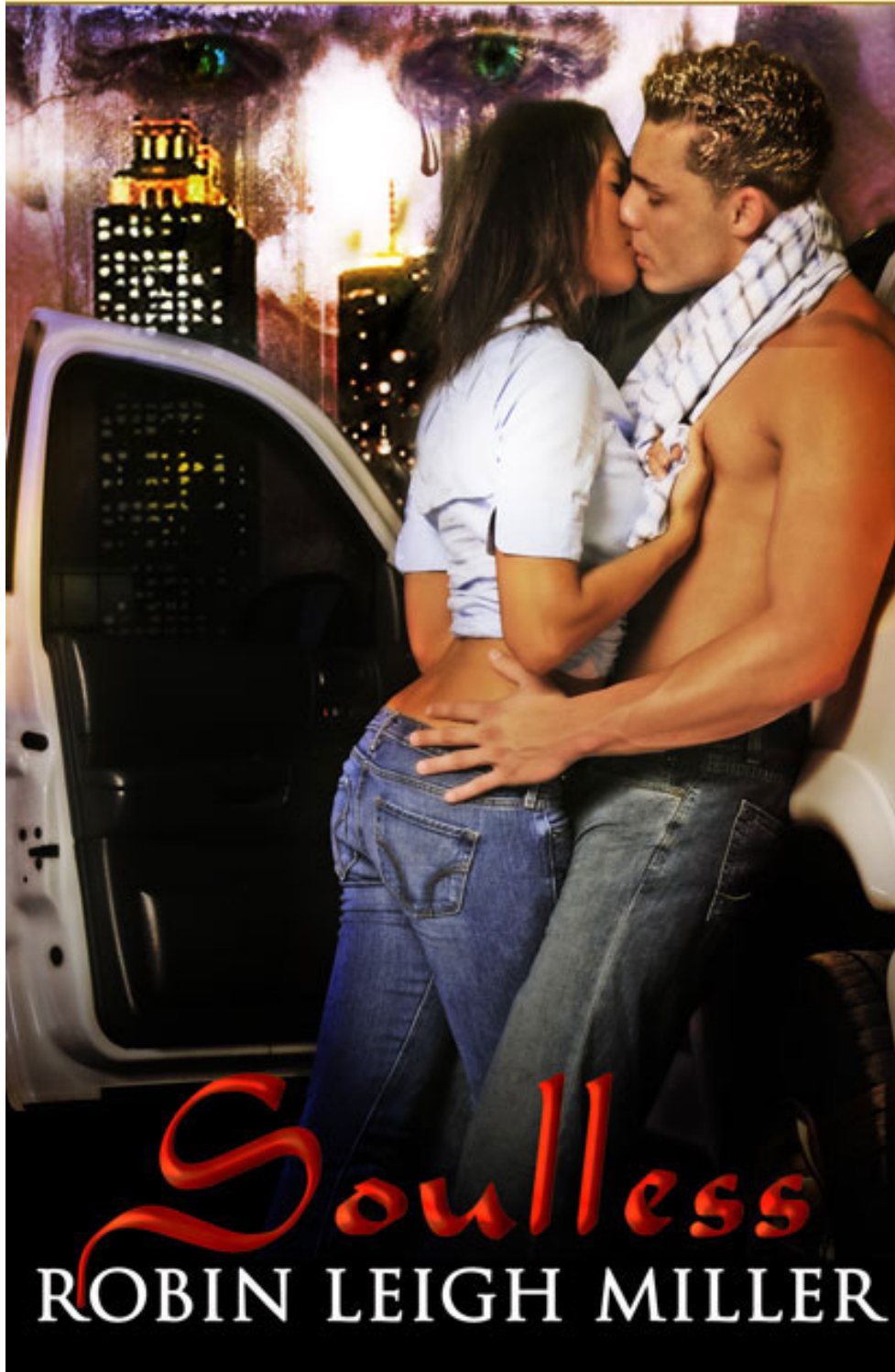


ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



Soulless
ROBIN LEIGH MILLER

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Soulless

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SOULLESS

Robin Leigh Miller

Dedication

As always, I'd like to thank my family for their love and support. Without them, I wouldn't be following my dream. And where would I be without my superb editor Helen Woodall? Floundering of course. To my readers, thanks for the emails that keep me going.

Trademarks Acknowledgement

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

BMW: Bayerische Motoren Werke Aktiengesellschaft Corporation

Cadillac: General Motors Corporation

Dumpster: Dempster Brothers Inc.

Subaru: Fuji Jukogyo Kabushiki Kaisha TA Fuji Heavy Industries Ltd

Chapter One

“Die you bastard. I have others things to do tonight.” With one last jab of her blade to the chest Quinn’s opponent dropped to the filthy alley, jerked, twitched and then exploded in a cloud of dust.

Jamming her knife into the scabbard tied to her leg, she turned and headed back toward the street, satisfied yet another Tulpa no longer walked the earth, free to wreak havoc on humanity. Too bad she hadn’t made it in time to save the creator of this abomination but that’s the way it went sometimes.

She passed by the blonde corpse, her pretty little head twisted to the back of her body, without sparing a glance. Either some kids or a vagrant would find her within the next few hours, call the police and another unsolvable murder would be logged in the books.

As she neared the end of the alley a shadow moved, catching her attention and putting her on guard. She slipped her blade from its sheath, walked on silent feet toward the street and prepared for battle. She wouldn’t kill a human, not unless they intended to kill her, but she could scare the living hell out of them. A nosy bum could cause trouble for her with the police.

Quinn pressed her back against the old dilapidated concrete building and inched her way to the corner. Holding her knife out and using the glinting blade as a mirror, she could see the arm of the intruder. Using her lightning-fast reflexes, she reached around the corner, grasped him by the arm and jerked him back into the alley.

In a blur of movement she slammed him against the wall and placed her blade to his throat. Quickly sizing him up, she realized he was just a kid, sixteen, seventeen at most and dirtier than the pavement she stood on. A torn, grubby shirt hung from his rail-thin body. A street urchin and from the look in his eyes one who had seen his share of horror.

“You here to mug me?” It wouldn’t be the first time she became the target of muggers.

The kid gave a jerky shake of his head.

“Then why are you waiting for me to come out of this alley?”

“Curious.”

“Curiosity kills. You looking to die?” His body shook uncontrollably. Good.

Using her slayer gift of reading auras, she focused on his, looking for any sign of evil or malevolence. If he held any inside it would show in his aura. Fortunately for him she could only read goodness and purity. Strange, how many street kids were good and pure?

Curious herself now, she released him, slipped her knife back in its sheath and folded her arms under her breasts. "What's your story, kid?"

His jaw quivered slightly before managing to force words past his lips. "Don't have one."

A smile tugged at the corner of her lips. "When was the last time you ate?"

His gaze shifted away from her face as he shrugged his bony shoulders. He reeked of body odor, his stiff, filthy hair jutted out in odd directions and Quinn just bet his last bite of food came from a Dumpster.

Not many things pissed her off. Tulpas and Tulpa creators were the main two, but when it came to kids living on the streets and eating garbage, well, that just soured her stomach. In today's world, no kid should have to exist this way.

"Make ya a deal. You answer some questions for me and I'll buy you something to eat." She didn't make it a habit to involve herself in people's lives but something about this kid bothered her. No street kid had such a pure soul as he emitted in his aura.

She could see his internal struggle. Even his state of hunger couldn't seem to overcome his pride. She admired that. Pride wasn't something she found in many people these days. Not real pride anyway.

"Come on. I need to get out of here and you need to eat."

He glanced down the alley and then back at her with a touch of fear.

"I didn't kill her." Quinn tried to make her voice convincing.

"I know."

"You saw what happened?" Great. That she didn't need. When he nodded his head again, she released a heavy sigh. "Okay, you answer my questions, I'll answer yours. Deal?"

"Deal."

With a nod of her head she exited the alley and headed back toward the better part of the city, which turned out to be only a few blocks. First though she had to make it past an area where druggies and dealers conducted business. The kid walked two steps behind her so she reached back and pulled him to her side. She couldn't help but notice how aware he was of his surroundings.

"What's your name?" She kept her pace fast and sure, her head held high. People tended not to mess with a confident person.

"Tyson."

"You know this area well, Tyson?"

"Bad place. I don't come 'round here."

"Except tonight." He didn't answer.

When they neared drug central she grabbed him by the arm and forced him down another alley. Normally she would have walked on by but she didn't want to risk

Tyson's safety. They were halfway to a safer street when she heard the crunch of gravel and trash behind them.

"When I tell you, run toward the street. Don't stop, don't turn around and wait for me when you get there." Already her fingers gripped the handle of her blade. "Go."

Tyson did as instructed, running as fast as his spindly long legs would carry him. Quinn continued a steady pace, even when she heard the footsteps behind her quicken. Timing it just right, she turned, her eight-inch knife slicing through the air, catching one of her attackers in the hand.

He stumbled back, blood dripping to the ground as he cursed. His two buddies pulled their own knives, spaced themselves out and rushed toward her. Quinn kicked out at the closest one, knocking the knife from his grip and then turned, jamming her fist into his nose. In one smooth motion she pulled back and plowed her fist into his gut. When he doubled over, she brought her knee up into his face, effectively knocking him unconscious.

Attacker number three wrapped his arms around her torso, pinning her arms to her side. Without missing a beat she lifted her leg, bent it and kicked back, hitting his knee and distending it. A loud snap echoed down the alley as he dropped to the ground and screamed in pain. The man she'd sliced stood there, holding his bleeding hand, staring at her.

"Come on. Let's get this over with," she huffed. "Things to do and all." She readied herself for the attack. To her surprise, the guy turned and ran. "Huh. Didn't expect that."

Quinn gave one last look at the two others lying on the ground and then turned and made her way toward the street. As she stepped out, Tyson appeared at her side. She'd half expected him to rabbit on her but he didn't. Of course the promise of a meal would keep him around.

They approached a small diner and when she opened the door, Tyson stopped and took two steps back.

"I can't go in there."

"Why not?"

Tyson looked down at his shabby clothes.

"Do I look like I give a damn how you're dressed? Come on. I worked up an appetite." She grabbed him by the arm and dragged him in behind her.

Seeing an empty booth in the back she headed for it, flopped down in the seat and waited for Tyson to sit across from her. She grabbed a sticky menu from behind the sugar, salt and pepper and slid it in front of him.

"Anything you want."

His eyes scanned the single plastic-coated sheet of paper as it shook in his hands. In the cruel, bright fluorescent lights of the diner, she could study him better. Beneath the dirt and grime she could see a boy who had been well taken care of at some point. His

hair, filthy as it was, had been in a stylish cut. He didn't bear any scars on his fingers or hands so he couldn't have been digging through the garbage for very long. She couldn't wait to hear this kid's story.

After they ordered he excused himself, went to the rest room and returned with a clean face, hands and arms, and had somehow managed to get his head under the tiny faucet to rinse out his hair. Impressive.

"So. Tell me about yourself."

"After you tell me what that thing was you killed."

Quinn thought for a moment. "Okay. You ever hear of a Tulpa?" When he shook his head, she went on. "A Tulpa is a thought form. A creature made up by someone."

"You mean like an imaginary friend?"

"Something like that except these come to life."

"I don't get it."

Of course he didn't. Not many people knew of Tulpas much less what they were capable of. As she explained how centuries ago man discovered that if you meditated, focused and chanted the right verses a creature resembling anything you wished would come to life, he sat listening intently.

"It started out with these things being created in the forms of monsters to terrorize villages. Ya know, keep people in line or run them off their property. Anyway, eventually they began to make them in their own image."

"Why do you kill them?"

"These things aren't human, Tyson. They have no soul and when a soul is missing, it gives evil a place to reside. They kill their creators and then they move on to others."

She could see the wheels turning inside his head as thought about it.

"Why do they kill their creators? I mean, that would be like us killing our parents after we're born."

"They aren't capable of affection, love or any other emotion you and I possess. They kill for the sake of killing."

"So some of these serial killers running around could be Tulpas?"

Smart kid. "Most are."

"What about Big Foot and Skunk Ape and all those other so-called creatures running around. Could they be Tulpas?"

Very smart kid. "Possibly. You get enough people believing in an idea and it gives the idea life. The more stories that circulate the more believe and next thing you know people see the thing wandering around. A vicious cycle that leads to monsters walking the earth."

"What about you?"

"What about me?"

"How do you fit in all of this? How do you know one when you see one? And why do they turn to dust when you kill one?"

The kid had a lot of questions. "I'm part of a line of people who were brought together in the beginning to kill them. My father, my grandfather, his father and so on were all slayers."

"A legacy."

She never thought of it like that. "I guess. Anyway, we all have the ability to see auras. That's how we know one. A human has a colorful aura. A Tulpa has a solid black aura. They turn to dust because they aren't flesh and blood, not really, just a thought. Cut one and it doesn't bleed. Stab a knife through it, break the image and it shatters." God she made that sound too easy. It wasn't.

"How do you find them? Do you just wander around until you see a black aura?"

"Sadly, yes. There isn't a real way of tracking them. Sometimes I listen to the news and if there's been a lot of killings where the victims have broken necks, then I head that way. Chances are it's a Tulpa."

The waitress delivered the food. When she slid Tyson's plate in front of him, Quinn swore he drooled. As hungry as he was, he bowed his head, said a silent prayer and waited for her to begin eating. Manners, like pride, are not easy to find. Time to find out his story but first she'd let him eat.

After he cleaned his plate, wiped his mouth and drank down the rest of his soda she leaned back in the booth. "Okay, Tyson. I answered your questions. It's time to answer some of mine."

"How do I know you won't turn me in to the authorities?"

Hmm? Why would she do that? "You don't. But maybe I can help you."

After some hesitation, he began his story. His parents were killed in a car accident six months ago. With no relatives stepping up to take him in he ended up in foster care. Unfortunately the homes he found himself in weren't really homes, more like labor camps as he put it. Quinn figured he exaggerated some of it but a few things he told her didn't sound made up.

After his fifth home, he gave up and ran. She watched his eyes, how they turned dark and sad. Something bad happened to him in that foster home, something that haunted him still. She needed to know what but not right now.

Tyson had lived on the streets for the last three months, eating out of garbage cans, doing odd jobs for a few bucks and sleeping wherever he could find a place that looked safe.

"I never sleep in the same place twice. It's too dangerous to do that."

How this kid had managed to survive on the streets for so long she didn't know. What she did know was he wouldn't make it much longer. To the scum who slithered the streets, Tyson was prime rib. They'd snatch him up, eat him alive and leave his

bones to decay under the feet of the good people of the city while they turned their backs.

"You aren't going to take me back, are you? I won't go. I'll run again."

She had no doubt about that? "How old are you, Tyson?"

"I'll be seventeen in a few months. If I can make it 'til I'm eighteen I won't have to worry about hiding anymore."

"What about school? You need to finish school."

"Got that figured out. I'll get my GED when it's safe. I have skills," he said proudly.

Quinn grinned. "Yeah, like what?"

"Street skills. I know when an argument is about to break out into a fight. I know a drug dealer when I see one and not just the obvious ones. I mean people who no one would suspect. And I know when someone's following me. That particular skill is better than yours."

Quinn tossed her head back and laughed. "Oh really? What makes you so sure of that?"

"Because that woman sitting four tables over followed you to the alley then followed us here. You didn't know that, I did."

Quinn jerked her head toward the table Tyson pointed out as her laughter died. An older woman, about fifty or so, sat sipping coffee and nibbling on a piece of pie. He was pulling her leg, what would this woman want with her?

"I don't think so, Tyson."

"I do. I saw her slide in and out of a few alleys as you stalked that Tulpa and girl down the street. While you were slamming me against the wall, she slipped farther into the shadows. When I got to the end of the alley, she stood on the street and watched you kick those peoples' asses. Don't tell me I don't have skills."

Quinn gave a quick read of the woman's aura. Big bold colors jutted out from her body. Not a Tulpa. The kid had to be wrong. One way to find out.

"Let's go, Tyson."

"Where we going?"

"For a walk." She needed to see if the woman would follow.

Tyson followed her out the door and down the street. As they passed a store with a large mirror in the front, Quinn saw the woman exit the diner and look their way. Okay, that didn't mean anything, yet.

They continued on another block. "Is she following us?"

"Yep."

Enough of this. "Where can we go that's good and public?"

"Park. Follow me."

Tyson crossed the street and led her for three blocks to where they entered what Quinn supposed could pass for a park. It had a small set of monkey bars, three swings

and lots of benches. Hookers milled around, hoping for their next trick, and at least two drug deals were in progress all while small children ran and played around the depravity.

After sending Tyson to the other side of the park, she lost herself in the middle of a crowd who gathered while two young men began throwing punches. The woman sat down on a bench and pretended to look uninterested in the ruckus.

Quinn made her way around the park, making sure she stayed covered by people or trees. When she got behind the woman, she approached quietly toward her back.

"Why are you following me?"

"Have a seat. No need to talk to my back and you really didn't need to go through all that cloak-and-dagger nonsense. You could have just sat and motioned me over."

"Who are you?" No way would she sit down next to a woman who went out of her way to follow her through alleys.

"My name is Ruth Ross."

"And that means what to me?"

"Please have a seat. I have an old injury that makes my neck sore when I have to look up too long. You can invite your young friend to join us if you'd like."

Quinn walked around the bench and sat. "He's fine where he is."

"Suit yourself. As I said, my name is Ruth Ross. I, like you, am a Tulpa slayer."

Quinn cocked an eyebrow and gave her a quick sweeping gaze.

"What, you think you'll stay young forever? We all age but I will thank you not to think of me as old. I'm a young fifty, a very young fifty."

"So what, did I home in on your kill? Is that why you were there?"

"Oh no, not at all. That was your kill. I simply wanted to see you in action." Ruth found this young woman's brash attitude refreshing.

"Okay, tell me what you want. I don't have all damn day." She didn't like Tyson being out of sight for long.

"Right to it then. My husband and I, who is also a slayer, are pulling together all the remaining slayers and forming a sort of corporation."

Quinn frowned. All? How many were there left in the world? "Why?"

"Tell me, how did you find the Tulpa you killed today? I'll tell you. You sort of wander around, checking out auras, following police reports, that sort of thing. What if you had a group who did all that work for you and simply pointed you in the direction of the Tulpa?"

It would make her work a hell of a lot easier, that's for sure. That would be interesting but it also meant having to answer to someone. She didn't like answering to anyone. She liked her freedom, coming and going when she wanted, not when someone told her to.

"You'd have a base, somewhere you could come back too. People who would look out for you."

No one looked out for her. "Sorry. I'm not interested." Quinn stood to leave.

"How many Tulpas have you destroyed over the last month?"

"Two." And it took her forever to track them down but she wouldn't admit it.

"The group we've gathered so far has destroyed eight. That's only with two slayers."

Eight in two months. Where there that many out there? "Are you trying to make me feel insignificant?"

"Of course not, dear."

"I do good work, Mrs. Ross. I do the best I can."

"I have no doubt you do. Just imagine what you could do with all the help we're able to provide. We're in the twenty-first century it's time we worked like we are instead of continuing the way our ancestors did."

Good point but it still meant taking orders from someone, answering to someone. She couldn't do that. She didn't want to do that. "I'm still not interested."

Quinn stood and headed toward Tyson.

"What will you do now? Leave? Even with several other Tulpas in the area? We've discovered a nest. As good as your kill is, you haven't even scratched the surface."

Now that got her attention. Unsure if the woman was telling the truth or not, Quinn chose to continue walking. What if another creature did roam this area and she left? How many people would die because she didn't know?

No. Mrs. Ross only wanted to trick her. That's all. What were the chances of another Tulpa being in the area much less a nest? She didn't have time for this. Other situations needed to be tended to.

Ruth pulled out her cell phone. "Tabitha, honey. I need your help again. I'll email all the info but we need to move fast. The nest will be spooked and this new slayer needs some persuasion."

* * * * *

Tyson ran to keep up with her as she stormed down the street.

"Where are you going now?"

She didn't know but she had to move. Moving made her feel safe. Nothing could hurt her if she kept going, never slowing. When she heard Tyson panting, she glanced over at him and slowed. The kid didn't have the energy to keep up. As she looked over his clothing, an idea struck her.

"Any thrift stores around here?" He could use some new clothes and shopping would give her time to think. God she had a lot to think about.

"This way."

As she followed Tyson down the street, she pondered what she'd do about him. Turning him in to the police would only make his situation worse. If the authorities didn't care enough to check on his well-being before, they wouldn't now. She couldn't allow him to continue to live on the streets either. Surely there had to be someplace he could go that would be safe and he'd be able to finish his education? But where?

What about this Ruth Ross? Was she telling the truth about a nest existing in this area? If they did, duty demanded she stay until the creatures were vanquished.

Tyson came to a halt in front of a plain, simple storefront. She looked through the window and then back to him. "Come on. Let's get you some clean clothes that fit."

"Why?"

"Because yours are falling off your body. They may have fitted at some time but they don't now."

"That's not what I meant. Why are you feeding and clothing me?"

She couldn't answer him. Even as she stood there, past memories threatened to wash over her like a tsunami. Memories she'd worked hard to forget.

"Because I want to." Her throat closed, making her voice husky and sad. Angry with herself for allowing those damn memories to affect her, she jerked open the door and pushed Tyson through.

Quinn picked and pulled shirts and pants off racks piling them in her arms. Tyson simply followed her down the aisles, his hands jammed into his pockets and his shoulders slumped. When she turned to him and passed him the pile, he looked at her square in the eye.

"Did you forget I don't have a home? No home means no dresser to keep clothes in. One shirt and one pair of pants will do."

His matter-of-fact tone caught her off-guard. "What?"

"I don't have any place to keep all this." Tyson lifted his piled arms in the air.

"You let me worry about that."

"You're going to take me back, aren't you?" He took a few steps back, putting distance between them. "I told you I won't go. Keep your clothes." He dropped them on the floor and turned to run.

"Damn it. Tyson, wait!" She ran after him, grasping hold of his arm before he could get through the door. "I'm not taking you back." The fear in his eyes clawed at her heart with sharp talons. Tears filled his eyes as his body trembled. What the hell had happened to this boy to put that awful terror in him?

"I'll find you a safe place to live until you're eighteen but I will not send you back to the authorities. I promise." What the hell was she doing? Where would she find a place that would take in a teenage boy and give him the love and attention he needed to grow into a decent man?

One single tear slipped down his cheek. Quinn's tough, rigid exterior cracked enough to let raw emotion slip free. Maybe she confused her past fear with his, maybe

she knew too well that need of self-preservation. Either way it all flooded through the fissure he'd managed to create in the wall around her heart. She pulled him to her, wrapped her arms around him and held tight. At first he held his body stiff so she strengthened her hold until he gave in, letting his body relax and sink into hers.

"We'll work this out, Tyson. I swear I'll do whatever I can to keep you safe. I won't let anyone hurt you again."

He pulled away from her. "How do you know I'm not some kind of thief or crazy insane sicko who'll hurt you? You don't know anything about me but you're willing to take care of me? Are you insane?"

A warped giggle bubbled up from her chest. "Maybe. Remember I told you I read auras? Well, I read yours back in the alley. There is nothing bad or sick inside you. You just need a chance and between the two of us we'll find that for you."

Tyson studied her, looked deep into her eyes and then nodded. "I believe you." Then he laughed, cramming his hands back into his pockets. "You fed me, you're buying me clothes and I don't even know your name."

She didn't hand out her name very often. It didn't seem prudent in her line of work. "Quinn Hurst."

Tyson held out his hand. "Nice to meet you, Quinn."

She shook his hand, smiling, and for the first time in a very long time a cold spot in her heart warmed. "Nice to meet you too. Now let's go get you some clothes that don't smell like a sewer."

After gathering all the clothes from the floor, Tyson went to the dressing room and began trying them on. Quinn leaned against the wall, crossed her arms and closed her eyes. She couldn't believe she'd actually hugged him but she couldn't help herself. One pained soul recognized another and the need to reach out and comfort overcame her.

Never, never had she done that before. Not since her father died. Quinn put the brakes on that thought immediately. After a few deep breaths she stuffed those feelings as deep as she possibly could before they took over.

She quickly changed her train of thought to Mrs. Ruth Ross. How did the woman find her? Had they really found a way to track the creatures? So many questions whizzed through her head it began to ache.

The thing that bugged her the most was, what if more Tulpas were in the area? One way to find out. She'd stay a few extra days and see if she could find them. That would also give her time to figure out what she'd do with Tyson.

The boy walked out of the dressing room. "These don't fit," he said, handing her a few shirts and a pair of jeans. "These do."

"Okay." Quinn took them all to the counter and tossed them down.

The girl at the register began ringing up the sale on the computer. When she finished, she began punching at buttons, her face going pale. Ah technology, Quinn loved it.

"I'm so sorry. This is a new system and I don't have clue how to use it."

The girl continued poking every button on the keyboard.

"Maybe I can help."

Quinn turned to Tyson. "You know computers?"

He nodded his head. "Top of my class."

The young girl backed out of the way so Tyson could get to the keyboard. Within seconds the machine spat out a receipt and the drawer opened. The young cashier gushed with appreciation as Tyson showed her how to complete sales without locking up the system. The boy turned beet red, escaping to safety behind Quinn.

After the essential niceties they left the store. "Have you thought about a career in computers?"

"I did once. But I'd need to go to college and that isn't going to happen."

His statement tugged at her heart. "You don't know that. Keep an open mind. Anything is possible."

They strolled down the street at a casual pace, not normal for Quinn but for the first time in a long time she had company and even though they walked in silence she enjoyed it. She kept watch, scanning auras. Tyson's radar worked nonstop, scanning the area for trouble.

When they reached her hotel and she opened the door, Tyson lingered, shifting from foot to foot.

"You can stay with me until we figure out what to do." When he still didn't move, she walked inside. "A safe place to sleep."

He looked around one last time before walking through the door. Okay, it would take some getting used to, having a kid around when she was used to sleeping naked and running around in her underwear but, what the hell, a good cause and all.

Chapter Two

Quinn awoke to the sound of the shower running. She had to smile. The kid took a shower before he turned in last night and now one this morning. Such a small luxury people tended to take for granted. Tyson apparently wanted to catch up on the last several months.

She slipped out of bed, her oversized t-shirt wrapping around her legs. God she hated sleeping in clothes. As she filled the small coffee pot with water and prepared for her morning dose of caffeine, Tyson opened the bathroom door and walked out, towel drying his hair.

“Good morning? Did you sleep okay?” She turned and caught a glimpse of his back in the bathroom mirror. Her heart sank to the pit of her stomach. Large, thick, angry raised red scars covered his flesh from shoulder to waist.

They were fairly fresh, only a few months old. She couldn’t fathom what instrument put them there but she knew they came from his last foster home. The rage that exploded inside her gut surprised her. She wanted to go, right now, and find the bastard who hurt this boy in such a heinous manner.

“I haven’t slept that good in I don’t know how long.” Keeping his back away from her, he pulled on one of his new shirts. “What do you want me to do with these?” He held up the clothes he’d been wearing for the last three months.

“There’s a Dumpster at the end of the building. I think that’s the best place for them.” She tried to keep her tone light and friendly but anger simmered just under the surface.

“So what’s up for today? You gonna hunt down any more of those Tulpas?”

Work, yes. She needed work to keep her mind off those scars. “Yeah. I want to scope around and see if there any more.”

“I know a place you can look.”

Quinn poured the first few tablespoons of strong coffee into her cup, sipped and waited for the warmth to sooth her nerves. “Where’s that?”

Tyson told her of a group who hung around a certain abandoned building close to where he hid out during the day. That’s how he spent most of his time, watching these people, trying to figure out what they were up to. He explained how they didn’t seem right to him, that they were different somehow.

“What makes you say that?”

“One of them passed by me one day, looked me right in the eye and I swear, Quinn, his eyes were so cold and dead it made me shiver.”

Oh yeah, classic sign of a Tulpa. “How many?”

“Six. And they won’t be there until midmorning. That seems to be when the group gathers.”

“What do they talk about?”

“Don’t know. I never got close enough to hear them. They scared the crap out of me. Sorry.”

Quinn turned away and smiled. He didn’t swear. What teenage boy didn’t swear these days? “Nothing to be sorry about. I say we get breakfast and head that way.”

She showered, dressed, and they returned to the diner they’d eaten at yesterday. Once again before he ate he bowed his head, said a silent prayer. She wondered what he gave thanks for.

After they finished eating, he led her toward the building where the suspected Tulpas gathered. Tyson showed her where he hid when he spied on them. Quinn figured they had about an hour before the group showed so she made Tyson stay put while she checked the area out.

The first place she wanted to see was the building they met in front of. She’d never dealt with a cluster of Tulpas before so she wasn’t sure what she’d find. They met here for a reason. Maybe she’d find that reason.

The old building looked to have been apartments during its prime. Today it held nothing but empty rooms covered in graffiti, filth and littered with drug paraphernalia. As she climbed the crumbling stairs to the fourth floor she noticed the graffiti stopped. The floors were swept clean and the used needles and empty lighters disappeared.

When she reached the top, she poked her head into one of the apartments. Boxes were stacked against the walls. At least six lanterns were shoved in the corner. Bags of food were sitting all around.

She moved on to the next apartment where she found six cots set up. Okay, six people meeting out front, six cots, it looked to be adding up. But who were they?

Unable to find anything else of significance, she made her way out of the building by way of a back door. Without electricity or lights the concrete building seemed pitch-black even in the daylight. Just as she reached the door and stepped out, she ran smack into a solid body.

The hard impact had her reaching out and grabbing strong arms for balance. Before her eyes could adjust to the light and she could back away, those same arms wrapped around her, holding her in place. Quinn looked up, meeting light brown eyes and a slow lazy smile.

His eyes focused just slightly above her head. Realizing what he was doing, she too read his aura. Instead of the big black aura she expected, she found bright, brilliant colors undulating around him. His colors were interesting. Clear green, vivid blue, bright yellow all showed how balanced, independent and compassionate he was. His bright orange and deep crimson indicated a healthy sex drive.

These colors were normal for most people but the indigo threw her. Indigo, as she was taught, showed a seeker of truth. The longer she stood there in his arms the more his orange changed, spreading out and touching his red. To her this meant he'd found something interesting, her.

Instead of pulling away or clocking him in the face for being so crude, her heart fluttered and then raced into overdrive. His touch didn't bother her like most men's did. In fact, where his fingers gently held her arms her flesh heated. He studied her aura for several more seconds before shifting his gaze to her eyes.

Her heart raced even faster as she noticed how warm and gentle they seemed, as if he could see right into her soul. That realization had her steel wall slamming down over her emotions. He must have seen it, or at the very least felt it because he arched an eyebrow and gave a very wicked smile.

"Who the hell are you?" Damn her sultry, husky voice. Just where did that come from?

"Garen Snyder and you are?"

"Out of here." She tried to jerk free from his grip but he wouldn't let her go. "Do you mind?" She had to get away from him. The way her blood heated and rushed through her veins made her uneasy.

"I believe we're both here for the same thing. No reason we couldn't work together."

"You have no idea why I'm here." Quinn gave one last hard tug and freed herself from his grip.

"I know a slayer when I see one."

Well, well, that made two slayers she'd run into in the past two days. He must be part of Mrs. Ross' group. But how did he know she was a slayer? That old familiar trapped sensation swept through her. Quinn rushed for the door only to be stopped by Garen when he caught her in his arms and pulled her next to his body.

Going into fight mode, Quinn prepared to throw a punch when he placed his finger to his lips and then pointed out into the alley. She pressed herself against his body and tried to get a look out the door. The sound of feet shuffling through garbage echoed through the door.

Garen pulled her back with him and as he pressed his back against the wall, she faced him. The intimate position made her uncomfortable, especially with him staring down at her mouth like he wanted to taste her lips. What really made her uncomfortable and had her mentally smacking herself, she wanted to taste his, just a quick taste to see if they were as soft as they looked.

Before she could bring herself back to reality, she felt herself being jerked out of Garen's arms and shoved aside. After a quick blink, she saw Tyson ready to punch Garen but, before he could fire the blow, Garen grabbed him by the arm, twisted it behind him and pinned him face first against the wall.

Fury burned through her system. She gave Garen a kidney shot, kicked him away and put herself in front of Tyson, her arms spread wide. "Leave him alone."

"I take it you know him," Garen wheezed, doubled over. "Sorry about that, kid, but you shouldn't sneak up on people like that."

Quinn turned to find Tyson putting on his best fearless face but she could see the terror in his eyes, which pissed her off even more.

"Quinn, they're coming."

"Shit." She looked at Garen. "I'd like to stay and kick your ass for this but I have something to do. Come on, Tyson. Stay behind me and stay quiet."

She headed through the door, Tyson on her heels and Garen right behind him. The three hid behind a pile of rubbish stacked at least five foot high. She needed to get a good look at them, check out their auras, but their location didn't afford her the opportunity.

"This is the group you've been watching?" she whispered to Tyson. He nodded his head in response. "I need to go out there."

Garen wrapped his fingers around her wrist. Immediately her pulse quickened and she jerked her arm free.

"We go together. Kid, you stay put until we get back."

Garen motioned her to follow him and together they made their way behind the building and around the other side.

"Follow my lead."

Before she could argue, he began shouting at the top of his lungs.

"I don't give damn what you think, you do what I tell you to do." He crooked his finger for her to follow again and headed toward the street where the suspected Tulpas gathered. "The sooner you get that in your head the better off you'll be. Don't make me smack you around again."

Those words were like a fist to her gut, memories of pain and fear tightening her throat. "You touch me and you'll draw back a stub. No one puts their hands on me."

The banter went on as they approached the group. Garen positioned himself so he could get a good look. Wanting her own look, she turned her back to him, crossed her arms and pretended to pout as he screamed and threatened her. What she saw stole her breath.

Five very large auras loomed over creatures that any normal person would see as human. She knew better, she could see what they really were—killing machines. What really caught her off-guard and made her blood run like ice through her veins was the vast amount of blackness that surrounded them. So much evil gathered in one place, how the hell could this have happened?

Garen jerked her around to face him. "We need to get out of here," he whispered.

She agreed. The group already watched them intently.

"I'm done with you," she shouted, and then turned her back to him and stormed down the street, past the group.

"Don't turn your back on me."

Quinn could hear him coming up behind her and she had to admit it gave her a sense of security knowing she wasn't alone. No way in hell could she take on five Tulpas alone. To remove herself from their sight, she veered off down another street and waited for Garen to catch up with her.

"Have you ever seen that many of them together?"

Garen shook his head. "No, and I don't like it."

Neither did she.

"You stay here. I'll go get the kid."

"No." She didn't want him near Tyson. The boy already feared him, chances were he'd run the other direction if he didn't see her. "I'll get him."

To her surprise, he agreed. She made her way back to Tyson's hiding spot, took him by the hand and led him away from the area. Garen met up with them two blocks away. As they walked, she found herself checking out the new slayer. Garen Snyder wasn't a bad-looking man.

His body looked sleek and muscular and tight, like a swimmer. He didn't have thick muscles but the ones he had were firm and strong. She could see the silhouette of a knife tucked in the waistband of his jeans, which led her eyes down to his toned ass. Quinn would be considered an ass woman—it was her favorite part of a man's body—but right now she didn't see any part of this man's body she didn't like.

When he'd held her back at the abandoned building and she'd pressed against him, it was like they were a perfect fit. It also felt natural and comfortable now that she thought about it. Hugging Tyson last night had been the first time in a long time she allowed a man that close to her. A big step.

And then today this stranger touched and grabbed and she didn't want to kill him. Old memories of pain didn't send her into a panic attack. If anything he made her hot. Not something she wanted to think about right now.

"Well, are they Tulpas?"

"Yeah, Ty, they are. Good job."

Garen pulled his phone from his pocket. "I need to call Ruth and let her know this is bigger than we thought."

"You work for Mrs. Ross?"

"No, I work with her. There's a difference."

Not to her. Quinn half listened as he spoke on the phone while she mulled over all the information she had. Inside the building there were six cots, six lanterns. Tyson told her six of them gathered every day but today only five showed. She'd killed one of them last night. She also would have left, never knowing five more existed if it hadn't been for Ruth Ross.

How many others existed because she'd killed one and moved on? How many people had died at the hands of these monsters because she simply didn't know they sought each other out and formed communities? That thought turned her stomach.

"Ruth wants us to come back so we can discuss what to do."

Quinn's guard went up. "I don't take orders from anyone. I work alone."

"Suit yourself. It's not like we need your help anyway."

"Hey, if Quinn hadn't killed one last night there would have been six there today," Tyson argued on her behalf. "I didn't see you kill any."

"That's enough, Tyson."

"No, he's right. Ruth said you're very efficient in your killing. And if I hadn't been following you it would have taken us a few days to find them."

"Tyson found them not me." Quinn believed in giving credit where credit was due.

"Well, we could use both of you. But we can still do it on our own. Maybe we'll run into each other again some day. You know, while you're leaving and we're coming in to finish up. Take care."

With her mouth hanging open, she watched as he turned right and headed in the opposite direction. As a proud slayer, his words hurt, demeaned and essentially left her feeling like a failure. Qualities she didn't particularly like.

Good riddance to him and Ruth Ross she thought briefly. But as a slayer and one who thought of herself good at her job, she couldn't sit by and let others clean up the mess. That would be disgracing her legacy. A war waged inside her head. Help the other slayers or run? Answer the call demanding she rid the earth of Tulpas or follow her head that screamed "loner".

"Damn it, I can't walk away now. I have to finish this. Come on, Tyson."

The kid followed without question. He struggled to keep up again. She really needed to get some meat on his bones. Quinn scanned the street ahead but couldn't find Garen. Where the hell did he get to so fast? He wasn't more than half a block ahead of them.

Focused on the street ahead, she didn't see him step out of a small coffee shop until she slammed into him again. Juggling his cup of coffee, he wrapped her tightly in his arms and held her close. Her vision wavered for a split second but when it cleared, she looked up to find his mouth only a whisper away from hers.

Warm breath breezed between his slightly parted lips, feathered across her face and set a fire to her flesh that blazed down between her breasts and ended in an inferno between her legs. Hot liquid seeped from between her folds, dampening her panties. His hold tightened around her as if he sensed the storm brewing inside her body.

Nothing existed, not the people who walked the streets, not the cars honking their horns, not even Tyson. Just Garen, her and the hurricane he unleashed on her senses. Her heart raced, thrumming against her breastbone in a rapid tattoo that stole her breath.

Somehow her hands moved from pressing against his chest to rest on his hard shoulders. Strength radiated through her fingers, up her arms and traveled deep inside, touching her soul. At that moment a shift occurred in her, as if she reached for him from the inside out. A familiarity, a sigh of relief that she'd found something she didn't know she was missing.

And then he leaned in, closing that scant distance between their lips. She should run, back away at the very least, but she didn't. Couldn't. A tempest brewed, swirling in his light brown eyes. Quinn had a feeling he couldn't stop what was coming any more than she could and, God help her, she didn't want to stop it.

Just the softest touch, a brush of lips, that's all. The world tilted on its axis and then shook violently as he took her mouth with the force of a tornado. He feasted, nipping her lips with his teeth and then soothing with the tip of his tongue.

Quinn answered his hungry lust, responding by pushing her tongue between his lips, delving into the warm cavern and tasting the few sips of coffee he'd taken. She swore her body hummed when he caressed her tongue with his. Her fingers dug into his shoulders, holding on tightly so she wouldn't be swept away in the storm.

