot daggers at him then quickly dismissed him as a non-threat.

He staggered back a step. "Whoa there. I reckon what we have here's a private party then."

"That's right, farm boy," one of the bullies barked. "Why don't you take yourself back to whatever horse you rode in on and get lost."

"Tarnation." Lifting his hat, he raked his fingers through his hair then resettled it on his head. "That's a downright unfriendly thing to say. I think I just might be offended." He paused for a moment, rubbed his chin. "Y'sir. I do believe I'm gettin' madder than a wet hornet."

"Lord, save us from stupid rednecks." He recognized the man who spoke—Wes Martin—the newest town resident. The other two were strangers.

Slow and easy, Ryker ambled closer. He wanted to get between the men and Kenna but as if her boots were rooted to the ground, she didn't budge. "Now that wasn't very nice."

"Oh, to hell with this." Without any further warning, Kenna's fist landed on the jaw of the nearest man. The resounding crack echoed loudly through the now silent alley.

He froze, stunned by her agility and strength. With lightning quick reflexes, Kenna took on all three men. She busted out some insane moves that defied gravity and the laws of physics. Flipping, twirling and landing blows while suspended midair.

"You plan on standing there all night?" She ran past him, up the side of the building, never breaking eye contact. Kenna flipped back and out, right over top of the man chasing her, kicking him in the head on her way down. "Or are you going to help?"

Without ever looking away from him, her fist shot out to the side, clocking Wes and sending him flying.

Ryker leaned back against the wall, crossed his arms over his chest, enjoying the show. "You seem to be doing fine on your own."

More than fine.

He got hard from watching her. Hands down, she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever known. She was incredibly tall, her well-conditioned body toned to perfection. He'd bet her creamy white skin was softer than silk. Ryker imagined removing the braid from her long black hair, feeling the cool strands fan out over his body. Losing hours just staring into blue eyes so vibrant they were almost purple.

He also recognized the fact that Kenna Fulton was different.

Special.

Like him.

Noticed something unusual about Wes too. The man took the brutal blows, shook them off with ease and taunted Kenna, pushing her to do more. To showcase her abilities. The bastard was studying her and learning her tricks, which in turn left her vulnerable.

He wouldn't stand by and watch that happen.

Closing his eyes, he clasped his hands and drew his power to the surface. He took a breath then opened his eyes. His hands glowed bright as he sought out Wes.

Kenna squatted, drew in the energies around her and pooled them in her core. She noticed that Wes stayed just out of range, allowing the two goons to take the brunt of the beating she dished out.

Staring straight ahead, she waited until they flanked her before uncoiling her powers. Her body shot up and angled sideways, feet planting in one man's chest, fists pounding the other's face. She landed in a crouch and almost fell on her ass as a deep voice spoke in her head.

I'm going to take out Wes. When I say go, haul ass out of here. Head north down the alley.

Holy shit. She'd lost her fucking mind. How else could Ryker be talking in her head?

Wes caught her attention. For a few fleeting moments she stared at him. She blinked, squinted and his body shimmered as if superimposed over another being. Then Wes was gone, replaced by a horrible monster of nightmare proportions.

Was hunky Wes really Asmodeus, the demon?

She got the impression of a body armored by hard scales and a mouth full of jagged yellow teeth. A forked tongue lolled out of one corner of that huge mouth. Deadly spikes protruded from where the spine should be and rose to the crown of its head.

Kenna rubbed her eyes with her fists and took another look. No horrific beast drooled on the pock-marked pavement where Wes stood. He hadn't transformed. But the lopsided smile he wore made her believe he knew exactly what she'd seen.

Focus, Kenna. On three run north.

Great, Ryker again. As if she didn't have enough to deal with. Kenna glanced over to see if his lips were moving but got distracted by the ball of incandescent light cradled in his hands.

Could this night get any more freaky?

Three...two...one.

The bright fireball exploded from Ryker's hands and zoomed toward Wes as she shot to her feet and ran in the opposite direction. The image of the white-hot light had seared her retinas. Not that she wanted to see what it did to human flesh anyway. She ran with her arms stretched out and prayed that her vision hadn't suffered permanent damage. Kenna ran as if the hounds of hell were hot on her heels. Ran faster than she'd ever run before.

Not from the fight or the goons. Not even the monster she'd thought she'd seen.

She ran from something much more frightening – destiny.

In the midst of everything else, her crystal had grown hot and started to dance a jig against her breast.

No! She wasn't ready. Not now.

Maybe not ever.

Running her hands along the wall, she turned a corner, leaned back against the building and sank to the ground. The girls would know, would call. She fished her cell phone out of her pocket and flipped it open just as it started to vibrate.

"It's happening, Dee. Jesus! I can't do this. Well, the fighting part, but not the rest. I don't want some pain-in-the-ass man changing my life—complicating everything. Fuck destiny."

"Shh! Breathe, Kenna. Just breathe."

She didn't need the call-waiting tone coming through the phone to let her know both Charlotte and Memory were also calling.

"We've talked about this. You're ready. As ready as you'll ever be. I know it's hard for you. Harder by far than for the rest of us."

"I-I can't—"

"Don't think of it as giving up your freedom. You're still free to live your life however you see fit, Kenna. But now you won't be alone anymore."

"I like being alone."

"McKenna Louise Fulton—"

She cringed. She hated it when Dee used that no-nonsense tone. And Dee had used her full name, which she knew drove Kenna crazy. She'd always hated her middle name. Louise was the perfect name for a delicate and defenseless lady. Everything she'd fought hard to never be.

"You don't believe that bullshit anymore than we do so don't even try it."

Hey, she got along pretty damn well with her delusions.

"The time has come. You can't run and hide from your life forever. Step up to the plate and get on with it."

Kenna wanted to throw a childish tantrum, piss and moan. Why the hell did Dee have to cut past all the crap and get straight to the heart of the matter? She didn't want to face this.

"Talk to Charlotte and Memory. Let them know you're all right. Then go to him and let the rest work itself out."

Dee hung up and the next call connected. "I'm scared, Char." Charlotte was the only person on earth she'd ever admit her weaknesses to.

"Don't be, Kenna. Be happy, honey. You have someone to lean on now. Someone you can trust with your heart."

"I already have the three of you. I don't need a man."

"You're stronger inside than you think, baby girl. And you can stop hiding behind the hard-ass attitude you wear like a shield. Let him see the real Kenna. It will be all right. I promise." Charlotte sighed. "Now hurry up and let Memory hear your voice before she has a stroke."

As Charlotte clicked off, Memory's voice came over the line. Kenna wondered how she would have survived all these years without her sisters. They were always there when she needed them and knew exactly what to say to get her through the bleakest moments.

"Mem—" Kenna's voice strangled in her throat. God, how she hated being away from them.

"Soon, Kenna. Not much longer now. Once your crystal fuses with your counterpart's the wait will be almost over. When we unite the Hearts nothing will keep us apart."

"I miss you all."

"We miss you too so get the lead out. The sooner you hook up with your guy, the sooner we all see each other. Let him in, Kenna. Drop that massive wall around your heart and let him love you."

Her retinas were no longer seared to a crisp and she saw a form begin to take shape from out of the darkness, steadily moving closer. With each step, her crystal grew warmer. A low hum vibrated from the cylindrical shaped pendant, resonating deep within her soul and stirring up a whole lot of sexual energy.

"You don't get to choose when fate and destiny collide. Go to him, Kenna. Believe in him."

"I-I'll try." But was it possible? She'd built the walls tall, thick and strong. They'd been in place for a long time.

Ryker extended his hand. She stared at it for a moment then took a leap of faith, putting more than her hand in his, also turning over her vulnerabilities. An electrical spark raced from the point of contact straight up her arm. Every nerve ending snapped into sudden tingling awareness.

He pulled Kenna to her feet, took the phone and flipped it closed.

"Come on, darlin'. Let's get inside before they regroup."

Turning back into the alley they crossed a side street and continued north. The way he held her hand, their fingers intertwined, was the most intimate touch she'd felt in far too long. Her head urged her to break free but her body refused. Delicious warmth spread from his skin to ease the cold she'd carried deep inside all these years she'd been alone.

Meeting her counterpart, her other half, shouldn't come as a shock. Angela had prepared her for this event and her sisters had all found their men. Yet shock her it did. To the point of dulling her normal reactions.

Where had her biting sarcasm gone? The irreverent attitude that had never before failed her. Kenna was at a loss. She should be lashing out verbally then hauling ass in

the opposite direction, not relinquishing control and following along like some docile nitwit.

Ryker had discovered a weakness in her that she hadn't known existed. And the bastard put it to good use. It wasn't a show of brute force. Nor was it the fingers lightly holding hers, the occasional gentle squeeze or even the warmth of their clasped hands that had turned her blood to molten lava within her veins.

No, what Ryker did was far more insidious.

He effectively subdued Kenna with only the gentle glide of his thumb over her inner wrist. The innocent caress stole the strength from her legs and short-circuited her brain. Her world narrowed down to the barely there, endless back and forth motion.

Somehow the tender stroke of his thumb managed to breach all her defenses, slipping through the cracks in what she'd thought to be impenetrable walls. He probably had no idea what he was doing to her. How it staggered her. The touch felt instinctive, an unconscious reflex. A reassurance.

But that wasn't all. Oh no. His touch heated her body, shortened her breath, had her nipples standing on point and dampened her panties.

She wanted Ryker. Bad. Fast, hard and sweaty. And he wanted her too if the glimpses she caught from his thoughts—sexually explicit images involving the two of them—were any indication. He wanted her on top of him, under him and on her hands and knees before him.

Unlike with Wes, the graphic visions she got from Ryker didn't disturb her. They made her extremely horny. She enjoyed the idea of spending the night in his arms trying out all those different positions. Still, for a moment she worried he could be the demon manipulating her desires, tricking her into thinking he was her destined mate.

She shook her head. No, she didn't sense anything evil in Ryker as she had in Wes.

He led her to the front of the garage, pausing to pull keys from his pocket and unlock the door. Kenna's freedom flashed before her eyes. Intuition flared and she knew once she crossed the threshold nothing would be the same.

Memory's words replayed through her head. "You don't get to choose when fate and destiny collide."

What a shame!

Kenna knew what came next. Had feared and run from it. Only she no longer wanted to escape.

The unconscious teasing of her wrist was potent. When he actually focused and touched her with intent it would be devastating. The mere idea should have her in full panic mode and retreating, but it didn't.

Just as Angela had predicted, Ryker tore down all of her defenses, rendered her naked, exposed and helpless—all with one small gesture.

It may be the adrenaline high of a good fight. Could be how long she'd gone without sharing physical intimacy. She didn't really give a shit what the reason. More than she needed the isolation that her existence had been based on, she needed his hands on her. To hell with the consequences.

He didn't let go as he locked the door behind them and headed toward a small office at the back of the large space. Only out of ingrained habit did her gaze sweep the room to assess security and make note of all windows and doors as they walked alongside Joey D's tricked-out Caddy.

Her scattered thoughts flashed back to the fight. Ryker had been very calm, undisturbed by a show of her abilities that typically freaked people out. Why didn't it bother him? Because he had his own?

She couldn't trust this man. Crave him, yes but she didn't dare divulge her secrets. Back there in the alley, talking in her mind, that blazing ball he'd created...

Kenna grabbed his biceps, forced Ryker to turn and face her. "You're a fi—" The words on the tip of her tongue shriveled up and died. Her hand dropped limp to her side. He stood inches away, less than an arm's length. Close enough to touch. All over.

Damn, the man was big. At six-feet tall she wasn't used to looking up at anyone but he had at least five inches on her. This close she had to tilt her head back to get her first good look at him.

Beneath the Stetson his light brown hair was shaggy, a bit long. It suited his angular face. His coffee-colored eyes were wide-set and speckled with amber, the left one bracketed by a crescent-shaped scar. The bridge of his nose was broad and had been broken. More than once. A five-o'clock shadow softened the sharp line of his jaw and the deeply indented cupid's bow above full lips.

His face had a lot of character, the few flaws saving him from being classified as pretty. She knew Memory would beg to photograph him when they met. Not that Kenna would blame her. Ryker's features were fascinating.

And that mouth. Kenna licked her lips as she wondered how his mouth would feel against hers. Would his kiss be soft and gentle?

Regardless of his charm and smooth talk, she figured Ryker for a dominant lover. His kiss would conquer, laying claim to not only a woman's body but demanding her soul. Which was what scared the hell out of her.

For someone used to being alone, trusting no one and fending for herself, being taken by a man like Ryker would be a challenge. He wouldn't accept anything less than all of her. She wasn't sure she had that to give.

He closed the remaining distance until the warmth of his body wrapped around her and she breathed in his masculine scent. Ryker's movements were deliberate and slow as if giving her a chance to retreat. But distance was no longer an option. Anticipation overrode lifelong fears. She had to know, feel, taste. Possess and be possessed.

This was the man chosen for her and to hell if she wouldn't have him.

"Kiss me, cowboy."

Chapter Three

Ryker had every intention of fulfilling Kenna's request and then some. He'd wanted to get to know the strong, enigmatic woman since her first day in town. She'd managed to keep her distance but not anymore. Now that he had her all to himself, he had no intention of letting go.

His hands slid around her waist and he pulled her soft curves against his solid frame. God, she fit him just right. Built like a brick house – tall, curvy and stacked – she was perfect. Full tits cushioned his chest almost as sweetly as her soft belly nestled the length of his aching cock.

With the first brush of their lips she purred and melted into him. Her lips parted in silent invitation, testing his resolve to go slow. He traced the pouty shape of her lush pink mouth, instantly addicted to her spicy cinnamon taste. It suited her, as did the dark, tough-chick clothes she wore.