Flames licked across her skin, curled around her erect nipples and swollen clit. Molten lava erupted and flowed between her legs. She moaned, Garen catching the sound with his kiss. Every inch of her body screamed for his touch, begging to be kissed and pleased.

The sound of Tyson clearing his throat very loudly shoved its way through her fogged brain. Seconds passed as reality seeped into her consciousness. With a gasp she pulled away, separating not only their mouths but bodies as well. Her hands trembled as she pressed her fingers to swollen lips.

She prayed her wobbly knees would hold instead of allowing her to collapse like a fool on the sidewalk, not that she hadn't already made a complete and utter fool out of herself. At least Garen had the decency to act embarrassed as well. He still looked at her like a hungry wolf but took a step back, putting more distance between them.

A pink hue colored his cheeks. Whether the coloring came from embarrassment or lust, she didn't know. What she did know, could see, was how he too trembled. That bit of knowledge should have made her feel better but at the moment it didn't.

"Will you come with me and talk to Ruth? No strings attached, just hear us out."

His low husky voice sent chills skittering down her spine. "Yeah, I'll come." The struggle to put one coherent thought together was enormous. She had to make him understand that this wasn't an agreement to jump on board with their little party. "I'll help finish this, that's all."

Garen arched an eyebrow. "That's a start." He took a sip of his coffee, cleared his throat and cast a quick glance at Tyson. "My car's a few blocks up. I'll take you to where we're set up."

Quinn waited for Tyson to fall in beside her and then followed Garen. She had yet to look at Ty much less speak to him. At least the kid had the decency not to press her about what just happened. She wouldn't know what to tell him if he did.

Cripes, she didn't even know what happened. One minute she was walking down the sidewalk and the next she was ready to rip her clothes off and have sex with the man right there in the middle of the damn street. What the hell did that say about her? She imagined in Tyson's eyes she boiled down to nothing more than a slut, which of course couldn't be further from the truth. The only feelings she had for men involved wanting to hurt them, not becoming an exhibitionist.

Worse, these foreign feelings gripped not only her body but her heart and soul. Places she normally kept guarded, safe from influence and hurt. No man should have this power over a woman.

"You okay, Quinn?"

Good question, one she wasn't sure the answer to just yet. "I'll let you know later."

Garen Snyder was a dangerous man. Not dangerous to society but to her. This man could make her forget herself and everything she'd learned over the past few years about men. He could hurt her in ways she'd never recover from.

Garen approached a little silver four-door BMW, unlocked it and opened the passenger side door for her. She shot him a speculative glance before sliding across the tan leather seats. An expensive car, far more classy than her beat-up, rusty, fifteen-year-old Subaru.

Money didn't impress her. It never did. She grew up with the basic necessities and never once wondered what it would be like to have all the latest and greatest fads. Simplicity made for an easier life. Her father always made sure she had enough to eat, clothes on her back and a place to sleep. What more did a person really need?

Tyson crawled into the backseat and Garen slipped behind the wheel. He sat a few moments, turned and watched her and then started the car. It purred to life, not like her car that kicked and bucked in protest at being forced to work another day. He pulled out into traffic and headed out of the small city.

The smooth ride was a stark difference from her car that vibrated and rattled her teeth until she had a headache. Okay, something could be said for a newer car. Still, one so flashy and expensive wasn't necessary.

"We rented a small building just outside the city, a command center of sorts. It makes it easier for us to set up our equipment."

Equipment, renting a building, that took money, lots of money. How'd they make their money? Quinn glanced in the side mirror and caught a glimpse of Tyson. He sat forward, making sure his back didn't touch the seat. She wondered how much pain those damn scars gave him and if they'd ever been looked at by a doctor. She'd have to find a gentle way to ask him.

Her guess, not. The kid probably took off after receiving them. Garen roughing him up probably didn't help either. Of course she wasn't too gentle on him last night. Quinn

huffed a frustrated breath, suddenly remembering why she opted to stay alone. She could handle her problems. Other people's problems complicated her life.

They pulled into a gravel parking lot in front of a small run-down service station with one garage bay. The windows were thick with filth, the cinder blocks chipped and crumbling. Not what she expected. An old sign hung by one end, the faded paint reading *Skip's*. Skip must have gone out of business years ago and no one else stepped up to take over. Sad.

Garen exited the car, pocketed his keys and headed over to her side. Tyson beat him there, opening her door and putting himself between her and Garen. The display of testosterone made her grin slightly. For some reason he felt the need to protect her. He might be just a kid but he was more man than any she'd run into lately.

Garen yielded to Ty's display and turned, leading them to the front door. As she followed him, she noticed the slight stiffness in his back. When they got back to the city, she'd look for a clinic and get him looked at.

Garen opened the crummy door and stood aside, letting her and Tyson enter what must have been the small office of the service station. At present it was empty save for a few empty boxes shoved in the corner. Garen opened another door that led to the garage bay.

When Quinn stepped through, she couldn't believe her eyes. Three computers and one printer were set up on a folding table. On another newspapers were spread out with highlighter markings all over them. On the wall a large map hung with pins marking specific areas.

Ruth Ross sat at one of the computers, tapping away on the keyboard, so engrossed in her work she didn't hear them enter. Quinn took a moment and studied the older woman. She wore her frizzy light brown hair pulled back in a ponytail at the base of her neck. A few gray wiry strands jutted out here and there unwilling to be held captive.

She wore a silky-looking black blouse with a pair of tan jeans, a classy look but one that didn't go with her current surroundings of grubbiness and grease. She mumbled to herself as she tapped on the keyboard. Time etched fine lines around her eyes but she had a timeless classic beauty.

"Ruth." Garen walked to her, settled his hands on her shoulders and kissed the top of her head. "Hard at it I see."

"Oh Garen. I'm sorry I didn't hear you come in. I've found another pattern."

"That's good but we have company."

Ruth stopped typing and looked up. A bright smile filled her face and eyes. "Welcome to our humble lair."

"We found where the nest gathers. Actually Tyson found them."

Ruth stood and walked to them. "Well, that saves us some time, doesn't it? On behalf of our little group I thank you."

Tyson shoved his hands into his pockets, lowered his head and stepped behind Quinn. Ruth stepped to the side and focused on him.

"You aren't a slayer. How on earth did you find a nest of Tulpas if you aren't a slayer?"

"That isn't any of your concern." Quinn put herself between Ruth and Tyson.

"I see."

Garen stepped up between them. Quinn shot him a nasty look. Did he really think he'd be able to stop her if she chose to put a move on Ruth?

"I don't think it really matters how he found them. The point is he did. Now all we have to do is figure out how to take out five Tulpas at once. If we take them down one at a time they'll spook and run."

"Yes. I've been thinking about that. I must have misread my information. I truly believed there were six." Ruth walked to one of the tables and picked up a sheet of paper.

"There were six. Quinn killed one last night," Tyson said from behind her.

"Oh, the one you took down was part of the nest? Interesting."

"Why is that interesting?" Quinn questioned. What did it matter? A Tulpa was Tulpa whether they ran in packs or not.

"I don't know yet. We've never encountered more than two at a time."

"Mom likes to rip things down, analyze them silly and then construct a hypothesis on the subject."

Quinn turned, her defenses going up. The young woman standing at the door was a sight to behold. Ink-black hair was braided on the side of her head. Heavy black eyeliner and mascara with deep red lipstick made her pretty face look pale. But that was just the beginning. She wore a spiked dog collar around her neck, a tight black-and-red striped shirt bearing a big black widow spider in the front. The material only came down just inches below her tiny breasts.

A good six to eight inches of flat belly separated her shirt from the top of her shiny black short shorts. Stick-thin legs protruded from the shorts and disappeared into knee-high clunky black boots with buckles up and down each side. On her hands she wore black gloves with the fingers cut out.

A model's body, Quinn thought, and a pretty face hiding behind all that thick dark makeup. She gave a quick read of her aura. The girl bore all the bright, brilliant colors her mother and Garen possessed. Quinn glanced at Tyson. He apparently liked the vision standing before him. A big smile spread across his lips and reached his eyes.

"This is my daughter Tabitha."

"Nice to meet you." The girl approached Tyson first, shook his hand and returned his warm smile.

Then she moved to Quinn and her smile faded a bit. Quinn could tell she was focused on her aura. Tabitha glanced at Garen and then back at her. Exactly what did she see in her aura that had her looking alarmed?

"Pleasure," she muttered. "Do you two have names or should we give you some?"

"I'm Quinn Hurst, this is Tyson."

"Well, Quinn and Tyson, are you here to help?" Tabitha went to one of the tables, sat in a folding chair and propped her chunky boots on the table.

"We'll help with this and then we're on our way."

"Ruth, honey, I've done it again."

They all turned as an older man entered from the backdoor, holding his hand, blood dripping between his fingers.

"Oh Donald, what did you do now?" Ruth and Tabitha hurried to him, genuine concern covering their faces.

"Dad, are you okay?"

Garen rushed to the small bathroom and came out carrying a wad of paper towels. He too seemed overly concerned for a simple cut.

"Quinn, there's a first-aid kit out in the office. I think it's still packed in one of the boxes. Would you bring it please?" Garen never looked up at her as he spoke, just held the man's bleeding finger tight.

"Sure." When Quinn returned with kit, she handed it over and stood back, watching as Ruth tended to the man's wound. It didn't really look all that bad. A long cut but not deep at all. The amount of blood pouring out made it look as though he'd hacked his finger off.

Curious, she paid close attention to how Ruth doctored the wound. Garen stepped up next to her, crossed his arms and let out a shaky breath.

"Don is Ruth's husband. He's had heart trouble over the last few years. The medication they put him on thins his blood so severely that a small nick to his skin makes him bleed profusely. Needless to say his slaying days are over."

His closeness affected her. She could feel a draw, like something inside her reaching out to him. Instantly her blood warmed and rushed through her veins. Doing her best to ignore it she swallowed hard. "He's a slayer?"

Garen gave her a quizzical look. "Yes. Don't you know how to tell a slayer from anyone else?"

That caught her off-guard. She had no idea there was a way to discern a slayer from the average Joe. "Ruth seems to know what she's doing. Is she a nurse?" A change of subject seemed appropriate.

"No, but when this problem with Don arose she went and got some training so she knew how to handle it. She's as skilled as a nurse. She just doesn't have the degree."

Good to know.

With the tense situation under control, Ruth led Don toward her.

“Donald this is Quinn Hurst and Tyson. They’ve agreed to help us with this particular nest.”

Donald smiled at her and Quinn felt her heart sink. He carried the same shade of twinkling blue eyes her father did. He wore his dark-brown, graying hair short and parted in the middle. A very handsome man with sharp angular features that told her he would have made any woman look twice in his younger days. His aura flared with gentleness, kindness and understanding.

Two years had passed since Quinn’s father had died but the sense of loss opening in her chest made it feel like just yesterday. Tears swam in her eyes. She fought them back, swallowed around the lump in her throat and did her best to return his friendliness.

“Welcome. We appreciate your help with this little matter. Come, have a seat.”

They began by explaining their little operation to her. Donald and Ruth had been married for over twenty-five years. They started out like all slayers do, roaming around and hoping to come across a Tulpa. When Don became ill, they decided there had to be another way to operate.

Tabitha played around with mapping out unsolved murders reported in the news, on the internet, anywhere news could be found. Since Tulpas had a distinctive way of killing it made it easier to track them. Don and Ruth would figure out a pattern and then she and Tabitha would head to that area, scope them out and dispatch them.

Garen came into the picture when they accidentally found themselves hunting down the same creature. The Rosses explained their situation and Garen agreed to work with them. Now he and Tabitha did most of the slaying so Ruth could stay close to Don, making sure he didn’t bleed to death from a minor cut.

Apparently Donald had an inventor’s mind. Between hunts he tinkered with gadgets, improving on existing ones and creating new ones. After years of selling his patents to large companies, they’d amassed a fortune, therefore making it possible to fund their little company of Tulpa slayers.

Quinn couldn’t help but be impressed. She lived off her father’s life insurance policy, taking part-time jobs when necessary to supplement it. They’d managed to create wealth and come up with a simple yet clever way of tracking down their targets.

“So you tell Garen and Tabitha where and when to go?”

“No, Quinn,” Garen jumped in. “We take the information and Tabitha and I decide what to do with it. If I can’t go for some reason Tabitha takes it and vice versa.”

“I still go out when necessary. Although age has made it more difficult for me to be fast and efficient,” Ruth said softly.

“In the few months we’ve been operating this way we’ve vanquished a dozen Tulpas. More than any of us could have done on our own.” A look of pride filled Tabitha’s eyes.

The entire setup sounded good but not for her. “So what are we going to do about the group gathered here?”

Chapter Three

Garen half listened to the conversation taking place. He couldn't take his eyes off the chestnut-haired beauty sitting across from him. Long thick eyelashes fanned on her cheeks when she lowered her lids hooding her milk chocolate eyes. Her full lips were a soft, natural pink that tasted like heaven. Her body was muscular, not bodybuilding ripped but toned enough that when she flexed a little you could see each defined muscle.

The outline of her body showed off an hourglass figure that Garen always found appealing on a woman. God, he wanted to touch her, run his hands over her flared hips and back up again. Her full breasts were the size a man could hold in his hand and revel in feeling their weight. He didn't judge a woman by her body but, hell's bells, her apple-shaped ass made his cock hard even now and the woman was sitting on it.

When she'd plowed into him in the old abandoned building, something very strange had happened. Without even getting a good look at her his body reacted to hers, as if they'd known each other forever. He knew every luscious curve, sexy dip and arousing mound personally.

One look into those sad eyes captured him, reached inside and gripped his soul with both hands. He needed to take the sadness away, show her life could be good. Before he could do just that the kid showed up. Unfortunately for him he'd reacted poorly and her walls had slammed back in place.

He had a feeling they'd work well together. She caught on to his little skit instantly, screaming at him and making their fake fight look real. Her reaction to his comment about hitting her had rattled him a little. Her response was a little too genuine, which had made him wonder. He'd decided right there and then that he'd find out about her past one way or another.

Quinn leaned over the table to look at a paper Tabitha pushed in front of her. She bit down on her bottom lip and his cock twitched to life. God, her mouth was the stuff of wet dreams for teenage boys. Men too apparently.

His mind transported him right back to the sidewalk where he'd damn near taken her. Jesus he'd wanted to fuck her right there, drive himself deep inside her until she screamed with her orgasm. Something inside had clawed its way to the surface and pushed all common sense right out of his brain. He preferred his intimate encounters be private not in the middle of a busy street but damn if he couldn't stop himself from taking as much as he could from her.

The promising part—she didn't slap him silly, stick him with a knife or pummel him into the concrete. No, she took just as much as he did, a fact that surprised her as much as him. If the kid hadn't interfered things might have gotten out of control.

He glanced over at Tyson who sat away from the group but close enough to Quinn that if the need arose he could be at her side. Their relationship didn't strike him as one of brother and sister. They couldn't be. Tyson wasn't a slayer and if they were related he would be. No, something else bonded them but what?

Tyson shifted in his chair and winced. Not a little wince, pain radiated through his face. Garen got up, moved over by him and sat.

"You okay, Tyson?"

"Fine."

"You sure because you look like you're in pain. I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"No, I said I was fine."

Quinn turned then, her face serious and hard.

"Just making sure he isn't too bored." A lie but he could see in her eyes she'd grab him and bolt, even if it meant walking back to the city. "Look, Tyson, I want to apologize for what happened both at the building and then, ah, with Quinn."

He shrugged his bony shoulders. "I don't blame you for grabbing me. I would have done the same thing. I should have stayed where Quinn put me. As for practically raping her in the middle of the street, well, she wasn't exactly protesting. I wasn't sure who was attacking whom. But," Tyson turned and looked Garen straight in the eye, "if she had and you didn't let her go I would have punched you. You would have kicked my ass good but at least she would have had a chance to get away."

Garen nodded his head in understanding. Chivalry in a teen. He didn't think that happened anymore. "She's lucky to have you."

"No. I'm lucky she found me."

So much information could be learned from five little words. Movement caught his eye. He looked up to find Quinn standing in front of them.

"I need to get him something to eat."

Tabitha jumped from her chair. "I guess it is time for lunch. Come on, Dad, help me set the table."

"They have a small portable stove they use to cook on. It's cheaper than going out and buying meals all the time."

"I think I'll go help Tabitha set the table." Tyson rose and hustled over to where Tabitha and Donald cleared a place to sit and eat.

"I think he's smitten with her," Garen chuckled. "But then what kid wouldn't be taken by a young woman who dresses like that." Hell, he'd even dabbled with the thought of giving her a try.

"She seems nice enough, just as long as she doesn't lead him on." Quinn sat down two chairs away from him.

"She won't. They're nice people, Quinn, good people. Give them a chance."

"I said I'd help out with this and I will. After that we're gone."

Anger jabbed his gut. Her cold, uncaring tone sliced through him like a knife. She might have a hot little body but she had the personality of a rabid dog. He wanted to grab her, shake her until all the vile venom in her system drained from her body.

"Yeah, so you've said. I guess we should feel honored that you're willing to spend your precious time helping us little peons."

She jerked her head around, ready to throw some barbed comment at him.

"Mr. Ross you're bleeding again." Tyson sounded alarmed, too alarmed.

They both jumped from their chairs, ran to the table and found Donald gushing blood from his finger.

"Mom!" Tabitha screamed.

Ruth came rushing out, saw all the blood on the table and ran into the backroom. When she returned, she held a small dagger in her hand. Garen and Tabitha stepped up beside her and placed their hands over Ruth's on the handle of the dagger.

"Tyson, hold Don's hand still. Keep a good grip on it," Garen kept his voice calm and steady as he looked the boy in the eye. He didn't want to scare him but they needed an extra pair of hands and right now his would have to do.

They waited until the blade of the dagger glowed a bright gold, all their slayer energy fueling the small instrument. A low hum filled the room, letting them know the knife was ready. Ruth placed the blade over the small cut on Don's finger and then touched it. Instantly the heat radiating from the metal seared the cut closed, effectively cauterizing the wound.

"That should do it," Ruth whispered as she wiped the excess blood from Don's finger. "Thank you, Tyson."

Garen glanced over at the boy, expecting to see surprise or even fear. The boy seemed more curious than anything. He shot a glance over his shoulder to Quinn who stood with her mouth hanging open and shock filling her eyes. So Miss High and Mighty didn't know everything there was to know about being a slayer.

In a short amount of time he'd picked up enough information about the pair that would come in handy. All he had to do was choose the right time to use it.

Quinn couldn't believe her eyes. At first she thought Ruth meant to cut the man's finger off with that little knife but when Garen and Tabitha placed their hands over Ruth's, the damn thing came to life. It actually hummed and glowed. She swore she heard a hissing sound when they touched it to his flesh.

She stood back and watched as Ruth returned to the back room and Don and Tabitha continued setting the small table. Tyson didn't seem fazed by what happened at all, he just gawked at Tabitha with a goofy grin on his face. When she looked over at Garen, he watched her with a smug smile.

"Stew's on." Ruth entered the room carrying a steaming pot of something that smelled like heaven. "Tabitha, honey, would you get the bread and butter please."

Don pulled out a chair for his wife, kissed her cheek and then offered the chair on his left to Tyson. The boy sat, salivating over his dish. Garen approached the table, pulled out a chair and turned to her.

“Come on, Quinn.”

She looked around the table. When was the last time she sat down to eat with anyone besides Tyson last night and this morning? Already they began meaningless chatter among themselves, simple talk like any family would do at the table. They included Tyson and he cautiously answered questions.

Garen walked to her side. “Scary, huh?” he whispered.

She shot him an annoyed glance – annoyed because he could sense her trepidation. Yes, it was scary to her. These people reminded her of good times long gone. Times she’d tried to recreate only to be cut down, humiliated and hurt for her trouble.

Her eyes burned from tears threatening to make an appearance. She shoved them down, past her tight throat and buried them deep inside. They were just eating food, that’s all. She could sit and eat, it didn’t mean anything.

Garen slipped his arm around her waist. Instead of jerking away and swinging from such a blatant move, she shivered from the overwhelming warmth that slid through her body. Comfort, that’s what she felt, not ill intentions or harm, just simple comfort.

Once again she felt herself reach out for him from the inside. She swore if she looked down she’d see an arm protruding from her chest, holding its hand out to him. God that scared her.

“Come have a seat. I’ll take you back whenever you’re ready.”

His whispered words flowed over her ear like a warm summer breeze. Butterflies took flight in her stomach from his soothing, gentle tone. *He’s dangerous*, she reminded herself.

He coaxed her toward the table, waited for her to sit and then took his seat. She allowed him to serve her only because her hands were shaking so severely that she feared she’d fling the stew all over the table. Tyson sat next to her, took her hand in his and gave it gentle squeeze before bowing his head.

To Quinn’s amazement Ruth, Donald and Tabitha smiled and bowed their heads as well.

“Share your prayer with us, Tyson, please,” Ruth requested in a motherly tone that sent Quinn’s nerves reeling.

“You don’t have to, Ty,” she snapped.

“It’s okay, Quinn. I don’t mind.”

They all bowed their heads, except for her, as Tyson spoke a very brief but meaningful prayer of thanks for the food before them. When he finished, Don patted him on the back.

The sheer pain that clenched his face had her stomach dropping to the floor. Luckily no one else saw it. At least she didn't think they did. Just as fast as the grimace appeared it vanished. She really needed someone to look at him.

They discussed everything as they ate from the weather to current politics but nothing about the job ahead. She found this odd. She thought the task ahead should be the main topic.

"Eat something, Quinn. Ruth's a very good cook."

With her nerves a jumbled mess she didn't think she could but picked up her fork and scooped a helping of the thick stew loaded with vegetables and meat. The rich meaty flavor exploded on her tongue, making her mouth water. She hadn't tasted anything so good in years. Suddenly her nerves settled enough for her to enjoy the bounty in front of her.

Tyson ate three helpings plus five slices of bread. If he continued to eat like this she'd have to go buy him new clothes again. Her biggest concern at the moment was whether or not all that food would remain in his stomach. The kid wasn't used to eating like this.

"That was great, Mrs. Ross." Quinn sat back in her chair and placed her hand over her sufficiently stuffed belly. "You're a good cook."

"I do my best. Tyson, why don't you help me and Donald clean up while the three of them discuss their plans to eliminate the Tulpas roaming this fine city."

As they cleared the table, Tabitha and Garen tossed around a few ideas. Quinn listened, keeping her opinions to herself.

"We could hide out in their makeshift home and take them down one at a time," Tabitha suggested.

"There's five of them and three of us. We'll only get one before they realize what's happening and gang up on us." Garen hiked his leg up, resting his ankle on his knee.

"Okay, so we go after them one at a time. Follow them and see where they go. It's easier than taking them all on at once."

"I don't know." Garen rubbed his jaw and then turned his attention to Quinn. "What do you think? You took one down last night, did you see any of the others?"

"No. Just that one and its creator."

"You have any suggestions, Quinn?" Tabitha asked.

She thought a moment, chewed her bottom lip and then figured what the hell. They wanted her help. "I'm afraid if we take them down one at a time they'll spook and run. It'll take forever to find them again. Then again, if we ambush them we're outnumbered."

"Yeah, and I like my neck just fine the way it is. I'm in no hurry to have it snapped," Tabitha jested with a hint of seriousness.

"Okay, what about this. We take a few days, follow them and find out where they're holing up when they aren't together. We come back here, map out how close

they are in the city and in one night eliminate them. That way they won't have time to get together and figure out they're being targeted. The three of us should be able to cover the area in one night," Garen said.

That made sense. She could see it, actually visualize how it would go down. Simultaneously killing the creatures and then moving on to the next until they were all dead. "I like it."

"I do to. Nice one, Garen. I knew we kept you around for a reason." Tabitha kicked her clunky boots up on the table and winked at him.

When he winked back, a knot formed in Quinn's stomach. A zing of jealousy shot through her so fast it took away her breath. Where the hell did that come from? Why would she care if they were knocking boots? It wasn't any of her business.

"I think you should take us back now." She had to get out of here. Being surrounded by all these people had her screwed up.

"You sure? We need to figure out when we're going to put our plan into motion." Tabitha dropped her feet off the table and stood.

"Its okay, Tab. I'll take her back."

Garen watched her too closely, as if he knew what she was thinking. "Tyson, we're going."

The kid quickly emerged from the back room, a look of worry on his face. She noticed the warning glare he threw at Garen who in return threw up his hands.

Ruth followed him through the door. "Did you come up with a plan already?"

"Yeah. Thank you very much for the meal, Mrs. Ross." Quinn had to get out of here. All this homey, family atmosphere was choking her. She fled for the door only to be stopped by Ruth shoving something in her hand.

"This has my number on it. If you need anything, see anything you think we should know about, call me please."

Just wanting to leave, Quinn shoved the card into her pocket, flashed a quick smile and all but ran out of the building. She didn't stop until she was tucked away in Garen's BMW. Tyson and Garen followed, only at a slower pace.

The farther into the city she got the more she settled down. Her heart rate slowed, her nerves weren't as frazzled and the constrictive sensation around her chest vanished. God, if she didn't know any better she'd think she was having a panic attack.

Luckily Garen didn't feel the need to chat during the drive. When she glanced back at Tyson, she noticed him leaning over, his hands pressed over his face. Was he in pain, or just tired?

"When do you want to scope out the Tulpas?"

What kind of information would a clinic want if she took him in? Would they notify the authorities if she didn't give them what they wanted to know? She'd have to say she was his sister.

"Quinn!"

Startled, she jumped and cringed, pulling her shoulders up to her ears and covering her head with her arms. A habit she hated. When she realized what she'd done, she silently cursed and then sat straight and tall in the seat.

"What?" When he didn't answer, she looked at him out of the corner of her eye. Oh God, he'd better not be looking at her with pity. She'd have to carve his eyes out if he did.

Pity wasn't what she'd consider the look on his face. More like, *Ah, so that's her story*. Damn it to hell, she didn't fucking need this.

"When do you want to scope out the Tulpas?"

At least he had the decency not to press the subject. "Can we do it tomorrow? That is if it's okay with Tabitha? The sooner we get started the better."

"I'll ask her but I don't think she'll have a problem with it. How about we meet you at your hotel? We can head out from there."

"Sounds good to me. Oh wait. I don't want to leave Ty alone all day."

"I'll be fine, Quinn," he said from the backseat. "I think I can handle being on my own for a few hours."

True enough, he'd spent the last three months alone on the street, not tucked away safe and sound inside a hotel room. "Okay. Tomorrow it is."

She gave him the directions to her hotel and then sat back thinking about the work ahead. It'd feel good working, not thinking about things from the past. Taking her frustrations out on Tulpas would help too.

When they pulled into the parking lot, Garen had a look of disgust plastered all over his face.

"What, you don't like my digs?"

"It doesn't look safe. I want to see what the locks look like."

He bailed out of the car and headed toward the run-down building.

"Great. Can this day get any better?"

"Yep. He knows what room we're in," Tyson said with a snicker.

Quinn looked up and sure enough, Garen stood right in front of their door. "How the hell?"

She jumped out, fuming so profusely, she wondered if smoke rolled from her ears. "Just how the hell do you know what room we're staying in, Snyder? Have you been spying on us? I should plant my foot right in your overactive groin area."

"Get over yourself, Quinn. I haven't been spying on you."

"Then just how the hell did you know what room —"

"One car in the lot, in front of this door. Anyone who would stay in this place overnight would be gone by now. Didn't anyone ever tell you these places are used by hookers? What kind of rate did you get anyway?"

"Mind your own damn business, Garen." Quinn jammed the key into the lock, opened the door and found herself being shoved through.

Tyson sauntered in, sat down on his bed, smiled at her and waited for the show to begin. Too much male testosterone. She couldn't deal with it.

Garen shut the door, snapped the deadbolt, hooked the chain and then gave the door a good hard yank. "Wow, that's surprising. These dives never have good locks."

"Believe it or not," she huffed. "I do have a brain." She stood, arms crossed, glaring at him.

Garen mimicked her stance. The tension in the room amped up enough to fry the crappy thin, faded, curtains hanging over the windows.

"I never said you didn't have one."

No, he just insinuated that she didn't use the one she had. *What is it with men constantly telling me how stupid I am?*

"I think I'll take a walk." Tyson got up, stepped between them and looked Garen right in the eye. "I won't be long."

Garen gave a curt nod of understanding. What the hell was going on between the two of them? As soon as Tyson closed the door behind him, the day's tensions overflowed.

"Just who the hell do you think you are?" Quinn fisted her hands at her sides and began to pace, never taking her eyes off Garen, stalking him, ready to launch an attack. "I agreed to help with this. That doesn't mean you have control over my life. No one, absolutely no one, controls my life."

"You spoiling for a fight, Quinn? Because I'd be glad to oblige. Maybe that's what you need, a good old-fashioned brawl to knock that fucking chip off your shoulder."

The gleam sparkling in his eyes might as well have been a blowtorch igniting her already-charged fuse. Anger burned her senses, narrowing her vision to a tunnel that only allowed her to see him. The sound of her blood pumping furiously through her veins deafened her to any other noise penetrating through the flimsy hotel room door.

The more she paced the more adrenaline dumped into her system until she couldn't contain the energy. She felt like a caged animal and freedom existed on the other side of him. She needed that freedom, craved it like a drug.

He moved, just a slight motion and that's all she needed to set off her fuse. The explosion inside her body sent her charging after him, her fists flying. She aimed her right swing at that fucking smirk on his lips. He knocked her fist away with little effort. Her next blow aimed for his gut, again he blocked. Each blow was thwarted as fast she threw them.

Not once did he strike back at her, only defended, and that pissed her off. "What's the matter, Snyder, afraid of a fight? All talk," she panted.

The words no sooner left her lips when he opted not to block her body blow but captured her wrists in an iron grip. The shock of his swift movement stunned her,

giving him the opportunity to hook his right leg around her left, effectively dropping her to the floor. His body crashed down on top of her.

Garen wrenched her arms above her, pinning them to the floor with one hand. Quinn struggled to no avail. With the weight of his body on her she couldn't move. Panic and fear welled up like a bubbling cauldron. Her breath came in short pants as her body trembled.

Not again. No way would she suffer at the hands of a man again. She felt the moisture running from the corner of her eyes. She prepared for one last attempt at freeing herself when out of the blue he crushed his lips to hers, pried her mouth open with his tongue and delved in.

Stunned she froze, unsure of what was happening. Garen didn't relent. He continued assaulting her mouth, nipping her lips with his teeth, tracing her lips with his tongue. Slowly his force softened. He kissed away the tears at the corner of her eyes, nibbled her earlobe and then kissed his way back to her lips.

Deliberately he worked until she could feel nothing but his warm, soft lips and hot breath on her skin. Her rage melted away like an ice cube in the July sun. Everywhere his hot tongue touched he left a hot flame burning, searing.

She found herself responding, returning his kiss, caressing his tongue before sucking the tip. When he groaned his pleasure at the small act, it spurred her on, fanned the fire that sparked to life in her belly, licking its flames down between her legs and teasing her clit.

"Who are you fighting, Quinn," he whispered softly against her lips as his free hand skimmed up over her hip.

She gasped as he slipped his large, warm hand under her shirt. Every inch of flesh he touched sizzled with electricity. Her muscles quivered uncontrollably under his gentle touch.

"I'm not him whoever he is." He cupped her breast, rubbed her extended nipple with the pad of his thumb until it hardened to an exquisitely painful pebble. "I don't hurt women, I cherish them."

To prove his point, he laid his lips against hers, tenderly sucked her bottom lip before angling his head to take the kiss deeper. While he distracted her with his sensual mouth, he worked his fingers beneath the cup of her bra, slipped her swollen breast free and palmed her.

His firm but gentle hand against flesh that hadn't been touched by a man in some time made it come alive. She arched, pressing farther into his touch. Her head swam with need, her body hummed with arousal. When he pulled his hand away, she groaned in protest as she nipped at his lips.

She didn't want him to stop, not now. Garen slid his hand over her other breast, freed it from its confines and rolled her nipple into a tight, painful peak. A hunger grew inside her. One she'd never experienced before and had no idea how to sate. Quinn

lifted her head from the floor, crushing her lips against his as fire consumed her body burning from the inside out.

He backed away, gazing down into her eyes. A storm brewed in their depths that promised an ecstasy beyond her wildest dreams. Garen wrenched up her shirt, exposing her bare breasts, and in that instant her breath seized in her lungs.

Would he see the scars or did lust blind him to their existence? Panic rose, she struggled briefly in his grip as he stared down at her naked, marred flesh. She watched for any sign of disgust.

“More beautiful than I imagined.”

His thick whiskey-smooth tone stilled her.

Garen shifted his gaze back to her face. “I’m not him, Quinn.”

With that, he leaned over, flicked her erect nipple with his tongue before sucking it deep into his mouth. The blood drained from her head, dismissing any coherent thoughts. Pleasure gripped her so tightly she cried out as her womb clenched, squeezing out her slick juices between her legs.

Blood flowed through her veins like molten lava spewing from a volcano, hot, thick and slow. When he rolled her nipple between the roof of his mouth and tongue, she arched her back as far as she could, pushing herself farther into sweet bliss. She couldn’t think, only feel. Her body stretched tight like a rubber band.

She struggled against his hold on her wrists. She wanted to touch him, feel every inch of him, but he wouldn’t let go. He released her breast with a pop, moved back to her mouth and jammed his tongue deep inside.

So focused on his kiss was she that she didn’t realize he’d unsnapped her jeans until his hand slipped beneath her panties, cupped her mound and one finger slid between her slick lips. Her hips bucked as she tore her mouth away from his and cried out his name.

She heard the touch of fear laced in the sound and cursed herself for it. Undaunted in any way, Garen returned to sucking her breasts as he stroked her engorged clit with his thumb. She couldn’t breathe. Her heart raced so fast it made it nearly impossible for her to catch her breath.

She rolled her hips, raising them off the floor as he worked her into a sexual frenzy. Too many sensations assailed her body at once. Her head flailed back and forth as she groaned and whimpered, climbing that great cliff that would send her over the edge.

Garen toyed around her opening, coating his finger with her slick honey. Quinn tried to encourage him to slip inside her but every time she tilted her hips to accept his finger, he pulled back. Frustration added to the tightness consuming her body.

“Garen, please,” she cried.

He bit down on her nipple, sending rippling chills throughout her and then slipped his finger inside her tight sheath. Quinn drew in a quick deep breath and held it. Garen groaned, the sound vibrating against her flesh.

“So wet and tight.” He held still for a moment, panting against her damp skin.

She could feel the turmoil swirling inside him. Would he take this to the next level and fuck her silly or would he continue on the current path? Part of her wanted him to fuck her. God, if his fingers felt this good, would she survive his cock slipping inside her?

And then he moved his finger deep inside, brushing against the sweet, delicious spot that nearly had her melting into the dingy carpet. Garen lifted his head, stared into her face and watched as she writhed in pleasure from his glorious stroking. She felt like a dam ready to burst, filling beyond imagine with pleasures she’d never thought possible.

“Come for me, Quinn.”

His thick, tight voice added to her arousal. Sweat beaded on his forehead. He gave her another long, slow stroke and she cried out his name.

“Yes, baby. I’m right here. Come for me. Let me feel you fall apart.”

He quickened his strokes, in and out, in and out as his thumb circled her swollen clit, never touching it, just teasing.

“Oh God,” she panted, pushing against his hand.

Garen stroked her one last time, simultaneously brushing his thumb across her clit and the dam overflowed. Gushing waves of liquid pleasure crashed over her. Bright white lights exploded in her eyes, blinding her to everything. Her body shattered into millions of pieces like confetti being tossed into the air.

Long moments passed before her orgasm subsided and her body reassembled itself. When she opened her eyes, Garen still stared at her, a look of wonder and awe in his eyes. Somehow she saw deeper into him, past his cool, calm exterior and into a soul that would protect, even die to keep her safe.

“Did I hurt you?”

His voice still held the thick, husky timbre and it sent chills skittering down her spine.

“No.” The word came out a mere whisper.

“If you know nothing else about me, know I won’t hurt you. I swear it.” He released her wrists, brought them to his lips and kissed her red flesh.

Quinn visibly shivered from the tender action. Oh yes, he could hurt her. Maybe not physically but he could hurt her. When he released her, she reached to tug her shirt down over her exposed breasts.

“No, don’t.” Garen ran the tips of his fingers over the silvery scars scattered all over her breasts and between them.

Embarrassed, she tried to shove his hands away.

“If I knew who did this to you I’d kill him.”

His words stunned her. Fear froze her in place. Her breath hitched once and she felt the anxiety rise up. Why would he say that? Bloody images assailed her brain, images she didn't want to see. Only when he leaned down to tenderly kiss the scars did it dissipate, replaced by calmness.

He pulled down her bra, tucked her gently back into the cups and then wiggled her shirt back down. When he finished he leaned over, brushed a few stray hairs out of her face and kissed her again. When she should have pulled away, should have ended it, she reciprocated, enjoying his taste, the feel of his lips on hers.

"Tyson will be back soon." Garen smoothed the backs of his fingers over her cheeks. "He doesn't trust me with you for some reason. Hell, I don't trust me with you. You scare me, Quinn, and that's no lie."

She scared him? Dear God, he terrified her. Danger didn't even begin to describe this man.

Garen stood, reached out and helped her to her feet. Her legs wobbled as he fastened her jeans. He wrapped his arm around her waist, pulled her hard against his body and rested his forehead against hers. She could feel his hard, erect cock pressing against her. She reached down, cupped him in her hand and gasped.

"You do that to me, Quinn. Whenever I'm near you this is what happens. Damned if I understand it."

Confusion filled her head. He'd given to her but not taken for himself. Why? The least she could do is relieve his ache. She fumbled with his zipper only to be stopped when he clamped his fingers around hers.

"No."

"Why?" What kind of man refused a blowjob?

"Because when I take you – and I will – it won't be in a sleazy hotel and it won't be quick. I want to take my time with you, Quinn. We'll explore each other, take each other on a ride through the stars, and when we return, we'll do it again."

Her nerves shivered with anticipation. "This is crazy. We don't even know each other." Even as she said the words they didn't sound true.

"I think we do, better than most."

A sound outside the door brought reality back. Garen kissed her one last time before separating himself from her. Her soul reached out, objecting to the distance.

Tyson opened the door, stood there looking them both over before rolling his eyes. "Should I come back later?"

"No, kid, I'm on way out. I'll see you tomorrow, Quinn. Get a good night's sleep. We have a busy day tomorrow."

She wanted to stop him, run and drag him back inside the small room and because of that, she stood her ground, keeping her mouth shut. When the door closed behind him, she let out a shaky breath.

"I don't get it. One minute you two are ready to draw blood and the next you're all over each other."

"I don't get it either, Ty." That was the understatement of the century.

"I hope you used a condom. You can't be too safe these days, ya know. I'd hate for you to get a disease from him."

Quinn's mouth dropped open in disbelief and then she burst out laughing. The idea of this kid lecturing her on sex seemed absurd. "What do you know about sex?"

He paled, a tinge of green eking its way around the fringes of his face. "I know enough."

And his face told enough. The boy had not only been physically abused but apparently sexually abused. She wanted to press him, find out who and when but knew now wasn't the time. They'd only known each other a day and he'd need more time to learn to trust before he'd tell his secrets. That she understood.

"So what do you want to do for the rest of the day, Tyson? We can't sit around this hotel room and stare at each other." She needed to do something, to get her mind off what took place on the very floor she stood on. If she thought about it too long she'd analyze it to death and turn something wonderful into a nightmare.

"I don't know."

"Okay." Quinn opened the door. "Let's go and don't ask where. We'll just head out and see what we find."

The genuine happy smile Tyson gave her touched her heart. She waited for him to walk through the door and then turned back, looking down at the floor where Garen had touched her. His words echoed in her ears.

When I take you and I will.

She couldn't allow that to happen. No matter how great he made her feel he would also hurt her and that she wouldn't survive.

Chapter Four

Garen stormed through the door of the old garage they'd rented to set up operations. His level of sexual frustration was off the charts. Jesus, that woman had him tied up in so many knots he'd never untie them.

He flopped down in a chair behind Tabitha, who was currently tapping away on the computer keyboard as the printer spat out paper after paper. He should ask what she was doing but really didn't give a damn. All he could think about was how fucking hot and gorgeous Quinn looked lying there on the floor writhing and coming in his hands.

He could still smell her cream on his fingers, taste her lips and feel her nipple on his tongue. If she had been any other woman he would have ripped her clothes off, driven himself deep inside her wet, tight pussy and satisfied his pure male need. But he couldn't. Not with her. Quinn Hurst was different, unlike any woman he'd ever met. Complicated yet easy to read.

When she had winced, her arms covering her head to protect herself just from him saying her name in a harsh tone, he knew. Classic signs, anyone could read them. She'd been abused by some man whom she'd put her trust in. How badly he didn't know until he saw all those inch-long scars covering her breasts and stomach.

Cuts, deep cuts put there by a knife. Did the fucker use her knife on her? Even now his blood boiled with rage just thinking about her being tortured in such a manner. Did the rest of her body bear the same marks?

He meant what he'd said about killing the bastard who put them there. If she ever revealed who he was, Garen would make a point of looking him up. He pushed those thoughts aside.

What he couldn't push away was how she swam in his bloodstream. His body craved her, demanded he be with her. Jesus it took control he didn't know he possessed to keep from fucking her. Even now his balls were drawn so tight he probably wouldn't be able to find them. His cock throbbed inside his tight jeans, punishing him for not allowing her to do whatever it was she had in mind before Tyson came back to the room.

He meant what he said. He wouldn't do it on the floor in that hellhole of a room. He wanted her on crisp clean sheets, candles casting a soft glow throughout the room and over her soft, luscious body. A nice big bathtub where he could personally clean her up and take her again would be sweet. And where the hell were these thoughts coming from?

Garen groaned out loud in frustration. He loved women, true, loved all shapes and sizes, but this one, oh this one would drive him to heights of ecstasy that he'd never

find with anyone else. Worse, he could fall in love with her and wouldn't that be a kick in the ass? He groaned again.

"Okay, you either tell me what's wrong or you leave. I can't work with all your muttering and groaning." Tabitha turned and shot him an annoyed look.

"Sorry."

"Did you knock some of the attitude out of her? I could see a fight coming between the two of you a mile away."

Did he? He wasn't sure. "We didn't fight. She wanted to but I don't fight women."

"Bull. I could see it in your eyes you wanted to go a good round with her."

Garen shifted in his chair, trying to relieve some of the pressure in his jeans.

"Oh wait. Oh, I get it. You're hot for her. Holy cow, Garen, you don't want to fight her you want in her pants."

Great, wonderful now Tabitha would lecture him on how Quinn wasn't good for him. Well, he didn't need to hear it.

"Good for you. Go for it I say. You might be the only person able to make her face whatever it is running amuck in her aura. That girl has issues."

If she only knew. "Yeah, well, they might not be that easy to deal with." Not when she had reminders staring at her in the mirror every day.

"Nonsense. You can overcome anything you want to if you put your mind to it. Look at me. I was afraid of needles but I wanted a tattoo. So I made up my mind and decided something like a little needle wouldn't stop me from living my life."

"You got a tattoo? When?" Leave it to Tabitha to drag his mind off his problems.

"When I was chasing down that last Tulpa a few weeks back. You wanna see it?"

Before he could answer, she whipped off her little shirt and stood before him naked from the waist up. His jaw dropped. God was punishing him, that's all there was to it.

"I wanted a pair of swords crossed, ya know, like pirate swords except not pirate swords. I wanted something to symbolize a slayer so I drew this up."

There between her perky little breasts were two golden crossed swords radiating light and engraved with the ancient symbols of the slayers.

"I'm thinking of adding a Tulpa being vanquished, ya know, exploding into dust. What do you think?"

What did he think? He couldn't. How could he think when he had a raging hard-on for one woman and another bearing her breasts like it was nothing. "You didn't have to take your shirt off to show me, Tab." His strangled voice showed how out of hand his life had become.

"I know but you can't get the full effect if I just lift my shirt up. Are you okay?"

Hell no! "Tab, I came in here sporting the boner of a lifetime. My testosterone is at record levels and I'm about to burst right out of my jeans. You standing there with your shirt off is doing little to help my situation."

"I could help you with that?" The wicked look on her face said she was serious.

"No offense, Tab, I love you and all but this is for Quinn, because of Quinn and I don't think you want me using someone else's hard-on."

Tabitha crinkled her little nose. "Guess you're right." She shrugged her shoulders, slipped her shirt back on, and said, "I hope she knows how lucky she is."

He had a feeling he was the lucky one.

"You'd better go find something to do to get rid of that thing or you're going to be miserable."

Too late. "Yeah, I will. We're going Tulpa chasing tomorrow. We'll pick Quinn up at her hotel."

"Okay." Typical for Tab, she went back to work as if nothing had happened.

Him, well, he'd go see if he could work off this nagging iron rod between his legs. Good thing he brought his weights along.

* * * * *

Quinn fell into bed, exhausted and somewhat happy. She'd had fun with Tyson, walking all over the city. They'd actually found a decent park they'd spent the afternoon in. He'd pushed her on the swing, they'd climbed the monkey bars and just generally acted like kids, laughing and having a blast.

When Tyson had started looking a little peaked they'd gone to a local pizza shop and chowed down a large loaded with everything. By the time they'd made it back to the hotel it was late and the hookers were out, hustling their clients into the empty rooms.

She hadn't tried to hide it from Ty or make excuses. He'd told her he'd seen his share of business being conducted in back alleys and behind Dumpsters. He'd even admitted to watching. She'd tried to explain the difference between what he'd seen and what went on between two people who loved each other but it had sounded lame, mostly because she wasn't sure herself. So they'd agreed he'd talk to her first before he decided to give it a try.

The long walk had worn them both down. Tyson dropped off to sleep as soon as he hit the bed and she wasn't far behind. In the darkness and the semi-quiet room, her mind wandered back to Garen. She knew so little about him except that he and she were born of the same blood—slayer blood. That didn't mean they were compatible in any way.

Still, something connected them. Garen had noticed it as well. He couldn't be near her without touching and, God help her, she liked his touch. The thing that bothered her most was that it was familiar. Like stepping into a pair of old fuzzy, worn bedroom slippers that fit your feet just right—comfortable, familiar.

Yet the only experience she'd had with men didn't have anything to do with comfortable, safe, familiar. Her knowledge of men included one thing. Pain. It was too much. She couldn't handle it and wasn't sure she wanted to.

Once they got rid of the vile creatures they'd come for, she'd be gone and Garen Snyder wouldn't haunt her thoughts any longer. At least she hoped he wouldn't.

Quinn yawned, stretched and rolled to her side, ready to drop off into a peaceful night when she heard the faintest sound. Her ears perked and she strained to listen. A moan. She heard it again only louder this time. At first she thought it might be one of the hookers next door but it wasn't. Tyson rolled and gasped in pain. She sat up, turned the light on and saw him sweating bullets.

"Tyson, honey, what's wrong?" When he didn't answer, she went to him, sat on the side of his bed and felt his forehead. He didn't have a fever but pain ravaged his face. "Ty, wake up."

He rolled to his side. Blood wept through his shirt and onto the sheets. Quinn gently pulled the material up and saw two of his scars bleeding. What could he have done to break them open? She should take him to a clinic or the emergency room but they'd ask questions she couldn't answer. It wouldn't take long for them to figure out he was a runaway.

No, she had to do something else. Tyson shifted, moaned and more skin tore open. Oh God, this wasn't good. Then she remembered Ruth. Ruth would be able to help. She dug through her jeans and pulled out the card the woman gave her.

Ignoring the late hour, she dialed the number and waited. Tears streamed down the boy's face as he slept.

"Hello?"

"Ruth, it's Quinn. I need your help, it's Tyson. He's bleeding and I don't know what to do?"

"Tell me what happened to him. I need to know what to bring."

Quinn could hear her shuffling around, probably gathering supplies and bagging them up.

"His back is covered in scars and some of them are bleeding. It looks like the skin is tearing."

"Does he have a fever?"

"No, but he's sweating like crazy. I think he's still sleeping."

"I'll be right there. Put a cool cloth on his head."

Ruth disconnected, leaving Quinn feeling lost and helpless. She ran to the bathroom, soaked a washcloth and mopped the sweat from the boy's face. "Tyson, wake up. Come on, honey, you're scaring me, wake up."

"Quinn?"

"Yeah, it's me. Honey, what happened to you? How did you get those awful scars?" He tried to turn away but any movement caused him pain. "Look, Ty, you and me,

we're gonna have to trust each other, okay? I promised you I wouldn't take you back and I haven't. I want to help you but you have to tell me what happened." She could feel hot tears streaming down her face.

"The last place they put me wasn't very nice. The man, he had a thing for boys, he liked hurting them."

"What did he use on you?"

"A whip, but he put razor blades on the end so when he hit me they'd do more damage. It hurts, Quinn, why does it hurt so bad?"

She couldn't lie to him, she just convinced him to trust her. "Some of the scars have opened up and they're bleeding. I called Ruth, she's on her way to help."

"Oh, so much for keeping things my own business."

"I know, I know but this isn't anything to screw around with, Ty. If you get an infection I'll have to take you to the hospital and we both know what will happen then. So it's Ruth or the hospital."

"I'll take Ruth."

"Yeah, me too, buddy. She's a nice lady. I think we can trust her to keep this to herself."

Tyson nodded and then winced in pain.

"Would you be more comfortable on your stomach? It might help keep the skin from tearing any more."

It cost him a lot of pain but he finally rolled over. Quinn did her best to keep his shirt up so it wouldn't touch him but he really needed to take it off. She didn't have a clue how to do that without hurting him further.

The fifteen minutes it took for Ruth to get there felt like two hours. She heard the car pull into the parking lot and yanked open the door to find Ruth and Garen rushing toward her.

"Oh thank God. What took you so long?"

"We got here in record time, dear," Ruth said, pushing past her and heading straight for Tyson.

Quinn followed, sat down on the floor so Tyson could see her and held his hand.

"Oh my, this is bad. We need to get his shirt off."

"I don't know how without hurting him," Quinn said tearfully.

Garen sat gently on the bed. "This a good shirt, kid?"

"No," Quinn answered for him.

Garen pulled out a pocketknife and ripped it up the back, letting the two pieces fall off to the side. "That should do. I might have ripped them open today. I didn't know who he was and got a little rough with him."

"No," Ruth said, cleaning the wounds. "He would have been bleeding all day. We would have noticed that."

She had a point. That meant they probably opened up while they were out, messing around at the park. "Oh God, I'm so sorry, Tyson."

"I saw them this morning when you came out of the bathroom, honey. I thought they were healed over."

"I did to. They just started hurting again." He sucked in a sharp breath as Ruth tried to clean his flesh.

"Okay, Quinn, I need you to fill the basin with warm water and grab as many clean towels as you can. Garen, go get him something to drink. I want to give him a sedative."

"Why, why do you want him out?" This wasn't happening. She'd wake up from this nightmare and Tyson would be fine.

Ruth pulled her away from the bed, leaned in very close, and whispered. "I have to get these wounds clean and see if there's any start of infection. It will hurt beyond belief and I don't want him feeling it. Do you?"

"No." Another tear slid down her cheek.

Ruth gently grasped her hands. "When he's out, I want you to tell me how he got these, Quinn."

She looked over at the bed. Garen sat on the floor so Tyson could see him. She stood back, listening to their conversation.

"You're gonna be okay, Tyson. Ruth is an excellent nurse. Listen, I know you don't have any reason to trust me but I want you to know if you want to talk about anything, I'm here. I know Quinn's your pal and everything but sometimes a man needs to talk to a man."

"You two aren't going to go at each other again, are you?"

Quinn bit down on her lip.

"That depends on what you mean by going at each other. I won't lie to ya, kid. I have a thing for that woman. Bad. But all I do is piss her off. Why do think that is?"

"I don't know, Garen. It could have something to do with the fact that you've only known her a day. Most women don't like men trying to get into their pants at their first meeting."

Garen laughed. So did she, quietly. For a kid, Tyson was wise beyond his years.

"There's something going on between us that we don't understand and I've learned life's too short to sit back and wait and see what happens. Hey, Tabitha said to tell you hey and she hopes you feel better soon."

"She did?"

That perked him up.

Ruth's sedative kicked in. He tried to talk but his words slurred. Garen coaxed him into relaxing, letting them do their job. He continued to talk to the boy until he fell into a deep sleep.

"He's out, Ruth." Garen tenderly rubbed the boy's head. "Who did this to him, Quinn?"

"I don't know." She went to the bathroom, filled the sink with water and snatched all the clean towels she could find. "This is all I have. I'll go to the office and see if I can get more."

When she turned to leave, Garen grabbed her. "Who the hell did this to him?"

"I don't know!"

He stared into her eyes, read her aura and then released her. "It wasn't the same guy."

She wouldn't answer him. Ruth looked over her shoulder with a quizzical look as she pulled bottles and gauze pads from her bag.

"Quinn, I need to know what was used to inflict these wounds. I know you two have your secrets but there are times to let those secrets go. Especially when it means someone's health."

Should she trust them? Would they take him and turn him back into the authorities? She studied Garen and Ruth closely.

"You can trust us," Garen whispered. "Trust me."

Those two words blasted through her like dynamite and that odd connection they shared made sense for just a split second. She could trust him. She instinctively knew that. At least in this situation she could trust him.

She walked to the bed, sat on the floor and looked into Tyson's sleeping face. "I only met him last night. He followed me into the alley and watched as I killed the Tulpa. I thought he was there to mug me but when I read his aura I knew there was something special about him."

"I saw that too," Ruth replied. "It's like he's been touched by heaven."

"Anyway, I fed him, bought him some new clothes and he told me his story. His parents died in a car accident. He got shuffled from foster home to foster home. From what I can tell the last one was where this happened." Tears flowed again. At this point she couldn't stop them and wasn't sure she wanted to. "He told me the man liked boys and liked hurting them. He used a whip with razor blades on the end."

Garen cursed profusely, pacing the room.

"I think he was sexually abused too. He didn't say straight-out but I'd bet my life on it."

"He ran away?" Ruth asked as she cleaned his wounds. "Good for him. How long has he been living on the streets?"

"At least three months. I won't take him back. They didn't care enough to make sure he was safe the first time. They won't the second. If you try to call the police we'll run. You should know that."

“And you should know that if you even think about taking him back I’ll take him and run,” Ruth shot back. “His parents reared a good boy, even all that he’s been through hasn’t changed that.”

“Will he be okay, Ruth?” God she hoped so. “I can’t take him to the hospital. It wouldn’t take them long to figure out he didn’t belong to me.”

“He’ll be fine. I don’t know how he managed to keep them clean but he did a good job. He has the beginnings of an infection but not so bad that we can’t take care of it. He needs the bandages changed every day and I’ll leave you some antibiotics and something for the pain.”

“Thank you. Both of you.”

Garen sat down on the floor behind her and began rubbing her shoulders. At first she moved away but Garen persisted. After a few moments the tension drained. God, his hands were like magic. Need swelled inside her belly, reaching out and clawing at her nerves. This wasn’t the time.

“I must be stupid to take on a kid who has problems like his. I’m the last person who should be trying to help him.”

“Maybe you’re the exact person to help him,” Garen said, rubbing the muscles in her back.

How? She could barely deal with her own problems. Not to mention the fact that she only had enough money to support herself. But she couldn’t trust anyone else with him. Ruth nailed it. His aura glowed with the colors of goodness and purity and the only way to have those colors was by being touched by a higher power.

Garen’s hands worked farther down her back, massaging away knots that must have been haunting her for months. She could fall asleep right here, right now and not wake until dawn. She stifled a yawn.

“Quinn, I’d like to come and change his bandages tomorrow while you all are out. In fact I’d like to take him back to the garage with me. Garen and Tabitha can bring you back and we’ll all eat together.”

“Sure.” Right now she’d agree to anything if Garen would just continue working her muscles.

Ruth cleaned up the mess, packed all her belongings and then looked at Garen. “Come on. They both need their sleep and so do we.”

“You want me to stay?” he whispered in her ear.

For the first time the word “no” didn’t fly out of her mouth automatically. It would be nice to have someone there to help if Tyson woke up in pain. The thought of having someone around for her was nice as well but she quickly tossed that out. She’d made this far without relying on someone, she could continue.

“No. We’ll be okay.” They had to be.

“Had a feeling you’d say that.” Garen helped Ruth carry her things to the door. “If you need us, call. We’ll be here as fast as we can.”

"Thanks." She shut the door, locked it up tight, and then pulled the blanket off the bed and set herself up on the floor beside Tyson. If he woke during the night she wanted him to see she was there.

"What a mess the two of us are," she whispered to the sleeping boy. "At least we'll always understand each other."

Within minutes she drifted off to sleep and dreamed of a family who couldn't exist. A teenage boy learning how to drive, a man patiently teaching the rules of the road and a woman—her—beaming with pride that she'd managed to bring the three of them together and make something good out of a two horrible pasts.

* * * * *

Quinn dressed in a pair of worn, faded blue jeans, a black t-shirt and her favorite low-heeled boots. She pulled her hair up into a ponytail and put on a minute amount of makeup. Tyson wandered out of the bathroom and gingerly sat down on the bed.

He'd slept through the night and woken sore but feeling much better. The pain medication Ruth left for him helped but made him groggy. She'd take that over the excruciating look on his face last night.

"Ruth is going to take you back with her. When we're finished, we'll come back to the garage."

"That's cool."

He sounded so off it bothered her. She went and sat next to him, wanting to put her arm around him but knew she couldn't. "Are you okay with this, being alone with Ruth and Donald?"

"Yeah, they're nice people. Mr. Ross reminds me of a grandfather-type, ya know. When he looks at me, I don't see anything in his eyes but kindness. Mrs. Ross is the stronger of the two. Kind, until you mess with her family, like you."

Oh yes, this boy could see things most people didn't pay attention to. Whatever his path in life, he'd survive it just fine.

"I think it's Tabitha you like the most," she kidded, getting up and tucking her blade into the scabbard hidden underneath her shirt.

"She's cool, pretty too. I like how she's not afraid to express herself no matter what people might think. Mr. and Mrs. Ross accept her that way."

"I noticed." Not really, but since he pointed it out, they did accept her wild outrageous outfits and her outspokenness. Not many parents would.

Tyson shifted on the bed, looked at her with crystal-clear, serious eyes, and asked, "Do you believe in fate, Quinn?"

The question threw her. She didn't put much belief in fate. "I don't know, why?"

"I think we've all been brought together for a reason. You, me, the Rosses, Tabitha and Garen. Our paths were meant to cross, here and now. It feels right being with you, like I should be."

Quinn didn't know what to say. She thought of life as a mass of creatures wandering around, crashing into each other every once in a while. Sometimes the crashes brought good things, sometimes not. Sometimes it brought pain and death. Could fate be so cruel?

A knock sounded on the door, drawing her out of her deep thoughts. *Thank goodness.* She opened the door and stood back, knowing Ruth would run her over getting to Tyson. Sure enough, she pinned the kid with her gaze and headed right for him.

Donald followed but stopped and gave her a warm, friendly smile as he muttered a greeting. Tabitha blew in, dressed in a skintight black shirt that came just two inches below her breasts. As Quinn's gaze traveled down, she snickered. The girl wore black oversized cargo pants that hung extremely low on her hips allowing her purple thong to show. Three chains hung halfway down her legs connected at the belt loops. Her boots were clunky, black with thick heels.

Black-and-white striped fingerless gloves that went up to her elbows dressed up her long, thin arms. She wore her hair straight today and it hung down to her shoulders in a blunt cut that complemented her somewhat square face. Tyson was right, the girl was pretty.

"I've seen her dressed in worse," Garen whispered in her ear.

"I like it. It's so Tabitha." She couldn't help smiling. The girl just made you happy when you looked at her. Tyson had her pegged. The girl wore what she liked and to hell with what anyone thought. Quinn wished she had that kind of courage.

"Did you sleep okay? Any trouble during the night?"

He turned her toward him as he spoke and her heart fluttered. He was dressed in a navy blue suede button-down shirt that looked so soft she wanted to reach out and smooth her hands over his shoulders and arms. Instead, she crossed her arms over her breasts and dug her fingers into her flesh. His black jeans hugged his body and though she couldn't see his ass, she imagined how tight and oh so perfect it looked.

Quinn cleared her throat and prayed her voice didn't sound thick with lust. "We both slept like babies, no trouble at all."

"Good, at least one of us slept. I was in pain all night."

She cocked her head. "Why? What happened to you?"

"You." With that, he walked to the bed and sat down next to Tyson with a bag in his hand.

Oh yeah, his ass looked good in those tight, black jeans. They all talked to Ty as Ruth changed his bandages. She stood back, out of the way, and watched so she knew

how to do it herself. The open wounds didn't look so angry this morning, not like they did last night. In fact they looked to be healing. *Strange.*

When Ruth finished, they all stood. Garen handed him the bag and told him to open it. Tyson pulled out a brand-new gray shirt, stared at it and then looked up at Garen.

"I owe ya a shirt."

Quinn bit down on her bottom lip to keep the tears swimming in her eyes from flowing. The look on the kid's face held so much gratitude one would think Garen gave him a gift of solid gold.

"Thank you but you didn't have to do this." A tear dripped off Tyson's cheek and he turned his head to hide his watery eyes.

Before she could move to help him in this awkward situation, Garen took the shirt back, unbuttoned it and held it out for Tyson to slip into. "I know I didn't. I wanted to and before you go thinking this is all about pity, stop. I don't do pity."

Quinn caught the poignant glance he shot her way. The message wasn't only for Ty but for her as well. She looked away, unable to meet his eyes for more than a second. When it came to the scars of the past, she wasn't ready to talk about them yet.

"Okay, gang. I think we should get moving." Tabitha pecked Ty on the cheek. "We'll see you later. Keep the old folks on their toes, will ya? I worry about them when I'm not around."

They all left the small hotel room. The Rosses and Ty got into their car and drove off.

"So do we walk or drive?" Tab asked.

"We should walk. No one drives to the place we're going," Quinn informed them.

Quinn and Tabitha led the way while Garen kept a few feet behind.

"Mom told me what happened to Tyson. I'd like to find the guy, skin his rotten little pecker and feed him the putrid flesh."

Quinn smiled. "Is that all?"

Tabitha returned the smile. "I'm sure I could come up with some other nasty things to do given time. You did a good thing taking him off the streets, Quinn. I haven't put my finger on it yet but something about him is special."

That seemed to be a recurring theme when it came to Tyson. "I know. He asked me this morning if I believed in fate."

"Do you?"

"Not really. He does though. He thinks we've all been brought together for a reason."

Tabitha walked quietly for a moment. Quinn glanced at her from the corner of her eye and could see her mulling the idea over.

"That's interesting coming from a kid. Most don't think that deep."

She didn't know the half of it. "He's very observant that's for sure." The boy could pick up on so many things quickly. "Why's Garen walking so far behind?" She tried not to let it bug her, even tried to ignore him, but it wasn't working.

Tabitha snorted. "He's trying to keep his distance from you."

"Why?"

"He came back yesterday with a boner that would have knocked the building down if he'd let it loose. No matter what he did he couldn't get rid of it. Mom said when you called last night she'd barely picked up the phone and he was standing there, like he knew it was you. She said she's never been so scared riding with anyone in her life. He blew through red lights and narrowly missed a homeless person walking across the street. Then he comes back, grumbling and pissy. The bulge in the front of his jeans was as big as a watermelon. He's got it bad for you, Quinn."

Well, chalk that up as lesson learned. She'd be careful with her questions from now on. "I thought maybe the two of you were, ya know, intimate."

"Us? Nope. More like sister and brother. I'll tell you how bad he's got it. He sat there yesterday in pain with this erection. Of course I didn't realize it at first but when I did I thought I'd have a little fun. I got this new tattoo and he hadn't seen it yet so I take off my shirt to show him. There I stood, all tits, no stitch. You should have seen his face."

As Tabitha laughed Quinn's jaw dropped in shock.

"He actually got pale. I offered to take care of the problem for him but he refused, saying it was for you, no one else."

"Brother and sister, huh?"

"Oh, I wouldn't have done it. I like him but not that way. I just wanted to drive the knife a little deeper so to speak. It was fun."

Quinn chuckled and then burst out with a full hearty laugh. She like Tabitha, a lot. "Are you always so open?"

"Sure. Lets people know where they stand with you."

Just to make conversation, Quinn told Tab how much Tyson admired her. As wild as the girl seemed, she also had a brain. Quinn was glad to hear that she'd be careful not to do anything to lead the boy on.

"I'll ask you not to do the same to Garen. In the short time I've known him I've never seen him so tied up over a woman before. Don't get me wrong, he treats women like queens, but you, you could hurt him."

Chapter Five

She didn't want to talk about this. If she didn't talk about it she wouldn't have to deal with it. Garen's unending erections were his problem. She didn't do anything to lead him on or tease him. To get off subject, Quinn stopped at a storefront window and looked at the rich leather pants on the mannequin.

"You like leather?"

She loved it but could never afford to wear it. Even if she could, she wouldn't. Clothes drew attention to people. She couldn't afford to be noticed and then discovered. "I just like to look."

They continued on. As they rounded a corner and headed down a lesser traveled street, she caught sight of a black aura surrounding a small woman. Quinn put her hand up, stopping Tabitha and Garen.

"I see," Tab said quietly. "Is it one of the ones we're after?"

"I don't think so."

Garen approached. "She wasn't with the ones we saw yesterday."

About that time another came around the corner. This one didn't look familiar either. Holy hell they'd stumbled onto another nest. Or did they work with the ones they found yesterday?

"Let's keep walking and see if they care."

Tabitha stayed close to Quinn's side. Garen fell back a few paces. As they neared the two they'd already spotted, another came around the corner, a large creature with a massive black aura that choked the life out of everything around it. That made eight creatures roaming this pitiful little city. Who the hell had created them?

The hairs on Quinn's arms stood up as they passed by. Pure evil oozed from their empty bodies. She could feel their Tulpa eyes following them until they rounded the corner.

As soon as they were clear, she stopped and turned to Tab and Garen. "There's only three. We could take them now."

"They may be part of the other group. If we take them out now the others may spook."

Tabitha had a point but did they take the chance? "What time is it?"

"Nine thirty. Why?" Garen asked.

"The other group gathers at ten every morning." She found that odd. Two nests getting together so close in proximity.

Just then, a shrill scream echoed down the alley. Garen held up his hand, telling them to stay put. He crept to the corner, peeked around and swore a blue streak. "They've got a victim."

All three took off. As Quinn rounded the corner, she saw a young female, hooker probably, struggling with one of the male Tulpas. Garen reached them first, plowed his fist into the Tulpa's face and yanked the girl out of his reach.

Garen pulled his blade from its sheath hanging off his belt loop, wielding it like an extension of his arm. Tabitha snatched the small female as she tried to run. As far as Quinn could see, she hadn't pulled her blade yet but she did put a pounding on the creature, firing blow after blow into its face.

Quinn slowed her pace to a walk. Charging in full force wasn't her style. The third one – the largest – stood facing her, waiting with a blank look on his face. Never taking her eyes from its face she approached cautiously. They circled each other like a pair of lions ready to do battle for leadership over the pride.

Around them, Garen and Tabitha played with their prey. She had a feeling this one would be the strongest. His aura radiated a blackness that consumed the space around him. Huddled against the building, the young girl intended to be the victim sobbed in fear.

Quinn blocked it all out and focused on the creature before her. Blood pumped furiously through her veins, fueling her bunched muscles for the fight. Reaching beneath her shirt, she removed her blade, flexing her fingers around the handle. If fate existed, this was hers.

She wouldn't make the first move, patience would win this battle. Her Tulpa glanced away as Tabitha dispatched the female, dust exploding into the air followed by a shrieking war cry. *Good.*

It made its move then, probably spurred on by fear. It raised its hands for her head and she slashed with her blade, catching both its hands and slicing through its fingers. The absence of blood was yet another telltale sign of Tulpas. A thought didn't bleed. Too bad she didn't slice the digits off.

It backed up two steps and then came at her again, kicking at her legs. Quinn sidestepped, spun and slashed out, connecting with its arm. Each strike weakened the vile creature while she used little effort.

She apparently underestimated its strength. Quinn glanced away toward Garen for just a second and took a shot to the head. The blow rocked her back on her heels. The Tulpa took advantage of her spinning brain and popped her in the gut.

As the air whooshed from her lungs, rage built in her chest. She allowed the old memories of beatings to consume her. Pure, raw hate pressed against her breastbone until she thought she'd explode from the pressure. Quinn raised her head, looking at the monster rearing back to assault her once more. Her vision was pinpointed on him, her hand gripped her knife and she detonated.

With a blast of adrenaline, she surged forward, shifted her stance and kicked her leg out high, connecting with his face. The creature stumbled backward. Quinn spun and kicked out again with her other leg, driving her foot into its chest. Even with the tremendous force it didn't go down but merely wobbled.

Inside her head echoed demeaning, hurtful and vile shouts from a man she'd long walked away from. Quinn allowed them to penetrate every fiber of her body and drew on that fury. She hurled kick after kick into the Tulpa's body. When it didn't go down, she began driving her fist into its face over and over.

Bones crunched and popped until her knuckles ached. Ready to end it, she flipped the blade in her hand, spun one more time and slashed the creature's throat. Purposely she kept the wound from being deep enough to end the Tulpa's life. It dropped to the ground, flopped onto its back and stared up at her. Deep in her throat a howl welled and wrenched from her mouth as she raised her blade high, dropped to her knees and drove the metal through its chest, ripping down through its torso to its stomach.

Breathing heavily she rose, stepped back and waited for the inevitable. The body twitched and then exploded into a cloud of dust.

Tabitha walked to her side and draped her arm around her shoulder. "That's my favorite part."

Hers too but she couldn't vocalize her thoughts, not at the moment anyway. Too much adrenaline swam through her system. She needed to move, run, do something to work off the steam still building inside. Garen gripped her arms and spun her toward him, panic in his eyes. The rage simmered too close to the surface and she reacted from the gruff handling. Instinct had her stomping on his foot and driving her fist into his gut.

He doubled over and hopped around on one foot. Tabitha backed away with a gasp. Recovering quickly he grabbed her again, pulled her to his body and held her there. As she struggled, he tightened his hold until it became nearly impossible for her to breathe. All the while he stared into her eyes. A flicker of a memory bounced through her head.

Two people walked hand in hand across a meadow toward a small wood and mud cottage. Smoke drifted from the small chimney and the scent of wildflowers filled the air. Happiness filled her heart as his warmth sank into her body. The battle had been fierce but they came away the victors. A small child toddled from the front door, her arms raised in the air. Behind her another child emerged. An older boy and he greeted them with a smile that touched her soul.

As fast as the memory came it vanished, leaving her shaken and confused. Garen's grip loosened and she backed away. What the hell was that? It seemed so real, as if it had happened only days ago. The faint scent of burning wood lingered in her nose.

She glanced up at Garen to find a matching look of confusion plastered all over his face. Surely he didn't see the same things she saw. It wasn't possible, was it?

"If you two are finished, I could use some help over here."

Tabitha's voice jerked Quinn around. She crouched on the ground, trying to console the hysterical girl currently slapping at Tab like a child. Quinn ran toward them, gladly leaving Garen and the odd vision behind.

"It's over. You're okay," she said, crouching next to her.

"I keep telling her that but it isn't working."

Quinn gripped the girl by the arms, shook her several times and then smacked her across the face. "Snap out of it. You're fine."

The girl froze mid-sob, released a shuddering breath and then met Quinn's eyes. "What the hell were they?"

First question answered. She didn't create them. "Tell me how you came to be here with them."

"The big one, he offered me a lot of money to do him and his friends."

A greasy sick feeling slid through Quinn's stomach. Would she ever be so desperate to sell her body to strangers for money? She'd starve to death first.

"She's not the creator," Garen huffed from behind them.

No, she wasn't and that sucked. Quinn didn't know about the other two but she really wanted to find out how all these damn creatures came into existence and open a can of whoop ass on the guy responsible.

Tabitha placed the palm of her hand on the girl's cheek. "You need to get out of here and forget what you saw. Well, not forget. Keep it in mind the next time you go off with a trick by yourself."

The girl nodded her head, dragged herself up off the dirty ground and brushed at her tiny skirt that barely covered her ass cheeks. An overbearing need to lecture her about the dangers of what she was doing niggled at Quinn's brain. It wouldn't do any good.

"Thanks for the help," she muttered, and then took off toward the busy street to safety.

"God that makes me sick," Tabitha hissed as she kicked at garbage on the ground. She didn't have to clarify her meaning. They all understood and felt the same way.

"We'd better get going. The others will be showing up soon and we don't want to miss that little party." Garen took his place a few paces behind them as they headed back down the alley.

Quinn fought to keep her mind on the job ahead but she couldn't shake the vision she'd had in Garen's arms. Not a vision, no, more personal than that. She felt it, as if it ripped right out of her soul and mind. Being around other people wasn't turning out to be a good thing for her. She needed to get this over with and get back on the road.

All three walked the eight blocks in silence. It seemed no one wanted to talk at this particular point. She could feel Garen behind her, his presence churned and rolled around her body like a thick storm cloud. It wasn't that she didn't appreciate his good looks, she did.

What woman wouldn't. And his body. Well, she'd be lying to herself if she didn't admit seeing him naked would probably turn her into a pile of goo. She'd already experienced his skilled hands and mouth. A shiver ran down her spine at the memory. If he could make her fly apart with just his hands, she wouldn't survive if they actually had sex, which wouldn't happen, absolutely not. Men weren't to be trusted, not on a personal level anyway.

So why did those thoughts crawl inside her head every time he got near her? It didn't make sense. Sure she noticed men but that's as far as it went. Look, don't touch. She'd touched once and that turned out horribly.

Quinn released an aggravated grunt. *Damn it, I don't need this.*

"Focus, Quinn," Tabitha said loud enough for only her to hear. "I have a bad feeling and we'll all need our wits about us."

Right, work. They neared the abandoned building and split up. Each hid in a different area to see and hear what they could. Not long after their arrival the Tulpas started showing up.

The creatures stood, milled about but said nothing. Quinn found this odd. *Is this all they do, just gather and look at each other? What about the cots, lanterns and food inside the building? What the hell are they for?*

Quinn redirected her attention to other issues. Three females and two males. The one she killed the other night, female. Something to think about. She focused on their black auras, nothing special there, just black masses.

Suddenly, as if someone gave a silent order, they all filed into the building. Once they were inside, Quinn crept out of her hiding spot behind an old ratty couch. Tabitha and Garen emerged from their prospective spots and gave her the sign to head into the building.

A car approached, sending them scurrying in retreat. Not just any car but a brand spanking new black and chrome Cadillac with tinted windows. It pulled to a slow stop in front of the building. Quinn craned her neck to get a better look.

The back door opened and a pair of expensive leather loafers appeared. A tall, black-haired, well-dressed man stepped out, straightened and looked around. Quinn did a quick read of his aura.

A thin layer of dark yellow surrounded his body, denoting a resentful person who thinks the world owes him something. Covering the yellow, slithered a reddish orange. Combining the two colors, he screamed cunning and slyness. Olive green coated the two other colors, indicating deceit and a hint of black outlined the entire aura.

All in all this man equaled very bad news but was not a Tulpa. They may have just found the creator of the nest. Quinn couldn't wait to get inside and hear what he had to say but they had to be careful. The car still sat on the street with the driver tucked safely inside.

She headed toward the back of the building where she'd run into Garen yesterday and ran into him again. Tabitha appeared, excitement glittering in her eyes. Garen didn't look as revved and she echoed his sentiment.

After a deep breath, she led them inside. "They're on the fourth floor. They have supplies set up in there. You think it's a good idea for all of us to go up there?"

Tabitha shoved her way toward the stairs. "I'll go."

Quinn wanted to argue but decided against it. They were working together and that meant some level of trust. Besides, if Tab needed help she and Garen could get to her in seconds. She quickly explained the layout of the upstairs, grasped Tab's hand and told her to be careful before backing into the shadows with Garen.

They both watched Tabitha skillfully maneuver her way up the stairs and out of sight. Quinn released a short breath, trying to ease her nerves. Working with others would take some getting used to. She couldn't help wanting to be up there and listening for herself.

"She's good at this," Garen whispered in her ear. "I caught her spying on me one day. She followed me for hours before I figured it out."

Fighting the delicious shiver that skittered across her skin from his warm breath breezing over her ear, she wondered why Tabitha would spy on him. What did he hide in his proverbial closet? Suddenly her interest piqued only to vanish when he slipped his arm around her and pulled her close to his side.

She stiffened, her body going on alert. To her surprise, it didn't last long. She found herself relaxing, warming where his arm lay against her waist. *No, no this isn't right*, she screamed inside her head. Damn her sexual needs for betraying her like this. Hadn't she learned? Tenderness could be faked, replaced by pain.

Quinn pulled away from him and felt her heart clench. She ignored it, her heart couldn't be trusted. It needed a little too much. Her body and mind wouldn't survive another betrayal.

Garen, however, couldn't seem to take the hint. He reached out and pulled her to him again. This time maneuvering her in front of his body and jerking her back, hard. Immediately she felt the rock-hard ridge of his cock pressing against her ass. Butterflies spread their wings and took flight inside her stomach.

The rapid beat of her heart made it impossible to breathe. What the hell was he doing? There were five Tulpas upstairs with their creator, Tabitha was sneaking around spying on them and he was down here thinking with his cock. Typical man.

Garen shifted slightly, pressing himself harder into her. A quick, sharp gasp flew from her throat before she could stop it. Quinn slammed her mouth closed to stop any further noises from emerging. She closed her eyes, concentrated on not feeling how thick her blood felt surging through her veins. She didn't feel her nipples harden and ache and she didn't feel her slick juices seep into her panties. She didn't, she didn't, she didn't.

It almost worked. She nearly pushed all the sensations from her mind until he slipped his large, warm hands beneath her shirt and rested them on bare skin above her hips. Ah hell, the man didn't play fair.

"I'm sorry." His voice rumbled against her ear, electrifying her nerve endings. "You have no idea what you do to me."

Oh yeah she did. She could feel it wedged between them.

"We have to talk about this, soon. I have to figure out what kind of spell you hold over me."

Her chest rose and fell with each heavy breath she took.

"I can't get the feel of how you clenched my fingers deep inside you yesterday out of my head."

"Try." Oh God that breathy word didn't sound very convincing.

His hands moved up and rested on her lower rib cage and her muscles quivered with excitement. Fire burned in the pit of her stomach, threatening to consume her body.