Kenna was no fragile rose to be kept sheltered and there was nothing tentative in her kiss. She met his lips head-on, her fierce passion draining all the blood from his thinking head and funneling it straight to his randy dick. Her tongue shot past his lips, delving and tasting, driving his hunger higher. He followed as she retreated only to have her suck on his lower lip and snap his control.

Following the curves of her ass, he cupped the firm cheeks and gave her a quick squeeze before grasping her thighs. As he lifted, she wrapped those gorgeous legs around his waist, hooking her ankles and holding on tight. He groaned and she drank down the sound as he set her on the fender of Joey's car, freeing his hands to explore.

Kenna devoured him, plain and simple. She sucked on his tongue and he had no trouble picturing her on her knees showing such avid attention to his cock. Her hands

got in on the act, first gripping his shoulders then moving lower, flowing over his chest as if she were blind and reading his body by Braille.

"Oh shit. You're bleeding." She went from feeling him up to ripping at his shirt. Two strong tugs and the material gave, splitting down the middle.

Bleeding?

Ryker glanced down, trying to figure out what she was going on about. A dark red stain marred the tattered blue material. He hadn't taken part in the fight, didn't feel any pain, so how the hell could he be bleeding?

She grabbed the braided leather around his neck and tossed the pendant over his shoulder. "Keep that away from me."

What the hell did she have against his necklace? She wore a strikingly similar one. Not that it mattered when the fingers stroking every inch of his chest into a frenzy almost distracted him from the genuine concern in her big violet-colored eyes.

Jesus! He couldn't remember the last time someone worried about him. Kenna also looked fighting mad, ready to tear apart anyone stupid enough to have caused him harm.

His heart turned over in his chest and pounded a wild rhythm against his ribs. Ryker caught her hands and brought them to his lips, kissing her knuckles with reverence. "I'm fine. It's not my blood, darlin'."

Kenna looked deep into his eyes for the space of several stuttered heartbeats then thrust her fingers into his hair, unseating his hat. She tugged, pulling him into a punishing kiss. They were both panting for air when they surfaced sometime later.

The loud slap of her palm connecting with his face echoed through the garage. Ryker rubbed at his stinging cheek and glared. "What the hell was that for?"

"Don't you ever scare me like that again!"

Damn, she had a lot of spunk. And the fierce protective gleam in her eyes—what a fucking turn-on. His cock jerked against the painful constriction of his jeans in

agreement. While he was dying to plunge deep inside Kenna, he wouldn't be rushed. Not with her. This was too important to screw up. "I'll try my best, darlin'."

The primitive instinct to claim and mark this woman as his was nearly overpowering his desire to give her more pleasure than she'd ever known. Deep down an inner conviction assured him they had a lifetime ahead of them but it didn't ease his driving need to fuck her senseless.

"You have too many clothes on."

"Mmm...so do you, cowboy." Her lascivious smile had the same effect as a mainlined shot of pure adrenaline. "How about shucking those jeans."

His cock throbbed and his jeans sported a wet spot. Ryker wasted no time toeing off his sneakers, peeling away both his jeans and briefs in one swoop, then shrugging off the tattered remains of his shirt. He pulled a foil packet from his pants pocket and held it in his hand.

"Your turn."

Kenna grabbed the hem of her tank top and lifted it over her body in a slow seduction. Each new bit of smooth skin uncovered teased and tantalized. His head spun drunkenly as her bra was revealed. Pale pink lace and satin. The ultra-feminine garment didn't fit with her persona at all. If he were a betting man, Ryker would wager his prized muscle cars that the bra spoke volumes about the real woman lurking beneath the dangerous exterior.

His hand trembled as his fingers traced the lacy edge. "So beautiful."

She'd been around town long enough for him to know she wasn't the kind of woman who slept around. In a small town like Indian Pointe people talk. Yet there had never been any word of her showing interest in anyone. Kenna didn't let people get close, which made seeing her like this, soft and delicate, a privilege he felt honored to receive.

He cupped her breast, circled a pebbled nipple with his thumb, delighted by her sharply indrawn breath. "Get rid of the rest."

She nodded and dropped the shirt. "Boots first." Her voice came out husky, needy, causing his abdomen to clench.

Kneeling next to her dangling feet, he worked the silver buckles of the big black combat boots free. He didn't think she would be any more gorgeous in stilettos. A firm tug and the first boot fell to the cement floor with a loud thunk. He wasn't surprised to find knives concealed in her footwear. They went right along with the ones strapped to her thighs.

Once both boots rested on the ground he pulled off her socks, enchanted by pink lacquered toenails. Kenna Fulton was a study in contradictions. He was going to enjoy searching out each sign of her softer, gentler side.

After spending several delightful minutes nibbling on her toes, Ryker stood between her knees and unbuckled her silver-studded belt. The zipper beneath revealed a glimpse of panties that matched the bra. A few more buckles and her leg holsters joined the boots.

"Lift up," he demanded.

Kenna did so without uttering a word. A couple of quick tugs later and his breath caught in his throat. Sitting atop the bright red fender of the Caddy, long black hair coming loose from its braid, lips swollen—she looked like a lingerie model ready for a photo shoot.

He had the insane urge to beat his chest and drag her back to his cave where no other man would ever glimpse her spectacular beauty. No, this he would hoard all for himself.

His gaze moved from her toes, up lean, mile-long legs, over silk and lace, following each glorious curve past her elegant neck. When he reached her face, Ryker froze in shock. Her eyes were shuttered, cheeks flushed and she chewed on her bottom lip. The truth hit him hard as a sledge hammer to the side of the head.

Powerful, confident, larger-than-life Kenna Fulton was shy and timid about her body.

No fucking way.

Not with him. He'd spend the rest of his life showing her just how exquisite she was, both inside and out. "Jesus, Kenna. You take my breath away."

Kenna watched emotions flicker within Ryker's heated brown eyes and didn't need to rely on her gut to know he told the truth. No other man had ever gazed at her with such overt lust and carnal hunger. In his eyes she was the epitome of feminine appeal.

Damn, was that ever hot! He made her feel sexy, wanton and more than ready to fuck. She wanted him to take her, right there on the back of Joey D's car, sandwiched between his warm body and cold steel.

He wasn't too hard on the eyes either. Broad shoulders, ropy muscles, trim hips and oh my. His cock rose thick and proud, extending from his groin to his navel. The wide head was slick with arousal. Wondering how he'd taste, she unconsciously licked her dry lips as her gaze traveled along the ridges and plump veins down to his heavy balls.

Ryker was well proportioned, his nude form more than living up to her imaginings. And she had imagined, even though she'd kept her distance.

Not anymore. If air was able to pass between them then they weren't close enough for what she wanted.

His harsh groan brought a smile to her lips.

"Keep looking at me like you want to eat me, darlin', and this won't last long."

"Who said the length of the ride mattered?" She blatantly stared at his body, drank in the magnificent sight. "I want it fast, hard and sweaty." When she met his dark, fiery eyes, she melted. "All night long."

He wrapped his fist around the considerable girth and stroked his cock. She stared, mesmerized by the slow, practiced motion. While watching him masturbate was scorching as all get out and she'd love to see ropes of cum erupt from him, her pussy was empty. If she didn't get him buried deep inside her quivering body soon she'd lose her mind. "And Ryker..."

"Hmm."

The distracted, mumbled response would never do. Kenna had to have his complete and undivided attention. She focused her powers, drew on the latent energies surrounding them.

"I want it right now." The words were barely out of her mouth when his body slammed into hers and she lost the ability to speak. He made quick work of putting on the condom, then his hands were everywhere, his kiss consuming her, sparking a rather unconventional idea.

She'd never considered using the bane of her existence to enhance sex. Why had it never occurred to her? Pool the sexual potency and use it to power their bodies. The possibilities were exciting, the potential explosive.

Ryker broke the kiss, their breathing rapid and shallow as his lips moved over her jaw. Kissing his way to her ear, he sucked the tender lobe and nipped it with his teeth. Kenna gasped, tossed back her head. Every nerve ending tingled and her body quivered.

They were joined together from shoulder to groin, his shaft pressed hot and hard to her cloth-covered pussy. She needed the material out of the way. Had to have that big cock filling her.

He continued moving lower, his lips and teeth tasting her neck, the curve of her shoulder. She gasped his name and started thrusting her hips, unable to resist the wonderful friction of lace rubbing against her aching clit.

"That's it, Kenna. Take what you need."

Ryker began rocking in counterpoint, teasing her with his cock but putting space between their torsos. She cried out in frustration but then his hands replaced his chest covering her breasts. He didn't bother with her bra. Instead he pulled the cups down and settled them beneath the mounds, forcing them together and upward. Cool air hit her nipples, increasing her torment.

He didn't leave her to suffer. The warmth of his tongue flicked over one distended peak as his fingers closed around the other. She arched her back, seeking firmer contact. Ryker's lips closed around her nipple and he sucked, hard. He molded the other breast in his palm, skilled fingers only giving her a featherlight touch. It was too much and not enough.

Clutching his shoulders, she shot some of the gathered energy through her body and into his. He moaned and shoved his cock harder against her soaked panties.

"Lie back," he demanded.

Her fogged brain had trouble processing the words. Didn't matter. He took control, physically and forcefully lowering her back onto the trunk. At last a man who trusted her strength and didn't treat her as if she were fragile because of her gender.

To make sure he didn't pull away, Kenna locked her legs around his hips and kept that juicy cock almost right where she wanted it.

After showering her other breast with the same wonderful attention, he worked her nipples with his fingers while kissing and licking his way down her abdomen. The drag of his body over her panties drove her wild. She writhed and pushed at his shoulders, urging him onward. Ryker paused along the way to tease her navel, his tongue making short jabs into the shallow indentation, mimicking how he would fuck her with his cock.

"Dammit, Ryker. Lick my pussy already. Suck my clit."

His facial hair rasped over the edge of her panties and she glanced down, meeting his hungry gaze. "Oh yeah, darlin'. I love it when a woman knows what she wants and isn't afraid to ask for it."

Her fingers wound into his hair and shoved. "That wasn't a request."

The throaty chuckle she got in response vibrated through her belly, increasing her hunger for more. Should she take a different tack with him? If it would get him to her goal faster she could beg, just this once.

Hot and wet, the tip of his tongue delved beneath the elastic of her panties. Okay, fuck pleading for mercy. "Ryker. Now!"

"So impatient," he taunted. "Lift."

His fingers curled into the sides of her panties and Kenna's hips shot upward. As the material disappeared, he blew a stream of air over her straining bundle of nerves and her entire body tensed. The first broad sweep of his tongue and she screamed his name.

"Oh yeah, darlin'. My name sounds good on your lips. Say it again."

She had no thought of denying him anything that would result in more of the incredible pleasure. Ryker's tongue investigated her sensitive folds, probed and discovered all of her secrets. She tossed her head from side to side, repeating his name over and over as he slurped, licked and nipped at her. The broad tip of a finger circled her entrance, which spasmed in anticipation.

"I wish you could see how your eager pussy is fluttering and begging for me. Damn, Kenna. That's so fucking hot."

"Ryker," she grumbled. "Put something in me. Fingers, cock...I don't care. Just do it before I have to hurt you."

His laughter should have irritated her but the two thick fingers that thrust into her stole her breath. She became one big mass of nerves sustained by the sensations he lavished on her body. Then it happened.

He stimulated an amazing spot inside her pussy, an instant on button no other lover had ever found. She'd heard of the mythical G-spot. Finally experiencing it was amazing. Her hips shot up from the car as she drowned in a wave of agonizing bliss. Muscles clenched as the force of a nuclear bomb erupted in her core and radiated outward. Screams of ecstasy reverberated around the garage.

Ryker didn't stop or ease her down. He stayed with her, kept going, stroking that pleasure button and sucking her clit. By the time the orgasm started to subside, Kenna's throat was raw and her muscles shook.

She should have been tired and sated, replete. Not even close. The stunning orgasm whet her greedy appetite. Only one thing would satisfy her hunger.

“Ryker – more!”

She didn’t have to clarify. They both knew what she desired, craved. It was in his eyes, his fierce expression as he rose over her, grabbed her hips and flipped Kenna onto her belly. He pushed her legs wide and held tight. The slight flash of pain increased her desperation.

Thankfully, he didn’t make her wait. The head of his cock probed her wet, puffy lips, found her entrance and slammed home.

On the first exquisite thrust they both moaned. Her abundant fluids eased the way and long-neglected tissues delighted in being stretched. For the space of several heartbeats she held still, enjoying the perfect moment. As her muscles relaxed he abruptly sank in farther, filling her more completely than she’d imagined possible.

She’d never felt anything half as good.

Chapter Four

He had died and gone to heaven. There was no other explanation for the rapturous joy of being buried balls-deep in the hot clench of Kenna's pussy. No living, breathing man could make it past the gates of paradise. Yet that's exactly where Ryker found himself.

Of course, being who she was, Kenna wasn't about to let him get too carried away. She had the unerring knack of keeping his feet planted solidly on good old terra firma.

"What the hell are you doing? Taking a break? Move, dammit. Fuck me already."

Saucy wench.

No one else talked to him with such irreverence. He loved it. Was beginning to fall in love with her. He ruthlessly shoved that thought aside for later contemplation.

"Yes, ma'am." He slapped the round curve of her ass. "Giddy up."

Ryker didn't give her a chance to whip out some smart-ass comment. Strong muscles clamped down on his cock as he retreated then rippled around him as he advanced. Kenna's body flexed and contracted, meeting every pounding thrust and demanding more, which he gladly gave.