"Your lips tasted so sweet, so soft. Your nipples rolled on my tongue like ripe little berries begging to be bitten."

The nipples in question hardened further as her breasts swelled, remembering how glorious his hot mouth felt taking her in as his wet tongue flicked her erect nubs. Her knees weakened, bent slightly but he held her tighter, closer, rubbing his engorged cock against her. Smoldering flames burned between her legs.

"I want to taste more of you, Quinn. I want to slip my tongue between your folds and taste your honey."

She swallowed the moan, refusing to let him know his words affected her but, oh God, he was getting to her. Beyond damp, she held her legs together, tight but couldn't stop the flow of hot liquid oozing from her pussy. The fire inside flared, its flames lapping and licking at her flesh, curling around her nipples and clit until the ache became unbearable. Her internal muscles tightened, ready to explode.

"I want to suck on your sweet little clit until it throbs between my lips and then drive my tongue deep inside you. Fuck, Quinn, I want you to come in my mouth so I can taste your cream. I want to feel you grasp my tongue the way you did my fingers."

The desperation in his voice fueled her lust, taking her higher. She sat on the edge of oblivion, her mind empty of everything but his words. Visions of him settled between her legs filled her head. Her body screamed for release. Nerve endings sizzled, heat consumed and her dripping cunt rippled.

"I need to feel you wrapped around me, Quinn." His hands moved again, cupping her full breasts so tenderly she wanted to cry out and demand he hold tighter.

"I need to feel your wet, tight sheath milk me dry while I explode inside you. God, I've never needed anything so bad in my life." He pinched her nipples between his thumb and forefinger.

The spasm came hard and fast, her orgasm exploded so violently she nearly dropped to the floor but Garen held her tight, his hot breath whooshing in her ear as he panted, almost growling his need. Her brain emptied and all she could do was ride the waves of pleasure until all the aftershocks subsided, leaving her weak and limp.

"Holy shit," she panted.

"Don't move, please just let me hold you." Garen released her still-aching breasts, dropped his hands and clasped them around her flat, tight stomach.

His rigid cock twitched inside his jeans. "That has to hurt like hell," she whispered, unable to think of anything else to say.

His painful, desperate groan answered her. Shit, it wasn't her fault. She didn't initiate this, she didn't ask for it so why the hell did she feel so bad for him? Twice now he'd given her the most phenomenal orgasms of her life and asked for no relief in return. What kind of man did that? How did he ignore a need that ate away at him nonstop?

"We need to figure this out, Quinn. I can't go on much longer like this. A man can only take so much before losing his mind and just taking what he wants."

His words sent a chill of fear through her system. Taking. Would he take without her consent? Why not? It happened before, on a regular basis. Sure at first she freely gave until the bastard found it was more fun against her will.

Yet he had the opportunity yesterday and didn't take it. She offered and he refused. No, he wouldn't do that. He wouldn't force himself on her. Deep down in her bones she knew he wouldn't.

"You have two hands. Grab a hold of that thing and use them." A sour taste bloomed on her tongue as the cold words exploded past her lips, a natural defense mechanism that reared its ugly head when she felt threatened. That was cruel and he didn't deserve it.

His body tensed briefly before he straightened and released her. She winced inwardly, cursing herself. Before she could apologize Tabitha appeared, her face rife with concern. She gave them both a quick once-over and then headed out the door to the alley.

Garen quickly followed, leaving her standing alone and feeling like an ass. She rolled her eyes out of frustration and followed. They all huddled against the side of an adjoining building while Tabitha quickly explained the situation.

"This isn't good. Mr. Big Bucks appears to be in charge. He's also noticed that one is missing," she shot Quinn a quick glance, "but doesn't seem to be too worried about it. He instructed them to get rid of their creators tomorrow night, return here and wait for further instructions."

Okay, that answered the question surrounding the cots, food and lanterns. Quinn frowned. "I don't get it. If he's not their creator, how the hell did he find them and how is he controlling them?"

“Good question but one we’ll have to wait to answer. Our first priority is to stop them from killing tomorrow night. But wait, it gets better. The three we just vanquished? He appears to be in charge of them as well. He said he’s giving them the same orders when he leaves here.”

“Fuck, he’ll know something’s up when they don’t show.” Garen rubbed the back of his neck. “We can’t worry about that now. Tab’s right, we have to stop these ones.”

“How are we going to do that? There’s five of them and three of us. The best we can do is save three lives.”

No one answered but it seemed they all thought the same thing. Three was better than none.

“We do what we can and exact revenge for the others later.” Garen looked at Quinn, avoiding direct eye contact. “Do you have a cell?”

She shook her head.

He pulled his out of his pocket and handed it to her. “Tab’s speed dial is number one, Ruth number two. If you get into any trouble don’t be a hero, call. We’ll come to you. We meet back at Quinn’s hotel.”

With that he took off and headed toward the front of the building. Tabitha patted her on the shoulder and followed. Great, what if he got into trouble? If anything happened to him she’d have it on her conscience. Jerk.

The creatures filed out of the building. Quinn picked a pair that broke off together and followed them. She glanced back to see Tabitha slinking behind one of the males and Garen following the other male. If they thought the males were more dangerous they were terribly wrong. In her experience, females did the most damage.

After six blocks, her pair emerged into a bustling part of the city. It made it easier for her to blend in but more difficult to keep track of them. Both her targets were tall, long-legged and built like every man’s dream. At the very least like the ones on calendars who almost wore swimsuits. This made her think. Their creators were probably men. It made sense. What woman would put that much thought into the color and length of hair of the perfect body proportions?

None. No woman would make a thought form more attractive than herself. These two looked like they walked right out of some college kid’s dream. If a man did create them there wouldn’t be any question about their purpose, especially since they seemed to be headed to the same place.

Five blocks later they entered a small electronics shop. Quinn held back, lingering around the front of the building. She caught a glimpse of one man inside, young, clean-cut and smiling a blue streak. The glass front of the store afforded her an excellent view inside as she wandered around as if she were waiting for someone.

The two vile female creatures approached the guy, draped themselves over him and planted big wet, sloppy kisses over his face. Quinn’s stomach turned. What the hell was wrong with people?

She watched as the man flipped the closed sign in the window and then disappeared into a back room with them. As if she had to guess what they were about to do. Still, she needed to know if he'd created them and the only way to find out was to go in. He was so preoccupied with his throbbing cock he didn't lock the door.

Quinn gave them a good ten minutes and then entered. She scanned the small store, making sure no one else lurked about and then made her way to the back. There, hanging on the wall, was a calendar with two women identical to those she followed.

Quinn crinkled her nose, pulled the calendar off the wall, ripped the picture off and crammed it in her pocket. Dumb kid couldn't even come up with his own version. She pressed her ear to the door and listened.

"That's my good girls. You always do what you're told, don't you?"

Yep, she'd found the sick creator. Wonderful, of the five she chose the two that had a pervert master. Giggles seeped through the slightly opened door followed by some lewd, gross commands. Quinn shivered. She didn't need to hear any more. She had all the information she needed. She didn't need to stand here and listen to the threesome go at each other.

Careful not to make any noise, she snuck out the door. Now what? Two options—she could leave and go back to her hotel or wait until the two monsters left and have a nice little chat with the guy. Would he believe her if she told him his life was about to end at the hands of his sex slaves? No, but she had to try.

Quinn crossed the street and sat on a bus bench where she could keep an eye on the store. Settling in, she thought about the type of guy who felt he needed to create soulless creatures to service him. A decent-looking guy like this one could have had a warm, caring woman actually capable of loving him.

The phone in her pants pocket vibrated, startling her. She pulled it out and stared down at the number calling. Since she didn't have a flipping clue what the others' numbers were, it really didn't make any difference. She flipped it open and answered.

"Hello?"

"Are you okay?"

The sound of Garen's voice sent shock waves down her spine, ending directly between her legs. "I'm fine. Where are you calling from?"

"Pay phone. Did you have any trouble?"

"No. I got lucky. Two for one." Lucky, poor choice of words. "I'm gonna hang here a while and see if I can catch a few minutes to chat with the creator."

"Good plan. I think I'll do the same, not that it'll do much good. The woman who thought this one up doesn't seem to be real intelligent."

"Ditto. Have you talked with Tabitha?"

"Not yet. I'll call her next. I just wanted to check in and make sure you were okay. Something about this doesn't sit well with me."

“Me either. I don’t get how an outsider can step in and command them. And what for?”

“All good questions we’ll have to hash over tonight. You are coming back with us, aren’t you?”

She shouldn’t. Being near him messed with her head and now wasn’t the time to be preoccupied. Her stomach growled, reminding her she hadn’t eaten yet today. The thought of a home-cooked meal made her mouth water. Tyson could use one more than her. “Sure. I have to get Tyson.”

“Of course.” He bit the words off in a tight voice. “I’ll meet you back at your hotel.”

The line abruptly disconnected. Quinn stared down at the phone and released a frustrated breath, closed her eyes and got lost in the noise of the city street.

Chapter Six

Garen slammed the phone down. Damn that woman and damn him. What the hell was wrong with him? Since when did he put so much effort into a woman who didn't give a rat's ass about anything but herself? If it weren't for the terminal fucking erection she gave him every second of the day he'd flip her off and show her what his ass looked like walking away.

Jesus his stomach hurt, his nerves were frazzled and he was sick and tired of his cock ruling his life right now. He slammed his fist into the side of the pay phone booth then cursed as the pain radiated up his arm. At least it burned some of the piss out of his veins.

The Tulpa he'd followed wandered out of the small dress shop, slipped on a pair of sunglasses and headed down the street. Garen stormed inside. The small bell attached to the door handle tinkled, grating on his already-shredded nerves. The girl behind the counter gave him such a sickening-sweet smile it made his teeth hurt.

"How can I help you today?"

Garen studied her a moment—took in her frizzy, drab-colored, shoulder-length hair. Her poorly applied makeup and skintight clothes that were three sizes too small. He wanted to take out his personal sexual frustrations out on her but couldn't. It wasn't her fault he was jonesing for a heartless slayer.

"I'm interested in purchasing something leather for my girlfriend." Oh what the hell? Did that actually come out of his mouth?

"We have some very nice jackets, pants and gloves. Do you know what size?"

Oh God, he didn't think about that. "Ah, you got me there. I'm not sure but I think I'll be safe with a jacket.

"What's your name?" he asked while he perused the rack running his hands over the butter-smooth leather. Good quality merchandise.

"Kim."

"Well, Kim, that man who just left. Who did you pattern him after, or did you come up with him all by yourself?" He plucked a waist-length dark brown coat off the rack and held it up.

"I'm sorry? I don't understand."

"Sure you do. He's a Tulpa, a thought form. You created him out of your head."

Kim fidgeted, wringing her hands and tugging at her tight skirt.

“Who taught you how to create him? Surely you didn’t stumble across this process all by yourself. Creating a Tulpa isn’t easy. It takes a lot of time, energy and concentration.”

She didn’t answer, just took a few steps back and looked at him with terrified eyes. Good. He judged the leather coat to be Quinn’s size and then took a peek at the price tag. Surprisingly it didn’t cost as much as he thought.

“The person who taught you to create your creature—”

“Stop calling him that,” Kim snapped. “He’s as real as you and me.”

“No, Kimmy, he isn’t. As I was about to say the person who taught you to create your—man,” he conceded, “did he tell you how dangerous they are? Did this person tell you that they kill their creators?”

Her eyes widened in surprise.

Garen took the coat to the counter and pulled out his wallet. “Let me give you a quick lesson on Tulpas. They are soulless, heartless and deadly. See, they blindly follow the commands of their creators until they desire their freedom and then,” Garen held his hands as if he were holding a head. “Snap. They break the neck of their creator, ensuring their true freedom.”

Kim gasped, her face paling to an ashen gray.

“You know what they do then, Kimmy? No. Let me tell you. Without a soul it gives evil a place to settle, fester. Demons, if you believe in that sort of thing, take up residence and use the shell, body, for their evil work. They become cold serial killers. Most kill at random, some are created with a specific hate toward certain things so they search out those qualities and murder the humans who possess them.”

“That isn’t true.”

“Oh I wish it weren’t but it is. Your creation is planning on killing you tomorrow night.” He let that sink in. “Tell me, has he changed at all over the last few days? Not responding to your commands? Coming and going as he pleases. Holding your head in his hands with too much pressure for just a little too long?”

Kim’s hands rose to the side of her head. One single tear slid down her cheek.

“The person who taught you to create him knew this. Your creature has been ordered by someone to kill you tomorrow night.” Garen tossed several hundred-dollar bills on the counter along with a white card with nothing but a phone number on it.

“This should cover it. If you decide you’d rather live than fuck that monster give me a call. I can help.” He turned to leave, took a few steps and stopped. “You aren’t a bad-looking girl, Kim. Get some clothes that fit properly, visit a hairdresser who knows what she’s doing and while you’re at it have her teach you how to apply your makeup. You don’t need to create a man to love you. There are plenty out there who would.”

He exited the store. Not until he got outside did he feel like a heel for that last shot he took about her appearance. Too late to take it back. Maybe she’d listen or maybe she’d end up dead tomorrow night.

He held up the beautiful leather coat he'd bought for Quinn and wondered how she'd take the gift. Probably deck him and then drive her foot between his legs. What the hell, maybe it would put his cock out of commission for a while.

* * * * *

After chasing away two guys who were determined to hit on her, Quinn was able to think. Unfortunately what she thought about made her uncomfortable. Garen. Her mind always found a way back to Garen Snyder.

The man had actually talked her into an orgasm. The only flesh contact had been him touching her sides, oh and cupping her breasts and pinching her nipples. But, holy hell, the man had talked her into having an orgasm. Right there in the middle of hiding from Tulpas.

How could that be? Was she any different from those creatures inside that electronics shop, performing on command? Even when she was under the influence of her last so-called lover she didn't, couldn't, do that. So why was it all Garen had to do was whisper to her and her body quivered for him?

A dull ache began behind her eyes. She had to stop thinking about him, stop being alone with him. It wouldn't work, even if they did have actual sex there couldn't be a relationship. A real relationship couldn't be based on secrets.

She rubbed her temples and noticed the swimsuit girls leaving the shop. Finally. Quinn let them get about half a block away and then headed across the street when the phone vibrated again.

"Hello?"

"Where are you?"

The alarm in Garen's voice chilled her. "Still outside the electronics store. The sicko finally finished doing his two blowup dolls. What's wrong?"

"Can you follow the Tulpas?"

She changed direction and headed down the street behind them. "On it. Why?"

"I just talked with Tab. She thinks they all headed back to the big wheel we saw earlier today. She's outside the building but can't get in."

"Why?"

Garen snickered. "'Cause of the way she's dressed. Apparently this guy has a posh office in a classy building. She says you'll be able to get in. I'm headed there now."

He gave her the address and then hung up. She could take a cab but that meant losing the two dollies up ahead of her. Resigning to the fact that she'd probably walk another twelve blocks or so, she picked up her pace.

By the time she reached the fancy office building in the middle of the city her feet were screaming in agony. Boots weren't made for walking, not long distances anyway.

The two Tulpas headed straight inside and Quinn gave a sigh of relief. She spotted Tabitha and Garen lingering on the next block and headed straight for them.

"If I have to walk one more block I'm going to take these damn boots off and do it barefoot," she complained.

"When we're done here we'll catch a cab back to your hotel."

She spied the beautiful leather coat Garen had draped over his arm. Too small to be his, Tab's probably. Jealousy tugged at her consciousness so she shook her head slightly to push it away.

"Be careful going in there, Quinn." The look of alarm on Tab's face made Quinn uneasy. "Watch the auras."

"Any idea what the business is?" She looked back at the building.

"None."

Quinn nodded. "Okay then. Let's get this over with." Ignoring the pain in her feet, she crossed the street, held her head high and sauntered into the building as if she belonged there.

As soon as she stepped inside the building, a thick, oppressive feeling blanketed her body. Heaviness settled in her chest, making breathing difficult. She scanned the large room.

Gray marbled floors sparkled under elegant, massive crystal chandeliers. Directly ahead on the back wall behind a reception desk a waterfall spilled down a rock formation. Soothing classical music played in the background. As she stood, taking in all the expensive furnishings, the hair on her arms and the back of her neck stood straight up.

Forcing herself to move farther into the building, she focused on the auras of those hustling by in their expensive suits. For the first time in her life she saw auras she didn't understand. Heavy blackness encasing the drab, pale colors of a typical human, yet not human.

A tall, thin, long-legged woman with short, spiky red hair passed close by her. Ink-black surrounded her body. Quinn gasped. An elevator door opened and three males exited, each radiating black auras with hints of color beneath them.

"What the hell?" She looked around, desperately seeking a real human. Behind the reception desk two women worked, their auras spilling brilliant colors with no hint of blackness.

The need to run, to escape this den of evil pushed her back toward the door. Just before she reached freedom she caught the attention of the man they'd seen earlier talking with the Tulpas. Quinn's stomach turned as her limbs began to tremble.

Something pushed at her mind. A malevolence so vile it sickened her. Icy fingers slithered around her brain, sank into gray matter, gripped and released its inky blackness of fear. The man took two steps toward her. Drawing on instinct, she pushed her way through the door.

The oppressive weight over her body lifted immediately, she sucked in a deep breath of air and all but jogged across the street toward Garen and Tabitha. She didn't want to be here. They had to leave – now.

The people passing her seemed to be moving in slow motion, blocking her way, trying to trap her. She couldn't look back. He'd be standing there on the street, watching. Panic pushed her on until she spotted Garen.

A lifeline, safety, protection. The words whispered through her scattered mind. Quinn focused on him, on his face, and began to run toward him.

Garen caught her as she slammed into him. "What's wrong?"

"Go. We have to go. Now." She looked up, meeting his eyes. "Please get me out of here."

Garen flagged down a cab, waited for Tabitha to slide in and then shoved Quinn inside. He slammed the door, gave the cabbie an address and then slipped his arm around her, pulling her close to him.

His warmth slowly sank into her cold, shivering body.

"You're trembling. What the hell happened?"

She could only shake her head. Words wouldn't form inside her brain much less pass her lips with any coherency they'd be able to understand. Tabitha held her hand, smoothed her hair and whispered something Quinn couldn't comprehend.

So much evil in one spot. How could this have happened? Quinn rested her head against Garen's shoulder as her brain began to throb. Somewhere along the line the cab stopped, they got out and crawled inside Garen's BMW.

She remembered him buckling her up, heard him and Tabitha mumbling, but it all seemed so far off in the distance. What had happened to her? Why did she feel like a prisoner inside her own body?

Pressure filled her head. She groaned, fearing it would explode right off her shoulders. Garen reached over and grasped her hand. She clung to him, digging her fingers into his flesh.

Don't let it take me. The words echoed in her head but she had no idea if her mouth formed the words. She sank deeper inside herself, like a frightened child withering away from a scary closet monster.

Hold on to me, Garen. Don't let me go, she screamed inside her head. His hand gripped hers harder. He said something. She could hear his warped, distant voice but couldn't make out the words.

As long she felt his warmth she knew she wouldn't be sucked into the black hole threatening to consume her. She felt the car stop, felt a flurry of movement but refused to release Garen.

Her body was jostled and then she felt a wall of secure warmth against her cheek. A loud, steady heartbeat sounded in her head. She knew that heartbeat, it called to her, gave her words of comfort even though she heard no words.

A presence moved toward her. She reached for it. It reached for her and together they entwined and clung for dear life. A memory assaulted her, rushed into her head so hard and fast she cried out.

She lay on a thick rug, animal of some kind. Its soft mane caressing her naked flesh. He moved above her, his shoulder-length hair draping around her face. His hard body pressed against her, slid up and then back down before he took her breast into his mouth. With each tug at her nipple pleasure surged throughout her body, setting her core ablaze.

She opened her eyes. The dark room flickered with a warm glow of orange from the fireplace. The small cabin smelled of wood, freshly baked bread and wildflowers. Home.

He slid inside her, filling her, stretching her internal walls. Oh yes, home. She reached for him, tilted her hips so he brushed that special place and prepared for the ride.

She tried to press closer to him, to be consumed by the man she loved more than life itself. His heavy, thick cock moved in and out of her body in slow, delicious strokes as he bent his head and sucked her nipple deep into his hot mouth. Lightning whipped through her body, wrapping around her clit and tightening the sensitive bud, causing it to throb.

Arching her back, she cried out and thrashed her head back and forth. "More!" His mouth was lethal and wicked and she loved it. When he bit down lightly and raked his teeth across the swollen pebble, she felt liquid heat surge from her inner core, drenching his cock.

"My sweet. My love," he whispered against her breast. "You feel like the fires of hell and the bliss of heaven."

Pumping her hips, she tried to get him to increase his rhythm but he'd have none of it. He always took his time loving her, bringing her to the brink and then easing back until she thought for sure she'd lose her sanity. Her muscles tightened around him, rippled and drew a deep guttural moan from his throat. She loved that sound, the sound of a man's deep pleasure.

He pulled from her body and she cried out in protest. Lifting her head and looking between them, she could see her cream coating his engorged cock. He gripped the base of the shaft and slapped her aching clit with the head. Electricity skittered through her taut body and exploded in her head.

"You like that, don't you, my love?" he growled, slapping at her again and then sliding two fingers deep inside her body.

Her fists clenched in the rug as he pumped in and out with furious strokes, continuing the taps on her clit. Unable to bear the pleasure any longer, she reached between her legs and prepared to send herself into heaven.

"No," he crooned, pushing her hand away. "Later I will watch you pleasure yourself but this is my time."

"I can't," she whimpered. "Please, now." She wouldn't survive this. Her mind would break before he allowed her to release.

She felt him move, a quick, brief movement and looked up to find him straddling her chest, his cock in his hand and pointing it toward her mouth.

"Suck me, love. Taste us together."

She opened her mouth, sucked his head between her lips and allowed him to push into her throat. The heady taste of their combined passion drove her wild as she sucked and lapped every bit from his length. Reaching up, she cupped his heavy sac and rolled it in her palms. His endless moan filled the small cabin as he fucked her mouth in slow, agonizing strokes.

He throbbed as she ran her tongue along the thick vein, teasing and tempting him to come but she knew he wouldn't. Restraint was his mastered skill and he used it in the most wonderful ways.

Suddenly he pulled from her lips, looked down at her with crazed eyes, panting as he fought for his precious control.

"You bewitch me," he accused before moving back down her body and tossing her legs over his shoulders.

He'd come to the end of his restraint and she smiled in triumph. Now she'd get what she wanted, needed. Gripping his cock, he pushed the head to her dripping opening and then stopped, teasing the pulsing muscles by slowing dipping in and then retreating.

"You wish to kill me?" she whimpered.

"I wish to hear you scream my name," he teased.

She would most definitely scream his name as she'd done from the first time when he took her virginity until she took her last breath. No other name would ever cross her lips.

With one forceful thrust he drove inside her waiting body, spearing through tight muscles.

The dim room went white as lightning flashed in her eyes and she bucked from the forceful penetration. Grasping at the rug, she screamed his name as she released so forcefully it tore the air from her lungs. Wave after wave of pleasure swept through her from the top of her head to the tip of her curled toes. Nothing would ever feel as good as her man loving her.

He thrust with force twice more before burying himself deep inside, shuddering and then tossing his head back and shouting her name. His hot seed filled her to overflowing with each pulse. She clamped tight around him, milking him, caressing him, and just when she thought her body could stand no more, he pulled back and rammed home again, triggering yet another nearly painful yet intensely pleasurable orgasm.

As he stroked in and out, groaning at the feel of her rippling muscles over his sensitive, depleted cock, she melted into the rug. When her body stopped trembling, he fell over her, covered her and buried his face in the crook of her neck.

“Mine, in this life and into the next. Forever mine.”

* * * * *

“Bring her in here, Garen. Set her down on the bed.” Ruth issued orders like a drill sergeant.

Garen sat down on the cot, cradling Quinn on his lap. “Whatever it is you’re going to do you’ll have to do it like this. I can’t let go of her, Ruth.” He looked into her eyes. “I can’t. I’ll lose her if I do.”

Quinn shivered and trembled in his arms. Fuck. He’d never felt so helpless in his life. He didn’t have a clue what was happening to her but he knew one thing for sure. As soon as she clamped on to his hand he was the only thing keeping her from drifting off into complete darkness never to return.

Her whimpered pleas not to let go, not to let it take her and to hold on, nearly wrenched his heart from his chest. Garen looked up and saw Tyson standing in the room, his eyes filled with tears.

“I won’t let her go,” he told the boy. “I swear to you I won’t let her go.”

Tabitha sat next to him, checking Quinn’s pulse. “It’s weak. Too weak, Mom.”

“Get the knife,” Ruth ordered.

“What the hell are you going to do with the knife?” As soon as the words passed his lips, a vision crashed into his brain.

Quinn bucked in his lap. Together they cried out. A quick blip, a snapshot of two people naked, entangled on a thick-haired rug appeared in his mind. It vanished as quickly as it came.

Tabitha returned with the small dagger, handing it to Ruth. Garen watched the commotion as if he stood outside himself. His heart raced. Panic and fear pounded away inside his chest.

“I can’t lose you again, Quinn. It’s been too long. Don’t leave me again.” He didn’t know where the words or sentiment came from. He looked down at her. She was panting now, her empty eyes staring at him as her body writhed in his arms.

“Don, come over here.” Ruth pried Quinn’s fisted hand open, placed the handle of the dagger against her palm and folded her finger around the handle.

Tabitha, Don and Ruth placed their hands over hers.

“Garen, you need to touch it.”

As soon as he touched their hands heat flooded through his body, rushed into his head and the world spun out of control. He held on to Quinn as darkness devoured him.

Oh God, he felt so good. His steady rhythm, sliding in and out, built her ecstasy to blinding proportions. Their sweat-slicked bodies caressed each other, heightening the pleasure. She'd reached the cliff, looked over the edge and prepared to dive into the exquisite bliss he always brought her.

Heat seared her body, sizzled up her spine and slammed into her head, yanking her out of the world she knew now. An unseen hand pulled her back through a dark tunnel lined with scenes, glimpses of lives she didn't recognize.

Ancient peoples chanted around a huge fire in the dark of the night. Men wielded swords and knives, dispatching soulless beings created to terrorize humanity. Heavily robed priests anointed and blessed men and their tools of obliteration.

For a brief second she understood, the original slayers, the ones who began the legacy. This is where she came from. The tunnel became darker, evil blanketed the air. She saw the man, the one from the office building who sent her into this coma of despair.

Soulless creatures surrounded him, clung to him awaiting orders. Dead bodies littered the ground around his feet. His dead eyes met hers, sending chills through her body.

The scene changed in a blink of the eye. A brilliant white light surrounded her, warmed her body. She looked into it and met the most amazing blue eyes she'd ever seen.

"The battle will be difficult." The soft, silky voice comforted her. "The tools have been delivered into your hands. Use them with confidence."

The eyes disappeared, replaced by wavering visions of Ruth, Donald, Tabitha, Garen and Tyson, all reaching out to her, calling for her to return.

"I'm coming." With a violent jerk she awoke in Garen's arms.

Blinking several times to clear her vision, she noticed his head bent over her. He wasn't conscious. Fear gripped her chest. She reached up and laid her hand on his cheek.

"Wake up, Garen." His eyes fluttered twice before opening and gazing down into her face.

"Oh thank God." Ruth collapsed into a plastic lawn chair.

Donald kissed her forehead. "Welcome back."

"You gave us one hell of a scare, woman. Don't ever do it again." Tabitha planted a noisy kiss on her cheek, making her smile.

She looked around for Tyson and found him standing off in the corner, his cheeks stained with tears. She reached out her hand and he ran to her, falling to his knees by her side. Quinn laid her cheek on his bowed head.

"I'm okay, Tyson. Everything's fine."

Ty lifted his head, held her gaze for a moment and then looked up at Garen. He nodded once, Garen reciprocated and then everyone drew a collective relieved breath.

"You can let go now," she told Garen, who still held her body tight against his.

"No."

"No?" It was then she realized the man trembled like an old broken-down shanty during an earthquake.

"I can't, not yet," he whispered to her. "Please let me hold you."

She could only nod her head in agreement.

"How do you feel, Quinn?" Ruth asked, exhaustion dripping in her voice.

Quinn took stock of her body. Nothing hurt, not even her head anymore. "Just weak and tired."

"How'd you know it would work, Mom?" Tabitha slid down on the floor next to Tyson, running her hand up and down his arm to soothe him.

"I didn't."

"What happened, Quinn. What went on inside that building?" Tabitha asked.

Quinn explained what she saw. The horrible feelings that overcame her and the fear that sent her flying out of the building. She did her best to describe the peculiar auras and figured from the looks on the rest of their faces they'd never seen anything like it either.

"It's like the place is the gateway to hell." Even now she couldn't stop the shiver of fear skittering down her spine. Garen gripped her tighter.

"I should have gone in," he grumbled.

"What difference would it have made? Unless you're protected by some divine power you would have suffered too." He'd stopped trembling and the color returned to his face. "Can you let go of me now?"

He shook his head.

Quinn sighed. "Okay, how about this. Let me sit up and you can hold my hand. How's that sound?" Her back ached from the unnatural position he held her in.

From the look on his face it didn't sound all that good but he conceded to her wishes. She stretched her back, rubbed at her sore muscles and then leaned against him, allowing him to hold her hand. It wasn't that great a hardship. Whether she wanted to admit it or not she needed his touch.

"Where did you go?" Tab asked. "Your eyes were open but you weren't there."

"Deep inside myself. It was like I was imprisoned inside my own body." Once again she went on to explain the bizarre happenings, minus the part where she needed Garen to keep her from slipping away permanently. They didn't need to know that.

"You were calling out to Garen, asking him not to let go, not to let it take you. Do you remember that?"

Damn Tabitha for being so observant. "No."

"Where did you go, Garen?"

Quinn turned and looked at him. Where did he go? Something happened to him?

"I don't know. I saw these little blips of things in my head.

"You two cried out at the same time. Where you seeing the same things?"

Quinn began to bristle at the interrogation. Of course he didn't. It wasn't possible.

"I think so."

Her shoulders sagged. Great. She waited for the inevitable.

"What did you see?"

And there it was. Well, it wasn't anyone's business.

"It was personal, Tab, leave it at that."

Surprise didn't even come close what she felt at Garen's words. He apparently didn't want to share it either.

Wanting to change the subject, she looked at Ruth. "What brought me out of it? It felt like something dragged me back."

"The dagger, dear."

Quinn looked at the small blade Ruth held in her hand. The same one they used to stop Don's bleeding. "Is it some kind of healing device?"

Donald chuckled. "No, Quinn. It belonged to my great, great grandfather. It's one of the original blades blessed by the ancient priests called on to anoint and protect those chosen to vanquish Tulpas. Its power is immeasurable."

"So how did it bring me out and release the grip that evil bastard put on me?"

Ruth twisted the blade. The light overhead glinted off the gold casting a glare around the room. "These weapons protected the slayers as well as made it easier to vanquish Tulpas. It broke the hold, dissolving it if you will, just as it dissolves their bodies when it makes contact. When you vanquish a Tulpa, it takes a deep cut to do the job. This," she said holding up the blade, "this simply has to break flesh."

Memories of what she'd seen flooded her mind. "I saw pictures of ancients slaying Tulpas, priests blessing men and their swords. That's where we come from, isn't it? That's how it all got started. Then I saw a bright light. The light told me all the tools were here for the battle ahead. It showed me all of you, including Tyson."

She blinked several times. Where the hell did all that come from? Ruth and Donald looked at her with thrilled faces. Tabitha's eyes held surprise and Garen clenched his jaw as he looked down at Tyson.

Tyson. How did he fit into all of this? Maybe his theory on fate wasn't so far-fetched after all. Still, a sixteen-year-old kid couldn't possibly fight against what they were facing.

No way in hell would she put him in danger like that. He'd lived through enough hell.

"They're afraid of me," Tyson said softly.

They all looked at him.

“When they saw me spying on them, they came toward me. Their cold, empty eyes stared right through me, at least that’s what I thought. Then they all stopped. It was like they saw something that scared them and they backed away.”

The room fell silent for several minutes. Quinn closed her eyes and leaned heavily against Garen. Exhaustion crashed down over her. Sleep would be so great right now.

“I don’t know about the rest of you but I’m hungry. Come on, Ty, let’s go see what we can throw together to eat.” Tabitha helped the boy off the floor then led him out of the tiny room.

“Quinn has given us some things to think about. Let’s pull out the old diaries and see what we can find. Come on, Donald.”

The Rosses left the room and pulled the door shut behind them, leaving her and Garen alone. Could they have been more obvious?

“I’ve never been more scared or felt more helpless in my life,” he growled, sitting very still.

She had but he didn’t need to know that. “Thank you for not telling Tabitha about the vision.”

“It isn’t any of her business but I think it’s something we need to explore.”

She didn’t want to. The can of worms it would open up was greater than she could deal with. Too much lay ahead of them and she could only deal with one thing at a time.

“I’m really tired.” She stifled a yawn, rubbing her eyes with the hand Garen didn’t cling to.

He maneuvered himself around on the cot and pulled her down next to him. “Don’t bother fighting me. You need rest and I need to know you’re here and all right. I don’t know what you felt while this all went down but I know what I felt and I need to deal with it in my own way.”

He spooned her, settled his arm over her hip and released a shaky breath. Quinn pillowed her head on his arm. Later she’d think about how safe she felt with him. Later she’d analyze how this man could affect her so dramatically but right now all she wanted to do was sleep.

Chapter Seven

"They're both out," Tabitha said, breezing into room they used as their kitchen. "Man, that whole mess was intense. Have you two ever seen anything like it?"

Donald shook his head. "Not that I recall and I believe that's something you don't forget."

"I think we can connect with some aspects of what they're going through, Donald. At least the personal side anyway."

"Oh? Interesting."

They shared a warm, touching smile and then went back to studying their books. Tabitha huffed in irritation. "What are you talking about?"

"Hmmm? Oh sorry. I believe Quinn and our Garen are old souls who have traveled through the ages looking for each other."

Tab waited only to be shut out again while her mother stuck her nose back in her book. "Mom! Out with it. What the hell does that mean?"

"What your mother means, honey, is that when they first walked this earth they met and connected. They've finally found each other again."

"Are you saying they've lived multiple lives, died, come back and each time they've been looking for each other, only to find each other now?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying. Much like your father and I did."

Tab's mouth dropped open. "That's so romantic."

Tyson scrunched his nose. "If you say so."

"Do they know this?"

"Probably not," Donald said, stretching his legs out in front of him. "The vision they shared, the one you pressed about, was probably a glimpse of the past. I'm sure they don't understand at this point what's happening. Quinn has suffered in this life and isn't open to a relationship, much less hearing that they're soul mates."

"My parents were soul mates," Tyson explained. "They looked at each other the way you two do, the way Garen looks at Quinn. They finished each other's sentences, knew what the other was thinking without having to be told. When the car accident happened, Dad wasn't hurt all that seriously. Mom hung on by a thread and when she let go, Dad died at the same moment. The doctors couldn't figure it out. I knew though, he couldn't live without her."

Tears welled in Tabitha's eyes. The man left his son to fend for himself. Doomed him to a life of abuse, how awful.

"I understand why now," Tyson continued. "I was meant to work with you guys and couldn't do that if I was still living at home."

"You are wise beyond your years, Tyson, and we are glad you came to us." Ruth leaned over and kissed his cheek. "And you," she said, pointing to Tab, "will not say anything to them about being soul mates. They must find their own path, no matter how rocky it will be."

Tab crossed her arms over her chest and poked out her lower lip. Damn, she wanted to spring that one on Garen and see what developed. How come she never got to have any fun?

"Ya know, Ruth, I could transcribe those diaries onto your computers for you. That way when you need to look something up all you have to do is pick out an index and boom it's there on your screen."

Tab watched her mother gush all over Tyson and then hustled him off into the other room. She'd have that boy work his fingers to the bone and Tyson would love every second of it. It seemed their little slayer team was coming together nicely. Now all they had to do is conquer the pit of hell in the center of the city.

She hoped Garen and Quinn pulled it together quickly. They'd need all their focus on the task ahead. Maybe she could help them along without spilling the beans, so to speak. A clever little plan began to formulate in her wicked mind.

She looked over at her father and caught the knowing gleam in his eyes. "What?"

"You're up to something."

Tab put on her best shocked face.

"Just don't let your mother find out."

* * * * *

The sound of voices drew Quinn from her deep slumber. She stretched as the foggy remnants of sleep slipped away, clearing her head enough to tell her she occupied the cot alone. Disappointment stabbed at her.

"Not good." It didn't bode well for her to become accustomed to having him near. Once this job finished they'd all go on their separate ways and she couldn't afford to be tied up over a man.

Her stomach growled, reminding her it had been forever since she ate. That brought her mind around to Tyson. Had he eaten? She pulled herself up, did a few stretches to work the knots out of her body and then made her way out into the main part of the garage.

Ruth and Tyson sat at two of the computers typing away. Donald riffled through books making notes. Where were Tabitha and Garen?

"Hey, Quinn. You finally woke up."

Tyson smiled at her. Something seemed different about him, she couldn't put her finger on it but it was there. "How long was I out?"

"About four hours."

"You must be hungry, dear. Let me get you something to eat." Ruth gracefully glided from the room.

"Did you eat?" she asked Tyson in a hushed voice. He simply smiled and patted his tummy. "What are you doing?"

"Tyson has been kind enough to offer his services. He's putting our records on the computer to make it easier for us to locate the information we seek," Donald said, never looking up from his books.

"When I'm done I want to write a program for them that helps locate the Tulpas." His fingers flew across the keyboard as he spoke.

This kid really needed to go to college. Ruth reappeared with a plate of spaghetti that smelled wonderful. She sat down, twirled some noodles on her fork and took a bite. She nearly moaned as her eyes rolled back in her head.

"Wonderful, Ruth."

"I'd like to take the credit but Tabitha made it." She sat back down at her computer and continued typing away.

"Where is she?"

"She and Garen went out to get some supplies. We were running low."

It hit her then. She and Tyson put a strain on them. She should offer some money to go toward the food. She dug into her pocket, pulled out a small wad of bills and peeled a few off. Her stash had dwindled recently, time to get a part-time job to fill the meager coffers.

"Put it away." Donald ordered in a harsh tone. "We don't want or need your money."

"I pay my own way," she shot back.

"That may be so but you're our guests and I don't take kindly to being insulted."

Quinn cocked an eyebrow at him. He looked serious, damn serious. Okay, she could understand his take on it. She wouldn't let Tyson pay for anything as long as he stayed with her. Reluctantly she shoved the money back into her pocket. Don gave her a nod of appreciation and returned to his work.

She finished eating, quietly savoring every bite. What a blow it would be to return to eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches once this ended. She'd miss a lot of things.

As she cleaned her plate, Garen and Quinn came through the door carrying two bags each. She offered her help but they said they had it all. Tabitha beamed at her, asked how she felt and then disappeared into the small kitchen to put away the food.

Garen walked a wide berth around her, never once making eye contact. Talk about a change. Usually he found a way to sidle up to her, crowding her space. Nope, this evening he made himself scarce, disappearing out back behind the building.

Tabitha wandered out, flopped down in a chair and smiled. "I was thinking. I don't think Big Bucks will miss those Tulpas all that much. It may put a crimp in his plans but he won't shed any tears over their demise."