Perspiration slicked hot skin as flesh slapped against flesh. Wet slurping sounds rose around them, joining with panted breaths and pleasure-filled moans. The Caddy's suspension squeaked in time with his thrusts. The musky scent of arousal, sweat and sex combined with the motor oil and filled his lungs.

Sweet heaven.

Bending his knees, he changed the angle of penetration, slamming upward to tap against her womb. As incredible as it felt to fill her so deeply, he longed for something else. This time, when she orgasmed, he wanted to see her expression. More than that, he

needed Kenna to see his face and know he was the man who completed her. The other half of her soul.

She whimpered as he pulled out, his cock glistening with her cream. The heady aroma and sight weakened his knees. "We're not done. Not by a long shot."

Ryker opened the passenger door, thankful he'd left the top down, and folded the front seat forward. Catching on to what he had in mind, Kenna scrambled over the trunk lid and into the car. A black curtain of hair fanned out over the white leather as she lay down, propping one leg over the backseat and letting the other knee fall to the side, putting her glistening pink slit on display.

He choked and nearly swallowed his tongue. Any hint of shyness or uncertainty he'd seen earlier was nowhere to be found in the sex goddess splayed out before him, confirming that he really had died and ascended to cloud nine because there was nothing as divine here on earth.

Ryker counted his blessings, a sense of coming home flooding him as he slid between her legs. Here, within his grasp, was everything he'd spent his life searching for. Kenna's eyes blazed with desire and unconditional acceptance as her body offered passion and succor.

Where the crystal bumped and rolled across his back he felt heated vibrations. What the hell? Why did it come alive around Kenna? Ryker hadn't missed the fact that the unique stone he'd worn since turning eighteen was an exact match for the one around her neck.

The implications hit him hard. He remembered every word of the crazy tale his father had told him. All that stuff about being chosen to protect a piece of some bigger crystal, finding his mate, fighting a demon and the rebirth of an ancient race. He'd thought it was a bunch of shit to make the lame present seem like something more. Lame to an eighteen-year-old know-it-all anyway. Now —

Now he had Kenna spread out and waiting for him to fuck them both senseless. He'd save contemplation of the future and destiny for another, more appropriate time.

"I could stare at your gorgeous body forever."

"Umm...or not," she snorted. "I'd really prefer that you fuck me instead."

A lifetime with his hellcat wouldn't be long enough. Not for everything he longed to share with her. "I think that can be arranged."

He held her gaze and slid into the warm cradle of her legs. The fervor had not cooled in the few minutes it had taken to rearrange their position. Their mouths met in a blistering, soul-stealing kiss. Ryker leaned into her, giving Kenna most of his weight, groaning at the sensual glide of his shaft along her drenched folds. He wrapped her up in his arms, held tight and filled her in one solid thrust.

The heated suction of her hungry pussy had him ready to explode as he withdrew until only the tip of his cock remained sheathed within her pussy. Gritting his teeth, he set a slow and torturous pace, reveling in the feel of being united with his woman.

His reason for living.

His everything.

The sharp bite of fingernails on his ass didn't snap his control. Neither did her frantic movements and rhythmic flexing of her strong legs cause him to speed up. No, it was something outside of him. He broke the kiss and stared into violet eyes that seemed to swirl with power and knew the energy that had their bodies slamming together with impossible speed and force came from her.

Kenna had seized command of not only his heart but the very functioning of his body. The momentum behind each violent thrust had the root of his shaft striking her clit, hard. It had to hurt, but her expression revealed only pure bliss.

"What...why?" he panted. "Kenna?"

She moaned, bowed her back. "Yes. Say it again. Say my name."

"Jesus...Kenna."

"Yes. Almost...there."

Thank God. He wouldn't last long. His balls were tight, heavy. Each time they smacked against her ass the telltale tingling at the base of his spine increased, grew into coiled tension waiting for release. The punishing tempo drove him right to the edge. He held on only by sheer determination and will.

Something happened. Ryker couldn't explain it. He still felt the dig of her fingernails in his ass but an exquisite pressure squeezed his balls as if she held them in her hand. There was no more holding back. He gave himself over to the profound sensations as his body was flooded with the most astounding pleasure.

He shouted her name as cum blasted through his cock. Her hot fluids bathed his sac as her pussy gripped him tight, rippling and sucking around his cock like a ravenous mouth, extending his climax for endless moments. His gaze remained locked on her as Kenna's head thrashed, her features contorted and she was overcome. They both struggled to merely breathe in the aftermath and he collapsed on top of her, drained of strength.

"Can't breathe," she mumbled a while later.

He had no energy left yet when she pushed at his shoulders, Ryker somehow managed to roll over, putting her on top and keeping his semi-hard cock sheltered within her body. His mind struggled to wrap itself around the most extraordinary sex of his life but failed to comprehend how something that earth-shattering was possible.

Putting out some major heat, her skin was hot to the touch. He gathered the thick blanket of silky black hair—the neat braid long gone—and moved it aside so she could cool down.

Ryker couldn't stop petting her, trailing his fingertips along her spine, the gentle curve of her hips, the lush globes of her ass. He'd never tire of holding her, would sacrifice anything to keep her in his arms.

Niggling questions resurfaced. He asked the most pressing one. "What was that? How the hell did you make us move like that?"

"You start fires," she grumbled. "I direct energy."

The explanation was overly simplified. He let it go as a state of awed reverence stole over him. A conviction and trust for the future took hold. The two of them together was right, true. Real. In his arms lay a woman who would understand and accept his oddities. He'd never imagined it would happen.

I want to know everything about you. Where did you grow up? Do you have a big family? What brought you to Indian Pointe?

How long are you going to make me wait before you marry me?

Kenna coughed then laughed so hard she shook. That clinched it. He had to be her one. She heard his whispered words in her head, connected with him on every level. And Ryker had to be an alien because she'd never met a man who still wanted to touch her after sex, much less talk...about her? There sure wasn't much to tell.

"I'm pretty boring. My parents left me in a bus stop when I was four days old. I grew up in an orphanage, the Gideon House. The headmistress, Angela, raised me and my sisters—De'alla, Memory and Charlotte. They're my sisters of the heart, closer to me than any blood relation could ever be."

"Do they live close by?"

"No. Dee lives in Seattle when she's not off to Japan, India or some exotic country, conquering the business world. Charlotte and Memory both live in North Carolina. Charlotte grows vegetables and herbs, and she's a freelance writer. She paints pictures with her words. Memory's a photographer. I swear, when I look at her pictures they come to life."

He kissed the top of her head. "They all sound wonderful. Do you get to see them often?"

Kenna shook her head as her fingers moved restlessly over his chest. Her heart clenched and she swallowed hard, shoving aside the loneliness. "I haven't seen them since they left the orphanage. But we talk on the phone all the time. We all have separate lives. And now that they've each found their guys..." She shrugged and fought back the pain.

Kenna. In her head, his voice was filled with compassion and empathy. His palm stroked soothing circles over her back. "You can tell me anything, darlin'."

No. The sting of being without her sisters and knowing they'd started new lives was bad enough. She couldn't trust Ryker with her heart. When he left—everyone left her eventually—the misery would consume her. She had to shore up the walls around her heart, make them stronger.

"There's nothing to tell. Memory has Marco, Dee has Faison, and Charlotte has Creed. And they all lived happily ever after. The end."

Everyone except you. Why can't you be happy? Let me make you happy.

Planting her palms on his chest, she pushed herself up, ignoring the wet tease of his cock slipping free of her body, she climbed out of the car. Her hands trembled as she tore through the discarded pile of clothes. "Where the fuck are my panties?"

"Kenna."

She didn't listen to him. Refused to let him see her weakness. She would not crumble and become some simpering idiot in the wake of mind-blowing sex. How damn cliché.

"Stop it, Kenna." His deep voice rumbled in her ear as strong hands grasped her shoulders, forcing her to turn around. Then he did the most unexpected thing. Ryker drew her into his arms and held her in the shelter of his body. Just held her.

She remained stiff, kept her arms down, refusing to return the gentle embrace.

"I've got you and I'm not going to leave you. We're bound to each other and I wouldn't have it any other way."

Her effort to hold back the misery made her shake harder. Ryker, damn him, held her tighter and rubbed her back. If he'd been a typical man, only interested in sex, she would have been okay. That she could handle. But no, he had to go and be compassionate, loving even. She felt her walls start to crumble.

Run, save yourself. The command from her brain went unheeded. Her body had other ideas. Against her will, her arms lifted, clutched at his back. She struggled to get closer. To slip right beneath his skin where she'd be safe and loved.

But for how long? He'd leave her. Everyone else did. It was only a matter of time, whether he was the counterpart Angela had predicted or not. No one stayed with her.

I will stay!

She leaned back, attempted to put space between them. Ryker's arms remained around her waist, holding her near. She yanked back her arm and slugged him in the chest using all her remaining strength. He rocked back on his heels, barely affected by the blow.

"Go ahead—lash out at me all you want. I can take it. And I'll be right here with you when you're done."

The truth of his words was plain to see in his soulful brown eyes. She glimpsed something there she'd never imagined possible. God help her, she believed him. Ryker would stay with her through the good and the bad—a true life partner.

All the fight went out of her. She dropped her forehead down on his chest and took the comfort he so freely gave. If that made her weak so be it.

He dried the tears she hadn't even realized escaped—since when did she cry—and helped her get dressed before getting into his own clothes. It felt good to lean on someone else and not have to be the tough one for once. Then he buckled her into the front seat of his tow truck and opened one of the garage bays.

When they turned off the main road and onto a rural route, she finally asked where they were going.

"There's something I want to show you."

Kenna stewed over her thoughts for a while. The silence between them wasn't uncomfortable. Still, she expected some reciprocity—mutual sharing. She'd bared her guts. His turn had come. Her curiosity demanded it.

"So tell me about you. What's your story?"

Interrupted from his private thoughts, Ryker shot her a sad smile. He remained quiet and she started to think he wouldn't say anything. Once he started talking, she was riveted.

"I grew up not far from here—where we're headed. Lived the storybook American dream. Nice house, parents who were completely in love with each other, great childhood. Even got my fifteen minutes of fame."

She got the impression his fame had cost Ryker a great deal. His shoulders slumped and he sighed heavily. They arrived at a large ranch-style house in a rural area. He parked in the drive but made no move to get out.

"Dad shared his love of cars with me. Found an old Ford at the salvage yard and the two of us spent every spare minute restoring that junker. He also shared his love of boxing. Started training when I hit my teens and I never did come up for air. I became obsessed with the sport, started spending less and less time with my family. Got worse when my mom died suddenly from a brain aneurysm."

"I'm sorry." The words were lacking but what else did she have to offer? She had the feeling that if she reached out as he'd done for her, Ryker wouldn't accept it. Not yet. Not until he finished his story.

There was no false modesty in his voice when Ryker said, "I was good. Damn good. Caught the attention of an agent. He got me out of the local gym and into matches where I got paid. Earned a name for myself and was advancing through the ranks of lightweight fighters."

He startled her by slamming his fist into the dashboard.

"Grew too big for my britches. My agent had a big event lined up for one of his other fighters, Sammy. A huge event with the potential to win a national title. Big as it got. The attention shifted, the spotlights all focused on Sammy. I got jealous, angry. Thought it should be me."

He rubbed at his jaw and stared out the windshield seeming a million miles away. When he spoke again even the words sounded distant.

“Sammy trained hard – too hard – broke his wrist. I couldn’t find it in myself to feel sorry for him when the agent turned to me. I was on top of the world.”

Ryker finally glanced over and made eye contact. The pain was fresh in his agonized expression.

“Dad told me I wasn’t ready. I didn’t listen. It was my turn to shine and I grabbed hold like a starved dog with a bone, refusing to let go.” He shook his head. “As luck would have it, I won the fight. Brought home a huge championship belt and big cash prize. Thought my shit didn’t stink and I walked on clouds. Had the media all over me. Everyone wanted my picture and to hear what I had to say.”

He squeezed the bridge of his nose. “When you get that high on yourself there’s only one way to go – down. I went down hard.”

Kenna gasped as her intuition kicked in and she got a pretty clear idea of the horror he’d faced. Her chest tightened, throbbed. Her heart pounded.

“It was the people I loved who paid the price for my ego. I was engaged to a delicate and painfully shy girl. Her name was Connie. Tiniest damn thing I’d ever seen. Pretty as the day is long. She didn’t do well with all the reporters and attention. Most of the time that was okay. She’d stay right behind me and let me handle the celebrity status.

“My agent set up a staged publicity fight for promotion. Wasn’t even a real match but they made a big deal out of it. I rode to the arena in a limo, flashbulbs going off in my face as I strutted to the ring. Went off without a hitch. After it was over, I slipped out the back, climbed into the limo and enjoyed the ride, leaving Dad and Connie to fend for themselves. I didn’t hear what happened until several hours later.

“Since I’d been whisked away, the media had no outlet for their frenzy. They turned to my family. From what I heard, Dad had to fight off the reporters just to make it to Connie’s car. She wasn’t the most confident of drivers and when the press gave

chase, she panicked. Took a turn too fast and rolled the car down an embankment. They both died on impact.”

She didn’t know what to do. Words wouldn’t ease Ryker’s pain. Nothing she said would help. Easing across the bench seat, she wrapped her arms around him and held on tight. Kenna gathered positive energies and used them to soothe him.

“Since then I’ve basically hidden. No one in Indian Pointe knows about my past. To them I’m a charming Southerner who fixes cars for a living. A simple, down to earth guy. I like it that way.”