That thought didn't sit well with Quinn. She'd seen him, looked into his eyes. One or two he wouldn't miss but they'd already killed three, well actually four. Five he would miss.

"I don't know, Tab. We may have to rethink this plan. He has something big brewing and he needs those creatures. We need to find out what that plan is."

"Oh my. I found something extremely useful," Donald said from his corner of the room. He picked up the worn, leather-bound book and carried it to Ruth.

She read it aloud. Ice crystallized in Quinn's veins. Her heart chilled. "This isn't good." She looked to Tabitha.

"No it isn't."

"What's going on? You all look like you've seen a ghost." Garen sat at the other end of the table, far away from her.

"It seems the older a Tulpa gets the more human characteristics it takes on, including auras," Tabitha informed him. "It explains what Quinn saw. That entire office building is made up inhuman creatures."

Quinn stared at the table, focused her thoughts and ran over what she knew inside her head. The man controlling the group of Tulpas they'd spied on this morning appeared to be a Tulpa himself, one that'd existed for some time apparently. Not just him, that building crawled with beings sharing his same constructed aura.

So someone created them a long time ago. Who? And did this person still breathe? Why were they created? For what purpose would one person design so many creatures? Maybe one person didn't. Maybe a group got together and decided to do this. Again for what purpose?

Why did these existing Tulpas recruit humans to create more? Quinn stood, jammed her fists on her hips and began pacing around the room as her brain aligned and categorized the questions they needed answered. Okay, why would anyone amass an army? To take something over, to protect themselves or possibly both?

Did it revolve around the business? They needed to find out what this business did. That information could start them on the right path.

"You gonna share or do we have to guess what you're thinking?" Tabitha smiled when Quinn snapped out of her deep thought and returned to the group.

"Tyson, can you find out what this company is? What it does and who's listed as the owner?" The owner could be the person responsible for starting this mess. "You know, do your thing with the computer?"

“Do you know the name of it and address?”

Tab rattled off the address. Tyson moved to another computer and began his research. Ruth rooted around for a notebook.

“What other questions do we need to answer, Quinn? Let’s get them written down.”

She liked Ruth’s efficiency. “Okay. We should research unsolved murders, not just recent ones but go back a few years. This head Tulpa has existed for a while, hell, that building reeked of old Tulpas. We also need to figure out how they recruit humans to do their dirty work but the most important question right now is what the hell does that business have to do with them? Why so many females?” She turned to Tab. “Did you guys notice that? There’s more females than males. I noticed that inside the building as well.” *Before that bastard put the whammy on my brain*, she finished to herself.

Speaking of which, a dull ache pounded behind her eyes. She rubbed at her temples, trying to relieve the pressure. God she hoped that inky blackness hadn’t found its way back inside her head.

“I still say we take down the five we found.”

Quinn frowned at Tab. “Do we want to draw that bastard’s attention right now?”

“We can’t let their creators die.”

No they couldn’t. There had to be a way of keeping them alive without sparking suspicion. “Maybe we should just hog-tie them in an old abandoned building for a while,” she muttered.

“I had a nice little conversation with the creator of the male I followed. Put the fear of God in her. Maybe she’ll make herself scarce.” Garen crossed his arms over his chest and smirked. “I could do the same with the others.”

“Worth a try.” Hell, at this point anything was better than doing nothing. Quinn pressed the heel of her hand against her forehead, trying desperately to ward off the headache.

“Found it,” Tyson said with excitement in his voice. “Demonio. They buy struggling companies, send their own people in to run the place until it starts making money again and then sell shares, but they hold the majority.” Tyson released a shrill whistle. “Man, they’re worth six billion dollars. Is there really that much money in the world?”

“Money is power.” Donald crossed the room to Tyson and leaned over his shoulder. “Not to mention a good way to spread their tentacles across the country and create other nests.”

Oh God, could this get any worse?

Ruth chuckled. “Gotta give it to them. They’re bold. Demonio means demon in Spanish.”

A sharp pain stabbed inside Quinn’s head. Her knees buckled and she dropped hard to the floor. When she opened her eyes, the room appeared to be closing in on her.

A black inky substance swam inside her eyes. Her stomach turned, heaved and she nearly vomited from the thick evil crawling through her body.

"Dagger! Dagger!" She had to hold the small knife again. It alone would end this.

Garen raced to her side, dropped to his knees and held her in his lap. She could feel his warmth fighting against the cold emptiness trying to consume her violently shaking body. She fought against the need to shrink inside herself, grasped onto Garen's voice and held it inside her head.

"Don't leave me, Quinn. You can fight this. You can beat this."

Yes, I can. I have to. Her vision went completely black, blinded her to those surrounding her.

She felt the dagger being jammed into her hand, heard Ruth instruct the others to grab a hold. Some of the darkness eased back but crept forward again, weakened but still strong enough to hold her captive.

You can't have me. I won't be taken this way, she screamed inside her head.

The malicious voice that answered back shocked her to her core. Fear so strong it strangled her throat exploded inside her body. *You belong to me.*

"It's not working." Tabitha's voice sounded miles away, weak and frightened. "Why isn't it working?"

Suddenly the brightest, whitest light she'd ever experienced exploded inside her head like a bomb. A piercing, earsplitting scream sounded in her ears and the darkness receded, pulling back so fast it sucked the air from her lungs as if burned by the light. No longer blinded by darkness, she now could only see white. Seconds ticked by slowly as it faded and the colors of her surroundings reemerged.

"What the hell was that?" she panted.

Garen looked between her and Tyson, a mixture of concern and terror on his face. Ruth, Donald and Tabitha stared at the boy in amazement.

The knife Quinn carried sheathed under her shirt began to burn her flesh. She fought against Garen's death grip, struggling to pull the weapon free. When she held it in front of her, the blade glowed as gold light etched markings into the sharpened metal like something out of a science fiction movie.

When it finished the glow faded, smoke wafted into the air and the handle vibrated in her hand. A faint hum sounded and then slowly transformed into ancient chants she'd never heard before yet somehow understood. Protection.

Ruth sank back onto the floor, her shoulders slumping. Donald sat beside her, sliding his arm around her waist. Both stared in astonishment. Tabitha looked as though she'd burst with questions no one could answer. An understanding smile blossomed on Tyson's face as sweat dripped from his brow.

"Tools." The voice said they had all the tools to do the job. It was up to them to figure out how to use them.

"I don't understand," Ruth whispered.

"My grandfather used to tell me the priests were wise beyond their years, blessed with future knowledge. I guess he was right." Donald looked pleased that his family knew their history so well.

"They found a way to pass on the power should most of the original weapons be lost." Ruth reached out to touch Quinn's knife but pulled back before making contact. "Amazing."

"But what did it?" Nothing had happened when she'd touched it hours ago.

They all looked at the still smiling Tyson. He shrugged his shoulders, jammed his hands into his jeans pockets and let lose a little childish giggle.

Quinn didn't understand. She sat up, Garen's arms still wrapped around her, and winced at the ache in her body. "I feel like I stepped in front of a bus." She wasn't a whiner but, damn, every fiber in her body hurt like hell.

Garen helped her to her feet and sat her down in a chair. Ruth gave her a painkiller and a bottle of water. She quickly popped the pill in her mouth and prayed it would work fast.

"Tell us what happened, Quinn," Ruth said, smoothing her hand down her back.

Once again she went through the process of giving them every sordid detail. When she told them about the voice inside her head, Donald jumped up, grabbed his old leather book and began leafing through the pages.

"I could feel the dagger in my hand. Why didn't it work this time?"

"Because," Donald said, running his finger across one of the pages, "we're dealing with something more powerful than your run-of-the-mill Tulpa. This thing is an actual demon that's taken up residence inside one. Apparently he's able to reach out and touch someone so to speak. We hurt him the first time. He withdrew, studied and struck again, learning from the first go-around."

Great. As if things weren't bad enough, now she had a freaking demon running amuck inside her head. "Well, something happened to get rid of it. What?"

"Tyson happened." Tabitha circled the boy, studying him carefully. "When he put his hand on ours, all hell broke loose. Does anyone else notice something different about his aura or is it just me?"

Tyson? A deep navy blue surrounded the boy now, indicating protectiveness. His indigo had exploded from a thin layer into a much thicker band. The silver streaked through the indigo is what confused her and apparently everyone else. Silver only appeared in highly evolved beings like saints or...mystics?

Tools. The word echoed inside her head. Quinn held her knife in her hand and studied the curly markings. *Protection.* The chant reverberated in her brain. Only when Tyson touched the dagger did the energy transfer to her blade. The ancient priests blessed the weapons, enchanting them.

"My God. Tyson is one of the ancients." It all fell together, the pieces fitting snug and tight.

“Only the priests were able to create the weapons,” Ruth whispered, looking at the knife in Quinn’s hand.

No wonder the Tulpas feared him. Could they sense his power or feel it? But what did that mean to the demon?

“Would you stop looking at me like I’m some kinda freak? You’re giving me the creeps.”

“It’s okay, buddy.” Garen approached him, gently wrapped his arm around his shoulder and frowned at the others. “All this information is hard to swallow at once. They don’t mean anything by it.”

“Can I get back to work?”

Ruth gave him a sweet smile. “Sure.”

Quinn did her best not to stare at the kid but she couldn’t wrap her mind around the fact that he’d been one of the original priests. That meant reincarnation actually existed, something she’d never bought into. Yet her heart, her soul, something firmly told her yes.

The pain pill began to kick in. Her mind felt sluggish as her muscles weakened. Thoughts jumbled inside her head, making it impossible to think straight. She wasn’t tired, just lazy.

The others sat and began an in-depth conversation about what this all meant to their efforts. She tried to listen but their words simply bounced around inside her head, never finding a place to stick. With her defenses down, peculiar memories were able to drift in and out at will.

Once again the small cabin emerged in her head. The smell of a warm fire filled her nose, mixed with wildflowers and fresh baking. It felt so comfortable here, in this old-fashioned world where modern-day conveniences didn’t exist. The simplicity made life more enjoyable.

The cabin dissolved around her and she found herself standing on a dirt road in the middle of the woods. She stretched out her arm to find a long sword held tightly in her hand. It glowed, sang of its willingness to protect her. A rustling sound in the trees jerked her attention toward the tree line. Oh yes, her prey hid among the brush.

A vile creature with blood-red eyes and a hunched back, which stank of rotting flesh, emerged. Drool dribbled from its deformed lips as it bared its teeth. She stared into its putrid face, slowly walked around it, sizing it up and then raised her sword. With one swift and sure blow her sword sliced the decaying flesh, cutting deep to the bone.

The horrid screech that echoed in the night died as the abomination exploded into dust. Quinn felt the satisfaction swell in her chest, heard the praise of her ancestors as she walked on light feet toward home.

With each step the woods dissipated into a bright sunny day. She wandered into the field her small home rested in. The sun warmed her face as the fresh scent of the

fields tickled her nose. She reached around, released the top buttons of her dress and allowed it to drop, pooling at her feet.

Standing there, naked under the warm summer sun she never felt more alive. This was her, free, unbound by material. She'd never understood the need to bind one's body to the neck and feet with heavy, uncomfortable clothing. A person came into the world naked and free, what harm to live that way?

Marcus always told her that if she hadn't carried the aura of a slayer she'd be hunted down as an unholy creature what with the way she went about exposing her body. Not that he had a problem with it. He rather enjoyed seeing her prance naked through the fields.

The picture faded. The warmth of the sun dissipated. Quinn sighed, a content smile spreading across her lips.

* * * * *

Garen divided his attention between the conversation and Quinn. He knew for a fact she didn't hear a word being said. Of course who would with those pills Ruth handed out? He took one once and didn't give a damn if the world blew up around him. The goofy look on her face made him smile. It made him wonder just what floated through her mind.

He worried if the drug would give the demon opportunity to invade her once more. The thought of that hideous creature inside her precious body pissed him off severely. He didn't care what she said. He should have been the one to go inside that damn building. Yeah, it may have attacked him too but at least she wouldn't be the one suffering.

He enjoyed watching her as she paced back and forth her beautiful mind turning facts over, analyzing them and figuring where to start. When she focused on something she was sight to behold. Just like when she fought that Tulpa earlier in the day.

It looked like more of a dance than a fight. While he and Tabitha went charging in, she approached gracefully, slowly and with purpose. Mesmerized, he got caught off-guard and took a pop to the mouth. He absently rubbed his tender jaw.

Instead of wasting energy flailing around, she performed each movement with reason. When the damn creature made a few connecting shots, he nearly jumped in and took over. Tabitha held him back. Quinn used it, let the anger take over and fuel her fight. He could see it in her eyes. She enjoyed the kill, toying with the creature by slicing its throat just enough to let it taste death before striking the fatal blow through the chest.

Yep, Quinn Hurst mesmerized him all right. Just like now. Spaced-out, a silly grin on her face and he'd never seen anyone more beautiful.

Quinn rolled her eyes, let her head loll back and released a sigh so breathy and sexy it made him hard. Whatever she daydreamed of, it made her happy.

"I think I should take her back to her hotel." He interrupted the heavy conversation between Donald and Ruth. "Tyson, you ready to leave?"

"No. Is Quinn all right?"

"She's fine, just spaced from the pain pill." Quinn tugged at her shirt, let lose a mewling sound that made his cock twitch. "I better get her out of here."

Ruth watched Quinn squirm in her chair. Alarm had her turning to Tyson. "Why don't you stay with us tonight? You can work for a few more hours. In the morning I'll make you a nice breakfast and you'll be ready to get back at it."

"I don't think Quinn should be alone like this. What if that thing tries to attack her again?"

Tabitha's concern echoed Garen's. "I'll stay with her."

Ruth and Tabitha gave a worried glance at Tyson. Garen knew the kid felt protective of her but he didn't need to see her like this. Under the influence of the drug she could do or say anything.

"She'll be safe with you, Garen. I know you won't let anything happen to her. I don't think the demon will try to hurt her any more though. I felt it leave."

"I hope you're right, kid. Come on, Quinn. I'm going to take you back to your hotel. Tyson is going to stay here."

She opened her eyes and for a split second they seemed crystal clear. "Tyson? You want to stay here?"

Oops. Maybe she understood more than he thought. Tyson walked over, knelt down beside her. "I'll be fine, Quinn. I have work to do and you need rest." He touched her cheek, a gentle brotherly gesture.

She gasped, a shimmer of light washed across her face and then she smiled. "Okay. If you're sure."

"I'm sure. I'll see you tomorrow. Garen will take good care of you. Be nice to him."

Tyson took her by one arm and Garen took the other. They both lifted her out of the chair. Quinn smiled up at him and leaned all her weight against his body.

"I don't know if I can walk. My legs are like noodles." Her cute little nose scrunched up and her lips did a funny little twist.

Garen hooked his arms under her legs and lifted her up, cradling her against his chest. Quinn shrieked, giggled and then settled her head against his shoulder.

"G'night, everyone. Thanks for a great day, oh and, Tab, you're a good cook. I'm gonna hate going back to eating peanut butter and jelly crackers."

Garen bristled, no wonder she didn't weigh anything. Quinn wrapped her arms around his neck.

"You smell like sweat and man. I like it." She nuzzled her nose against his neck.

Her warm breath swept across his skin, sending chills throughout his body. He prayed for strength both in body and mind. She would not make this evening easy for him.

As he moved toward the door, she brushed her lips against his jaw and wiggled in his arms.

“Quinn, please don’t do that. I’m not a strong enough man.”

“Mmmm. You feel plenty strong to me.” She ran her hand across his chest.

He turned back, looked at Ruth with pleading eyes. “Tell me those pills are doing this to her, that she doesn’t realize what she’d doing.” If her personality altered due to the drugs he could convince himself she didn’t mean any of it.

“Sorry, honey. They’re just muscle relaxants. Apparently she’s relaxed enough to let down those walls she’s built up. One beer would do more than that pill.”

Garen swallowed hard. Okay, he could always hope she fell asleep and slept like a log. Otherwise he was screwed.

Chapter Eight

She slid into the car, allowed him to buckle her up and then rested her head against the window. He figured she'd already fallen asleep. Thank goodness for small favors. After everything he'd felt today, the fear of losing her, the anger over her demon attack and the vision they shared, all he wanted to do was crawl into bed and hold her.

Unfortunately, holding her wouldn't be where it stopped. He teetered on the edge and it wouldn't take much for him to lose control. Tabitha told him the best way to get her attention would be to ignore her but he found that incredibly difficult. How did you ignore someone who felt like part of your soul?

He wanted to know more about her. What she liked, disliked. What kind of music and movies she liked and what her favorite food was. He looked over at her. She hadn't moved.

"Quinn, you awake?"

"Yep."

Did he dare take advantage of her state to get the answers? What the hell, why not? "How long have you been on your own?"

"My father died about two years ago. I traveled with him, worked with him. He had a heart attack and left me all alone. I'd never been alone before."

"What did you do?"

She sighed and he looked over at her. Her profile illuminated from the streetlights. "I got scared. Started looking for someone to take care of me and made the dumbest decision of my life."

He waited, hoping she would continue without being prompted but she didn't. He had a feeling it had something to do with those scars.

"We all make dumb decisions at some point our lives. That's what makes us human."

"Some make more than others." She tugged at her shirt again. "I need to get out of these clothes. Why do we cover ourselves with such uncomfortable pieces of cloth? Do you like wildflowers? I think I love wildflowers. I don't know why, I've never been around any. Some day I'm going to find a pretty little cabin out in the middle of nowhere with no one around and I can run through the fields of wildflowers absolutely naked. Doesn't that sound like heaven?"

Okay. "That's the place we saw in our vision, Quinn." Come to think of it, it sounded incredibly familiar, like he could picture the exact area, smell the flowers.

"You think? I want to be that happy, like her, but I don't think that's going to happen. I'm tired of being on guard all the time. I want to be me."

"Why do you feel the need to be on guard all the time?" As if he didn't know.

"I won't survive another situation like that. I won't. I want to be happy like her."

"You can be happy and cautious at the same time. I do it every day."

She turned her head toward him. "What would you have to be cautious about?"

Garen gripped the steering wheel tightly. He didn't want to go into this now. It wasn't the time or place. "We'll talk about it someday. We have a lot to talk about."

She turned her head toward the window and continued staring out at the street. Within a few minutes she began squirming around in the seat and tugging at her clothes. She stretched her legs out, parted them and arched her back. If he didn't know any better he'd think she was having some sort of erotic reaction to the medication.

"What are you seeing, Quinn? What's going on in that pretty head of yours?"

"I'm not pretty. Never was. Plain, ordinary and useless."

She hissed out the last word, lacing it with deep hurt. "That's not true, none of it. You're beautiful and intelligent. Sexy as hell."

She shifted in her seat, placed her hand on his thigh and ran it up and down in a slow, dizzying slide that made him clench his jaw. Each stroke brought her hand closer to his crotch and swelling erection. Every beat of his heart flooded his cock with hot blood.

"I wish I could believe that."

He wished he could show her. "You're sexy with those wonderful brown eyes, sinful lips, skilled hands and an ass that makes me want to grab it."

She chuckled, a deep husky sound that rolled across his body, setting him on fire. "I bet you look awesome in a pair of tight boxers hugging your thighs."

Her hand brushed the bulge in the front of his jeans. He jumped from the sheer pleasure the nearly nonexistent touch brought. Pushing close to the edge, he reached down, wrapped his hand around hers and stopped the torment. "Don't push it, Quinn. I'm trying very hard to be a gentleman."

"No one's ever talked me into an orgasm before. How'd you do that? Do you think you could do it again? It pissed me off, ya know, that you could do that. I'm usually not susceptible to those types of games."

"It's no game, Quinn." He didn't mean to sound so harsh but this running around the mulberry bush was getting old. He pulled off to the side of the road, jerked the car into park and then turned sideways in the seat. "If you think I run around fucking anything that walks by, think again. I've had relationships, good ones, bad ones and each time I put my heart on the line only to have it handed back to me after they stomped the hell out of it."

Quinn listened as she looked at him with clear eyes.

"I don't play games. Don't ever accuse me of playing with you." He couldn't take it, the sympathy in her face bristled his frazzled nerves further. "You need to get some

sleep." He jammed the car back into drive, pulled out onto the street and sped toward her hotel.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to imply you were a man whore or anything."

Garen rolled his eyes.

"You're hot when you're angry."

Oh for crying out loud. She just wouldn't stop. Instead of responding he chose to heed Tabitha's advice and ignore her for a while. The rest of the ride to her hotel went quietly although she started her writhing in the seat again. It seemed when he had her mind occupied with conversation she didn't have a chance to drift off into that place that made her horny. Talking, well, that was out of the question.

When he pulled into the hotel parking lot, he released a relieved sigh. Once she fell into bed she'd fall asleep until morning and he'd be safe. "I need your door key."

She looked at him for a second then looked around. "Oh we're here?"

"Yeah, key."

She fumbled around in her pockets, muttered about how she knew she had it and then collapsed back against the seat.

"You'll have to find it. I can't seem to make my arms or hands work at the moment."

Wonderful. Garen crawled from the car, opened her door and helped her stand. As she leaned against him, he fished around in her front pockets, trying to ignore the fact that his hand played too close to forbidden territory. Once he located the single key, he maneuvered her toward the door and opened it.

Her sudden burst of strength surprised him. She pulled away, walked through the door and did the last thing he expected or needed. With one swift jerk she removed her shirt and tossed it on the floor. Garen groaned, turned and looked back to the safety of his car. He could sleep out there tonight.

He turned in time to see her jeans fly across the room. In the darkness of the room he could only make out her silhouette. That alone could have brought him to the brink of explosion but when she turned on the light, he nearly dropped to his knees.

There she stood, his slayer, in the thin white lacy bra that he'd felt earlier in the day. The thin scrap of material cupped her luscious breasts so lovingly he wanted to weep. His gaze drifted down to the matching lace boy shorts that hugged her tight ass like a second skin.

Garen tried to swallow but every bit of moisture in his mouth evaporated. The black scabbard strapped to her torso added to her allure, giving her curvy, supple body an air of danger. Fuck, that turned him on.

He considered himself a reasonable man but at the moment reason evaded him. Reason would have him turning around and crawling back into the safety of his car. Reason would make him cross the room and toss a blanket over her. Instead, he stood gawking at her like a hungry wolf that hadn't eaten in a year.

"That feels so much better. I usually sleep naked but the last two nights I've had to wear something to bed. It'll feel better to sleep tonight. Are you going to stand there all night or are going to come in?"

Yeah, Garen, what are you going to do? Before he realized it he closed the door and locked it.

"I can't get this damn thing off. Will you help me?"

She fiddled with the strap of the scabbard. Garen closed his eyes, took a shaky breath and walked toward her on trembling legs. As his unsteady hands worked to untie the old, fraying material he did his best not to notice her creamy smooth skin. When the knot released he slipped it from her shoulder and held it out in front of him.

"Thank you. Wow, I feel so light and free." She spread her arms out to her sides and fell back on the bed. "When Tyson touched my face something melted away inside me. I haven't felt this good in ages."

Exhaustion speaking, he told himself as he tried to disregard his throbbing cock. She'd return to her standoffish self in the morning. He chanced one last look at her splayed out on the bed, her brown nipples pressing against the sheer, thin lace of her bra and the sexy little panties hugging and curving over her mound.

"You're killing me, Quinn, but you know that, don't you?" he growled from deep in his throat. He thought she'd fallen asleep.

Because she lay so still, he took the opportunity to peruse the scars covering her body. He'd already seen the ones on her breasts and stomach, they didn't shock him. The thick silver slices on her thighs and between them did. They all appeared to be the same in length, as if strategically placed with purpose. How long did she suffer this inhumane abuse?

"You scare me," she whispered, drawing him from the pit of anger he'd worked himself into. "But you turn me on too. I don't know what to do about you."

He didn't want to just turn her on. He wanted to capture her mind and heart but for now he'd take that. Small steps were better than none.

"You don't have to do anything right now, Quinn. But before too long we'll have this out." They'd either kill each other or make the most exquisite love ever made. "Get some rest. I'm going to take a shower."

"Something pulls me to you, Garen."

That he understood.

She lay still and quiet again, her chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm. Finally asleep, he thought to himself. A nice shower might relieve his body of this awful ache he suffered whenever they were together. And though he didn't do it often, he'd have to resort to relieving himself with his hand.

As the shower warmed, he thought of how easy it would be to take advantage of her right now. He knew a lot of men would do just that but he meant what he said

yesterday. When they came together it would be in the proper place, she deserved that. And she deserved being fully aware with all her senses.

After tossing his shirt over the toilet, he unsnapped his jeans and slumped at the relief it gave him not to have the tight material confining his erection. Once he kicked them away, he slipped his fingers into the waistband of his boxers, pulled them far away from his hard cock and lowered them.

Not being confined felt so much better but nothing would feel as good as being held inside her tight body. With his hard, aching, throbbing cock jutting from his body he stepped beneath the warm spray of the shower. Tilting his head up, he let it gently wash over his face in hopes it would rinse away the terrifying and stressful day.

He kept the memories of her mental attack at bay. The events passed and she came through them like a trooper, never once complaining. Her strength intoxicated him as much as her beauty and sexuality. She came alive when he held her today and yesterday. He had a feeling if and when she ever let those walls fully collapse she'd unveil her true self, a self that would bring him to his knees with pleasure.

Garen picked up the small bar of soap and lathered his body. Wound so tight, his skin hurt and prickled from the simple act of bathing. Time to do the deed and hope it gave him enough relief to get through the next couple of days.

Reaching down, he gripped his overextended cock and worked his hand up and down the shaft, fisting the head with extra pressure. He braced himself against the shower wall with his arm as he worked furiously for the release he so desperately needed. It felt good but not good enough. Gripping tighter and increasing his speed, he labored to come.

Suddenly the shower curtain opened. Quinn stood there completely naked and watched him stroke himself. She bit down on her bottom lip and then snaked the tip of her tongue between those soft petals, licking them. That small act did more than the last few minutes of self-pumping.

"I can help you with that."

Her husky voice made his cock twitch in his hand. He shook his head. "No. You aren't yourself and I won't take advantage. Go. Let me do this. Please." God he hated pleading.

"I'm more myself than I have been in a long time." She stepped into the tub, ducked under his arm and settled under the water spray. "You heard Ruth. A beer would affect me more."

Stepping back, he took in the sight of her, fully naked and wet. Her unbelievable body there for him. Perfect round breasts with lovely brown nipples pointed toward him, begging to be sucked. Her tight, tucked tummy laid a pathway to her—*Oh God, help me*—cleanly shaven pussy. He didn't remember that, didn't recall not feeling any soft curls between his fingers yesterday. How could that be?

"If you ignore the scars, I can."

"I'm not looking at the scars." His voice strangled in his throat. "I've never seen anything so beautiful in my life. You're a goddess, Quinn."

A pink hue bloomed across her cheeks as she lowered her head. Garen lifted her chin with one finger. "Don't ever be embarrassed around me. You have nothing to be embarrassed about."

"I've felt more beautiful over the last two days than I ever have. You make me feel that way."

As she moved toward him, his erect cock poked into her belly, sending electric shocks coursing through his system. He couldn't stop the moan, didn't want to. Bending his knees, he lowered himself and sucked one of her pearly nipples between his lips.

Quinn arched her back, offering more as she ran her fingers through his wet hair. Garen feasted on her breast, rolling her nipple on his tongue, sucking hard. She enjoyed it, her little mewls of pleasure filling the tiny bathroom. His cock swelled further as if reaching for her pussy.

He wanted to enjoy her, taste and feel her. Reaching down, he cupped her mound, slipped one finger between her folds and rubbed against her swollen clit. Her hips bucked forward, pressing hard into his hand. Slick juice coated his wet finger. Reluctantly he pulled away from her, releasing her breast with a pop, removed his hand and stared into her eyes as he sucked her sweetness from his finger.

Her hot brown eyes widened in surprise and then warmed to a smoldering heat. Obviously she'd never been tasted this way before. What other things could he teach her?

Lowering to his knees, he reached around behind her and held her sexy tight ass in his hands, bracing her. With one quick movement he slipped his tongue between her folds and swiped his tongue from her tight opening to her clit. She gasped, gripped his shoulders and would have collapsed if not for him holding her.

While her fingers dug into his shoulders, he lapped her sweet honey and sucked at her throbbing clit. Switching off and on, he delved his tongue inside her, brushing his tongue across her opening, working his way up to her nub and then sucking with force. Quinn's knees buckled, her nails dug into his skin and she panted, moaned and pleaded for more.

"Don't stop. Please don't stop."

He had no intention of stopping, not until she exploded, drenching his lips in her thick cream. With his own arousal burning, he sank his fingers into her ass cheeks, drove his tongue far inside her tight opening and thrust back and forth. Feeling her walls grip his tongue and her juice flow over his lips, he pulled out, sucked her clit between his teeth and bit down slightly.

She cried out, shouted his name and came hard. Pressing his nose against her nub, he shoved his tongue back between her smooth lips and caught her cream as it oozed from her channel. Very gently he stroked her there, softening his tongue so not to

aggravate sensitive tissue. The sound of her pleasure ran rampant through his veins, mixing with his blood like a drug that made him heady and dizzy. A side effect he didn't expect and had never experienced.

When her orgasm ceased, he rose, kissed her parted, stunned lips and allowed her to taste herself on his tongue. She hesitated at first but quickly relaxed, devouring what he offered. His painful cock throbbed between their bodies, twitched and seeped precum.

As if sensing his pain, Quinn pulled away, gripped him in her hand and lowered to her knees. Bracing himself emotionally and physically, he closed his eyes and enjoyed the feel of her soft hand wrapped around his iron rod. At first he feared her grip would be too gentle but lost all thought process when her tongue slipped out and licked his head.

A violent rush of fire and blood surged through his body, slammed into his cock and wrenched a groan from his throat. He wouldn't survive this, wouldn't last more than a few seconds. He'd gone too long without and needed her desperately.

Quinn cupped his tightly drawn balls, pressed her thumb hard against the base of his cock where the thick vein jutted out and effectively cut off the immediate need to explode in her hand. On a sigh of relief he gently slipped his fingers through her hair. Her knowledge of the male body would help him through this or so he thought.

Moist heat consumed his cock as she slipped him between her lips and took him all in one thrust. Stars burst in his eyes, his legs trembled and it took every ounce of strength to keep from collapsing. When her tongue snaked around his shaft, he swore she wrapped him in silk.

While drawing him out she sucked, a steady pressure that made him grow thicker inside her warm mouth. Instead of fully releasing him, she stopped, holding his head just inside her moist heat and lavished him with licks and sucks until he thought the world would tumble around them. When he nearly reached the point of no return, she took him all the way in again.

He chanced a look down and all the breath in his lungs froze. Did she realize exactly how gorgeous she looked? Her heavy lashes dripped with water while she concentrated on pleasing him. The sight of his cock sliding between her lips looked completely exotic and natural.

Quinn took him all the way in until his head touched the back of her throat. When she moaned, the vibration traveled up his shaft and reverberated in his tightly drawn balls.

"Quinn." He couldn't say anything else, every breath, every shiver, every inch of his body became consumed by her.

Her trick of holding off his release began to fail. The pressure in his body pushed past her thumb as she picked up her pace of swallowing and teasing with her tongue. To keep from making her feel forced, he withdrew his hand from her hair and placed it behind his back.

Once again he closed his eyes, teetered on the brink and allowed her to throat him one last time. So close to the edge and not wanting to come in her mouth, at least not now, he reached down and lifted her to her feet.

“What’s wrong? Don’t you like it?”

Caressing her cheek, he smiled. “You are incredible. Too incredible.”

She grabbed him again, working her hand up and down his shaft. “Fuck me, Garen.”

He shook his head. “No, Quinn. Fucking isn’t what we’ll do. When I lay you down I’ll make love to you, such sweet love that I’ll erase any foul memories you have.”

She swallowed hard, he could see her throat clench. “Don’t say that.”

“I say what I mean, Quinn, but not here.”

“What about... I mean you made me... That looks like it hurts.”

She honestly looked perplexed. Oh God, he was losing himself to her. “It does, honey, and with your permission I’ll take care of it.”

“Not with your hand when I’m standing right here.” The wicked look in her eyes made him laugh.

He turned her around, pressed his aching erection between them and then began the process of bringing her to a peak again. With one hand he plucked at her nipple until it pebbled. The other hand stroked her pussy and then flicked her clit. She responded by reaching around and grasping his ass.

Garen slipped two fingers inside her. She rode his hand, her head flailing back and forth against his chest.

“That’s it, baby. We’ll come together, I promise.”

When he felt her inner walls tighten around his fingers, he slipped himself between her legs. “Hold your legs together nice and tight for me.”

Quinn squeezed her legs around his throbbing cock. While continuing to stoke her, he pumped himself in and out between her legs. Just the feel of her soft flesh surrounding him made his head spin.

“Garen,” she panted, “I can’t wait.” She released his ass and wrapped her arms around his neck.

He thrust his hips in and out, in and out, his fingers matching stroke for stroke. He latched his lips on to her neck as his entire body brewed and boiled with a mixture of pain and pleasure. He pinched her nipple, sending her plummeting over the edge. Her satin walls clenched his fingers, sending him crashing into oblivion.

He thrust hard once more and then stiffened as he exploded between her thighs. Hot cum coated her supple legs. Sweat cream saturated his finger and they both clung to each other, riding out their orgasms. When Quinn slumped in his arms, he tightened his grip, not ready to let her go yet.

Worry niggled in the back of his brain. Would she run from him now, regret what they'd done? In the storm of passion, fears could be ignored, but after the loving they returned and sometimes with full force.

When she released him, he prepared for the worst. She turned in his arms, laid her head against his chest and wrapped her arms around his waist. The way she settled against him warmed his heart. At least she still felt comfortable.

"I should get you washed up before the water gets cold," he said, running his hand up and down her back.

"You don't have to do that."

"I want to."

He lathered the soap and gently washed her back. With extra care he allowed his hands to slide over the curve of her ass. Still concerned he'd scare her off, he didn't linger long. Once the water washed away the suds, he turned her, pulled her back against his chest and began to bathe her front.

So far she didn't reject, pull away or fight his ministrations. With his hands full of lather, he started at her shoulders and worked his way down to her breasts. As his hands cupped the weight of her globes, she sighed. He wanted to tell her how beautiful she looked and felt but once again small steps were required.

Quinn reminded him of a skittish cat. The slightest movement or sound would send her fleeing for safety. He carefully soaped her stomach, worked his way down lower and stopped. Did he dare go any farther?

She answered him by placing her hand over his and leading him down. The thrill that shot through his body made him shiver. Slipping his hand between her legs, he soaped away the remnants of his ejaculation and then washed away her slick cream.

He felt as though he held the most precious flower in his hand and gave that blossom the loving care it deserved. The trust she put into him at this moment meant the world to him. No doubt this woman could make or break him. He feared, however, that the latter was more likely. Still, he wanted to enjoy the time she gave him.

After the soap rinsed from her body, she turned again, took the bar from his hand and smoothed it across his chest. The emotion that welled inside his body choked him, tightening his throat. He didn't expect this. He merely wanted to take care of her and now she repaid him with her gentle touch.

She didn't speak and neither did he. The precipice they walked seemed too fine to chance any one word that would push them off. So he stood under the water spray and watched as she explored his body under the pretence of bathing him.

With tender hands she lathered his sac and paid careful attention, making sure every nook and cranny of it and his cock was washed clean. Concentrating on warding off another erection, he closed his eyes and reminded himself time would win her over. Still, the more she played, the more his flaccid rod stiffened.

"If you keep doing that we'll never get out of this bathroom." When he opened his eyes, she bit down on her lower lip as if weighing her decision. At least she didn't let go immediately as if it might come to life and bite.

For an instant he thought she might continue, wanting to carry on their intimacy but she gently released him. He didn't feel the disappointment he expected, instead seeing it as chance to mentally score points with her. The cooling water washed away the suds. Time to end this quiet session of exploration.

Garen turned off the water, stepped from the tub and grabbed a towel, holding it out in front of him. Quinn stepped into it and allowed him to dry her body, yet another act of trust in his mind. When he finished with her body, he rubbed her lovely brown hair, soaking up the extra water.

She took the towel and reciprocated, drying him from head to toe. This closeness seemed so familiar to him. The ability to react to each other without cluttering the moment with words. It had happened before. But how?

He pushed the thought away for later. He needed to enjoy the here and now. Good things could be taken away so fast.

What would happen now? Unease slid through him as she walked through the bathroom door. Should he get dressed? Would she bundle herself up to her neck and hide beneath the thin, crummy blankets?

He occupied himself in the bathroom for a few moments, slipping his boxers back on, hanging the towel and simply wasting time. When he had nothing else to do, he took a deep bracing breath and walked out. He purposely kept his gaze away from her and noticed her clothes strewn on the floor.

He gathered them, folded them and placed them on the dresser. Okay, now what?

"Wanna watch a little TV?" Her soft voice startled him.

"Sure." He looked over and found her on top of the bed, propped up on pillows and completely cloaked in her two-times-too-big nightshirt. Well, it shouldn't surprise him.

She looked tired, dark circles blared from under eyes. "Do you feel okay, Quinn?" She looked a little pale as well.

"Tired and weak. I think those two attacks took more out of me than I thought."

"You don't feel like it's trying to come back, do you?" He walked to her bed and sat down on the edge.

"No. I'm pretty sure Tyson got rid of it. God. I can't believe what happened."

The need to touch and soothe her had him reaching out and rubbing her shoulder. "This turned out to be bigger than any of us thought. We have a real war on our hands." Quinn tilted her head, giving him better access to her shoulder.

"That feels good. Do you think we can win it? I mean, there's only a few of us and God only knows how many of them. It seems hopeless."

"Nothing's hopeless. Lie down and I'll rub your back."

She didn't argue, simply stretched out on her stomach and moaned when he dug into her tired muscles.

"Do you really believe Tyson is an ancient priest in a boy's body?" he asked.

"I know he is. Don't ask me how, I just know. It makes sense though. You should have felt what I felt, seen what I saw. And what about my knife? Priests are the only ones able to do that."

She had a point. He saw the kid's aura too. No everyday kid possessed colors like his. He wondered if Tyson would be able to deal with it.

"I'm anxious to try out my new blade," she said on a yawn.

Yeah, he wanted to see that too.

Suddenly Quinn propped herself up. "Is your blade regular or is it like mine?"

"Just a plain old hunter's knife why?"

"I wonder if Tyson could change yours and Tabitha's. Hell, I wonder if he could change any old knife. We could use all the help we can get. If all you have to do is break the skin it will make this job a whole lot easier."

Another good point but he hesitated in asking the boy to try. They weren't sure exactly what powers Tyson possessed and playing around with something they didn't understand could get them in trouble.

"I'll ask him tomorrow. We have a lot of planning to do, starting with what we want to do about the creators of those five Tulpas we found. Tabitha is hell-bent on killing the Tulpas."

She dropped back down on the bed and yawned again. She really needed to sleep. "Don't think about it tonight. We'll hit it head on tomorrow when everyone is fresh."

"Yeah. Good idea."

Her breathing evened out and she felt like putty under his hands. Just because he wasn't ready to stop touching her yet, he continued working his hands up and down her back. When he decided not to push any further, he stopped.

"Garen?"

Not asleep. "Yes?"

"Would you lie here with me? I'm half afraid to go to sleep. I know I said Tyson got rid of that thing in my head but still."