They had a great deal in common. Both hurt, afraid and alone—hiding from what they’d been told was their destiny. The difference—Ryker hid in plain sight and stayed in one place while she was always on the move, never stopping in any one place long enough for the future to catch up with her.

There would be no more running. Not now. The time had come to stand and fight. Together. “It’s all different now. We have each other. And no demon prince from hell is going to stand in our way.”

She prayed for strength to face the upcoming battle then searched her mind for a distraction.

“So what did you want to show me?”

Chapter Five

"Kenna, I'd like you to meet Candace, Roxie and Louise."

She arched a brow, nodded toward the other end of the large space. "And who's that over there?"

"That lovely lady is Gracie. She belonged to my dad."

"All female names." Kenna glanced down the row of polished metal and chrome filling the huge garage. "Isn't that a bit sexist?"

Her comment earned the laugh she'd been aiming for. Anything to lighten the mood and chase the shadows from Ryker's eyes. Her heart still ached over the misery he'd lived through.

She strolled around the cars, half listening to the details he rattled off about each one. The first car was a deep plum color with lots of shiny chrome and a scoop thingy on the hood. His love of the vehicles was obvious in his reverent tone, especially considering the foreign language he spoke. He threw around numbers and odd words such as torque, cams, headers and roller rockers, which were all Greek to her.

"Candace is a sixty-seven Pontiac GTO."

The next car she recognized from reruns of *The Dukes of Hazzard*, although this one looked a lot different. It had been painted a brilliant blue and had a wide white stripe on the backend from fender to fender.

"Roxie's a sixty-nine Dodge Charger." Picking up a soft cloth from a nearby workbench, Ryker rubbed away an imagined smudge on the flashy paintjob.

A cherry red muscle car with a pair of bold white stripes running from the hood over the roof and down the trunk was her favorite. It had extremely wide tires, flashy

rims and silver gills on the side. When she looked inside there were exposed steel poles and the front seats had strange harnesses instead of seatbelts.

"This is my baby, Louise. She's a sixty-eight Chevy Camaro SS."

Kenna cringed hearing her hated middle name assigned to the gorgeous car. "Why Louise? It's a crummy name. Doesn't fit the car at all. She should have a sexy name."

"What's wrong with Louise?" Ryker sounded defensive. "It's a great name."

She groaned. "And what's with the poles? Shouldn't they be covered up?"

"That's the roll cage." He moved around and popped the trunk, proudly showing off a large black tank hooked to a bunch of hoses. "She's tricked out with NOS."

"Should I know what NOS is?"

He shot her a wicked grin. "Nitrous oxide."

"Why the hell does Louise have that junk in her trunk?"

The broad grin was back and even bigger. "'Cause it makes her go fast. Really fast."

She shivered. "I'll take your word for it. So why are all of your cars from the sixties? You can't be stuck in that decade because you weren't even born yet, right?"

"Nope." He laughed. "I wasn't a Summer of Love child. I'm an early eighties disco baby. I just happen to like the muscle cars from the late sixties and early seventies."

Early eighties? Oh shit. That meant he was in his late twenties while she was thirty-four. What did that make her, a cougar? She thought that's what they called women who went on the prowl for younger men. How cool was that.

Kenna coughed and covered her mouth to hide her goofy grin.

Ryker nodded toward the final, much older car, his mood turning somber. "Dad's car, Gracie, is a thirty-one Ford Model A."

The restored pale yellow car made Kenna think of old black and white movies.

Making a full turn she took in the garage and its contents. It had an unused, although far from neglected, feel. Almost like a museum or shrine. "You don't come here often."

"Too many memories – not all of them good."

Sensing his need to change the subject, she offered up the most convenient distraction. "And the house?"

His grin returned, only now it was more boyish. Ryker grabbed her hand and tugged her toward an interior door. "Come on. Let me show you around."

The house had even more of a preserved vibe than the garage. At least he still drove the cars. She imagined not much had changed with the house other than maintenance and general upkeep since Ryker's father and fiancée had died. Walking through the kitchen felt eerie as walking in a ghost town. A slice of vintage seventies nostalgia from the avocado green Formica to the strawberry vine wallpaper.

"This is where I grew up. I just can't part with the old homestead. A cleaning service comes in once a month to dust, air the place out and do general maintenance."

He rushed her through a pristine living room that could have been straight off the set of an old television show and up a carpeted staircase. Halfway along the upstairs hall he pushed open a door but didn't move inside. Ryker stared into a room she'd bet he hadn't seen since before the accident that changed his life.

She peered around him and gazed at the typical American boy's bedroom. Posters of various rock icons tacked to blue walls, along with a few pictures of sexy women cut from magazines, a single twin-sized bed, shelves full of trophies.

When he spoke, Ryker's voice sounded wooden and hollow. "I haven't been in here since I grew up and moved out."

Kenna touched his forearm and felt muscles bunch beneath skin that had turned cold. "It's okay. We don't have to go in."

He glanced at her and his eyes were empty for a moment before he pulled himself together, drawing on a deep well of inner strength. "Yeah, we do." Taking a hard breath, he crossed the threshold. "On my eighteenth birthday, when my father gave me the crystal, he also gave me something else."

Kneeling beside the bed, he reached beneath and took out a scarred wooden box. Kenna moved to his side as if pulled by a magnet. There was something in that box she had to have. Something belonging to her, as impossible as it seemed, the object called to her.

Ryker opened the lid to reveal a young boy's cache of accumulated treasures. A couple of baseball cards with signatures scrawled over the images, some coins, a glass marble, a key – various junk valuable because of the emotion attached to each item. Yet there was something else hidden, lurking beneath everything else. She didn't see it, but Kenna sensed it. Her skin felt stretched tight and her heart thudded in an erratic beat.

Thick fingers pushed through the box, searching, landing upon something he tucked into his palm as a cold sweat broke out over her body. Her breathing had turned shallow and she wasn't able to draw enough air into her overlabored lungs.

"Wh-what is it?" She cupped his closed fist in both of her hands, gaze riveted on his fingers.

"I didn't understand at the time, still don't really. Hell, I never believed the insane story my father had told me – not before tonight." With his free hand, Ryker touched her cheek, brushed away a few strands of hair and tucked them behind her ear.

"You are the woman he told me about. I remember what he said clear as if he spoke the words only moments ago." His eyes went distant again, gazing off into the past.

"When the time is right a woman will come thundering into your life – a fierce warrior. Together, you will battle Asmodeus, the demon prince. It will take both of you to defeat him. You'll have to believe in each other, fight for each other. Love each other. And she'll need this."

He opened his fist and in the center of his palm rested a smooth, dark green stone with red spots that looked like splattered blood. Kenna gasped and one hand flew to her chest, covering her crystal which vibrated, creating a low hum throughout her body.

"This is a special piece of bloodstone, touched by Atlantean magic and passed down through my family—guardians of the stone." Placing the warm stone in her hand, Ryker wrapped her fingers securely around it. The hum of her crystal intensified, pulsed in time with the stone.

"The bloodstone will amplify your powers, strengthen our telepathic link and is crucial to fighting the demon."

She met his confident and loving gaze. "And you suddenly believe in all this? Why now?"

"Aw, darlin'. I believe in you."

Her heart clenched, stopped beating. She would never forget anything about this moment in time. The slight musty smell in the stale air. The soft mattress beneath her butt and thighs, although she didn't recall sitting down. But most of all there was a sense of rightness, a belonging she'd never known, not even with her sisters.

Ryker nodded. "It's you and me against the world, Kenna. At least until all eight pieces of the Heart of Fire are united."

Kenna shot to her feet, pacing the confines of his boyhood bedroom like a caged tiger. Over the course of the night he'd accepted what was happening. She still had a ways to go yet. Not that he could blame her. Their lives were undergoing drastic changes. Hearing the story years ago and having it unfold around you were two very different prospects. It would take some getting used to.

"So I—we—don't have a choice. The albatrosses around our necks will fuse, condoms will be useless."

The last bit was news to him. Kenna kept right on with her restless, one-sided conversation.

"That dickhead Wes will show up." She actually growled when she said his name. Ryker loved her fierce nature. "We'll have to kick his ass—not once but twice—the two of us and then as a group."

She made an abrupt stop, froze, her eyes pleading with him. "I'll get to see my sisters again."

While she didn't make it as a question he nodded anyway, intently watching as she rubbed at her left breast, over her heart. She turned on him then, anger and fear flashing in her hard gaze.

"How the hell can you just sit there all nice and calm?"

He stood and went to her, brushed his fingers over her flushed cheek. "There's no downside to this, darlin'. No matter what, I win. I get a new family of brothers and sisters, and I get you."

Her eyes widened and she clutched at his shirt. "But you have no choice—no free will. This was all decided before you were even born and now you'll be stuck with me. Forever."

He placed his hand over her chest and held hers over his heart so she could feel the steady beating. "We're already connected, Kenna. Don't you feel it? Knowing the story ahead of time only made the anticipation sweeter and all of this easier to accept. The way I see things, you're more than worth the wait. We belong together, darlin', no matter what you call it—fate, destiny or sheer blind luck. I'll never give you up. Can't. You're the other half of my soul."

Tears gathered at the corners of her eyes and a fat drop rolled down her cheek. She smacked his chest, stomped her foot and pointed at the silvery stream of liquid. "Damn it. See what you did. I don't cry...except when I'm around you."

Wrapping an arm around her waist, he pulled her shaking body into his. "It's okay to cry. You're not alone anymore. I've got you."

He held her through the emotional storm, rocking her gently from side to side. When she finally spoke, she floored him with her bold, cut-to-the-chase approach to life.

"I suppose we should get naked and fuck some more so the cursed damn crystals can fuse."

Ryker tossed back his head and laughter erupted from deep in his belly. When he finally got himself under control and glanced down at her, Kenna wore a sheepish grin.

"Life with you will never be boring, darlin'."

"Good. I hate boring."

"Me too. As for your suggestion..." Her fingers flexed, kneading his chest. "I like the idea of getting you naked." He placed two fingers beneath her chin and almost got lost in her heated violet gaze.

"I'm going to make love to you, Kenna. Touch and taste every glorious inch of your beautiful body, watch you orgasm over and over again. Then when you're all soft and sated, I'm going to slide between your thighs and love you every way humanly possible." She shivered, softened, molded against him from shoulder to knee. "And in the morning, I'll start all over again. You'll wake up to my cock thrusting into your pussy, screaming my name."

"Ryker."

"Hmm?"

She lifted up on her toes, hard nipples dragging over his torso, and nipped his lower lip. "Shut up already and show me."

"Yes, ma'am."

Ryker did everything he'd said and more. He taught her what it meant to make love, right there on the small bed he'd slept in as a child, surrounded by the memories of the past and hope for the future. One they'd face together.

Each slow and easy thrust of his cock kept her on edge, waiting for the moment their crystals would fuse. Charlotte had told Kenna what she'd felt when her crystal had fused with Creed's—energy flowing from her crystal, intense heat and golden light, the sense of soaring through time and space.

None of that happened.

Maybe her crystal was defective? Kenna couldn't help wondering if she'd made a mistake and Ryker wasn't her true Chosen one.

No, she didn't buy that. Ryker was hers — period. It had to be something else.

At his insistence they showered together. She'd never showered with a man before so it was all new to her. The sensual glide of water over taut skin. Adding soap made his body slippery and gave her naughty ideas.

He'd spent hours teasing and tormenting her body. Kenna figured turnabout was indeed fair play. She started with his hair. The luxurious strands slid through her fingers creating a tingling awareness that zinged around her body faster than lightning. She massaged his scalp, pleased by his guttural moan.

"Rinse." She slapped the flat of her palm against his wet pecs and the sound echoed through the small enclosure. Oooh, she liked that.

Once he'd rinsed his hair, she moved him out of the spray and picked up the soap, working the bar in her hands until a thick lather formed. Muscle bunched and rolled beneath her fingers. She followed each hollow, traced every solid hill of the X-rated road map, driving her right into tactile overload. She couldn't get enough of touching him.

He hissed as her knuckles brushed over flat nipples so she did it again, thrilled when they puckered in response. She rolled one tight bud between her fingertips and after the soap washed away, she licked the other.

"You like that?"

"Oh yeah."

She sucked hard then lightly bit and he cursed.

"What about that?"

"Darlin', I love everything you do to me."

She planned on testing the validity of that statement.

With great care and deliberation she washed the slats of his washboard stomach and dallied over prominent obliques. The wiry hair covering his powerful legs tickled the pads of her fingers.

On her knees, she met his gaze over the length of his body. His cock jerked when she told him to turn around.

The view from the back was as nice as the front, if not better. His firm buttocks required a great deal of attention. Light pressure set the muscles into motion, rippling beneath smooth skin. Her teeth and tongue started his hips thrusting. By far she got the best reaction from simultaneously giving his balls a gentle squeeze and rimming his tight pucker. Ryker cursed and his whole body shuddered.

"Keep that up and I'll come."

"So. What's wrong with that?"

"I want to be balls-deep inside your tight, hot pussy when I come."

"Mmm...I do like the way your mind works but hold that thought. I'm not done playing yet."

She pressed on his sphincter and her finger sunk in to the first knuckle. Ryker jolted as if she'd stuck a live wire up his ass. Thankfully he couldn't see her wicked grin as she formulated a new plan.

No longer lingering, she washed his back and had him turn to face her again. Their lips locked in one hell of a scorching kiss and Ryker's hands started to roam her body. The water worked in her favor, allowing her to slip through his grasp and back down to her knees.

His engorged shaft jutted proudly, lifting toward her. Kenna licked her lips and pumped him within her damp fist a few times before angling the broad crown to her mouth. She lapped up a drop of fluid that leaked from his slit. Her pussy spasmed and she hummed her appreciation for his salty-sweet flavor. Laving his cock from top to bottom, she followed the curving path of plump veins, and let him feel the edge of her teeth on the sensitive underside.

His fingers delved into her hair, the slight bite of pain resulting in a gush of cream over the swollen lips of her sex.

“Kenna,” he groaned. “Suck my cock, darlin’. Wrap those pretty lips around it and suck hard.”

She gave his balls a light squeeze, fighting back laughter when his hips jerked. “Don’t get pushy. I’m driving this bus, not you.”

Chapter Six

The bus would run over him if she didn't hurry. He was dying to fuck her mouth and feel her throat tighten around him as she swallowed.

"Kenna!"

"All right. Sheesh! You big baby."

He opened his mouth to reply but the words strangled in his throat as her lips parted and she swallowed almost his entire length. There was nothing tentative or shy about her skilled mouth. She sucked hard, hollowing her cheeks, as she drew back. On the descent, she rolled his balls in her palm and one finger stroked over his perineum, exerting the perfect amount of pressure, and took him to the back of her throat.

The thrusting of his hips matched the rhythm she set. He trembled, gritted his teeth, fought to hold back. She didn't let him. That mischievous finger returned to his anus, pushed passed the ring of muscle and unerringly landed on his prostate.

He cursed, groaned, thrust into her mouth two, three more strokes before falling under a whole fleet of buses.

Ryker climaxed hard, shot what felt like buckets of cum down her greedy throat. His body trembled and for a second or two, the world went dark. Next thing he knew, he was on his ass staring at Kenna's smiling face.

"Not a word," he warned.

She bit her lip, gave a casual shrug, and rose to turn off the water then held out a hand to help him up. Wrapped in a fluffy towel she left the room but he didn't miss the laughter trailing her as he rubbed at his sore ass. Those tiles were murder. He'd probably be feeling it for the next few days. His bruised ego sure as hell would.

He stepped into the bedroom a few minutes later and his heart thudded against his ribs. Kenna lay naked, stretched out on her side, emphasizing her lush curves. The fates had surely smiled on him when they picked her as his mate. "Plan on spending most of the next fifty years or so in bed."

"How come?" Going by her impish grin, she had a pretty good idea of what he had in mind.

"It'll take at least that long to do everything I want to with you."

Her bright smile worked better than CPR, quickly reviving his limp, lifeless cock. Enjoying the results, he made a mental note to compliment her often.

She crooked a finger at him. "C'mere, stud."

"Stud, huh? You plan on riding me?"

"Mmm," she purred. "Now that sounds like fun."

Too bad he didn't have any more condoms.

He moved to the side of the bed and stared down at her. "That bed's really not big enough for two."

"We'll make room. In fact, with me on top there will be plenty of room. Now get your skinny ass in this bed."

"Skinny?" He looked back over his shoulder. "My ass isn't skinny."

"Whatever." She eyed him suspiciously. "Why are you stalling?"

"We ran out of condoms."

"Now how the hell did you let that happen? Isn't it the Boy Scout motto to always be prepared?"

"I was never a Boy Scout, and if you weren't so insatiable—" He held up a hand to stop any comeback. "Not that I'm complaining. 'Cause I'm not."

"Okay." She shrugged. "Doesn't matter. The condoms won't work anyway."

"Why the hell not?" She'd said something similar earlier. While the mere suggestion should have panicked him, Ryker found it had the opposite effect. The idea of Kenna's belly swollen with his child had him longing to make it reality.

"When my sister hooked up with her fated counterpart and their crystals fused the condom failed. Part of the deal is that the Chosen are supposed to fuck like rabbits and keep the race going."

"But our crystals haven't fused?"

"Umm...yeah, about that. You're not the creepy, perverted demon of lust, are you?"

He laughed so hard tears formed and his stomach ached. "Sure, and if I was the bad guy, I'd just come right out and admit it."

"Well, you could be the demon trying to trick me," she huffed. "He tried to trick my sisters."

"No, darlin'. I'm no demon, even if you do turn me into a lusty sex fiend."

Kenna patted the mattress and looked up at him from beneath thick lashes, violet eyes heated with desire. She kept him perpetually horny. Even though his cock had deflated during their conversation, all it took was one sexy glance in his direction to have Ryker hard and wanting. "Maybe you're the demon."

As he slid into bed next to her, Kenna's warm fingers wrapped around his cock and her lips curled into an evil grin. "Hmm...you might be onto something there. Tempting you into unprotected sex." She pumped his cock slow and easy, running her thumb over the damp head before twisting her wrist and sliding him through her fist again. "That sounds like something a devious she-demon would do."

She shifted over him, straddled his legs, and rubbed her hot, wet slit against the root of his cock. Her cream slid down to anoint his balls. He moaned, dug his fingers into her hips and pulled her into him harder, grinding her pelvis to his.

"Put me inside you, darlin'." He couldn't wait to be inside her with nothing between them.

"Not yet."

Kenna tightened her grip and leaned closer, her silky black hair fanning out over his chest. The tip of her pink tongue circled her lips, got them nice and damp. With a toss of her head, her hair shifted out of the way and she latched onto his nipple. Her gentle, teasing licks tested his control.

"Kenna," he warned then gasped as her teeth bit into his chest and she sucked hard, leaving her mark on him. Again. "Dammit, woman."

She lifted her head and kissed him then, one of those soul-stealing potent lip locks that only made him hungrier for her. Their tongues roamed, stroked and thoroughly joined until oxygen deprivation forced them apart.

"Put me in you, Kenna," he panted. "I have a theory. About the crystals fusing."

Her wet pussy lips kissed his cock as she slid up his length. Ryker reached between them, lifting his shaft and positioning the head at her opening. She braced herself against his chest and stared down at him for a long moment, eyes full of love. He got the impression she wanted to express her feelings but couldn't find the right words.

He brushed her long hair over her shoulder and feathered his fingers over her flushed cheek. "It's okay, darlin'. You don't have to say it. I already know."

He knew because he felt it to. While the intense emotions may be shocking and have happened unbelievably fast that didn't make them any less pure or true. "I love you too. And I'm glad you're the one Chosen for me."

Stunned, speechless, the words moved beneath her skin and wrapped around Kenna's heart. So what if their stupid crystals hadn't fused. She and Ryker were already joined together and nothing would come between them.

Since she had no idea what to say she decided to let her actions speak for her. Relaxing the muscles in her legs she let her weight go, impaling herself on his hard cock. They both moaned as he buried to the hilt, filling her exquisitely.

Being with Ryker was so good. She'd been lonely for a very long time. To be in his arms, sharing their bodies and love – It was more than she'd ever dared hope for. She was a different person with him, whole and fulfilled.

Rocking her hips, she savored the slow friction of his hard cock along her sensitive tissues. Bare skin to bare skin. The root dragged over her clit and the broad crown pressed against her womb creating an agonizing pleasure that swept through her from head to toe. Sensations accumulated, coiled in her belly. She moved faster, rode him harder, her breasts swayed and the crystal thudded against her breastbone—a heated reminder of her failure to bind them together.

Ryker had mentioned having a theory about the crystals but as passion increased all coherent thought fled. All that existed was their bodies coming together and the building orgasm.

Twisting to the side, he grabbed something from the nightstand and held it in his fist. Then Ryker's hand grasped her nape and drew Kenna down to his chest, sealing them together from shoulder to hip. She cried out as her puckered nipples rasped over his chest hair. Sparks jolted through her breasts and arrowed straight down to her clit.

"Ryker...yes...good," she panted. "Almost there."

He took her hand in his, fused their fingers and the smooth, warm edge of the bloodstone pressed into her palm. Sudden scorching heat erupted in her hand and chest. Energies flowed through their joined bodies similar to when she manipulated the forces around her. But she wasn't doing this, had no control over what happened.

Waves of heat washed over Kenna and a hazy pink light glowed, surrounding them. She blinked several times to clear her vision but the pink remained, almost as if she'd donned a pair of rose-colored glasses. A low hum began and her crystal began to vibrate.

"Oh God," she gasped. "It's happening."

The coiled tension in her belly mixed with the vibrations and both swelled to proportions her body couldn't hope to contain. Ryker groaned, drawing her attention to

his scrunched-up features, his expression a combination of extreme suffering and erotic rapture.

He bellowed her name and hot spurts of cum bathed her womb, triggering her own release. A nuclear bomb detonating within her body wouldn't come close to equaling the impact of her orgasm. Her entire body tensed seconds before sizzling currents of energy radiated from one nerve ending to the next, reaching muscle, tendons and bone. She spasmed, shook and her spirit took flight, hurtling through the heavens, disrupting the space-time continuum. There was no up and down, no earth and sky, no Kenna and Ryker. Particles collided and sailed in wild disarray.

A movie played through her mind, vivid images, one blurring into the next. Out of the chaos came one solid truth, one reality—she and Ryker had become irrevocably tied. She heard his thoughts, shared his memories and knew him down to the depths of his beautiful soul.

The sensations of his pleasure became her own. She now knew how his climax felt. The white-hot bolts of lightning gathering in his pelvis, the tight clenching of his balls, the wonderful squeeze of her slick pussy clamping down and the fiery agony of cum shooting through his swollen to bursting shaft.

Way beyond the intimacy of him speaking in her mind, he now shared her mind, body and soul. He felt her emotions, knew her every desire, hope and fear. Experienced the pleasure of her body, her sexual gratification. There were no secrets between them, nothing private or separate.

She struggled to adjust and absorb everything that happened. The joy and terror of realizing she'd never be alone in her skin again. The implications of being Chosen had not prepared her for the infringement on her life and privacy.

What if he didn't like what he saw about her? They couldn't just walk away now.

Panic closed around her chest like steel bands, stealing her breath. The clang of heavy metal bars closing her in echoed through her head. Chilled to the marrow,

shivers racked her body. Kenna fought the hands and legs holding her, cursed, kicked and clawed. She had to get free or she'd die.

"Kenna!"

The sharp authority in the shout cut through her terror. Then he was there—Ryker—touching her mind, soothing and lending support without taking over.

Easy, darlin'. I've got you. I'll keep you safe, Kenna. Look in my mind, my heart, see my love for you.

He helped her to regulate her breathing and slow her pounding heart. His words whispered through her mind, soft and gentle—not a smothering intrusion but a sheltering support. A loving companionship.

It clicked for Kenna then, like a light switch being flipped, illuminating the dark. Being Chosen, having Ryker's love, it wasn't a heavy weight determined to drag her down beneath the tide. Not a prison cell and chains to limit her. No. He lifted her up, enabling her to reach for her dreams. To soar high and free knowing he'd never let her fall.

All he wanted was to be there with her. Not a step ahead but by her side. They'd be partners, finding their way together.

* * * * *

Kenna woke with a gasp, finding it hard to breathe under the crushing sense of urgency riding her. Now that the crystals had fused they were running out of time. Odious Asmo—Wes the super creep—would be coming for them. Her entire life had been spent preparing for this event.

Yeah, and here she was, basking in the afterglow, barley armed. The rest of her arsenal was safely tucked away at home.

Crap, she had to get a move on.

Easier said than done. The crystals around her neck tied her to Ryker. Even as she unclasped the silver links and fastened the chain around his neck, she understood the

mixed emotions he would feel—happiness over her show of faith in leaving the necklaces in his care tempered by a world of irritation for going without him.

She made a token attempt to wake him, whispered his name, gently tapped on his shoulder. He slept right through her lifting his heavy leg from over hers and climbing out of bed.

The hot spray of water felt wonderful on sore muscles but she didn't delay. Her sisters would call soon. Back in the bedroom, she fished her cell phone out of her pants and turned it on vibrate just in time. Instead of talking to them one at a time, the girls cornered her with a conference call, all three talking at once.

"I'm so happy for you." Charlotte sounded close to tears.

"Wasn't the sex amazing?" Memory asked. "I told you it would rock your world."

"We want details. Explicit details." Leave it to Dee to get right down to the nitty-gritty.

Kenna took a great deal of satisfaction in telling them, "Angela doesn't know as much as she thinks."

"Bite your tongue, baby girl," Charlotte interrupted. "And don't you ever intimate that to her. Angela might be getting older but she still has plenty of power."

Didn't she know it. Kenna had often been too wrapped up in physical training to worry about classes or mental exercises, which had often resulted in her feeling the sting of Angela's powers.

"You sound so different. A lot less the headstrong hard-ass."

"Uh, thanks, Charlotte, I think."

They all laughed until Memory demanded, "Now dish, honey."

"Yeah, and don't leave anything out," Dee added.

"Ryker was given a stone intended for me. A bloodstone." She filled them in on the stone being placed in Ryker's care, the story of his family being its guardians. The girls were as shocked by the development as she had been. "The bloodstone somehow

altered our powers, allowing them to blend together. I doubt our crystals would've fused without it."

She didn't need intuition to predict when her sisters' focus shifted back to sex. Not wanting to cheapen the experience, she refused to divulge details. "Suffice to say it was more than I expected and a memory I'll cherish forever."

"Asmo-what's-his-butt will be coming now." Dee stated what was on all their minds. "Are you ready?"

"Yeah, I just have to head back to my place and pick up—"

Charlotte gasped and Memory's voice cut off her words. "You have to stay with Ryker. We don't know what would happen if the demon catches you alone."

"It won't take long—"

"You can't risk it."

She understood Charlotte's concern, but she had to get her weapons. "That's why I'm leaving the Hearts with Ryker."