"Okay." He didn't have to be asked twice. He pulled the comforter off the other bed and lay next to her. She rolled to her side, scooted back against him and pillowed her head on his arm.

Garen reached over and turned off the light, keeping the TV on. He curved his body around hers and prayed he'd be able to sleep with her gorgeous ass cradling his cock.

Chapter Nine

The sound of the door opening and closing woke Quinn. She rubbed her eyes and looked over at the tiny clock on the nightstand. Morning already. She stretched beneath the comforter and realized, although still tired, her body felt wonderful.

Was it from a good night's sleep, from the pill Ruth gave her or the foreplay in the shower last night? Of course that glorious backrub Garen gave her could have done it. God that man had magical hands, in more than one way.

Her stomach quivered, remembering how sweet and tenderly he'd treated her. Never once did he make her feel pressured, instead treating her like a fragile piece of glass. She willingly went to him prepared to give into the burning desire to have sex. When she'd opened the shower curtain and seen him pumping his cock, she'd almost jumped him right there.

She had to admit her disappointment when he'd refused to have sex with her. His explanation threatened to cut through her protective wall around her heart. Even now she didn't want to think about it. But he'd managed to sate them both in ways that made her belly tingle. The man had a scrumptious body, all lean muscle with planes and angles she loved running her hands over.

She wasn't so dense as to believe that all men treated women the way her last lover did. Casting the evils of one person onto another wasn't fair. Still, the gentleness Garen treated her with amazed, befuddled and terrified her. The impulse to give into him became harder to ignore.

Shoving from the bed, she padded across the floor to the bathroom, turned on the shower, shed her nightshirt and stepped in. She couldn't let the prospect of excellent sex cloud her mind. She had a feeling it would be more than sex for him. He'd expect more, start wanting to know everything about her and he couldn't know more about her.

When she finished rinsing her hair, she shut off the water and stepped from the tub. No, she couldn't let him seduce her anymore and she had to rein in her need to seduce him. No matter how much she wanted to tangle with him between silk sheets and quiver with need under his touch, she couldn't let it happen.

"Get a grip, Quinn. Focus on the job."

With a towel wrapped tightly around her body she peeked out of the bathroom. Garen hadn't returned so she quickly snatched up some clothes and put them on. Just as she tugged on her shirt, the door opened and Garen strolled in.

"Good morning. I hope I didn't wake you."

“No, you didn’t. Give me just a minute and I’ll be ready to go.” Damn he looked good in the morning, especially with that short, scruffy beard making him appear rugged.

“No problem.” He walked to the bed and sat while she combed her hair and pulled it back into a damp ponytail.

She tucked her knife in her back pocket and felt a peculiar vibration. After a few seconds it stopped. Odd, she’d have to ask Ruth about that.

“Okay, I think I’m ready.” When she turned around, he stood there, inches from her, crowding her space and drenching her in his sexual aura. Unable to put together a coherent thought with him so close, she took several steps back.

“I got you something yesterday.” Garen pulled the leather coat from behind his back and handed it to her. “When I saw it, I don’t know, I thought it looked like you.”

When she didn’t reach for it, he draped it over her arm. Its warm burnt brown color matched her eyes. As she breathed in the distinctive leather aroma, she ran her hand over the creamy-smooth hide. Why would he buy her something so extravagant?

How wonderful it would feel against her skin. She’d never received such a luxurious gift before. And that’s why she couldn’t accept it. It meant something. A man didn’t give an expensive present unless he wanted something or he wanted to make their tenuous relationship more serious.

A mixture of sadness and fear mingled in the pit of her stomach. It wasn’t that she didn’t appreciate the gesture. It just couldn’t mean anything, to either of them.

“It’s wonderful,” she said, looking up into his eyes. The satisfied smile spreading across his face only confirmed her decision to reject the gift. “But I can’t accept it.”

“Why the hell not?”

Not wanting him to see the tears burning in her eyes, she cast her glance away. Genuine hurt laced his words and she hated that. Swallowing around the lump in her throat, she handed it back.

“Do you buy gifts for everyone in your life?”

“No. I rarely buy gifts for people.” He wrapped his fist tight around the coat as he spoke.

“That’s why I can’t take it, Garen.”

“Too soon, I get that. I’ll put it away and save it for later.”

“No.” She wanted to work up a good mad over this but simply couldn’t. His gesture touched her. How could he know her so well and yet only have known her for a few days. “There won’t be a later for us, Garen. When this is over and if we all walk away alive, I’m gone.”

A jumble of emotions crossed his face all in a matter of seconds. Whatever war waged inside, calm and collected won the battle.

"So you keep saying." He reached out to touch her face but thought better of it, pulling his hand back. "We should get going. Ruth will probably have a big breakfast waiting."

That would be heaven. For some reason she seemed ravenous this morning. Cautiously she followed him out the door and to his car. For the first five minutes of the ride neither said a word. Normally she wouldn't mind that but this morning she would've welcomed mindless chatter.

"Are you sorry about last night?"

His question caught her off-guard at first but before she could stop herself, she answered. "No, I'm not." Honesty, at least about this, she could give him. "Just so you know, I don't make it a habit to engage in sexual behavior with men I've only known a few days."

"I didn't think you did."

His slight chuckle as he spoke made her feel better, as if the wavering, invisible wall between them since she refused his gift melted away. She needed to be able to work alongside him without anything interfering. They had one hell of a fight ahead of them.

"What's wrong?"

Quinn shook her head. "I just don't see how we're going to be able to vanquish so many Tulpas without them zoning in on us and retaliating. I don't want to see anyone get hurt." Especially him but that bit of info she didn't need to share.

"Let's wait and see what the gang came up with last night. No point in buying trouble before we need to. For all we know there's a simple way to do this, we just aren't seeing it yet."

"Are you always so positive?" she asked, smiling at him.

"Can't help it. That's just the way I am."

Quinn spent the rest of the ride trying not to let his optimism rub off on her. If she'd learned one thing in her life it was never get her hopes up. By the time they pulled into the gravel parking lot of the garage her stomach growled and churned, from hunger or worry she couldn't be sure.

When they walked inside, the smell of bacon, eggs and toast permeated the building. Her stomach grumbled loudly. Garen smiled and chuckled. She couldn't help but grin an apologetic smile.

They entered the large bay of the garage and found Tyson working feverishly at the computer. Quinn gave a quick read of his aura, making sure what she'd seen last night wasn't a hallucination. Sure enough, silver still streaked through his colors.

"Hey, you look better this morning. How'd you sleep?"

"Like a baby, Ty. Don't tell me you've been at this all night?"

"Of course he wasn't. I made him shut everything down at ten." Ruth entered the room carrying two plates heaped with eggs and bacon. "Any further attacks?"

"None. Tyson chased the bastard out of my head last night."

Ruth set down the plates and silverware and then walked to her, held her face in her hands and studied her face. "I'm glad you feel better. I have to say you had me more than a little worried." She placed a gentle kiss on her forehead and then returned to the table.

Donald literally danced into the room whistling a happy little tune, carrying a plate of toast stacked a dozen high. "Hey, now there's a pretty face."

"I think I'm more handsome than pretty but thanks anyway, Don."

They all laughed at Garen's joke, including her. Donald shook his finger at him and then winked at her. Tabitha exploded into the room with a carafe of coffee.

"You couldn't be pretty with a pound of foundation and an entire factory of lipstick. But I would like to see you in a dress some day."

Quinn and Garen scanned Tabitha's outfit for the day. Another pair of clunky knee-high boots, red-and-white striped tights that disappeared under a very short, shiny black skirt and a tiny neon orange shirt that barely covered her breasts, exposing most of the tattoo she'd proudly shown Garen. About six springy braids erupted from her head.

Garen whistled. "Looking like an angel as always, Tab."

Knowing he was as shocked by her appearance as she, Quinn appreciated the fact that he didn't feel the need to insult the girl. Besides, at this point, Quinn would be more surprised if Tabitha wore normal clothes.

"Is that sarcasm I hear?" She stomped her way toward them, cocked her hip to the side and gave a very wicked smile. "Would you like to see my tattoo again, Garen?"

Quinn snorted, covering her mouth as Garen's face paled.

"I'd like to see it," Tyson said, raising his hand like a school student.

"No!" Quinn, Garen, Tabitha, Ruth and Donald all yelled at once.

Tabitha stepped to the side of Quinn, slung her arm over her shoulders and placed a wet, noisy kiss on her cheek. "See you're still with us. I guess that demon didn't sink his slimy fingers into your brain again."

Quinn just smiled and shook her head.

"Good," she whispered in her ear. "It wouldn't be the same around here without you."

Those simple words sank like dead weight in her stomach. She pushed away the warm, fuzzy feeling and refused to think about its meaning.

"Come, sit and eat," Ruth ordered.

Without being told twice Quinn made her way to the table and sat. Her mouth watered and her stomach made it known it was time to eat. They all dug in and when they finished not even a stray piece of egg remained on any plate. *God, I'll miss eating like this.*

She helped clear the table, wash up dishes and store them while Ruth issued orders in her stern yet sweet way. Tabitha and Garen picked at each other like brother and sister as Tyson occasionally add his two cents.

“You have a very pretty smile. You should do it more,” Donald whispered to her.

That’s when she realized she’d been smiling since she walked into the place. *Don’t get used to this*, she reminded herself. This family stuff wasn’t for her. She’d do nothing but bring misery to these happy people.

Stacking the last plate, she turned to Tabitha. “We should get started planning.”

They all agreed and adjourned back to the garage bay. Tyson had discovered the Tulpa housing the demon had been created about eighteen months ago, old by Tulpa standards since they mature and learn at a faster rate than humans. From what he could dig up, the creator fell victim to his thought a short time after, but not before he left all his money and small business to it.

Approximately three weeks later Demonio cropped up, the listed owner Derrick Towns. Hours of research showed nothing on Derrick Towns before Demonio. The city began seeing a spike in unsolved murders. Most involved broken necks but others ranged from bloodletting, to their hearts being removed and any other form of grotesque mutilation that could be thought up.

Ruth suggested sacrifices and Quinn had to agree. If a demon ran the show he’d want human suffering, not just death. From what Tyson could throw together, the victims had been murdered elsewhere and then dumped.

The question of why – well, they could only speculate. Quinn suggested the demon forming an army. What better way to spread its evil than to create hundreds of soulless beings to do the demon’s bidding. They all agreed.

Now that they had most of the background, they needed to come up with a way to destroy this so-called army. Quinn asked the question that bothered her. “Would the demon die from the blade and if not, what then? Would it move on and find another empty shell to inhabit or would it return to hell?”

Donald told them he hadn’t found anything in his old diaries as yet but he’d continue looking. In the meantime they needed to begin the business of vanquishing Tulpas. Everyone kicked in their idea of how to go about this task and then they put it to a vote, including Tyson.

The verdict – five to one they go out and take down as many as they could before the demon caught on. In the meantime Donald would continue searching his books for an answer. Quinn couldn’t get past the idea that picking them off one at a time would be a waste of time but reluctantly agreed.

“Tyson, do you think you could change Garen or Tab’s knife the way you changed mine?”

Garen bristled next to her.

“I don’t know. I’m not even sure how I did it last night.”

"Can you try?"

"Why not?"

Tabitha pulled out her knife and laid it on the table. They all watched as Tyson's hand hovered over it. The knife vibrated on the table, jumped and then slid away.

"I can't touch it. It's like there's something keeping me from picking it up."

"We need to do what we did last night, everyone hold on to it and then Tyson puts his hand over ours."

Tabitha grabbed the knife and they all stacked their hands on top of each other.

"Go ahead, Tyson," Quinn urged. "Try."

The boy placed his hand over theirs. An intense heat built from the handle out but nothing else.

"Sorry."

"It's okay, honey," Ruth soothed. "We'll figure it out."

Garen looked at his watch. "If we want to start with the group that meets at that old abandoned building we'd better get moving."

As they all stood and made their way to the door, Quinn stepped up to Tyson. "Maybe you can help Donald with his research. Something might click with you that doesn't with him."

"Yeah. Be careful, Quinn."

After they received hugs from Donald and Ruth along with warnings to be careful, they took Garen's car and headed back into the city. An air of tension settled inside the vehicle. Most likely they all had different opinions about what they were headed to do.

Quinn still couldn't shake the unsettling feeling that something big awaited them, maybe not today but soon. The thought of picking off Tulpas one at a time wouldn't work, not this time. This demon running the show wouldn't stand by and watch as his army was decimated.

She'd never encountered a demon, hell, until last night she really didn't believe in them. Experiencing one firsthand changed all that. Hopefully Donald and Ruth would find a way to handle this. For now though, she'd focus on eliminating five Tulpas that were ordered to kill tonight. That's how she'd go about this mess, one step at a time.

Garen parked the car along the street four blocks away from the kill zone. Without a word they stepped from the car, locked it up and walked side by side down the street. What a sight they must have made strutting along the sidewalk, determination etched on their faces. Some people turned, grabbing a second look, but Quinn figured they were mostly gawking at Tabitha.

As they neared their destination, Quinn felt her knife heat. The warmth sank through her flesh, feeding her with confidence. They took up their hiding spots outside, waiting for the creatures to show.

They didn't wait long. Like a group of mindless zombies the Tulpas appeared and gathered in front of the dilapidated building. Quinn carefully slid her blade from her back pocket. As soon as she wrapped her fingers around the handle a low hum vibrated up through her fingers and traveled up her arm, shoulder and ended in the center of her chest. Inside her head she heard the faint chants of her ancestor slayers demanding death.

"Derrick will be happy with us. We took care of our creator last night," one of the swimsuit girls she'd followed yesterday said.

The pain of disappointment washed through her. They were too late for that poor, ignorant boy. Anger soon blossomed, feeding the desire to kill. She'd take these two down first. Focusing all her attention on them, she stood from her hiding spot and walked with sure, steady feet toward the nest.

Had she been more aware of her surroundings she would have seen Garen and Tabitha joining her but she didn't. All she could see, all she wanted to see were the two vile sluts that ended a young man's life last night. The blade she held in her hand became an extension of her arm, melding with bone and flesh, a living thing thirsty for destruction.

By now they'd caught the attention of the Tulpas, their empty eyes sizing up the three humans who dared to invade their gathering. Quinn felt a wicked grin spread across her lips, baring her teeth. Her targets, the two overdone females, stiffened as she headed straight for them. They didn't back away in fear, stupid bitches, instead they jutted their perfect chins forward and looked down their noses at her.

Stupid cunts, they have no idea of their fate. Quinn raised her blade. Let them get a good look at the instrument that would vanquish them. Did they know fear, pain? God she hoped so.

Rushing blood whooshed through Quinn's ears, deafening her to anything but the ancients singing their songs of war. As she neared her victims, her muscles bunched, adrenaline pouring into her system. Still she walked with ease, approaching her prey.

Quinn cut the females off from the rest of the nest, knowing, trusting that Garen and Tabitha would do their bit to keep the others from attacking while her back was turned. She circled the swimsuit girls, meeting their empty eyes as they followed her, spinning in a tight circle, wobbling on their high heels.

She wouldn't make the first move, never did. Eventually the false confidence would push the creatures into action, as it always did. Sure enough, one let out a growl and lunged, its hands reaching for her head.

Her blade came alive, sensing the attack. Quinn wrapped her fingers around the creature's wrist, yanked, twisted and chicken-winged the pathetic being. In one swift, sure stroke she drove her blade into its chest. As soon as she felt the blade sink into the flesh she released the creature, took one step back and watched as ash and smoke erupted into the air.

A high-pitched howl sounded behind her. Without even a glance Quinn stiffened her arm, raised it and jabbed backward, driving the blade into the other female's throat. Horrendous gagging lasted only a few seconds before the evil exploded, raining its debris onto the filthy ground.

Words of victory rang in her head. She turned slowly to find Tabitha and Garen standing between her and the three other monsters awaiting their death. Good, they let them witness their destruction to come. Stepping up between her two fellow slayers, she prepared to finish the slaughter.

"You don't know what you're playing with," one of the males grumbled.

Quinn heard herself hiss in response. This one had the largest aura, so thick with evil it blocked out the surrounding background. Power surged through her body, making her jerk from the force. As if commanded by an unseen ruler, they moved at once.

Quinn forced herself not to make the first move although the urge to do so had her stepping forward. Garen grappled with the other male, trading blows, playing with his prey. Tabitha let loose several shrieking war cries as she danced around, dodging strikes from the remaining female.

Blocking them out and concentrating on the Tulpa in front of her, she stalked around him, sized him up and realized it wouldn't be an easy battle. Even with the power of the ancestors coursing through her muscles it would be difficult. This creature had lived long, grown stronger than the one she vanquished yesterday.

It lunged for her, its long stride bringing it right up into her face. Quinn simply sidestepped, clasped her hands together and pounded her fisted hands into the back of its neck. The sound of crushing bones overrode the gasping yelp of pain emitting from her opponent.

Not wanting to give it time to recover, she struck again, this time bringing her knee up into its face crunching and splintering facial pieces. Out of nowhere the monster burst up with newfound strength, jabbing out and striking her in the chest. As she fought to catch her breath, she took in the deformed and sickening sight of the creature, its face caved in and its head sitting low and forward on its neck.

Was that pain she saw in its sunken eyes? Had it lived long enough to develop the sense of pain? Rearing her leg back, she swung it forward and connected with its balls, driving them up into its body. Oh yes, it felt that. Pure satisfaction pushed her on. With blow after blow to the face, she moved it step-by-step back and away from the rest.

Raising her blade, she swung at its cramped neck only to be kicked off her feet, falling hard to the ground. Energy surged through her body as she kicked out, striking the abomination in the stomach and shoving it against the old building. In the background she heard her name being shouted but chose to ignore the voice.

Rolling up and onto her feet, she caught the deformed atrocity by the hair, wrenched its head back and prepared to drive her knife into the broken neck. Once again it came alive with power, plunging its fists into her gut. Her body seized as acute

pain surged through her system. She fought for air but her lungs refused to draw in the sweet life-giving element.

The creature staggered and prepared to strike once more. Again Quinn heard her name being shouted only to have it drowned out by the rising chants of the ancients. Her pain eased, her body straightened and she lunged, grabbing the monster by the neck. Wrapping her fingers around its squishy neck, she looked it in the eyes.

"This war will end with your death," the creature choked out.

"Yeah, but it starts with yours." Quinn sank her blade deep into the Tulpa's chest, turned it a quarter turn and then released the creature and backed away.

Garen and Tabitha rushed to her side, held her up and pulled her away before the blackness erupted into ash. Her knife dropped to the ground, its silver blade glowing, casting out a brilliant white light.

In that light she saw the images of robed men bowing to her before it winked out. Her knees buckled as all her strength slipped from her body, leaving her a pile of trembling flesh. Garen and Tabitha held tight, dragged her to the stairs and sat her down.

"Did you see it?" She couldn't be the only one to witness the imagery within the light. "Tell me you saw it."

Tabitha brushed the backs of her fingers over the bruise forming on her face. "We saw it, honey. Try to relax and get your strength back."

Her lungs burned, her chest throbbed and her stomach ached as if a bomb went off inside. All she wanted to do was lie down. Garen pulled her against his body. The small movement sent pain rippling through every muscle, forcing a moan from her throat.

"I don't think she's gonna be able to walk out of here, Gar. You better go get the car."

If he answered she didn't hear, only felt his warm body slide away from hers as yet again they moved her. Why did they keep doing that? Couldn't they see her agony?

"Hang in there, Quinn. We'll get you outta here."

"Tell me what you saw, Tab. Please tell me what you saw." She needed to know they all saw the same thing, that she wasn't losing her mind.

"I believe I saw the priests thanking you."

Quinn slumped in relief. "They were thanking us."

"I'll go along with that, although it is your knife. Good lord, girl, you fight like a lioness. I've never seen anything like it. Watching you is like watching performance art. Didn't you hear us yelling?"

Some of the pain eased in her stomach so she sat up a little straighter. "I heard something."

"You took some serious shots. I thought Garen was going to spontaneously explode when that bastard nailed you in the gut. We couldn't get to you in time to help. These Tulpas were strong, stronger than I ever encountered before."

"Tell me about it." Yet this was just a taste of what they stood against. "Where's my knife?"

Tabitha retrieved the weapon, studied it for a few moments before handing it over to Quinn. "Does it do that all the time?"

"What?"

"Vibrate like that?"

"It gets real warm too." She slipped it into her back pocket and tried to take a deep breath. It felt like an elephant was sitting on her chest. "This is going to be one hell of a fight, Tab. I hate to admit it but I'm fucking scared."

Tab held her close, kissed her temple and sighed. "Me too, Quinn. Me too."

They'd started it now. There wouldn't be any turning back. The demon would soon realize its loss and what that meant she didn't even want to hazard a guess. At least she didn't have to face it alone.

Ready to share that exact thought, she looked up at Tab and gasped. Blood dripped from her nose and a deep purple bruise blossomed around her swollen eye. "My God, Tabitha, are you all right?" She'd been so lost in her own wounds she didn't even think about Tab and Garen being hurt.

"I'm fine. A little sore but nothing I'll die from."

"What about Garen? How badly is he hurt?"

"I won't lie to you, he took some nasty licks. How badly he's hurt I can't say. Speak of the devil. Man he must have run the whole way to the car."

His BMW pulled up in front of the building. When he got out, she noticed him wince and hold his side but he recovered quickly. Big macho man didn't want her to know he hurt.

"Come on, babe. Let's get you back so Ruth can check you over. I already called her and told her to have the first-aid kit ready."

Quinn pulled her arm out of his grip. "How badly are you hurt?"

"I'm fine. Come on."

"Damn it, Garen, answer me." The words exploded out of nowhere. "Where are you hurt?" She reached out and yanked up his shirt to find a large purple and black area on his side. He winced and sucked in his breath.

"Oh my God."

"Geez, Gar. I think you broke a rib or two." Tabitha gently poked at the area, eliciting a hail of curses from him.

"What the hell, Tab? Do I go around poking your sore spots?" He pulled his shirt down and backed away from Tabitha's reach.

Quinn pushed a few stray hairs back out of her face as she racked her brain. They were all banged up and poor Garen wouldn't be able to do much with broken ribs. Anger bubbled in the pit of her stomach.

"Fucking bastard," she muttered.

"Hey, what'd I do?"

She looked up at Garen. "I'd like to kill that creature again for doing that to you."

Garen's eyes popped with surprise. She waved it away and then sat up straight, wincing in pain, with an idea. Pulling her knife from her pocket, she held it out.

"Put your hands on mine." They both shrugged their shoulders and did as instructed. Immediately the handle heated, vibrated and sent warm electric shocks through their arms. It lessened some of the pain but not all. "Damn I thought that would work. Wait, we need Tyson."

She struggled to stand but her weak legs wobbled and gave out, plopping her back down on the steps. Tabitha tried to help but could barely stand herself and Garen couldn't do much but breathe and even that gave him pain.

"Tab, you're going to have to drive," he panted. "It gets worse by the minute."

Quinn and Tab leaned on each other, staggering to the car. Garen got in the back and Quinn rode shotgun. It only took about two minutes before she realized Tabitha's driving was more dangerous than fighting Tulpas. The girl only knew two things about driving – push the accelerator to the floor and jam on the brakes at the last second.

During the harrowing drive back, Quinn shouted "Stop!" and "Watch out!" a thousand times. Garen sat in the back, moaning that they weren't going to make it, and Tabitha took it all in stride, ignoring them both. When they finally pulled into the parking lot of the garage and jerked to a stop, Garen folded his hands and said a prayer of thanks.

Tab shot him a nasty look. Ruth, Donald and Tyson rushed out, opening doors and helping them from the car.

"You can let go of the dash now, Quinn," Tyson murmured.

As hard as she tried, she couldn't release the death grip she had on the car.

Donald moved him aside. "It's all over, honey. The car's stopped." He pried her fingers loose and helped her out. "Tabitha isn't the best driver in the world, is she?"

"I saw my life flash in front of my eyes. I never believed that happened but it did," she told Donald as he and Tyson supported her. "Who the hell gave her a license?"

"We haven't figured that out yet. I think she must have bribed someone."

"I heard that," Tab hollered from up ahead.

"I don't ever want to ride with her again, Donald." Quinn gripped his shirt. "Please don't ever make me ride with her again."

He and Tyson snickered. "Don't worry, honey. I don't even ride with her."

Chapter Ten

Once they were all settled inside, Ruth began triaging their wounds. As suspected, Garen had a cracked rib. Quinn and Tabitha had mostly suffered deep bruises that went all the way to the bone. Now that she could see him better, she realized Garen had more than a few bruises on his body. She wanted to go to him and check every inch of his flesh herself.

"Well, it looks like the three of you will have to wait a few days before you can do any more slaying," Ruth announced.

"That won't do. Tyson, come here." She pulled out her knife, explaining what had happened when they all held on to it. "We need you to heal us, Ty."

"Quinn, that isn't fair," Garen mumbled.

She brushed off his comment. Deep inside she knew the boy held the power to heal. She grabbed Tab and Garen's hands and placed them on the handle. "Okay, buddy. Now you."

Tyson hesitantly placed his hand over theirs. The immediate burst of energy that sailed through their bodies had them all sitting back in their chairs. Bright white light filled Quinn's vision as scorching heat slipped into every muscle and organ. She could actually feel the mending process taking place. Acute piercing pain seared as broken veins and torn muscle knitted back together. Pressure mounted inside her chest as her lungs expanded.

Suddenly it exploded outward as if her chest opened up. She slumped in her chair, panting with relief. Garen moaned in agony as his damaged rib came together, forming new bone. She couldn't stand the pain on his face. Dropping to her knees next to him, she cradled his head and brushed his brow until the process ended.

When he finally relaxed, she kissed his forehead and wondered how the hell this man had worked his way past her defenses. She didn't like to see people in pain but this, this just tore her to pieces. She truly wanted to take revenge on the creature that hurt him.

She opened her eyes to find Tyson in Donald's arms, trembling and looking as frightened as a mouse facing twelve cats.

"It's okay, Ty. You did it. A little rest and we'll all be as good as new."

"I thought I killed you guys." A tear rolled from his eye, down his cheek and dripped to the floor.

"No. You healed us, honey. Granted the healing process is just as bad as getting hurt but we'll be just fine now."

Ruth examined the groaning Tabitha then moved to Quinn and Garen. "Even the bruises are gone."

"Well, how 'bout that. We learn something new every day, don't we," Donald said, stroking Tyson's hair and giving him a smile. "You are one special kid."

"You think you can fix Tab's driving," Garen whimpered.

"Careful, Garen, or I'll break that rib again."

The tension broke, snapped like a brittle twig and they all shared a hearty laugh. One more tool they'd discovered. Quinn wasn't sure she wanted to experience that particular tool again any time soon but they had it if they needed it.

"Come on, you two, let's get them something to fuel their bodies." Ruth hustled Donald and Tyson out, leaving them slumped in their chairs.

"Quinn, if I weren't so weak I'd drag you out of here, rip off all your clothes and drive us both mad. I never saw anything so hot as you fighting that damn creature in my life." Garen's head lolled to the side so he could get a better look at her.

"Get a room," Tab groaned.

While they recuperated they agreed not to take on so many Tulpas at once again. No one wanted to go through the healing process again any time soon. Ruth and Donald brought them some warm noodle soup and they ate it down as if they hadn't eaten in days. An hour later they all felt as good as new.

Tab suggested they head on over to the office building and scope out a few more Tulpas, see if they could catch some alone when they left and do a little vanquishing. Quinn agreed as long as the Derrick demon wasn't one of them.

Donald and Ruth did their best to discourage the idea but backed down in the end. It needed doing and waiting would only give the demon time to catch on. Tyson stepped up just before they got ready to leave, holding Ruth's dagger.

"Can I see your knives please?"

His seriousness caught them all off-guard and after exchanging curious glances, they handed over their weapons. The boy laid them all out on the table and looked them over, studying them. Quinn looked to Ruth for an answer but she only smiled.

Finally he picked up Tabitha's in one hand and held Quinn's in the other. Motioning for them to come join him, he asked that they together hold Tab's knife. As before a massive amount of energy surged through their bodies, funneled into the knife and then heated it until they couldn't hold on to it anymore.

After they dropped it to the table, the blade cast a gold glow and the familiar etchings burned into the blade. They looked to Tyson in amazement.

"It took me a while but I realized I needed to hold a blessed knife in order to transfer the power. I can do yours now, Garen, if you want."

"That's okay, kid. I can't take any more of that, whatever it is, today. We'll catch mine later."

Tabitha gave Tyson a noisy, sloppy kiss, which of course put a big bright smile on the boy's face. "Thank you, thank you, thank you." She tucked it away and bounced with excitement.

Proud beyond belief, Quinn strolled over next to Tyson, bumped him with her shoulder, and said, "Nice job."

He jammed his hands into his pockets, a habit she came to expect when he felt embarrassed. "I can't believe I didn't see it at first."

"Yeah, what's the matter with you," she joked. "Let up on yourself, Ty. Considering everything you're learning about yourself, I'd say you've done well."

"Can I go with you?"

It took a moment for his question to register. "Ah well, I don't think so, Ty. You saw how we came back. I couldn't handle it if something happened to you." The truth was she meant it. If he got hurt by one of those monsters she'd lose her mind. "Your job right now is to find out as much as you can that will help us. I really need you to discover a magic bullet for that demon."

Conceding, he nodded in agreement. "I'll do the best I can. Try not to get hurt this time."

"I'm driving," Tabitha yelled on her way out the door.

Horror gripped Quinn with an iron fist. Garen shouted something close to, "Like hell" and took off after her. Hot on his heels, Quinn crashed through the door, leaving a laughing Tyson in her dust.

Thankfully Garen won the battle to drive although Quinn felt sure Tab had no intention of driving. The two acted more like siblings than anything else. She liked that, in fact she liked everything about these people. Ruth and Donald were great. Ruth the compassionate general of the family and Donald the quiet loving bear who handed out comfort when needed.

Tabitha, well, she could be a very good friend, a fun friend, someone to confide in. Having a friend like that would be new to Quinn. She'd never had a real friend. After her mother had died, she'd traveled on the road with her father until he passed. Friends weren't something she had.

These people were a family, a real family. And something she had no business even thinking of involving herself in. The pain and chaos she would bring to their perfect world wasn't fair. She'd do well to remember that.

Garen parked the car a few blocks away from the office building. Once again they headed down the street, side by side, the slayer trio. It felt good to know she wouldn't be facing these creatures alone.

They positioned themselves at the corner of the building and watched. Twenty minutes passed before the first Tulpa emerged from inside the building. A female showing the early signs of an actual aura strutted out in its expensive suit and heels,

swinging silky brown hair that hung to her shoulders and headed down the street with its hips swaying.

Tabitha jumped. "Shit, what the hell is that?" She yanked out her knife, tossed it back and forth between her hands. "That's hot."

Quinn pulled hers from its scabbard on her hip and hissed. The intense heat made it nearly impossible to hold on to. This didn't happen earlier, sure it got warm but this was ridiculous.

Just as fast it heated it cooled to comfortably warm. The vibration amplified too, jostling her arm like a seizure. It also stopped quickly.

"Do you hear that?" Tabitha turned, her mouth hanging open.

Yep, even the chants were louder. They didn't have time to worry about it now. They needed to move, follow the Tulpa and do their job. On the same page, they took off down the street, keeping a respectable distance between them and the creature.

Anxious and concerned at the same time, Quinn wondered exactly how difficult it would be to eliminate this particular creature. They would soon find out. The female rounded a corner, stepped inside a small newsstand and purchased a paper.

"I don't think it's going to give us the opportunity we need." Tabitha chewed her bottom lip, looked down at her knife and then smiled. "A simple cut is supposed to do the job with these things, right? Let's see if it's true."

Before she or Garen could stop her, Tabitha strolled inside the newsstand, looking very much like an interested customer. If Quinn hadn't watched carefully she would never have seen the quick movement of Tab's hand. As she passed the creature, she flicked her blade out, catching the Tulpa's bared leg and sliced a neat cut about half an inch long.

A tiny drop of blood appeared. Quinn gasped. How could it bleed? Tulpas didn't have blood running through their veins. The female creature flinched, slapped her hand over the wound and then became eerily still. Tabitha continued her ruse of browsing until she made her way all the way around and back out the door again.

"It's not working," Garen whispered.

Could they be wrong? Could this be a human so enveloped in evil that it reflected in her aura? The female turned, her empty eyes focused on them. No, Quinn knew that look, they weren't wrong.

Still holding her leg, the creature limped out of the store, walked a wide berth around them and headed back toward the office building. They couldn't let her get back inside and warn the demon.

"Let's go." Garen took off, followed by Quinn and Tabitha. He stepped up alongside the creature.

Tabitha took position on the other side and Quinn fell in behind. The cut from the blade began to take effect, blackening the area around the wound. If they didn't get it

off the street it would deteriorate right there for everyone to see, showering passers-by in black ash.

The creature tried to pick up her pace but Garen wrapped his fingers around her wrist, keeping her next to him.

“What do you want? Who are you?”

He didn’t answer. Quinn reached out and touched Garen on the shoulder. When he turned, she pointed to the black leg. Garen directed them down the next alley to the farthest end and shoved the female up against the wall behind a Dumpster.

“Should we wait and see how long it takes? It wouldn’t hurt to have that bit of information,” Garen asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

Tabitha agreed. “I wonder if another cut would speed up the process.”

“We’ll try that with the next one. Small steps,” Quinn suggested.

The creature let out a shrill shriek as she tried to push past them. Weakened and failing fast, it took little effort for Garen to shove her back against the wall. Tabitha slapped her hand over the female’s mouth to keep it from drawing attention to them.

“How many of you are there?” Tab asked. When she didn’t answer, Tab laughed. “You don’t have long. In case you haven’t noticed your body is about to erupt in the most awesome display of ash you’ve ever seen. Of course you won’t see it but we will.”

Blackness spread, consuming the entire leg, spreading to the other and as far as they could tell worked its way up her torso.

“Eww. What’s that smell?” Tabitha released the creature and plugged her nose.

“Rotting flesh,” Garen said with a smile.

Quinn nearly gagged. The putrid stench was so foul it made her stomach clench and heave. How much longer could this go on? The creature emitted some odd, creepy squeaks and moans, slumping against the wall and dropping to the ground.

The blackness crept up her neck inch by inch. Quinn thought it looked like something out of movie, a disease consuming the body at a rapid pace. Only this wasn’t a disease, it was death. *God, couldn’t this just end?*

Seconds later the creature’s entire face became stiff, its already-cold eyes going blank. Even the hair withered and died. They all three took several steps back in time to miss the shower of ash that burst into the air. For several seconds they simply stood, looking at the empty spot where the creature sat.

“Okay.” Tabitha broke the silence. “The more human characteristics they have the longer it takes them to die. I vote we don’t do that again and just end it fast. I’m never going to get that smell out of my clothes.”

Quinn agreed. She didn’t need to experience that ever again.

“You okay?” Garen asked softly.

Quinn nodded her head. “I don’t think I’ll be eating any time soon though.”

“Lesson learned. Let’s go find another one.”

Once again they positioned themselves at the corner of the building and waited. It took another thirty minutes before another Tulpa emerged. Unlike the last one, this male carried a thick black aura, not yet old enough to obtain human characteristics. Quinn breathed a sigh of relief. This creature would be easier to vanquish.

“You two get ahead of it, I’ll come up from behind. We might as well use the same alley. This time we do it quickly.”

Quinn and Tabitha worked up a plan as they all but jogged down the street. When they reached the alley on the next block, Tabitha turned to Quinn and began shouting nonsense about her stealing her man. When the Tulpa came close, Quinn bumped into it, knocking it off balance and shoving it into the opening of the alley.

Garen smoothly walked by, grabbed it by the arm and dragged it far back out of sight. It all happened so fast the creature didn’t have time to make a fuss. Quinn and Tab stood at the opening, partially blocking the view of passersby. Sparing a glance, Quinn looked back in time to see Garen slice its throat, turn and walk away as it exploded.

When he reemerged, Tab clapped her hands together. “I get the next one.”

Over the next three hours they vanquished seven Tulpas, taking turns dealing the death blow. Most were caught off-guard, making the task easy. A few fought back, creating a scene, causing all three to become involved. In the end the situation concluded the same way – death.

They agreed to go after one more before calling it a day. As they stood waiting for the final victim, Quinn let her mind wander as she watched Garen out of the corner of her eye. She had to admit the man was truly a specimen of strength and confidence.

The way he carried himself, sure but not cocky, caught the attention of a lot of women. She noticed that as they stood on the street. Many took a second sweeping look and not just one type of woman. Average, well-to-do, even an old woman shuffled by, scoping out his ass.

Obviously he could have any woman of his choice yet he didn’t seem to notice anyone but her. Many times today she’d caught him staring, letting his gaze slink up and down her body and oh did that make her hot. Just a simple look warmed her blood and sent her heart racing. The few times he actually touched her, an inadvertent brush of his arm, a bump of the body, made her slick fluids seep into her panties.

She’d like to say she hated it but she didn’t. No one ever made her feel so pretty or sexy before. It wasn’t all physical either. His contagious sense of humor had her constantly smiling and he didn’t feel the need to order them around, always asking for hers and Tabitha’s opinion. If her life were normal she’d love to take the time to get to know him, go on normal dates, sit and eat dinner over candlelight, but her life wasn’t normal. She carried dark secrets, secrets that would bring nothing but misery to anyone around her.

Still, wouldn’t it be nice to experience a healthy relationship with Garen Snyder. Her soul shifted, moved closer to the surface making her heart ache. Inside she wanted

to risk it and lose herself in him but her brain, the reasoning part of her body, refused to allow that to happen.

Even now as she picked at her fingernails, she could feel his gaze on her. That strange sensation of something reaching out from inside toward him wouldn't go away. In fact it grew stronger with each passing hour they spent together. One sure way she knew of to get some relief, put distance between them, starting tonight. She'd forgo having dinner with the group and return to her hotel room. The time away from his constant assault on her senses would allow her to refocus and remember why she didn't allow anyone in her life.

"Heads-up. Here comes lucky number eight," Tabitha all but squealed in delight.

The girl found entirely too much pleasure in her job. Quinn looked up and spotted the Tulpa standing in front of the building. Dread washed through her body. This one would be a challenge. His pale aura flickered and wavered like a television set ready to burn out. A thin black line outlined the pathetic colors.

"Could it be a demon?" she asked, not aware she spoke out loud.

"We'll soon find out," Garen answered, and then turned to her, taking her hand in his. "Be careful, okay?"

"It's coming this way." Tabitha flapped her hands around like a small child excited on Christmas morning.

"I'll head down the street and see if I can find a place to do this." Garen took off, leaving Quinn uneasy.

Something didn't feel right about this. When the creature passed by them, Quinn felt that greasy, slimy feeling slide through her system like it did when the demon Derrick looked at her. Before she could say anything to Tab, the girl took off.

She had to stop them. They couldn't mess with this one yet, not until Donald, Ruth and Tyson figured out the consequences. She ran down the street, trying desperately to catch up with Tabitha.

"Tab, wait," she yelled, only to be drowned out by a blaring horn.

Up ahead, Garen stood, leaning against a building and waiting. When the Tulpa neared, he stepped out in front of it and shoved the creature into the alley.

"Oh no."

Tabitha disappeared down the alley after them. As fast she could move, Quinn darted into the alley and found Tab and Garen locked in a fist fight with the creature. Quinn removed her blade from its sheath. Intense heat seared her hand but she pushed the pain aside. Her arm twitched and her head filled with loud chants.

Garen dodged swings to his face and body. Tabitha took advantage of the distraction and kicked out, hyperextending its knee and dropping it to the ground. The ancestors railed inside her head.

True evil. Beware the dark.

Quinn didn't understand. Did it mean they should kill or walk away? Just then the creature snapped out its arm and latched on to Tabitha's ankle. Her thick boots didn't allow it to get a good hold but it managed to drop her on her ass. Garen cursed and kicked the monster in the side.

She could hear the snapping ribs echo down the alley. Still, it fought on, clawing at Tab's leg, ripping her tights and drawing blood. Garen drew his blade and plunged it into the creature's chest. It only laughed as a small amount of blood leaked through the gaping hole.

Quinn stalked up to the brawl, her knife firm in her hand and held high over her head. The creature stopped, looked up and allowed the smallest sign of fear to wash over its face. It knew, somehow it knew her blade would end its existence. Tabitha scrambled to her feet, pulled out her knife and raised it. Power surged through the air, crackling around both women.

"You don't know what you're doing," the monster growled. "But you'll realize your mistake soon." With that it threw its arms wide, opening for its destruction.

Quinn and Tabitha drove their blades deep into the chest. Tab held hers there as Quinn yanked back and then slit the throat. A horrible sulfuric smell leaked from the gaping flesh. She swore she heard the most evil, demonic laugh half a second before the body exploded.

Blackened ash spewed high into the air, swirled around, choking her, clogging her nose. Then it dropped straight to the ground. They shouldn't have done this. They should have let it go until they better understood what they were up against.

"You okay, Tab?"

Garen's voice drew Quinn's attention to the girl. Blood dribbled down her leg.

"That could have gone better. These were my best tights too."

Garen rolled his eyes and then looked at her. "What is it? What's wrong, Quinn?"

"Not right. Did you hear it? Did you hear the laugh before it burst? That wasn't strictly a Tulpa. I think we opened a can of something really nasty."

"I didn't hear anything, Quinn. It was just trying to scare you. I'll tell you what's not right. My knife didn't do squat to that thing. I guess I'll have to have Tyson change mine when we get back."

They didn't hear it. Why didn't they hear it? "I'm telling you we've got big problems, Garen. That," she said pointing to the ground, "was a demon, not as strong as the Derrick one but a demon nonetheless."

"Okay, Quinn, but we killed it. It's gone."

No, it wasn't that simple, she knew it couldn't be that simple. "The body is gone but where's the demon?"

By the looks on Garen and Tab's faces they understood now.

"Let's get out of here," Garen huffed, looking around the alley. "We shouldn't stay if it's lingering around."

* * * * *

When they made it back to the garage, she found Tyson and Donald bent over the old diaries, exchanging information and jotting down notes. She hoped like hell they were finding something useful because she had a feeling their time was running out. Ruth fussed over Tabitha's leg, dabbing and cleaning the deep scrapes. Tab whined about her tights.

Garen dropped into a chair, looking exhausted. Her first notion was to go to him and rub away the tension in his shoulders so she clenched her fists and held them tight to her sides. They explained what happened, gave all the gory details and Donald noted them down.

"Quinn has a very good point. Demons are far different from Tulpas. It went somewhere, probably looking for a new host," Ruth surmised. "Do you all feel okay? Nothing different that you can put your finger on?"

They all shook their heads. Aside from being tired she felt normal, or as normal as she could feel being in the same room with Garen. Now that all the formal questions were over she decide it was time to make her escape, except she didn't have her car. That meant Garen would take her back and no matter how much she protested, he'd stay.

"Ruth, can I have a word with you?"

"Sure, dear."

Quinn followed her into the kitchen area. "I was wondering if you could keep Tyson again tonight. I'm so tired all I want to do is soak in a hot bath and fall into bed."

"I'd be happy to."

"Could you take me back? If Garen does he'll insist on staying and I don't want to fight with him, not tonight."

Ruth cupped her face and smiled. "Just give me a minute. You go out the back door to our car. I'll let Donald know quietly what I'm doing then I'll be along."

Relief had her shoulders sagging. The woman understood. Quinn quickly darted out the back door and settled into the passenger seat of the Ross' car. After only a few minutes Ruth hustled out the door, jumped in the car and took off.

"Garen was getting suspicious. I didn't want him chasing me down. I hate lying to people."

"I'm sorry, Ruth, I didn't mean to put you in that position."

"Don't you worry about it. I can handle Garen."

"Better than I can."

"He's a good man, Quinn, a very good man. I hoped he and Tabitha would connect but it didn't take long to see it wouldn't work. They have opposite personalities, different ways of looking at things. Sometimes the way they carry on makes me crazy but when it counts they come together. You two, however, are made for each other."

Quinn sighed. "I don't think so."

"He has nothing but respect for the way you fight. I heard him tell Donald it's the most incredible thing he's ever witnessed. And the way you took Tyson in, well, it melts his heart. He thinks a lot of that boy, as we all do. Respect is a hard thing to come by these days."

Didn't she know it? Ruth sure did her best to sell Garen. This could be her chance to find out a few things about him. "What does he do for money? Do you pay him?"

"Oh no. He's very well off on his own."

"Comes from money, huh?" She figured as much.

"Nope, self-made. He hasn't told you?"

Quinn shook her head.

"He didn't come from much. Like most of us, his family traveled around chasing Tulpas, living off next to nothing. They were in a serious accident one night and his father became lame, unable to continue the hunt. Garen was still young yet. They found a small two-room apartment and his mother went to work. Garen used to sit and listen to his dad tell stories of when he was young and hunting. Garen began writing the stories down. When he turned eighteen he set out on his own and took up the fight."

As they entered the city Ruth pulled over, jumped out of the car and ran into a newsstand. When she returned she tossed a magazine to her, put the car in drive and continued on. Quinn looked at the cover—not a magazine, a comic book. *Dark Payne*. She'd heard of this, it was all the rage with young adults.

"You read these?" she asked, flipping through the pages.

"I own every one of them ever printed. Garen writes them."

Quinn's hands froze. Garen wrote *Dark Payne*? He was the elusive author of the popular comic book. "You're kidding me?"

"No. Needless to say he has plenty of material to work with. Keep it, read it, you may actually enjoy them. Those comics allowed Garen to move his parents out of that rickety apartment and into a nice small house. He sends them money every time he receives a royalty check."

Oh she didn't need to hear that.

"He even paid for his mother to go to nursing school. Something she'd always wanted to do."

Stop! No more. Why couldn't he be some selfish, hard-nosed prick who turned his back on his family and wallowed in money? It would make it easier for her.

They pulled into the hotel. "You get some rest and come in the morning for breakfast whenever you're ready. And don't worry about Tyson, he and Donald get along wonderfully. I haven't seen my Donald this happy since Tabitha still lived at home."

"Thanks, Ruth."

After a nice long soak in the tub, Quinn settled into bed and began reading the *Dark Payne* comic. She still couldn't believe Garen wrote the famous tales. She remembered being in a small town a few months ago and the news reported the latest edition sold out an hour after it hit stores. Clips of angry customers milling around outside bookstores and newsstands, demanding a copy of the popular comic, filled each newscast.

As she read, she discovered the *Dark Payne* character took on a lonely, sullen appearance. Kind to those he helped but when faced with the dark, quiet nights he turned to liquor to fill the void. When the tale ended the last picture on the page showed the man staring out into the midnight sky, the bubble reading, "I'll find you someday."

Figuring she'd have to read all the books to understand that last bit, she ignored it. The story kept her intrigued, factual to a real slayer with enough of the fantastic thrown in to keep even her attention. The pictures were a different story. They didn't portray the characters in the fashion Garen wrote them. Quinn flipped to the front page to check if Garen did the artistry.

Some joker by the name of Cliff Bing did. Well, he didn't do the story justice. In fact she couldn't understand why Garen let the dope do the illustrations. Quinn riffled through her duffle bag and pulled out her notepad then grabbed the pencil in the nightstand drawer.

Before long she sketched out her version of Dark Payne. A rugged, lean-muscled man with scruffy brown hair that hung to his ears and haunted eyes that made people wonder what pain he hid inside. She studied the drawing. Something was missing. With a few strokes of her pencil she gave the character a five o'clock shadow.

"Perfect. That's what you should look like, Dark Payne. Not that chunky off-kilter moron in the book." It had been years since she'd picked up a pencil and drawn. It made her feel good so she flipped the page and created her version of a Tulpa.

This turned out to be much more difficult. There were so many things she wanted to depict she couldn't get them all in one picture so she hammered out six. When she finished she yawned, stretched and settled against her pillow clutching the *Dark Payne* comic in her hand.

Chapter Eleven

Garen propped himself up in his cot, seething with anger. Ruth apologized for sneaking Quinn out and explained that sometimes too much of a good thing could be overwhelming but it didn't make him feel any better. She ran from him. Tucked her tail between her legs and ran like a frightened rabbit. Why didn't she ask him to take her back? He would have dropped her off and left.

Oh who the hell was he kidding? No he wouldn't and she knew that. He was getting to her and it scared the hell out of her. She'd even left Tyson behind. Now tomorrow she'd drive her car and he wouldn't have an excuse to go back to her hotel.

Damn it, this sucked. They could work together without any problem, why couldn't they be alone without her being skittish? Because he ended up taking her clothes off when they were alone, that's why. Although she took her own clothes off last night. He didn't have a thing to do with that. She came to him, he begged her to go but she refused.

He sat up straight and smiled. It wasn't him she didn't trust, it was her. Well, now that made things different. "Watch out, Quinn, I have you figured out now." She wanted to have sex with him, just not on his terms.

On her terms it would be simple sex, on his it would mean something and she didn't want it to mean anything. The same with the coat. Could this have something to do with those horrible scars? Did she no longer trust men to actually love her?

No, she was too smart for that. Something else was behind all this and, by damn, he'd find out what. Pleased that he'd figured out most of the mysterious Quinn Hurst he picked up his notebook and started the next installment of *Dark Payne*.

After outlining his story he decided to do some research. He strolled out to the garage bay and found Donald and Tyson pouring over diaries. "Don't burn that kid out, Donald. Everyone needs a break once and while."

"We had a break today," Tyson said without looking up. "Donald took me to lunch."

Garen frowned. Ruth never let Donald out of her sight for more than a few minutes. She must have felt comfortable with Tyson being along. Of course the kid did heal broken bones. Stopping bleeding would be a snap.

Garen typed in his topic on the search engine and then ran through results. He picked a few sites, read and then moved on. Most of the info he knew already but when he found a site written by a priest he stopped and paid particular attention.

"Ah Donald. I think you should read this." This couldn't be true.

Donald leaned down over Garen's shoulder. When he finished reading, he straightened. "I've found most of the info in my diaries but the part about demons possessing the body of their exorcist, that's new to me."

Ruth and Tabitha sauntered in. "What's news to you, Dad?"

"Garen found writings of a priest who did regular exorcisms. It says the demon will first try to possess the body of the exorcist before looking for another host. It needs to find a host immediately or it will become weak and be forced to return to the netherworld."

"You should add that information to your books, dear. It could come in handy down the road."

Donald slapped Garen on the shoulder. "Good work."

Having everything he needed, Garen returned to his small room and began writing his story. When it came to the part where Dark Payne vanquished the demon, it hit him. Quinn said she heard it laugh. The ash swirled around her—not him, not Tab but her. She choked, struggled to breathe for a moment and then all the debris dropped to the ground.

"Oh fuck. It's in her." Garen jumped up and burst into through the door. He did his best to explain as he shot out of the building. He just hoped it hadn't have a chance to take over yet.

* * * * *

Quinn tossed and turned, her nightmare too real. Evil blanketed her, smothered her but she fought back, resisting the urge to slip away and let it take over. Where did it come from? She felt its weakness as it fought against her will. Like a tug of war, the evil reached for her soul but she pulled back away from it.

Give up, little girl. You're no match for me.

Fuck you, she screamed back.

Oh I will fuck you many times and many ways until your will is broken and your soul is mine.

She had to find her knife. Where was her knife?

Loud banging boomed in her ears. She struggled to open her eyes but could barely see anything but heavy, black mist. Her limbs felt like lead but she dragged herself from the bed toward the door. She needed help.

Boom, boom, boom. The banging continued. It hurt to breathe, her lungs burned for oxygen but she would not give up. As she pulled herself across the floor, she heard her name being shouted. Garen.

You won't win, bitch. You'll only make it more painful for yourself.

The demon's words only urged her to keep moving. She reached the door, pulled herself up on her knees and fumbled with the deadbolt. Garen screamed on the other side. The black mist grew thicker, taking her over. She needed her knife. Finally she

turned the latch and fell back to the floor. She heard the door open and felt Garen cradle her in his arms.

He was too late. She couldn't see him. The darkness took her sight and now it enclosed around her soul. The heavy, slimy weight sank deep inside, closing off her lungs.

Trust him to save us. The voice pleaded within, helped her push against the demon but they were both weak. *He would die to save us.*

Using the last of her breath, she formed the word on her lips, and shouted, "Knife."

Instantly her body jerked, bright white light exploded inside her head and she knew Garen had saved her. The demon shrieked in pain, shrank away from her soul and cowered behind her lungs. Another presence appeared by her side and together they drove the evil from her body.

You cannot have this body, spawn of the devil. Be gone with you, the female spirit commanded.

Not to be outdone, Quinn cursed the blackness. *Go back and finish rotting in hell where you belong.*

The brilliant light flared out, burning the darkness into nothing but a memory. Quinn could feel it evaporate. Her lungs lightened, taking in air easier, and her body relaxed.

The female spirit turned to her, holding out her hands. *Why do you fight what you know is right? He will not hurt you.*

No, but I will hurt him.

The spirit dropped her hands, sadness filling her lovely face. Quinn backed away into the light and returned to fill her body. She gasped, jerked in Garen's arms and then reached up, clinging to his neck, holding on tightly so as not to be swept away into the darkness again.

"Oh thank God. It's okay, baby. I've got you."

"It's gone. We killed it." She buried her face in his chest, breathed in his scent and then did something she never did – cried.

Garen pulled her naked body onto his lap and rocked her back and forth, holding her with such fierce strength she knew the spirit was right. He wouldn't hurt her, ever. And there lay the reasons for the tears. Now that she knew who he was, they could never have a life together.

When the last tear fell and calmness settled into her body, she snuggled against him. "How did you know?"

He cleared his throat. "I was doing some research and came across these writings of a priest." He explained it all very carefully. "It didn't connect right away but when it did –"

He came to her rescue. "Thank you. It nearly won." His arms tightened and he kissed the top of her head.

"I'm not even sure the rest understood what I was saying as I ran out the door." On cue, his cell rang.

While he ran through the details, she rested in his arms. She tried not to notice how good he felt against her bare flesh. She tried not to notice how his fingers gently stroked up and down her arm even while he talked on the phone. She tried.

"I'll check in with you later. I will, Ruth, I promise." He disconnected. "Well, you have the troops worried sick."

"Sorry."

Garen chuckled, the soft vibration in his chest felt good against her cheek.

"What is it with these demons wanting inside me?"

Garen shifted, hoisted her up and stood, a feat that couldn't be easy.

"They aren't the only ones," he grumbled, setting her down on the bed. "What's this?" He picked up the copy of *Dark Payne*.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

He shrugged and tossed it aside. "Didn't think you'd care." Her drawings slipped from the magazine. "What are these? This is Dark Payne. This is exactly the way I picture him when I write. And these, my God, Quinn, these are perfect. You drew these?"

"No offense but the drawings in the book suck. I say that 'cause I know you didn't do them."

"Yeah, I don't like them either. I can't draw worth spit and no matter how hard I tried to convey my distaste for them they ignored me. But these are perfect. It's like you're in my head and see what I see."

"Keep them, show them to your illustrator and tell him to get his head out of his ass." She shivered, suddenly realizing she was naked.

"Are you okay? Is it coming back? Should I call Ruth?"

"I'm fine just a little chilly."

Garen yanked the thin comforter out from underneath her and then gently tucked it around her body. His hands were always so gentle even while he elicited a mind-blowing orgasm from her. The female spirit within pushed, encouraging her to ask questions.

"Why did you think I wouldn't care about your comic?"

He shrugged again. "I get the feeling you aren't that big on money and if I told you about it you'd use it as another excuse to push me away."

Frowning, she rolled that explanation around in her head. He had a point, she would have. "It's not so much the idea of having money. It's how people use it. I hear you've used it for very good purposes."

He actually blushed and lowered his head so she wouldn't see. "I put most of it away, give myself an allowance every month. I don't really spend it like you think."

“Except buying that lush BMW.” She didn’t mean it as a slam, just a small joke.

“It took me three months of researching before I decided on that car. Compared the gas mileage to other cars and then took into consideration the trade-in value and it made sense.”

Practical, she liked that.

“What do you do for money?”

Quinn picked at the small lint balls on the blanket. “I work odd jobs until I can stash enough away and then hit the road again. Dad had the foresight to teach me that, yes, our mission in life is important but we still need to eat and wear clothes. When he was alive, we’d travel around until the money ran low. Then he’d park us somewhere for a while, find a job and work his ass off until he figured we had enough.”

“That sounds familiar. That’s why I’m so careful with what I earn from the comics. It could all go away some day and I don’t want to be left with my butt hanging out in the wind.”

She looked at him, really looked at him, past the handsome face, behind his warm eyes, and for the first time saw the man inside. Strong but sensitive, caring enough to make sure the people who reared him were taken care of and intelligent enough to plan ahead. He wasn’t hung up on the money. He could afford to stay in a plush hotel but chose to stay with the Rosses in their rented garage. That meant more to him than the money.

“Do you have a place of your own, a place where you can go and unwind, step away from it all?” Sometimes she wished she had a place like that but she’d been living out of hotel rooms since she was a kid.

“Sort of. I rent a house from Don and Ruth. It gives me a place to regroup, take care of things that need to be taken care of. But I’m not there much, after a while the need to move kicks in.”

She understood that. However, what drove her was far different from what drove him. She yawned and stretched, pulling the blanket down past her breasts, instantly her nipples pebbled from the cool air or because Garen’s gaze immediately went straight to them, which she wasn’t sure. He reach out, traced a finger over one of her scars between her two mounds.

“Tell me about these please.”

The question was bound to come up, she knew it would. Did she really want to talk to him about it? It would put them on another level.

He pulled the blanket down to her waist, continued touching, soothing the silver scars. She sighed. His touch felt so good and warm. If she told him the story, would it change his opinion of her? Would he look at her differently? Normally she wouldn’t care. It wasn’t anyone’s business but hers. But she did care.

“Remember I told you we all make mistakes,” Garen said. “Well, a few years ago I began dating this woman. I thought she was everything I wanted and I did everything I

could to make her happy. I came off the road, stopped doing what I was born to do, jumped every time she snapped her fingers and just became pussy-whipped. I was so afraid of losing her I allowed myself to become someone I wasn't."

Quinn listened intently as he continued touching, brushing his fingers across her belly and causing her flesh to tingle. Her mind focused on his words but her body responded to his loving hands.

"I wanted it all—the home, the wife, the family—so much I turned a blind eye to things I should have run from. Looking back, I can see what a bitch she was but at the time I didn't. It all came to a head when I stopped by her place one night and when I walked up on the porch I could see into her living room."

He took a deep breath let it out slow and smiled at her. "There for anyone to see who walked by, were her and three men, naked and fucking like rabbits. Apparently I wasn't enough for her."

Quinn's mouth dropped open. She couldn't even imagine walking up on a situation like that, especially involving someone she thought she loved.

"The sad part was she almost had me convinced it was all my fault. Luckily I came to my senses and the real woman emerged. She threw everything she could get her hands on at me, called me every foul name she could think of and then said all I was good for was my money."

"That gold-digging bitch!" She couldn't stop the outburst or the anger.

"Yeah, not my finest moment in life." He leaned down and kissed the valley between her breasts. "It took me a while to get over it but I finally realized that I was worth more than that. Someone out there would appreciate me for who I was, not what I was worth."

"Damn straight." They sat there for a few moments silently while he stroked her arms, shoulders, belly, but carefully avoided touching her breasts. She wanted to feel his large hands cup them.

"I was afraid to be alone too." The words just blurted out as if something inside her pushed them out. "After Dad died, I ran into this guy who seemed really nice and attentive. He said he wanted to take care of me and since I found myself alone suddenly it sounded like a good idea. Not being that experienced with men, I didn't see the controlling aspect. He had me hook, line and sinker. Next thing I knew I couldn't go anywhere, talk to anyone or even take a piss without his permission and if I dared do something on my own I got punished."

"He cut you."

"Yep, tied me naked to the bed took out his pocket knife and cut, always making sure it was where no one could see them."

Garen only frowned, showing no more emotion than that.

"He'd let me lie there for hours like that, covered in blood and hurting. Eventually I realized I was strong enough to leave and being alone was better than being with

someone who thought caring for me meant hurting me." He didn't need to know any more than that.

"I won't lie to you. I want to hurt this man, hurt him the same way he hurt you."

He meant it. She could see it in his eyes but nothing more, no disgust, no pity and absolutely no judgment.

"I see these scars as strength, not weakness."

Now that surprised her and softened a barrier around her heart. "How so?"

"You could let this change your view of men altogether but don't. You know one man doesn't act the same as another. You suffered the indignity and abuse but still had enough strength to walk away. Not many do." He leaned down and brushed his lips across hers. "And you don't hide them from me. That takes unbelievable courage."

Whether it was his words or his hands still stroking her inflamed flesh, or the featherlight kiss, an inferno ignited in the pit of her stomach and consumed her body. She had to have him, needed his touch like nothing she'd ever needed before. It scared her, for him to have this kind of power over her wasn't something she needed.

Lying there, staring into his eyes, she didn't care. Right now was important. She would deal later with the prospect of leaving him.

Grabbing his hands, she moved them to her breasts, placed her hands over his and squeezed. He didn't need much encouragement. He swallowed hard, looked down at their hands and clenched his jaw.

"You have no idea how much I want to make love to you." He released her, pulled the blanket back up and stood. "And because of that I'm leaving."

"What?" He wouldn't. He couldn't just walk away when she lay here, offering herself to him.

"I want all of you, Quinn, not just your body."

Angry, hurt and just plain flabbergasted she jumped from the bed. "Why can't we just enjoy each other now? Why do you have to make it so damn complicated?"

He just shook his head and turned toward the door. Oh no, he didn't dare turn his back on her without a word. When he put his hand on the doorknob, she took three steps toward him, grabbed his arm and spun him around.

"You said you don't play games but this sure as hell feels like a game, Snyder." The burst of anger subsided. Hurt took over, filled her chest and strangled her throat. Realizing she'd fallen for another male ruse, she backed away. "Jesus, you're good. Get me to spill my guts, satisfy your curiosity and then walk away."

"No, Quinn, you don't understand." He reached for her then but she jumped back.

"Does this disgust you now?" she asked, pointing to her scarred, nude body. "Now that you know the truth it's hard to look at me or even think about fucking me. Well, here's something I left out, just to clinch the deal for you. After he did all his handiwork, he brought his friends in to look. They had a nice laugh, standing over my

bleeding body while I cried." She choked on a sob and pressed the back of her hand over her mouth.

So stupid, so damn stupid. How could I think this man would be different. She picked up his comic book and her drawings and threw them at him. "Get out."

"Don't you do that," he growled at her. "Don't you put me in the same class as that sick bastard. You're blowing this all out of proportion."

"I'm finished." She should never have stayed in the first place. "Tell Tyson I'll pack his things and be by in the morning to get him." Yanking the blanket off the bed, she covered herself up.

"You're going to run. I guess it shouldn't surprise me. You've been looking for a reason to bolt since we met. Creating this delusion just makes it easier."

Anger flared until she thought her head would pop. "Delusion?"

"Yeah, Quinn, delusion." He poked his finger to his temple, glaring at her.

The tears welled fast and furious, stinging her eyes, blurring her vision. Refusing to let them fall, to let him see that he affected her on a deeper level, she did the only thing she knew to do. Struck out at him. With her fist balled tight, she stepped forward and landed a hard right hook to his jaw.

Garen staggered, reached up and rubbed his throbbing face. "Feel better?"

Not yet. Adrenaline dumped into her system and she fired off another round of punches only to have him block and duck, making it impossible for her to land a blow. Stepping back, she sized him up. Keeping out of his reach, she sidestepped, circled him as he turned with her every move. Everyone had a weakness. Capitalizing on that guaranteed a victory.

Garen's weakness was he didn't want to physically hurt her. He wouldn't physically hurt any woman and that would be his undoing. A look of trepidation settled on his face. Sweat beaded on his forehead.

"Calm down, Quinn."

She'd calm down as he lay on the floor, moaning in pain and regretting ever meeting her. Like the flash of a snake striking at its prey, she kicked up and out, aiming for his chest. Garen dropped to the floor, leaving nothing but air for her to connect with. Quinn followed through, spinning and then jumping into the air before he could knock her off her feet.

Landing in a crouch with her hands pressed on the floor, she looked up. Score one for him, he'd anticipated. By now he stood, looking down at her, a hint of anger flickering in his eyes.

Springing from the floor, she angled her shoulder and aimed for his waist, ready to plow him back into the wall. Again he anticipated, sidestepped and pushed her to the side so she wouldn't crash into the dresser. Quickly she recovered, found her footing and launched herself toward him, fists flying and not caring what part of his body she struck.

Garen lunged. Like two semitrucks heading straight for each other, their bodies collided. Using his weight, he pushed her backward while wrapping his arms around her, pinning hers to her side. A low, rumbling, guttural growl sounded in his throat as pushed them onto the bed.

She struggled, kicked, wiggled, did everything she could think to do but his weight kept her pinned while his arms encased her upper body. Instantly panic struck. She couldn't move, she couldn't break free, she had no control. He could do anything he wanted and she wouldn't be able to stop him.

Horrible memories flashed like lightning inside her head. Being tied to a bed, the pain as the knife sank into her flesh, her screams of agony. Her breath came too fast, whooshing in and out of her lungs, making her head spin. Her chest ached from the relentless hammering of her heart against it.

Garen crushed his mouth against her parted lips, breathed into her mouth and caught her ragged, unstable gasps. His tongue slid across her lower lip and then up and around until he circled her mouth. The strong hold around her body eased, he slipped his hands down, placing one on each of her ass cheeks and then squeezed and released in the same rhythmic tempo as his inhalations.

As she began to match his breathing and her body relaxed the smallest amount, his lips softened and the harsh kiss became tender. Frozen and unsure of what to do, she simply lay there. When he pulled away from her mouth and kissed her jawline and then worked his way down her neck, she closed her eyes.

At the juncture of her neck and shoulder he lingered, sucking lightly before biting down just enough to send a current of electricity jolting through her body and sizzling to an end between her legs. Not able to stop herself, she moaned and turned her head, giving him better access.

"Don't do this to me," she pleaded in a desperate whisper. She couldn't stand to be left hanging again.

"What? This?" He bit again, slightly harder this time, making her buck underneath his rigid body. "You want me to stop, Quinn?"

No. Yes. She couldn't think, not while he licked, bit and kissed her sensitive flesh. He moved off her, to the side, and kissed his way down her shoulder, back and then moved over the swell of her breast, lingering there. Her nipples hardened, jutting out until they ached for his warm, moist mouth.

She waited with anticipation but he moved away, returned to her mouth and brushed his fingers over her quivering stomach. Too slow, too gentle. She needed him fast and hard or she would blast off this bed. He thought he had to be careful with her but she didn't want careful she wanted now. Time for her take control.

With her now-free hand she reached up, slid her fingers through his hair and fisted at the same time, taking over the kiss, turning it from sweet to ferocious. Jamming her tongue into his mouth, she swept the inside once, wrapped her lips around his tongue

and sucked hard. Garen stilled for a moment as if in fear, giving her opportunity to roll on top of him, never once breaking the kiss.

Pressing her body against his, she could feel the hard ridge of his cock confined by his jeans. He wanted her just as much as she wanted him and he would not walk away this time. In one quick movement she jerked her legs up until her knees bent at either side of his hips.

Still playing with his tongue, sucking, stroking and then nipping at his lips, she unbuttoned his shirt, slipped the material to the side and pressed her breasts against his hard chest. Like hers, his heart pounded out his need. Caught in the moment now, he sank his fingers into her hair, gripped her head and began meeting her voracious hunger.

Straightening her body against his length, she used her feet to pry off his sneakers. With them gone, she worked her knees back up to his hips and began work on the stubborn button of his pants. Garen pulled his mouth away from hers. She thought for a moment he'd protest, stop her from going further but he didn't. Instead he feasted on her neck and shoulders.

Once the button broke free, she made quick work of the zipper and none too gently grabbed the denim material and jerked it down. It wasn't easy maneuvering while he sucked and kissed her shoulder but she managed to get his pants past his knees to his ankles.

Beyond frustrated, she pulled out of his reach, jumped off the bed and jerked off his jeans and then nearly ripped his boxers from his body. His erection sprang free, bounced off his stomach and then stood at attention. Mesmerized by his thick steel-hard rod she licked her lips. How she'd love to taste him, but not now. No, she needed that throbbing cock inside her.

She couldn't give him time to think. Thinking wasn't helpful now. Leaping like a cat, she landed on top of him, straddling his body with her dripping, aching pussy. Leaning over, she put her left breast in front of his face, slipped her hand underneath his head and lifted until he had no other choice but to concede to her demand.

His tongue lapped out, flicking her pearled nipple and then taking it into his mouth. *Oh, that's what I want* she thought, but he insisted on being cautious. Damn it she didn't want cautious.

"Suck it, hard," she demanded.

He complied, drawing her into his mouth with such force the tingling sensation exploded in her chest and traveled down between her legs. "Oh God yes!" Colorful lights exploded in her eyes.

When he cupped her free breast a little too gently, she smacked her hand over his and squeezed. Catching on now, he shook off her hand, reached up and filled his hands with both swelling, aching breasts. Pushing them together allowed him better access to suck and tease both nipples.

Her body burned with a fever that could only be broken by him. Moving her hips in small circular motions across his stomach brushed her engorged clit, drawing more fluid from between her folds. She needed more. She had to have more.

Smacking his hands away from her chest and clamping them down on the bed, she moved up, positioned her knees to the side of his head and placed her sopping cunt directly over his face. The surprised look in his eyes gave her a thrill.

Not saying a word, she grabbed a handful of hair and lifted his head. Her mind blew apart when he wrapped his lips around her nub and sucked. She could actually feel her juices pouring out.

"Oh Garen, that feels so good," she shouted at the top of her lungs.

While he lapped at her sweet honey, she reached around and gripped his cock. His moan vibrated against her pussy, sending delicious chills through her body. Wanting something to hold on to himself he filled his hands with her ass, digging his fingers into her fleshy globes, guiding her hips where he could get the best access to pierce his tongue deep inside.

Wild beyond reason now, she pumped his cock from base to head, felt the drops of pre-cum and smeared them around, coating her hand. She'd never felt so alive, so free in her life. Her body tightened, warning that she wouldn't hold out much longer. Already her walls gripped around his tongue, refusing to let go.

"Tell me you have a condom," she panted, continuing to stroke his shaft. "I'll fucking kill you if you don't." *God, is that me growling like a wild animal?*

"Wallet."

He began to move and she yanked his hair. "Stay. Don't you move." Crawling down his body, she leaned over the bed and pulled his wallet out of his crumpled jeans.

As she fished through the small compartments, he reached out and stroked her wet pussy. Her breath seized in her lungs. Wiggling her ass, she found the packet, pulled it out and noticed there were two. *Good*, she thought to herself because if she had her way he wouldn't be leaving until he hobbled out of here.

Tearing open one of the square packs, she turned and looked down at his twitching hard-on. Unable to resist, she bent, drove him deep inside her mouth until he hit the back of her throat and then sucked her way back up until he popped free.

"You're killing me."

"But it will be the sweetest death," she whispered.

She rolled the latex down slowly, making sure he felt every torturous touch. Sheathed, she straddled him, wrapped her fingers around his length and guided him to her wet opening.

"I won't break. I won't shatter into a million pieces so don't baby me. I'm going to ride you like a bronco so if you can't keep up, tell me now."

He swallowed hard, gazed into her eyes and then smiled the most wicked, evil grin she'd ever seen, heightening her pleasure and senses. "We'll see who can't keep up." With that he thrust his hips up and drove himself inside.

Together they shouted unidentifiable, made-up words. He stretched her tight walls, pushed farther in until she felt him hit her uterus. She cried out from the combination of pain and pleasure. His body stilled. She took the moment to let herself adjust to his thickness.

"Hurt?"

"Oh so good."

"My God you're tight, Quinn." Beads of sweat erupted all over his body.

She smiled, reached behind and cupped his drawn balls. "So are you. Gonna make it, cowboy?"

"I'll do my best, ma'am."

Nodding, she rose up, feeling every glorious inch of him sliding through her channel. Hell, she might not make it. When he nearly pulled free, she lowered, his round head forcing its way back deep inside. With each stroke she increased the pace until she bounced up and down, her body devouring him.

Tighter and tighter her body wound like an over-sprung spring, ready to release and explode. She gripped him with each thrust. He cupped her breasts and flicked her nipples.

"Don't stop, baby," he panted.

She slid her hands into her hair, tossed her head from side to side and released little gasps of pleasure as she brought herself to the edge of insanity. Every fiber in her body felt him like a drug running through her system.

Garen released one of her breasts, reached between them and pressed his thumb against her swollen clit. Hell itself detonated, tossing her high into the air and flooding her body with every sinful, erotic feeling that could be imagined. In the distance she heard someone screaming with pleasure but didn't care.

Every molecule of her body hummed and vibrated as her body shook with wave after wave of orgasm. Not wanting to lose it, she continued to bounce up and down on his cock until she felt him stiffen. She opened her blurry eyes and looked down into his face. She wanted to see him come.

Still riding the waves of pleasure she wanted him to feel what she felt. Bracing herself, she slammed down hard, taking him all the way in and felt his cock pulse with release. He shouted her name, tipped his head back and urged her to continue moving.

She obliged until she could tell he'd drained every last bit of seed. Falling forward, she rested her head on his chest and listened to his heartbeat. She didn't know she could do that, take over and dominate, dictating what she needed, wanted. She liked it a lot.

His arms wrapped around her and his hands stroked up and down her back. "I think I'm dead."

"Better not be," she whispered sweetly. She still had plans for when he recovered.

"This wasn't the way I planned it."

"Planning is overrated. Sometimes you just have to let things happen."

He chuckled deep in his chest, the vibration fanning the still-flickering flames of desire.

"That's a lesson I'll carry with me for the rest of my life."

Her too. She didn't know sex could be so great. She moved, letting him slip from her body, sat up and carefully removed his condom. On shaky legs she walked to the bathroom, tossed it in the basket and then looked in the mirror. Her breasts bore red marks as well as her neck and shoulders.

Smiling because they were put there without pain and torture, she returned to the bed. Garen had shoved the blankets back and now rested against one of the pillows, his glorious naked body looking relaxed and as sexy as sin. Oh yeah, she wasn't done with him tonight.

Chapter Twelve

Quinn crawled into bed next to Garen, rolled onto her stomach and propped herself up on her elbows. He looked perplexed for some reason, his brow furrowed and his eyes lost in thought. Well, she couldn't blame him.

"Not exactly the delicate rose you thought, huh?"

He frowned. "What?"

"Me, you were hoping for the proper trembling, scared, let-you-take-the-lead woman. Sorry to disappoint."

Garen flipped onto his side and popped her on the ass, hard. She yelped from the sting and mostly from the sheer shock.

"I've been wanting to do that for a while now." He smoothed his hand over the red spot blooming across her cheek.

"Like spanking, do you? I'll keep that in mind."

A look of worry zipped across his face and made her laugh.

"If I had been disappointed I would be the dumbest ass on the face of the earth. I just wasn't expecting it. You're always so reserved."

"Can I tell you a secret?" He nodded, his eyes looking like a hopeful puppy's. "That was new to me too. You just work me up into this tight ball of nerves and then leave me hanging. I figured this time I'd better take what I want." She thought it odd she didn't feel the least bit embarrassed by it now.

"I can see you now in a leather teddy, holes cut out for your lovely breasts, high heels and a whip." He shivered. "God that gets me hot."

Cocking her eyebrow, she stared at him. "So are we good now? No more insults being hurled back and forth? Can we enjoy now and take what comes later?"

Leaning over, just inches from her upturned mouth, he whispered, "I can't turn back now." He kissed her quickly and then backed away. "Did you mean what you said about that bastard letting his friends see you tied naked to the bed?"

If she didn't answer him he'd obsess about it, besides, she was the one who blurted it out like an idiot. "Yep. Look, Garen, I'm past all that. I've dealt with it and I don't let it rule me. So ask the questions you want now and then let it drop."

He studied her, his hot gaze sliding up and down her body. Already she could feel herself reenergizing for another go-around. He would take longer, she knew that but oh the fun they could have until he did.

"When you see yourself naked in the mirror, what do you see?"

The question surprised her. "Me, plain, ordinary, nothing special."

"You don't look at the scars and flinch or have flashbacks?"

"No. Like I said, I'm past that. The only problem I do have is being confined, held down and unable to get free. That's why I panicked when had me pinned to the bed." She didn't like admitting it but there it was.

"I'm so sorry."

"Why? You didn't know. Besides, I don't think it'll happen again with you."

"You aren't plain, by the way. You are incredibly sexy. Seeing you fight without clothes on, well, we could tape it and make millions in the porn industry. Do you have any idea how hard it was to fight for my life at the same time as getting a hard-on?"

Quinn poked him in the ribs. "That's not funny," she said, laughing.

"And when you bent over the bed to get the condom out of my wallet," he gave a shrill whistle, "I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. Have you ever seen your backside when you're bent over? They should bronze that ass. People from all over the world would come to gaze upon its beauty."

She liked the way he joked with her, not afraid of offending her, just being himself. He didn't dwell on her past either. He asked his question and that was that. She'd never been so at ease with anyone before. Rolling onto her back, she raised one arm above her head and rested the other on her stomach.

"Probably not as many people as would come to see Tabitha's bronzed boobs."

His face went blank and paled a little.

"That's right, I heard how she ripped her shirt off for you."

"She didn't mean anything by it. That's just the way Tab is."

"Really, she shows you her naked body often?" He started stammering, running his hands through his hair. Quinn had to fight to keep the smile from spreading across her face. "Hmmm? If you like her body that much, maybe we should do a threesome."

That put him over the edge. He jumped from the bed. "No. I don't like her body, I mean, I do but not that way. I don't want to have sex with her."

A hearty laugh erupted from her chest. She crawled across the bed, grabbed his hand and pulled him down. "I'm just kidding. Relax before you blow an artery. I know you don't feel anything but friendly love for Tabitha. I just wanted to yank your chain a little."

Garen grabbed her and pulled her back with him until she leaned on his chest. "Seriously though," he said, brushing a few stray hairs out of her face. "I don't care what you were told in the past or what you were led to believe. You are a beautiful, sensual, sexy and intriguing woman. Not to mention as intelligent as hell and talented."

How could she respond to that? She couldn't, her tongue tied itself into knots. Instead of speaking, she laid her head down on his chest and listened to the beat of his heart. Inhaling his pure male scent, she closed her eyes and enjoyed the warmth of his body.