They argued the merits of her plan until they'd wasted more time than she had to spare. "Look, I've got to get moving or we're screwed. Wes is an idiot but he won't drain his resources by coming after me when I don't have the crystals. Once I kick his ass back to hell we'll discuss preparing for the big showdown." So she didn't exactly tell them all of her plan. They'd get over it.

According to Angela there would be a final showdown. Banished from this realm, Asmodeus would draw power from other sources until he had adequate strength to attack. And he'd wait for the opportune moment, when they were all together and least expecting it.

Memory, Dee and Charlotte had all faced the demon after their crystals fused and temporarily drove him out of this realm. They couldn't protect Kenna from what she had to do, no matter how much they wanted to.

"Call us the minute it's done."

“Umm...I’d love to Memory, but from what y’all said, I’ll be kinda busy with Ryker then.”

Charlotte groaned. “Just promise you’ll call as soon as you can.”

“I promise.”

She pocketed the bloodstone and her phone, along with the keys to Ryker’s truck, brushed a kiss over his forehead and hit the ground running.

Kenna made the trip in record time, parked the truck in the drive and hopped out but didn’t go inside the house. Instead, she headed into the woods and walked the familiar path. About half-mile walk and the dense foliage opened to a small clearing.

The old hunter’s cabin had been the main reason she’d rented the property, second only to the breathtaking beauty of the isolated land. It was the perfect place to store her gear and train while avoiding the attention of the town gossips. She doubted they even knew the outbuilding existed. The owner probably liked it that way because what Uncle Sam didn’t know about he couldn’t tax.

Walking around to the back, she located a fake rock in the underbrush and retrieved the keys. The strong padlock she’d installed on the door was overkill but she wouldn’t chance someone stumbling upon her weapons and hurting themselves or someone else.

Tiny dust motes floated lazily on golden shafts of light filtered in through windows set high on the walls. The rough wooden floor was covered by blue gym mats. Various equipment hung from a pegboard—a jump rope, boxing gloves, wrist and ankle weights. A metal rack held a few hundred pounds of dumbbells. Punching bags—a heavy bag and a speed bag—hung from strong hooks bolted into thick ceiling beams. But what she’d come for today was contained in a locked cabinet—her blades.

Using the second key she opened the doors wide and perused a variety of knives, swords and daggers, several dating back hundreds of years. The weapons of a true warrior. Forged stainless steel and antique silver. All polished, sharpened and ready for action.

She changed into her fighting clothes, a ribbed leather sleeveless jumpsuit, protective gloves and her shitkickers. The harness she strapped on over her torso concealed a matched set of long daggers at each shoulder, the lethal blades extending to the small of her back. A pair of curved blades were secured to the sides of her rib cage. In a horizontal strap above her breasts was a dangerous little knife that would fit into her palm and remain hidden by her fingers, undetectable until the moment it sliced through vulnerable flesh. She topped it off with a fitted leather jacket.

Fastened to her thighs was the set of daggers that never left her. After tucking slim knives into the specially designed sheaths in her boots, Kenna plaited her long hair to ensure it would remain out of her way.

Would mortal weaponry work on a demon prince from hell?

She hoped so. It was all she had to save her sisters and Ryker.

Walking away from him and putting up her walls had been one of the hardest things she'd ever done. Kenna felt physically ill. Rubbing at the burning ache in her chest, she struggled to draw a breath without mourning the loss of their link.

God, but she loved him. And that terrified her.

This was more than being Chosen, fated counterparts. Destined mates. Much more than fabulous, mind-numbing, off-the-charts sex. He made her feel alive in ways she never imagined possible. He made her feel...everything.

The problem—the part that scared her as nothing else had the power to—when they linked he saw all that she wasn't. He knew everything in her head—all her memories, doubts, fears and needs. Saw each flaw, her many shortcomings and inadequacies.

She'd also seen inside him, sensed his love and acceptance of the real her, and all that entailed. And he still wanted her.

How the hell could that be?

During their phone call, her sisters had noticed a difference in her—a softening of the hard edges. Something Kenna had to hurry up and fix before going against the demon. He'd know and use it to defeat her.

If she had any hope of making something lasting with Ryker she had to find a way of getting rid of Asmodeus, once and for all. This had to be the final battle. One she'd fight alone, protecting her sisters, their mates and hers.

To do that she'd had to rebuild her walls and make them stronger. Had to keep Ryker out for his own good until she neutralized the threat.

She locked the cabin up tight, moved out into the open and dropped to her knees in the tall grass. Her focus turned inward, drawing on her energies and those around her in nature. Pooling them, she shot a blast of pure energy straight up into the atmosphere, waited several moments and let another go. The demon would feel the spikes of power and hopefully follow them like a homing beacon, straight to her and away from all those she loved.

Something battered at her walls, tried to get in, but she held firm and waited.

"Come on, Wes. Forget the blasted crystals and come to me. I've got all the power you could ever want. Come and take it, you sick fuck."

Chapter Seven

Of all the scenarios he anticipated waking up to on the morning after the best night of his life, being alone wasn't one Ryker had even considered. Well, more like the evening after if he were to be honest. For almost twenty-four hours, he and Kenna made love, with a few short naps here and there.

During that time they'd created a permanent, indelible link, shared everything down to their souls. Two missing pieces of an intricate puzzle finally coming together and fitting in ways nothing else ever could or would.

Obviously their bonding hadn't made quite the same impact on Kenna. Not since she'd shut him out and walked away without looking back.

No matter how hard he fought against the heavy cloak of sleep, he hadn't been able to shake it off. The connection had remained strong, at first. So strong he'd known the precise moment she woke up. Had felt her arms go around his neck, clasping her necklace next to his, entrusting him with their fused crystals.

He knew when she entered the bathroom. Images of her wet body under the hot shower spray flooded his mind. He was aware of her conference call with her sisters but not the details of the conversation. Even understood and admired her intentions as she kissed him then headed out of the house.

Kenna had gone off to prepare for battle. Without him. To protect him.

"Crazy ass, stubborn woman."

To hell if he'd sit around while she was out there alone and vulnerable, fighting for them all.

After a quick shower he got dressed then headed for the garage. Slapping a button on the wall, he climbed into Louise and was edging under the electric door before it had

fully opened. At the end of the drive he downshifted, powered through the turn, straightened out and gunned it.

Normally he'd take great pleasure in driving one of his cars – the throaty roar of the engine, the effortless glide of the performance vehicle as he put it through its paces. Kenna dominated his every thought, urgency rode him hard.

They were supposed to be partners and you never left your partner behind.

So what if she usually went it alone, never relying on anyone. She had him now and needed to adjust her attitude. Maybe he'd paddle the round curves of her pretty ass to help teach her the lesson. Ryker doubted anyone had ever attempted to spank her and it was long overdue. His cock twitched in agreement.

The drive to town was endless. He sped down Main Street, ignoring the shocked response of his friends and neighbors who'd thought they knew all there was to know about him. In reality, they'd only ever seen what he allowed, which wasn't much since he guarded his privacy well.

He hit the back roads, taking them too fast, fishtailing in the dirt. The fused crystals grew increasingly hot against his chest and started to vibrate. He didn't think that was a good sign. Especially since every time he'd tried to follow the link and connect with Kenna's mind he ran into a brick wall. Something was keeping him out.

On a stretch of straight road he flipped the toggle, activated the nitrous, cut the distance in half. The back fender kissed a tree trunk as he skidded around the last turn. As the house came into view, his truck parked out front, Ryker prayed he'd made it in time.

Out of the car almost before it had come to a full stop, he raced up the porch steps and banged on the door. Nothing. Not the soft rustling of wind through the trees. No chatter from squirrels. No chirping of cicadas. The complete and utter lack of sound was disturbing.

He jiggled the knob but the door was locked. Tried every window and peeked through the curtains. There were no signs of Kenna having recently been at the house.

And yet the crystals increased heat and movement against his chest made him certain she was around here...somewhere.

After making a full circuit of the house he returned to the car and leaned back against the front fender. Closing his eyes, he took a calming breath. The hard pounding of his heart slowed, matched the tick-tick-hiss, tick-tick-hiss of the cooling engine.

Okay, he had to simplify the problem. To find Kenna, he had to get past the wall she'd put between them.

He visualized a tall, wide, solid wall of brick that seemed to stretch into infinity. In comparison, he was small and insignificant. But there had to be a way to bring it down.

If faced with such a barrier in reality, how would he go about bringing it down?

Chipping away with a chisel and hammer would take too long. A sledgehammer would make a bigger dent but the wall was too big.

What was the fastest, most efficient way to demolish a wall?

Then it hit him.

Please let this work!

The harsh growl of a diesel engine rumbled, disturbing the peace and quiet. Ryker pictured himself sitting at the controls of a crane, a wicked grin on his lips as he directed the movement of the five-thousand-pound wrecking ball that hung from thick cables.

Rubbing his hands together, he studied the levers and set to work. He moved the ball back, way back, then set it on a swinging arc. The first loud crash made the earth shake under the heavy machine and a few cracks appeared in the wall.

Over and over, he pulled the ball back and slammed it into the same spot. Bit by bit the bricks cracked, crumbled and fell, leaving a wide hole. He battered at the wall, not stopping until there was nothing left to hit and the brick dust hung heavy in the air.

When the dust finally cleared, Ryker's heart stopped cold.

* * * * *

She didn't have to wait long. Like a moth to the flame, Asmo was unable to resist the call of power. He strolled into the clearing, calm and confident, looking her up and down, turning her stomach in the process.

"Hello, Wes."

He tipped his head, black hair briefly covering his dark eyes as he gave an elegant bow. "Aren't we well past mortal designations, my dear? You may refer to me as your highness or Prince Asmodeus."

Her laughter held no real humor. "I prefer to call them like I see them so I guess that leaves us with disgusting freak."

Asmodeus tsk-tsked and waved his finger at her. "Now, Kenna. Let's be civilized about this, shall we. Hand over the Hearts and I'll be on my way."

Rising to her full height, she met his hateful gaze. "I'm sorry, Wes, but I don't believe parasitic, undead beings from hell know what civilized actions are."

In the back of her mind, she registered the gravelly rumble of large machinery but ignored the discordant sound, chalking it up as a trick.

"You should know that the fight has already been won. Dee, Memory and Charlotte have all handed over their crystals."

Unwelcome images flashed in her mind. She clearly saw each of her sisters kneeling before different versions of Asmodeus, submitting to his demands and handing over their necklaces. Then she saw all three girls locked in subterranean prison cells, the fires of hell burning all around them.

No! Kenna shook her head. No matter how real the images, she would not be tricked. "Nice try, dragon breath, but I'm not buying your line of crap."

Shattering pain pierced her skull and a loud thud echoed through her head, almost driving Kenna to her knees as the earth beneath her feet rolled and pitched. Holy shit! She'd had no idea Asmodeus had such strong powers.

Hmm...but judging by the confused look on his face, he didn't know what the hell had just happened either. He was quick to figure it out and clue her in though.

"Ah, it appears that lover boy's coming to the rescue."

Aw, fuck!

Kenna wished she could warn Ryker but the wall meant to keep him safe also kept them from communicating. Damn, she needed her sisters here with her.

As if having heard her wish, the phone in her pocket vibrated wildly and she knew the girls were frantic with worry, all three trying to call her at once when they couldn't touch her mind.

Another loud bang ricocheted around her skull and the earth shook again, making her wonder what the hell Ryker was doing.

"Give me the crystal, Kenna. You know that you want to." Wes took a step closer, his body shimmered, and the façade wavered, giving her a glimpse of the horrible creature she'd seen in the alley.

Jesus, to think that only yesterday I considered him hot and totally doable.

Wes nodded. "Exactly as I'd intended. I really had hoped you would be more reasonable than the others and allow us both to enjoy the experience...in bed. You've never had a dick as big as mine or felt the kind of sexing I could give you. Pounding into you, hard and fast. Giving you the delightful pain that makes the pleasure so much better."

The beast's forked tongue tasted the air, the ends flickering in her direction. Cold chills skittered along her spine and Kenna nearly lost the light lunch she'd eaten a few hours earlier with Ryker. She rubbed at her chest, palmed the small blade, secreting it within the special slit in her right glove.

"Dream on, slime ball. I'd cut off your putrid dick before letting it get anywhere near me."

"Hand over the crystal, Kenna. Save yourself a world of misery."

"Never," she spat. "I'll never give you the crystal." Not that she had it anyway.

The pounding in her head grew louder, the time between each punishing blow shriveled until they were as constant as her heartbeat.

"Ah, yes." Asmo pointed to her right hand. "You do like your knives, don't you? But your knives are useless against me, as are those fighting skills you've worked so hard to gain."

Fuck!

No one was invincible. She'd find his Achilles heel and take him down.

Instead, he snatched her biggest fear straight out of her mind—being weak and defenseless. Then he made it her reality.

Kenna found herself in the pits of hell, chained and helpless on her knees before the demon prince, all of her blades gone. She felt the heat on her skin. The scents of brimstone and decay burned her nostrils. All around her lay bodies in various stages of decomposition. Maggots crawled in and out of rotting flesh and flies buzzed over fresh carcasses. Others were mere piles of bones with all the meat having been picked away.

Memory walked up next to Asmodeus, kissed his hideous cheek and frowned down at her. Kenna pleaded for her sister's help but Memory just shook her head, turned and walked away. The same happened with Dee and Charlotte. Finding her lacking, they all turned their backs and left her at the hands of the demon.

It appeared as though her worst nightmares had come true. But Kenna knew appearances were deceiving and Asmodeus was the biggest deceiver out there. It was all nothing more than illusion.

"Don't you have any new tricks up your sleeve? These old, amateur ones are boring." She yawned dramatically. "You're wasting both our time."

Asmodeus lumbered closer, flashed a smile full of jagged yellow teeth.

Kenna felt the small knife in her right palm that the demon hadn't missed. She drew on the energies she'd gathered, spun to face him, poured her power into the blade and sent it hurtling through the air.

Taken by surprise the large creature wasn't able to dodge the incoming projectile. It sliced cleanly through his side leaving a wide, gaping wound.

Asmodeus didn't cry out in pain. He glanced down at his side, slid long, curved talons through the gash and brought his hand to that horrible mouth. His black tongue snaked out, the forked ends lapping up his greenish blood, sucking up every drop. His tongue smacked at bulging lips and the thing hummed low in his throat.

"A bit salty. But I bet your blood tastes sweet. Shall we spill some and give it a try?"

Her body was jerked back around to face him, and this time her blade rested in the demon's gnarled claws.

Before she could form a witty response, white light burst in her head and suddenly Ryker was there, but only for a fleeting moment.

No one had ever come for her before, but he had.

I need you to trust me, darlin'. Believe in our love.

Then mentally he was gone, having cut off the link, as he physically ambled up next to Wes.

Damn, he was a sight for sore eyes. A tight T-shirt stretched across his chest, tucked into a pair of faded blue jeans. His jaw was clenched, his expression hard, but with his hat pulled down low she couldn't see his eyes.

She hated him seeing her like this.

"So glad you could join us, Ryker." Asmo gave him a devious grin.

He tipped his hat. "Well, now. I wouldn't wanna miss out on all the fun y'all are havin'."

"Not to worry, my boy. You're just in time."

Ryker remained silent so Asmodeus continued. Waves of dark power swirled around them, sucking Ryker into his evil plans.

“Think of all the power we can possess. After all, the strong will always rule. And with you sitting to the right of my throne, nothing will stop us. In fact, I’ll give you this world to do with as you wish. Imagine it, bending others to your will, controlling all the sniveling beings in this realm, making them dance to your tune.”

Asmodeus’ sick plans had bile rising in her throat. Her faith in Ryker didn’t waver, not in the least, until he lifted his gaze to hers. The fanatical gleam in his eyes threatened to crush her hopes that they’d make it out of this mess together. Cold hatred radiated off Ryker, making her shudder in revulsion.

She couldn’t read his thoughts but feared Asmodeus had gotten into his mind and now Ryker would desert her, falling into the demon’s malicious trap. She pleaded with her eyes, fought to connect with him.

“Take the crystal from her. Do it now.”

She wanted to scream at him, slap his face, shake him out of the trance he’d succumbed to. Find any way to break the demon’s dark power over her mate.

No, Kenna would not lose her trust in Ryker. Above all else she would always believe in him. He wouldn’t harm her. And besides, he had the damn crystals, not her. If he were siding with the demon all he had to do was hand them over.

Taking strength from the fused crystals cupped in his hand, Ryker walked toward Kenna, each step slow and measured regardless of how badly he wanted to run to her, wrap her up in his arms. The image of her bound and submissive at the demon’s feet seemed so real, but he knew better. Kenna was strong and would never stop fighting.

Asmodeus cackled in glee with each step Ryker took. Good, the idiot thought he’d fallen under his control. That worked to his advantage.

The illusion projected his worst fear—the woman he loved weak and vulnerable. He refused to see what the demon wanted and kept the real Kenna Fulton firmly in his mind. The false image faltered and he saw Kenna standing tall and proud, ready to

fight. When he reached her, Ryker took her left hand in his, felt the small bump concealed beneath her glove. One finger at a time, he peeled the leather away.

He had to keep the link shut down, even though it hurt him physically not to share her thoughts. They couldn't risk Asmodeus picking up their communication. Then he met her vibrant violet gaze full of love and trust and felt all the pain and misery wash away. She still believed in him, would stand by his side and fight.

She'd given him the greatest gift he'd ever received.

"Take it, my boy. Bring it to me."

Not a chance in hell!

Their fingers intertwined, holding the crystals and bloodstone between them. Their powers coalesced, amplified, swelled around them creating a protective shield. Ryker winked and silently mouthed, *I love you*.

Kenna read his emotions, smiled and returned three words that made them an unbeatable force. Apart they were easy to defeat. Joined together the demon wouldn't succeed. "Let's kick ass."

He nodded in agreement and as one, they turned to face the demon prince of hell.

"What are you doing? You fool!" Asmodeus bellowed. "You'll both pay for this."

The pinks and purples of sunset disappeared from the sky, which churned with black, roiling clouds. Thunder cracked and lightning hurtled straight for them.

With their link reestablished, the two of them worked in perfect unison, dodging to the left.

Howling in frustration, the demon struck again and again until the scent of charred wood and grass filled the air. Then Asmodeus got a lucky break.

Ryker glanced over at Kenna to make sure she was all right. The brief moment of inattention was all the demon needed. Searing pain jolted their bodies, knocking both of them off their feet. The white-hot sensations made his blood feel as if it boiled in his

veins, cooking organs, muscle and even bone. The acrid odor of burned flesh permeated every ragged breath.

Because of their link, the pain was multiplied. He took her sensations into himself, absorbed Kenna's injuries. The ache of electrically shocked muscles, the overwhelming heat.

He felt Kenna trying to draw the sensations to herself, fought against her, refusing to let her take on so much misery alone. Then she shared her intentions, how she was gathering the energies, including those Asmodeus created, and would use the crystals and stone in their clasped hands to turn them back on the demon.

Glancing at Asmodeus, Ryker saw that he had grown and now towered over them. His armored body oozed slime. That disgusting black tongue lolled out from between two rows of sharp teeth. The spikes protruding from his spine glinted silver, without a doubt they were blades sharp as the ones Kenna carried. His hands flailed around him, tossing lightning bolts, which rained down all around them but never hitting their targets.

Once he understood what Kenna was doing, Ryker stopped blocking her. Their powers wouldn't destroy the demon. Only all eight pieces of the Heart of Fire brought together could manage such a feat. It would, however, blast his ornery ass out of this realm and send him straight back to hell.

He closed his eyes to the demon, called his own abilities to the surface. When they had sufficient resources pooled his eyes snapped open and latched onto the demon.

Let's do this!

In the midst of her worst fears, Kenna knew a love stronger than any demon's power, felt it surging through their link, and took strength from it. The bloodstone and crystals vibrated and hummed, creating a harmony like the soft chiming of bells. The sound lifted her spirits and lightened her heart, rising above the demon's vile curses and threats.

Ryker, listen. Do you hear it?

Pure joy poured through her as she listened to her sisters' voices joining the melody, merging with the beautiful song of the crystals. Deep male voices mixed with the others, and although she'd never heard them before, her heart told her these were the other Chosen lending their support and power.

Yeah, darlin'. I hear them. That's our family.

Tears burned at the edges of her eyes. Her sisters hadn't left her to face evil alone. They stayed with her and brought their mates with them. While she'd wandered for so many years, she'd never truly been alone. Not really. Now Kenna and Ryker would always hold the love of the other Chosen within their hearts, carrying them with them wherever they went.

Come on, Kenna. Let's finish him off.

Choked up with emotion, she nodded. They aimed their linked, glowing hands and together gave the energies a mental shove.

Shield your eyes, darlin', Ryker warned.

Ryker shared his sense of amazement through their connection. The fireball that exploded from them was bigger and brighter than anything he'd ever managed alone. It was a dazzling mass of scorching flame and energy blazing through the darkness, visible even behind tightly closed eyelids. Kenna tucked her chin to her chest and waited.

Straight and true, the explosive ball of energy hit its mark. The sounds of the battle began to recede, along with the dark clouds. When the demon's voice reached them it sounded distant and weak.

"She will grow fragile and die, Ryker," the demon warned. "Taken away from you, just like Connie. She'll crumble, fall apart, ripping your heart out. Wes was the man she wanted. I plucked his image right out of her fantasies."

Asmodeus laughed, the sound filled with evil delight. "He doesn't love you, Kenna. He'll never stay. You know he won't. Everyone always leaves you."

She glanced at Ryker, saw the pride and love she felt for him reflected back at her in his dark brown eyes. They both burst out laughing.

“Yeah, whatever helps you sleep at night, Asmo. The two of us are sticking together. And when you come back, you’ll have to deal with all eight of the Chosen, standing together solid and strong.”

“We believe in each other,” Ryker added. “Your threats are feeble, easily conquered by the power of our love.”

“Until next time,” the demon snarled as he faded. Along with him went all the signs of their fight, restoring the land to its previous splendor.

We’ll be ready and waiting.

Chapter Eight

Rubbing at her eyes, Kenna batted away the tears that clung to her eyelashes. She blinked to clear the bright orb from her vision, blamed the tears on the fireball. Even with her eyes clamped shut she'd still been able to see the damn thing.

"Gonna have to invest in some dark shades if I keep hanging out with you, fire starter."

"I'll kiss it and make it all better." Ryker cupped her chin, tilted her head back and tenderly kissed both closed eyelids.

She slowly opened her eyes and stared up at him. Backlit by the fading sun, the brim of his hat blocked the light from her supersensitive eyes and created a halo around him.

God, he was beautiful.

And all hers.

She'd hated having her choices taken from her, forced to deal with a destiny she wanted no part of. With every fiber of her being, Kenna had resented being Chosen, made an outcast because of her strange abilities. Had wondered if she'd ever be accepted for who she was or if she'd spend the rest of her life alone and wandering.

Then Ryker had come into her life and in the course of one day everything had changed. While he might not be the man she'd thought she wanted, he sure as hell was the one she needed. The one she loved. Desired.

Oh yeah. There was a whole lot of desiring going on. The heat in those coffee brown eyes let her know he felt the same. Her hand rested over his heart, the steady boom-boom-pow a quiet reassurance. Bone-deep exhaustion had settled into her once the battle ended and she leaned into him for support.

She fingered the crystals and stone in their still linked hands. "So the crystals fused..."

He nodded. "Yup, sure did."

"That means we're bonded, mated."

"Yes, ma'am, it does." The cad winked at her.

"And..."

"And, what, darlin'. Why'd you get shy and hesitant all of a sudden? If there's a point to this, spit it out."

Jerk! His attitude made her spine stiffen. She started to get angry then realized he'd done it to push her back onto level ground, give her some of her confidence back. Whoo, that turned her on.

And damn if he hadn't figured her out already.

She scowled up at him, shifted onto the balls of her feet to make them more equal, meeting eye to eye. "The point, cowboy, is that we're stuck with each other. Whether we want to be or not. So we might as well make the best of it."

He dropped his hat onto her head. "I like the sound of that. In fact, I was thinkin' we need to take a vacation. Get out of Dodge, somewhere relaxing, get to know each other."

Kenna pictured the two of them swimming in the surf at one of those tropical places where the drinks all had those tacky umbrellas and fruit sticking out of the cup. Someplace hot, Ryker shirtless and wearing only a pair of shorts.

Hell yeah. Sign me up!

"We can't go on vacation. We have another battle ahead of us." She bit her lip, tried to suppress her smile but it wouldn't be held back.

"All the more reason to grab some R&R while we have the chance, darlin'. I'll buy you one of those itty-bitty bikinis. We can lie on the beach and soak up some sun."

He kissed the tip of her nose and seemed to hold his breath while waiting for her answer. How cool that they were on the same page. But she wasn't going to make it easy for him.

"The beach? Ick! All that sand getting into places it should never be. And I'd go stir crazy doing nothing but lounging around. How about something exciting. Snow skiing? Kayaking? Ooh, I know, parasailing."

She really didn't care what they did or if they went any farther than her bed. But she did have to keep the man on his toes.

Once again he showed her how right they were for each other. "Um...sure. That would be...fun. But right now the only activity on my mind is some mattress Olympics and hot monkey sex."

"Hey, wait. Don't you have to work?"

"I own the shop so if I want to close it up for a while, I can."

He pulled her in closer, pressed the hard ridge of his cock against her soft belly. "Wanna race me to the bed?"

Taking him literally, she pulled out of Ryker's arms, tucked the crystals and bloodstone in her pocket, then ran hard and fast. His hat flew off somewhere along the way. Having to retrieve the keys and unlock the door put her at a disadvantage, allowing him to race past as she opened the door but he didn't know where the bedroom was and headed toward the kitchen.

Kenna charged into the bedroom, threw herself onto the bed, laughing as she bounced several times, felling as if a huge weight had been lifted from her shoulders. Ryker did that for her. Without a complaint, he shouldered the burden of being Chosen, which let her just relax and enjoy.

"This, Kenna..." he spoke from the doorway, his voice raspy, full of emotion. She lifted up onto her elbows to see him better.

"This is how you were meant to be—carefree, cheerful. Absolutely glowing." He placed his hand over his chest. "I'm going to do everything in my power to make sure you stay happy, darlin'."

Her eyes prickled with suppressed tears. Damn him. She wasn't a weepy woman yet he had a way of turning her into mush. "Well, what are you doing all the way over there then? I'd be a lot happier if you were naked and in this bed."

He wore a smarmy grin. "That all? You're pretty easy."

"Easy and horny, cowboy. But only for you."

Ryker's movements were unrushed even while radiating such a high level of sexual tension. He took off the hat he must have picked up on their mad scramble to the house. Without glancing away from her, he tossed it and the hat hooked neatly over the curtain rod.

Nice trick.

"Take out the braid, Kenna. I love the way your hair feels as it slides over my skin."

She ditched her jacket first, throwing it to the side of the bed. The chest harness went next, followed by her thigh holsters. Those she carefully laid on top of the jacket. Propped against the headboard, she ran her fingers through her thick braid, loosening the strands, while watching Ryker undress.

The slow striptease had her breathing fast and shallow. Her breasts were swollen and achy. Her clit throbbed and her panties were soaking wet. Hell if she'd tell him to go faster though. She was enjoying the show. Each new bit of muscled flesh revealed made her heart beat faster.

Her boots hit the ground at about the same time as his sneakers. Rising up on her knees she grasped the zipper just beneath her throat and kept her gaze locked on his as she pulled the tab along her cleavage, past her navel. As he shrugged out of his shirt, she pushed the jumpsuit over her shoulders.

As he popped the fastener on his jeans, dropped the zipper and hooked his thumbs in the waistband, she rose to her feet. Standing in the center of the mattress, Kenna followed his lead, dragging the leather down her legs. After removing the crystals and stone from the pocket, her jumpsuit joined the growing pile of discarded clothing. She was down to her bra and panties, a few scraps of purple silk.

The snug green boxer-briefs he wore did nothing to hide the large bulge of his hard cock. Ryker stepped forward, took the necklaces and clasped them at her nape. "Until today, I'd never taken the necklace off. Not once in ten years. Now I want you to wear our fused pieces of the Heart. At least until we join them with the others and defeat Asmodeus."

His fingers brushed over her collarbones, dipped into the hollow of her throat, distracting her from what he said. Goosebumps broke out over her skin. He was saying something important. She struggled to put aside thoughts of making love and concentrate.

"Then I want to replace the crystals with my ring. I want you to take my name—become my wife."

He stared at her with such love and devotion. Kenna swallowed hard around the lump in her throat. She had no regrets over anything that had happened, no complaints about the mate who had been Chosen for her. Could imagine nothing better than spending the rest of her life with Ryker. It was all happening so fast but exactly as it was supposed to.

Except for the talking. He was talking entirely too much when she was dying to be fucked.

"You make me cry again and I'm going to kick your ass, cowboy."

His fingers moved lower, followed the edge of her bra. Kenna found it difficult to breathe.

"Is that a yes?"

"To what? I didn't hear a question in all that alpha-male-in-charge blah, blah, blah."

For some reason, she needed him to ask. To spell it out in plain English so she could wrap her dazed brain cells around it.

His fingers caressed the crystals resting between her breasts then he knelt on the bed before her. "Kenna Fulton —"

"McKenna Louise Fulton."

"What?"

"My middle name is Louise."

Ryker tried to hold back the laughter bubbling up through his chest, really he did. The last thing he wanted to do was offend her. Damn, it was too priceless. No wonder she'd made such a fuss over him having named the Camaro Louise.

He grabbed her around the waist and laughed so hard he fell over, toppling them both to the mattress. "Aw, darlin'. It's a great name," he sputtered between irrepressible laughter. Thankfully, she laughed too, which allowed him to enjoy the moment. His proposal would be a great story to tell their kids someday.

When he finally recovered, Ryker lifted up on his elbows and brushed a sweet kiss across her lips. "God, I love you, Kenna."

"I love you too."

"Good, now let me finish."

She pursed her lips and put on a serious expression. "Okay, go ahead. I'm ready."

"No more interruptions," he warned.

Kenna nodded.

"McKenna *Louise* Fulton, when we unite all eight pieces of the Heart of Fire —"

"After vacation."

"After we take a vacation, fuse the crystals and defeat the demon prince from hell —"
"He stopped. Waited to see if she had anything to add before continuing. "Will you do me the honor of marrying me?"

She choked, rapidly blinked eyelashes that were damp. Kenna grabbed his head, took his mouth with a hard kiss. Her legs wrapped around his hips and she flipped, putting her on top. She became a blur of motion, unclasping her bra, sending it and her panties flying across the room.

She tore at his briefs, pushed them out of the way just far enough to free his cock, which she wrapped her fist around. Holding him tight, she rubbed her pussy over the crown twice. When her cream coated him, she lifted, positioned him at her entrance, and impaled herself crying out, "Yes, yes, yes!"

The abrupt shock of being taken into her body, surrounded by all that tight, wet heat, had him sputtering and gasping. Reaching out for their link, he saw her intentions for a fast, hard fuck. Uh-uh. He had other ideas.

Ryker flipped them back over and seized control. "Where's the fire?"

"Need you. Now," she gasped.

"You've got me, darlin'. And we've got the rest of our lives so let's slow this down. I want to make love, not bust a bronco."

"I—you—we—" Kenna stammered then growled in frustration.

"Easy, Kenna." He switched to speaking in her head. You're overwhelmed and exhilarated. There's so much you want to say, to express. It's all right. I know. Relax. You don't have to say a thing.

He pictured their bodies moving together, long, deep thrusts, hands exploring slow and easy, mouths joined in a sensual seduction. Ryker shared the images with her, showed her how good simply making love would be, felt her tension slowly ebb away.

That's it, darlin'. Let me make love to you.

Every thought and every sensation were shared between them, formed a foundation on which they built the passion, savored it. Rose higher than either had ever gone.

He discovered the blissful friction she experienced with the slow drag of his cock along her responsive tissues. Felt the euphoria of his crown sliding over her G-spot and the ecstasy of his root lightly pressing against her clit.

The complete and total sharing took really great sex and elevated it to soul-deep love, forging a bond that would never be broken. The astounding realization hit him then that a true connection of two souls such as they'd established would never be severed. Stronger than any marriage vow, their union wouldn't fracture. It thrilled and terrified him in equal measures.

Even if he could, he wouldn't have it any other way.

Epilogue

"I've lost track. First it was surfing in Hawaii, right?" Memory asked.

"Then it was snorkeling the Great Barrier Reef," Charlotte helpfully added.

"Wait." Dee held up her hand. "Wasn't the rock climbing before the reef?"

"Don't remind me," Ryker groaned.

Kenna wasn't buying his act. He'd loved scaling that cliff, the exhilaration of the climb, the pride in making it to the top. She knew since he'd been in her mind, sharing his elation.

Creed's smiling face popped in front of the webcam as he sat on the couch next to Charlotte and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "Don't forget skiing in the Alps."

The big bounty hunter appeared so dangerous and gruff. Except when he got anywhere near Charlotte. Then he became nothing more than a cuddly teddy bear.

"Hey," Marco turned his disgruntled stare on Memory. "You didn't tell me they were in Switzerland."

"Yes I did, you just weren't paying attention."

Faison shushed everyone, snatched up the laptop and drew it close as if staring them down. "Forget all that. Where on earth are you two now?"

Whoo, what a voice.

Every hair on Kenna's body stood on end whenever she heard it.

Ryker's possessive grumble echoed in her mind and she absently patted his arm. You know there's nobody else for me but I'm not dead. I can still appreciate a great voice and sexy smile.

He muttered something she chose to ignore. Instead, Kenna focused on Faison's question. She waved her hand, indicating the primitive surroundings and mosquito netting covering the bed behind them. "We're on safari in Africa."

"It's not a real safari," Ryker complained. "I won't be bringing home a zebra's head to mount on the wall because *someone* won't let me hunt."

"Ha! As if you'd ever shoot a living creature." She winked at her mate. "I don't have to read your thoughts to know that one, cowboy."

Ryker tipped his hat, conceding the point then turned his attention back to the others—their family. "It's really more of an expedition. We're staying at a wildlife preserve, no guns permitted. We've seen wildebeest, cheetah, howler monkeys—"

Reading the direction he headed, Kenna warned, "Ryker."

He just laughed and continued on. "Kenna had an interesting run-in—"

She turned the laptop and scooted away from him but the crazy fool tackled her then pulled both the laptop and her closer.

"A run-in with a giraffe."

He dissolved into hysterical laughter and she had to bite the inside of her cheek to stop herself from joining him. "It was horrible. There I was, minding my own business." Ryker's laughter increased as she talked. "Taking the long-necked freak's picture, and out of the blue, it attacked me."

Charlotte gasped but the others just grinned, waiting to hear the rest.

"Y'all should leave the photography to me."

Memory's remark made Kenna bristle with indignation. You didn't have to be a fancy-pants photographer to take a few damn vacation photos. Sheesh!

"He stole my hat. Ripped it right off my head and started chewing on it."

The men fell all over themselves laughing. Kenna steadfastly ignored the idiots. "I really liked that hat. It had a wide brim and a panel in the back to cover my neck."

"McKenna Louise," Dee chastised. "What did you do?"

Kenna cringed. Memory snickered. Charlotte faked a cough but didn't put her hand over her mouth fast enough to cover her broad smile.

Ryker leaned in toward the camera, face beet red from laughing. The other men leaned forward in anticipation of a great tale.

Go ahead, tell them, but remember...paybacks are a bitch, honey.

He proceeded to tell every horrible detail in fits and starts, panting for breath. "She dropped her purse —"

"Kenna bought a purse?" Memory's eyes widened in shock.

"No, it's not a damn purse. It's a tote bag." Kenna drummed her fingers on her thigh.

"She shimmied up a tree...hung out on a branch..."

Crossing her arms over her chest, she prayed he'd hurry up and end her misery.

"Ooo-kaaay," Memory mock whispered. "Why hasn't she opened a can of whup-ass on Ryker yet? She has to be embarrassed."

Charlotte absolutely beamed at the camera. "Because she's in love —"

"Which means she doesn't have to be a hard-ass anymore," Dee finished for her.

Kenna stuck her tongue out at them.

"That's not it," Marco interjected. "It's 'cause she's not the baby anymore."

"Yeah." Creed gave her a knowing grin. "She's a cougar. Rawrrr."

She blew him a kiss.

Ryker went on as if no one had interrupted. "She leaned out...swiping at the hat...cursing the giraffe. The giraffe...k-kept munching away. She was okay...until the lemur..." He laughed too hard to continue speaking.

Kenna shoved his shoulder, hard, knocked him out of the camera's view. Figuring it was better to finish it fast now, she told the rest. "The damn monkeys stole my *tote*." She scowled at Ryker. "And played a game of keep away with it. Didn't get either one back, not that the big jerk over there even tried to help," she huffed.

Glancing at her sisters and brothers—the Chosen—she realized how lucky they all were. Being stuck with a predestined mate could have been a total nightmare. Thankfully, that wasn't the case. Each couple shared chemistry, passion and love. As a group they all got along great. One big happy family, something she'd never dreamed possible.

While everyone got the laughter out of their systems, she silently planned her revenge. Kenna shared a visual with Ryker of him tied to a tree, naked, in the middle of the preserve, in broad daylight, with honey poured all over him and hungry animals circling.

His face paled briefly then he shot her a wicked grin. I'm good with that as long as you're the one licking off the honey.

Thankfully, Charlotte—she always could count on Charlotte—came to her rescue by changing the subject.

"So while you two have been off having fun the rest of us have been talking about the showdown with Asmodeus."

That quick, all the merriment vanished and everyone turned serious. They all knew time grew short. Soon as Asmodeus strengthened again, he'd be back, with a vengeance. He wouldn't stop until he possessed the Heart of Fire and wielded its power. The fused crystals would enable him to permanently manifest in this realm and wreck havoc. None of the Chosen were prepared to let that happen, which made a nasty confrontation inevitable.

"No more staying apart. Our true power lies in our love for each other."

Everyone voiced their agreement with Dee.

"We have to be ready," Memory said. "Once Asmodeus' minions find out we're all together, he'll attack."

"So it's settled then." Charlotte's smile was a combination of dread and joy. "We're going to finally be together."

Kenna was ready. It had been so long since she'd hugged her sisters. "Just say when and where."

Dee took charge then, as usual, getting them all organized. After the details were set and agreed upon, Memory, Marco and Ryker started talking about restoring old cars, a subject near and dear to all three of them. Kenna, Charlotte and Dee just rolled their eyes indulgently. Once those three got started it was impossible to shut them up.

When they finally all said good night and ended the webcast, Ryker pulled her into his arms, holding her tight.

We'll defeat him, Kenna. None of us will stop short of doing so.

She sighed. That's what worries me most, one of us pushing too far and being hurt. Or worse...

Not gonna happen, darlin'. Together, with the fused Heart of Fire, he can't win.

God, I hope you're right.

Her fingers worried the crystals hanging around her neck. But worrying about it now would only drive her nuts. And she had something much more important to do. She had a few precious days remaining with Ryker all to herself. Kenna intended to use them well, to love him enough for a lifetime.

Burrowing her fingers into his soft hair, she knocked the hat off his head. Their kiss began as a soft seduction, quickly stirring deep, insatiable desires. Soon she forgot all about the Hearts, the demon prince, fate and destiny.

Ryker shared some very creative visuals with her. His naughty ideas turned her on but... *Is that even physically possible?*

How about we find out.

God, she loved the way his mind worked.

About the Author

Nicole Austin lives on the sheltered Gulf Coast of Florida, where inspiration can be readily found sitting under a big shade umbrella on the beach while sipping cold margaritas. A voracious reader, she never goes anywhere without a book. All those delicious romances combined with a vivid imagination naturally created steamy fantasies and characters in her mind.

Discovering Ellora's Cave paved the path to freeing them, as well as manifesting an intoxicating passion for Romantica®. The positive response of family and friends to her stories propelled Nicole into an incredible world where fantasy comes boldly to life. Now she stays busy working as a certified CT scan technologist, finishing her third college degree, reading, writing and keeping up with family. Oh yeah, and did we mention all the hard work involved with research? Well, that's the fun job—certainly a labor of love.

Nicole welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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