Any thoughts of his words or sentiments she shoved aside. They didn't have a place here and now. The only purpose they would serve would be to confuse and scare her. She had to keep her mind set on the plan. Finish the job and then hit the road. In the meantime, soak up every bit of him she could. Remember his scent, the feel of his body, his laugh and sense of humor.

"You okay? You got awfully quiet."

"I'm fine," she answered, looking up at him. She swirled her finger in the sparse matt of hair on his chest and then flicked his nipple with her tongue.

"Come here." With gentle hands he pulled her up, slipped his fingers through her hair and met her halfway, brushing his lips across hers.

Her body responded, coming alive and tightening. The heat was always instant with him. Just a touch or kiss could elicit deep errant yearnings she hadn't known existed inside herself. In a way she found it comforting, knowing the most basic need of human beings hadn't been destroyed.

Sinking into the kiss, she adjusted herself, pressed against him tightly. His hands roamed up and down her body, setting off little flares everywhere he touched. When he smoothed his hand over her ass, she wiggled, encouraging him on. The harsh smack of his hand against her flesh set those flares ablaze.

Another smack caused an inferno, one she wasn't sure she could control. Slipping her leg over his hips, she straddled him. "Don't start something you can't finish," she whispered into his mouth.

"I'll finish, you'll just have to help me get started."

Reaching behind her and blindly finding his cock, she decided he'd already started without her. He was already stiff. She cupped his balls and then let her fingers rake over the flesh. Turning herself around so she straddled his body the opposite way, she leaned over, wrapped her fingers around his shaft and then flicked her tongue across the head of his hardening cock.

It twitched and he groaned. This is what she wanted, a little playtime. She ran her tongue from base to tip and then wrapped her lips around only his head and sucked. He muttered something incoherent and then smacked her ass again. She had to admit it turned her on. The sting of sensitive flesh made her shiver.

"Again," she demanded. When he didn't move fast enough, she encased his head in her hot mouth and sucked harder. His hips bucked up, trying to push farther in. Increasing the pressure and not allowing him to enter deeper set the tone. He would get what he wanted when she got what she wanted.

His hand struck hard and fast, stinging heat blossomed on her ass cheek. Rewarding him, she lowered, sinking only a little farther down. She had him now, controlling him would be easy. Or so she thought. A quick study, he paddled her opposite cheek just as hard and then stole her breath by grabbing her hips and swiping his tongue across her pussy.

Her whimper of pleasure drove him on. His tongue delved inside her slick sheath and then traveled up to her puckered anus. Having never been touched there before, she gasped with surprise. Big mistake on her part.

He'd found a new play area and play he did. His tongue circled the area before traveling back to her pussy. He ate, lapped and sucked before returning to the sensitive forbidden area. She tensed unsure she liked this new sensation. Garen slapped hard, one ass cheek and then the next.

As quickly as she tensed, she relaxed and felt his moist, wet tongue circle again. As he played around her anus, she wiggled, finding the feeling erotic. He smacked again, drawing such a low growl from her throat that she swore an animal had entered the room.

When his hips bucked up, she realized she'd been neglecting him. In one smooth motion she took him in until he hit the back of her throat and then swirled her tongue around his shaft as she worked her way back up. The more he teased her pussy and ass the faster she swallowed him.

The next thing she felt blew her mind. His thumb slipped inside her anus as two fingers sunk deep inside her pussy. The top of her head must have blown off because she couldn't think, couldn't see and couldn't move.

"Relax, babe. Tensing will only make it uncomfortable."

Doing her best to release the tension, she concentrated on his cock, swallowing and licking until she could feel him harden inside her mouth. Before she realized it, her hips moved back and forth, helping him exit and enter her body over and over again. He rubbed her clit until it throbbed and ached.

His fingers slid and entered her pussy, each time drawing more lubricant from her walls and she could hear the suctioning sound. Every nerve ending in her body screamed and pulsed with pleasure. Garen smacked her ass once more, extra hard and cursed.

"My God, woman, you're going to kill me. Stop."

He pushed her to the side, jumped to his knees and then grasped her hips, pulling her back against his raging erection. His thick rod fitted nicely between her cheeks. Quinn wiggled her hips.

"Get the other rubber. Now."

When she leaned forward to reach over the bed, his thumb found its way back inside her hole. She groaned, deciding she liked this new experience and snatched up the last condom. Tearing it open with her teeth, she looked back over her shoulder.

"I want to see you put it on this time." Dark storm clouds swirled in his eyes, making him look like the ultimate bad boy who would show her corruption in the worst fashion. And, God, did she like it.

He moved to her side, took the latex from her and rolled it down his steel pole very slowly. Something about seeing him do it himself, watching like a voyeur, made her

almost come right there. With a mind of its own, her hand reached back and slipped between her legs.

Garen pulled it away. "Not this time." He moved back behind her, pushed his throbbing head against her anus and stopped.

Quinn froze. He didn't mean to fuck her ass, did he? Playing was one thing but this – she didn't know if she could do this.

As if reading her thoughts, he leaned over her back. "Not now," he whispered in her ear. "But one day soon."

Relief rushed through her body.

"I have to feel you wrapped around me every way possible, Quinn. I have to know your body inside and out like I need to take my next breath."

He pulled back, gripped himself and guided his head to her pussy. He pressed against her soaked opening and stopped. She could feel his body shudder once and then he slipped inside. Holding her hips so she couldn't force him in, he pushed in agonizingly slowly.

Her walls stretched, swallowing his hard length. When he sank to the hilt, he stopped again.

"So fucking tight," he panted.

Quinn gripped the sheets in her hands. "Damn it, Garen, get on with it. I can't take this."

His hand landed hard on her ass before he pulled back and thrust. "Yes oh yes, hard. Please."

Like a piston, his hips worked back and forth, driving his shaft in and out, drawing her body tighter until she struggled to breathe. He leaned over her back again, reached around and cupped her bouncing breasts. Plucking and pulling on her nipples, he drove her higher until all she could hear was their smacking flesh.

Oh God, her body throbbed beyond belief.

Releasing her breasts, he straightened, smacked both ass cheeks and then reached between her legs and pinched her clit. The world around her burst into flames and detonated like a bomb. Wave after wave of pleasure crashed over her body as she cried out his name.

Garen slammed into her once more and then stiffened, his cock pulsing furiously with his release. Grabbing her shoulders, he held her still so he could keep himself buried deep inside. She needed to move, needed to feel him stroke her contracting walls.

"Garen, please let me move. I need to move." Her head thrashed back and forth, she dug at the sheets and the more he held her still the more powerful her orgasm became. "What the fuck are you doing to me?"

He pulled out fast, the sucking sound of their bodies separating filling the room. He pushed her over onto her back, spread her legs and drove inside again. She arched her

back as he pumped in and out of her body and then screamed at the top of her lungs when he latched on to her breast and sucked her nipple deep and hard.

Another orgasm consumed her, ripped through her with such force she stiffened from the shock and then trembled as each spasm shuddered through her body. Garen withdrew, lay down overtop of her and sucked at her breasts as he stroked her still-pulsing cunt.

When the storm ended she lay there drenched in sweat, fighting to fill her lungs with air and wondering if she'd died and gone to the naughty part of heaven. She couldn't be in hell because nothing could feel this good in hell.

"Am I dead?" she asked, blinking, trying to regain her sight.

"Very much alive and very sexy."

"What the hell was that?"

"I don't know but I'm not complaining." He stroked her hair, kissed her dry lips and laughed. "You're a screamer. I like that."

"I am?" She didn't realize that about herself. "I guess no one ever made me scream before. I can't even move. I think I'm paralyzed."

"You'll be okay, just let your body come down for a moment." He feathered his fingers across her flesh, traveling up and down until she was thoroughly relaxed. "There are so many things I want to do to you, Quinn. Things I want us to experience together. Are you open for it?"

Her brain literally spun around in her head. "Not now!"

He laughed and kissed her gently.

"No, not tonight. You've had enough for tonight. Just how much pleasure are you willing to experience, Quinn?"

Using all her strength, she rolled to her side as he slipped up beside her. "Everything." And she meant it. This was only beginning. Somewhere inside she knew he would take her to new levels of ecstasy.

He nodded. "You've unleashed the beast. I hope you can handle it."

"I love challenges." It wouldn't be a challenge. What he didn't realize was he unleashed something inside her. Something that craved him like a drug and the more she had, the more she needed.

* * * * *

When morning came she stretched and felt Garen's leg tossed over her body. She opened one eye and looked down. Sometime during the night he'd moved her up on the bed and covered her with the sheet. Now he lay draped over her like a heavy quilt but she liked it. His morning erection pressed against her hip but it didn't come close to being as hard as when they were in the throes of passion.

Very carefully she slipped out from under him and left the bed. Quietly closing the bathroom door, she turned on the light, started the shower and then caught a glimpse of her backside in the mirror. Each cheek glowed with huge round red splotches.

"Wow." She ran her hand over them and winced. Oh well, play with fire, get burned as the old saying went. She stepped under the warm spray and sighed. She felt like a new woman and ready to take on anything.

When she emerged from the bathroom, Garen rolled on his back and looked up at her. "I would have joined you but I can't seem to get moving."

"That's funny. I have all kinds of energy this morning. And look," she said, turning around, showing him her red ass.

"Oh shit. I'm sorry, Quinn."

"Stop it. It's fine. Good thing I have to wear pants or Tyson would kick your ass." Seeing him still lying there with a look of remorse, she sat down. "Look at it this way, it's our little secret. Remnants of last night that only you and I know about."

"You sure?"

"Well, we won't be doing that little nasty for a while, not until my butt recovers but I like it, now go get a shower. They'll all be showing up here if we don't get a move on and make an appearance."

Garen grunted, grumbled and then rolled out of bed. Restraining herself from grabbing hold of his stiff cock took a lot of effort but she managed. The shower turned on while she dressed and dried her hair. When he came strolling out, she couldn't stop the smile beaming on her face.

"Good morning," he said in a more civilized tone, and then leaned down and kissed her.

"Feeling better, I see." When he turned to walk toward the bed, she popped him on the ass.

"Hey."

"Just a little revenge. Hurry up, I'm starving. I can't wait to see what Ruth whipped up for breakfast this morning."

Half an hour later they pulled up to the garage. Before she could reach for the door handle he slipped his hand behind her head and jerked her toward him. The kiss was hard, deep and just the way she liked it.

Her head spun like a top but she managed to crawl out of the car without falling. Before entering the building she took a deep breath, rolled her shoulders and then opened the door. Garen chuckled behind her.

"There you are. We wondered if that demon ate you both alive last night."

Tabitha had toned it down a little today. White tube socks with three-inch wide green bands at the top came just below her knees. Military style boots hugged her feet and her shorts hugged her tiny thighs and ended just above her knees. Her white shirt did little to hide her protruding nipples but at least it covered her belly today. Two

ponytails sprouted out from the side of her head and the studded dog collar pulled the ensemble together.

"I was pretty tired last night. I guess I overslept."

Tab squinted and studied them.

"Oh shit," Garen mumbled.

Crossing her arms over her breasts, she smiled and cocked her hip to the side. "Yeah, I know why you were so tired and it didn't have anything to do with a demon, not from hell anyway."

"Tab, let it alone." Garen pushed past her and entered the bay area.

"So spill, girl."

"Spill what?" As if she didn't know.

"Look, it's been like six months since I've twisted sheets. I want details. Is he good? Was it 'wow' or 'blow my mind to pieces and don't care if I ever walk again' fantastic?"

Oh what the hell, why not? "Good, no. Phenomenal, yes, and he did blow my mind to pieces and I really didn't think I would ever walk again."

Tabitha draped her arm around Quinn's shoulder. "I knew there was an animal behind that quiet man. Good for you."

They walked into the bay and found Ruth changing the bandages on Tyson's back. Quinn wandered over to get a look. She couldn't believe how much they'd healed. They were barely even red anymore.

"I think we're finished with the bandages, Tyson," Ruth told him. "How does it feel?"

"Perfect. Thanks. Hey, Quinn. You okay after last night?" He frowned at her, putting her on guard. How did he know about last night?

"Yes, that demon must have played hell on you." Ruth looked at her and winked. Oh great, they all knew she and Garen'd had sex. Damn aura reading anyway.

"Garen got there in time. It almost had me though and it was weak."

Donald came trotting out carrying a large platter of ham and pancakes. "Breakfast is ready." He turned and winked at Quinn and then stopped. "Oh maybe I should make more ham. It looks like you may need the protein."

"Donald," Ruth scolded.

"I haven't seen an aura like that since you and I—"

"Set the food down, Donald, now." Ruth glanced over at Tyson and then back to him.

Without another word he did as ordered and they all sat. She and Garen devoured their food and then Garen jumped up.

"I have some errands to run. I'll be back shortly." He leaned down, gently kissed Tab on the forehead, did the same with Ruth and then planted a healthy "thanks for last night" kiss on her.

"Oh I get it. You two had sex last night," Tyson blurted out. When they all turned and looked at him with surprise, he shrugged his shoulders. "What, you think I don't know about sex?"

Garen slowly turned and all but ran out the door. *Coward.*

Tab cleared her throat. "So do we operate today like we did yesterday? It seemed to work pretty good."

"I wish there was a faster way. Standing around and waiting for them to leave the building seems like a waste of time." There had to be easier way to get rid of a group. "You guys didn't find anything in those old books, did you?"

"Sorry, Quinn." Donald shook his head. "Now that those knives of yours are blessed it should make it easier. From what Tabitha told us, just a little cut and they begin to disintegrate."

Quinn's mind went to work. How could they use that? They'd have to go back inside the building, slicing everyone they passed, to make a real dent and she really didn't want to go back inside. All that evil was like trying to breathe used motor oil, thick, slimy and suffocating.

Not to mention the demon that lurked around. If he could get into her head once he could do it again. And what about Tabitha and Garen, could the bastard reach all three at once? She just couldn't see another way without endangering their lives. Of course the longer it took the longer she and Garen had.

By the time she finished helping Ruth and Tabitha clean up Garen came strolling back in. "So do we have a plan?"

"Second verse same as the first," Tab responded.

"Ya know, if you could get some names of these monsters that work there I could find their addresses. You wouldn't have to stand on the street and wait."

Quinn thought long and hard about Tyson's suggestion. "We'd have to go inside and find the right office that held the records, assuming they even have any. I'm not going back inside and I won't stand by and watch either of you go in. It's too dangerous."

"Good point." Tyson rubbed his jaw and lost himself in thought.

"In the meantime," Tabitha pulled out her knife and flipped it in the air, "we should get going. Hey, Garen, don't you want yours zapped?"

Quinn reached behind and slipped it from Garen's back pocket, handing it to Tyson. Then she removed her blade and held it out. They all wrapped their hands around the hilt as Tyson laid his hand over theirs and felt the power build around them.

The room filled with a loud hum, building with intensity until Quinn swore the walls pulsed. Suddenly it stopped and the voices of ancient priests chanting replaced it. All three knives heated, glowed with a gold hue and sent a mild jolt of electricity skittering through their bodies.

Tyson's face hardened, light wavered through his irises. The boy tossed his head back, stiffened his body and shouted an unfamiliar foreign word at the top of his lungs. At that very moment Tabitha, Garen and Quinn mimicked his stance as a powerful rush of force blasted through them, temporarily paralyzing their bodies into statuesque form.

A huge ball of white light radiated around them, pulsed twice and then broke into three separate spheres. Each settled over the individual blades and then as if absorbed by a sponge, sucked into the steel. Tyson wobbled, stumbled and nearly dropped to the floor had Donald not acted fast to catch him.

The hold over their muscles released, all three slumping with a gasp. Quinn stood, taking stock of her body, making sure all her parts were still in working order. Instead of pain or weakness she felt invigorated, seeing the people around her through different eyes. The light seemed brighter, colors more vivid and her body more sensitive to even the slightest movement of breeze around her.

Garen and Tabitha's presence swamped her. She could feel them, their body heat, their auras reaching out and touching hers, not at all an unpleasant sensation. Maybe that's where her newfound energy came from? Maybe they fed each other?

Looking over at Garen, she could tell by the look on his face he'd experienced the same thing as had Tabitha, her dark-maroon-painted lips parted in surprise. Tyson groaned, bringing her attention back to him. He leaned against Donald, his weak legs barely holding him upright.

"Ty, honey, are you okay?" Quinn rushed to him, reached out and touched his pale, drawn face. "What happened?" Upon contact, the most exquisite warmth and light swelled in her chest, bringing tears to her eyes.

The boy's decency and integrity touched her, wrapped around her heart and soul, giving her a peek at what made him. In that instant she knew, simply knew just as she knew her name, everything that had happened to him since the day he took his first breath on this earth had prepared him for the fight to come. An ancient soul living in a boy's body, reincarnated to complete the work left unfinished so many hundreds of years ago.

What an awesome responsibility for someone so young to bear and yet no other would be as up to the task as Tyson. Quinn took him in her arms, held him tight, stroked his hair and became lost in the unconditional love that he possessed. She could feel strength return to his body. When Tabitha and Garen stepped up, wrapping their arms around them, he stood straighter and stronger, absorbing the energy they offered.

"Do you know how special you are, Tyson?" she whispered in his ear.

He pulled away, looked her right in the eyes, his filled with a library of knowledge he didn't have earlier. "No more than you." His gaze softened, moisture dampening eyes. "I saw, Quinn, all of it."

"Saw what?"

"Your lives, past and present."

Icy fear slid over her heart. He saw? He knew what had happened, what she'd done? No, he couldn't. Glancing away, she released him and took a step back.

"It's okay. I understand."

How could he understand? She didn't understand.

Garen gently laid his hand on her shoulder. "What's going on?"

"I saw each one of you, your lives before and now." Tyson blinked away the tears that threatened to spill. "I could feel it too, pain, excitement, fear, loneliness, all of it. Like I lived it right alongside you."

Garen squeezed her shoulder, whether to let her know he understood or reassuring her it would be okay, she wasn't sure.

Tabitha stepped next to her, hooked their pinkies together at their sides and smiled. "Creepy."

Talk about understatement. She wanted to run away, leave Tyson's knowing eyes, but Garen and Tabitha's protective auras surrounded her, helping her frazzled nerves calm.

"Did you see anything else, Tyson?" Garen moved his hand from Quinn's shoulder to the back of her neck where he gently massaged away any tension building.

"No, but it felt like my head was going to explode with all the information cramming into it." The change of subject had him looking toward Donald. "The magic gets stronger each time. Like," Tyson pressed the heels of his hands to his temples and squinted his eyes as if trying to sift through all the information, "every time we add another blessed knife everything amps up. It was done to make the slayers stronger."

Donald settled his arm around Ty's shoulders. "How do you know this?"

"I just do." He turned back to Quinn. "You should feel different, all of you. Do you feel anything?"

Tab jumped in. "I can feel Quinn's distress and Garen's concern. I have a feeling I'd know when they entered a room without seeing them. And I feel as though I could take on the biggest, nastiest, ugliest beast walking and kick its ass royally."

"Will we always feel each other this way, Tyson?" Garen continued rubbing Quinn's neck as he spoke.

"No. It'll ease with time. It's just new to you so you're extra sensitive right now. Your knives, they'll work better. I don't know how yet but they will." The boy wobbled and Donald moved him to a chair. "Whoa, too much, way too much to process."

Squatting on the floor next to the boy and mussing his hair, Garen said, "It's okay, buddy. Maybe if you don't push it'll come easier. We should be going anyway." Garen looked down at his now transformed blade with markings that matched Quinn's and Tab's. "By the way, thanks."

Tyson nodded and then looked up at Quinn with understanding shining in his eyes. "Everything's going to be okay. We just have to stick together."

Chapter Thirteen

Quinn couldn't get out of the rundown garage fast enough. Knowing Tyson didn't judge her by what he saw did little to make the fact that he knew what she'd done any easier. He said he understood but how could someone with such a wholesome, pure soul understand? Would he tell the others? She doubted it.

Garen's aura reached out and brushed against hers, soothing and stroking her distressed colors. She looked over at him as he drove down the road silently. He thought he knew but he didn't. To him her dark secret was nothing more than her abuse at the hands of an ex-lover. What would he say if he knew?

Pushing that thought back because it didn't matter what he'd think, she focused on what they were headed to do. Tabitha sat in the backseat, bobbing her head to whatever music she listened to through her earbuds.

"There's got to be a better way to do this, Garen. I just can't figure it out."

He released a long breath and then scratched at his jaw. "I know but until we do, taking them out one at a time will have to do. I'm curious to see what our knives are capable of doing now."

"Yeah, me too. They'll be missing the ones we took down yesterday. I'm betting they'll be on guard today." Did these creatures really care if one of their own vanished? Were they capable of feeling anything when they began to take on human characteristics?

"I'd like to toss a damn bomb inside that building and be done with it," Garen grumbled.

So would she. As they entered the busiest part of the city, her stomach clenched and her nerves sizzled. Something wasn't right.

Tabitha pulled out her earbuds and leaned into the front seat, her gaze darting around the streets. "Do you feel it?"

Garen gripped the steering wheel until his knuckles turned white. "Oh yeah. Bad shit and I don't like it."

Then she saw it, the flashing red and blue lights, police cars parked up and down the street in front of an apartment building and the massive black auras surrounding stone-faced onlookers. Bile rose in her throat. What had they done? What kind of hell had they unleashed on the city yesterday?

Garen found a place to park and they watched for a few moments. Gurneys wheeled out the front door one after another, the bodies covered from head to toe with a crisp white blankets. Quinn counted six.

Tabitha pressed her face close to the back window. "Maybe this doesn't have anything to do with the Tulpas she says, not believing a word coming out her mouth," Tabitha said.

"Let's go, maybe we can get someone to tell us what happened." Garen climbed from the front seat and waited and for her and Tab to join him.

The closer they got to the crowd the more on edge Quinn became. While Garen questioned a young woman standing at the fringe of the chaos, Quinn noticed the Tulpas standing around still bore the massive black auras. She scanned the crowd but couldn't find any dull colors encased in black. Why?

"Six people dead, all broken necks," Garen informed them.

A flash of anger reached out from Tabitha and collided with her aura. Garen gently wrapped his fingers around Tab's wrist and held her in place.

"Let's go." Garen dragged Tabitha behind him, unwilling to let her go until they were a good two blocks away.

"We did this," Quinn whispered. She knew retaliation when she saw it. When she looked up at Garen, she didn't like the stone-cold look on his face. He clamped down tight on his feelings so neither she nor Tab could feel him.

When they reached the office building housing the monsters, he stopped, turned to them, and simply said, "Stay here."

Before she could comprehend his intentions, he stormed inside the building. Tabitha tossed her arms up in the air and let loose a string of curses that made pedestrians scurry across the road. Quinn only heard the sound of her heart thumping inside her chest wanting to break free and chase after him. They'd eat him alive in there alone. He wouldn't stand a chance even with his blessed blade.

Panic took hold, strangling her throat. She couldn't let anything happen to him. If someone had to be tossed to the wolf it should be her. She was damned anyway. Without a second thought, Quinn ran through the front doors of the building and slid to a stop on the marble floors.

Empty, completely empty, the lobby anyway. Where was Garen? Taking a few steps farther in, she could hear her breathing echo in the vast space. This time yesterday the building buzzed with activity.

"Garen," she whispered softly. "Where the hell are you?" She looked toward the elevator doors. Surely he wouldn't go upstairs alone, would he? Then she looked toward the few office doors at the other end of the lobby.

That's where he'd be, she felt it in her bones. Making her way toward the doors, her glance darted from side to side. When she reached the first door, she opened it carefully, peeked in, and only felt the residue of evil hanging in the air.

"Garen, you in here?" Not getting a reply, she moved on.

Once again she opened the door slightly, peeked in and ignored the lingering malevolence. No Garen. Damn it, where did he get to?

The third door stood slightly open, she placed her hand on the knob and pushed only to be dragged inside the dark room, pulled against a hard body and a hand slapped over her mouth. The point of knife pricked the flesh under her chin. Confusion wafted off Garen's body, as if he didn't know who he held. Unable to speak Quinn did the first thing that came to mind.

Wiggling her ass, she rubbed against his crotch and then with her free hand reached around behind and grabbed a handful of his ass. To top it off she let a small, low groan rumble in her throat. His hand loosened, giving her the opportunity to flick his palm with the tip of her tongue.

Still he held the knife, the point piercing her skin until a trickle of blood snaked its way down her neck. *He should know who I am. He should be able to tell the same way I know he holds me captive.* This damn building stank of evil and it made its way into his head just like it did her the other day.

Grinding herself against him and then carefully moving her hand toward her mouth, she drew his hand away. "Garen, it's me. It's Quinn."

The knife punctured slightly deeper. Quinn did her best not to yell from the pain. His ragged breathing indicated he waged an internal war, fighting whatever demanded he hurt her. Well, it wouldn't win.

"Damn it, Garen, listen to me. Don't let it have you, don't give in to it. You're stronger than it is. I know you are." He pulled the knife away from her skin but let it hover around her neck.

Why wasn't his blade helping him like it did her last night? It should be chasing away the evil. Slipping her hand behind her back, she removed her knife and felt the vibration travel up her arm. She could hear his hum along with hers.

"Listen to it, Garen, let it inside. Let them chase away the darkness and protect you."

His grip on her loosened, his hand dropped and she turned, placed her hands on both sides of his head and kissed him hard. At first he didn't respond, just stood there frozen in place. Refusing to lose him to the evil, she forced her tongue deep inside and swept his mouth.

Like a switch being flicked he came to life, answering her kiss with his own ferocity, devouring her lips. His aura reached out and consumed her, wrapping her in his sexual needs and desires.

"Not here," she panted. "Later. I promise." It took willpower she didn't know she had to pull away from him. Her body screamed for his, wanted him inside her, needed his touch.

"I'm sorry. Oh God, Quinn, I'm so sorry." Garen yanked her against him and held her with trembling arms. "I could've killed you."

"It isn't your fault," her voice muffled against his chest. "We have to get out of here." She pried herself from his grip and pushed back her hair. "I don't like this, Garen. Something weird is happening."

He nodded in agreement and then took her by the hand. "Where's Tab?"

"I left her standing outside but she might be in by now."

"No, she's still out there. We've worked together enough. She won't leave the entrance unprotected."

He led her out into the lobby and then together they ran for the door. The ding of the elevator brought them to a halt. Quinn felt it before she saw it step out into the lobby. As Garen opened the front door, she shoved him through. Instantly the door slammed behind him.

Desperately she yanked and jerked, trying to get it open. Garen and Tabitha stood on the other side, yelling her name, pounding on the glass and pulling on the door to no avail. Without looking she could feel the creature approach, its malevolence reaching out to her, circling and waiting to strike. Her body trembled, her stomach clenched and heaved as sweat trickled down her face.

"No need to waste your energy. Those doors won't open until I release them." The echoing, rumbling voice filled the empty room and made her bones quiver with fear.

She stilled, looked up and met Garen's eyes through the glass.

"Don't listen to it, Quinn. Look at me, listen to me."

"He can't help you. No one can help you." The creature posing as a human stepped closer, its darkness sucking the air from her lungs.

Keeping her eyes fixed on Garen's face, she gasped, silently pleading for him to help. His mouth moved as he shouted to her but no words reached her ears.

"You're mine, slayer."

Its words pierced her brain as she fought the darkness tugging at her, trying to pull her in and hold her captive. "You killed those innocent people." Speaking helped her hold on to that thin string she desperately clung to, dangling between the real world and the yawning jaws of hell waiting to devour her.

The demon released a horrifying laugh, a sound so vile Quinn shivered in fear.

"I killed no one. I don't have too."

"No," Quinn responded, still staring into Garen's eyes through the glass. "You just order those monsters to do it for you. I didn't know demons were such cowards."

The beast clucked his tongue. "Sticks and stones, slayer. I can kill with a flick of the wrist. But then you know all about taking a life, don't you?"

Her body turned icy cold and her breath steamed from her mouth. It knew, of course it knew. The bastard crawled around inside her head—it would know everything about her. She blinked several times as Garen continued to pound on the other side of the glass. Tabitha held her cell phone to her ear, frantically talking, probably to Ruth.

"You felt empowered when you sliced that man, didn't you, slayer? You reveled in the knowledge that you ended his miserable life."

The scene played like a movie inside her head. She couldn't stop it. No matter how hard she fought to keep from remembering she saw it all happening in front of her. He'd just untied her after spending several hours of marking her body with fresh cuts and opening old ones that hadn't yet healed. Blood dripped and smeared on the sheets. Sheets he'd make her clean as he stood over her, telling her she brought the punishment on herself.

As soon as he freed her, she reached under the mattress where she'd hidden her blade, pulled it out and slashed her so-called lover across the throat. His gasps for breath echoed inside her head. She could smell the coppery blood as it trickled down his throat, soaking his shirt.

"Yes, remember."

"No." She didn't want to remember. "No!" Garen's face wavered on the other side of the door. His angry, fearful eyes broke the hold the demon held over her memory, burning away the vision.

"More innocents will die but you can stop it."

Oh she'd stop it all right. She'd stop it by tearing this foul demon apart, ripping its putrid body to pieces and then setting it on fire just for the hell of it.

"My servants roam this wonderfully sinful city right now, waiting for my command to kill again. How many more innocent humans will die, slayer? What would you sacrifice to save them?"

Tabitha and Garen held their blades against the glass, begging, pleading for her to do the same. Quinn didn't understand but followed their lead, carefully turning, removing her blade from her back pocket so the demon wouldn't see.

"What do you want from me?" she asked, making sure not to look at it yet keeping her knife from its view.

"Very simple. You will give yourself to me and your friends will go away, unharmed, free to carry on their lives. I will call back my servants and the people of this city will continue to go about their day as if nothing happened."

Quinn put her back to the glass, pressed her blade between her and the door. Instantly the handle heated and the metal vibrated, sending small electric shocks up through her arm.

"What do want with me?" The icy chill of her body melted, replaced by the warmth of her ancestors chanting inside her head.

Again the beast cackled, its evil reaching out and surrounding her, filling her head with one more vision. Her stomach turned, her heart stuttered inside her chest and she cried out from the horrific scene. Her naked body lay tied to an ornately carved bed with hideous sub-demon faces looking down on her. Deep, oozing gashes covered her body as the demon hovered over her, its true grotesque animalistic form lapping at the blood dripping from her body. An eternity of torture for the lives of innocents.

Her soul shifted inside her body, filled her with power and anger. The intense heat of her blade seared through her arm, filled her chest and gut and then blasted away the vision the demon planted in her head. Chants of strength, the will of a higher being sang inside her head, joined by the strong melodic voice of the female she'd encountered during her last battle with a demon.

As the energy built inside her body, she looked up and met the beast's shocked, glowing red eyes. It felt the power.

From within, the female spoke, joining Quinn's voice, two speaking as one. "Not this time, imp. Not in the past, not now, not ever." The glass behind her vibrated until the two large frames shook from the force. "Crawl back to hell and simmer within the pits of depravity and fire you know so well."

"I may have lost you before but I will not lose you this time. You will be my eternal slave, feeding me with your blood." The beast within the body briefly emerged. Long fangs and thin lips curled back, exposing rotting teeth and a snakelike forked tongue striking out at her.

Inside, Quinn wanted to run but the female presence held firm, standing for the fight, silently reassuring her they would win. "The only blood you will feed upon will your own." Quinn lashed out with her blade, striking as if to slice the beast's throat.

The doors behind her burst open with a loud crash. Garen and Tabitha reached in and dragged her out onto the street. Her gaze never left the demon inside as it flew backward from the combined force of their blessed blades. The shrill shriek it released could be heard on the busy streets. Pedestrians stopped, looked and then continued on.

"Are you okay?" Garen ran his hands all over her body, checking for any injuries.

Do not push him away, the female spoke inside her head. *We need him.*

Quinn had no intention of pushing Garen away. Right now she welcomed his touch, his concerned eyes and even his absurd string of curses that made no sense. *I won't, not yet.* Right now she wanted nothing more than to throw her trembling body into his arms and lose herself in his safety.

"What did it say to you?" Tabitha grabbed her by the arm and dragged her away from the front of the building. "What did it do?"

"It'll stop killing if you two go away and I give myself to it." The vision it showed her flashed in her mind. Quinn shook her head, trying to shake it off.

Garen ran his hand through his hair. "That's not going to happen, Quinn. You hear me. I won't let you even think about such a ridiculous idea."

"Don't worry." She wrapped her arms around herself to calm the shaking. "I know what it wants to do with me and I'm not eager to spend eternity suffering that kind of fate." One last violent shudder swept over her body before Garen pulled her to him and held on for dear life.

"We should take her back," Tab said, running her hand up and down Quinn's back.

You must destroy as many Tulpas as you can now. The more the demon has, the more horror it will spread. Quinn looked up and saw a mass of black auras heading toward the office building.

"They're coming."

Garen and Tabitha looked down the street.

"We can't let them inside the building. We need to kill them now."

"Right here on the street?" Tab looked around at all the people coming and going. "I think someone will notice."

"It doesn't matter, Tab." Quinn looked into Garen's eyes. "We need to kill them now."

In an act of trust he nodded his head in agreement. "How?"

She didn't know for sure. All she knew was they couldn't get back inside. Looking down at her blade, an idea burst into her head. "Just a slice, that's all it'll take. Walk by, cut and keep walking."

Tab shrugged her shoulders. "Why the hell not?" She sauntered down the sidewalk, heading straight for a Tulpa. As she passed, she flicked her blade to the side, cutting deep into the creature's torso. Not bothering to look back, she headed straight for the next one.

Quinn and Garen watched as the monster puffed into a cloud of ash. To their astonishment no one seemed to notice. Garen took her by the hand and they too headed into the crowd. One by one they dispatched the soulless creatures without any interference from passersby.

Eventually Tabitha hung close to the front door of the office building, catching any that got by and tried to enter their safe haven. After a few hours, the numbers of young Tulpas diminished until they couldn't find any more. And then Quinn saw them, the older ones, the ones carrying pale auras.

"Now comes the fun part," she muttered to Garen.

He gripped his blade and winked at her. "It shouldn't be any different." He pulled out his cell, dialed Tab and told her what was headed their way. "Let's give it a try."

After taking a deep breath, they headed toward the older Tulpas. Garen walked past the first one, turned and jabbed his blade deep into the creature's body. Any blood on the steel burned and sizzled until it vanished. The Tulpa turned. Its cold, dead eyes staring straight through him and reached out as if to throw a punch.

Quinn acted fast, driving her blade into its stomach. The flesh around the wound turned black and brittle. The stench of rotting flesh filled the air as it dropped to the ground. Quinn grabbed Garen's arm and led him away toward their next victim.

As she turned for one last look, the rotting Tulpa crumbled into a pile of ash right there in the middle of the sidewalk while people walked right on by, never noticing. Grateful and a little confused, she turned back and headed on to the next. They worked out a system, pass, slice the flesh and keep going.

Quinn wasn't sure how many they vanquished but when they spotted their next victim it stopped dead in its tracks, looked directly at them and then turned, running away. One by one the Tulpas fled the area.

"Damn." Garen tucked his blade into his back pocket and pulled his shirt over the handle.

Suddenly Quinn felt tired and weak, her blade shaking in her hand. "How long have we been at this?"

Garen looked down at his watch. "About five hours." When he glanced over at her, he gave an audible intake of breath. "You look like hell."

"Thanks. Just what every woman wants to hear," she chuckled. "I'm so tired, Garen. Would you take me back to my hotel room? I need to lie down."

"Yeah, sure. Let's go get Tabitha."

When they reached the office building, Tab was leaning against the wall, a large pile of ash at her feet. "That thing in there has been howling its fool head off. Do you think it can feel them dying?"

They all looked at each other as if to say "good question".

Garen reluctantly dropped Quinn off at her hotel room alone and then left to return Tabitha to her parents. Once tucked inside the dingy room, Quinn stripped off her clothes and flopped down on the bed. Her heavy eyelids slammed closed and her tired body relaxed into the broken-down mattress.

Sleep came fast, plunging her into a welcome darkness. Slowly she became aware of a presence lying next to her. She opened her eyes to find a woman propped on the bed, looking down at her. Her physical body looked real and solid but Quinn sensed the spirit within. A familiar being who she should know.

Oddly enough, Quinn didn't feel any fear but was comfortable with this mysterious woman. "Who are you?"

"I am you, you are me, we are us."

"Yeah, that makes sense." The woman wore a leather skirt that fell to her ankles and a worn leather vest with nothing underneath, her bosom spilling over the sides. Quinn had to admit she liked the outfit, a little old-fashioned but tasteful.

"So you're telling me we're the same person."

"Yes and no. We share the same soul but we are not the same. I would not be so willing to walk away from a man who wishes to do nothing more than please me."

Quinn closed her eyes. "That's the way it has to be. Why do you care anyway?"

The woman lay down next to her. "I have waited for centuries to find him again and now that I have you want to keep us apart."

"Centuries?"

"A very long time ago we lived together. I knew him as Marcus, a very handsome, rugged, loving man who treated me like a queen and could love me for hours on end."

Quinn frowned. "You lived in a small cabin in the middle of a field surrounded by wildflowers."

"Yes, we did. I loved that field when it bloomed. I could go out and lie naked among the blossoms as the sun kissed my flesh. Marcus always knew where to find me. He'd strip off his britches and lie with me, making love to me for hours until the sun dipped low in the sky."

"Sounds like heaven." And it did too. What she wouldn't give to live that simple life right now. "So Marcus, or Garen, truly loved you?"

"Oh yes, just as he does now, only he doesn't realize it yet because you won't let yourself be loved. I tried to awaken you when that horrid man abused you but the wall you built was too strong. I could not break through in time. No matter, that is past."

Quinn didn't want to hear about love. Love didn't exist for her, especially with Garen. "What did that demon mean it lost you once? What happened?"

"Oh that wretched creature. Marcus and I stumbled upon two Tulpas that some evil townsfolk created to chase away people who settled too close to their land. Little did we know that the hate used to create these monsters brought a demon straight from hell to occupy the one of the bodies. Marcus chased down one of the Tulpas and I went after the other, the one bearing the demon. I guess it took a liking to me and decided it would have me for its own."

"You beat it, how?"

"The fight was hard, dear Quinn, I did not walk away unscathed but in the end I slit its throat with my sword. I assumed the demon died along with the shell it lived in. Apparently not."

"Apparently."

"You know I used to walk around this way all the time," the woman said, stroking Quinn's bare stomach with her fingertips. "I hated the confines of clothing. Never saw the use in it. We arrive on this earth naked and free but insist on covering our bodies with uncomfortable materials. Marcus used to tell me if any of the townsfolk saw me they would declare me a spawn of the devil and hang me from the highest limb."

"I don't much like clothing either," Quinn said, yawning.

"You bear our scars well, Quinn," she said, stroking the silver lines across her breast. "You do not allow them to define who you are yet you fear someone who only wishes to please and love you. Why?"

Quinn shivered from the featherlight touch of the woman's fingers. "My secret will only hurt him," she whispered. "I don't want to hurt him."

"You do not give him enough credit. Our man is much stronger than that."

"I don't want to talk about it anymore." Thinking of Garen as her man only made it seem like a relationship, which it wasn't. Sure, she liked having sex with him but that as far as they could go. "Hey, last night, was that you or me?"

"That was you and I thank you for it. You brought me that much closer to my Marcus. He was and still is a very skilled lover. As are you."

Quinn lay quiet for a moment, remembering how wonderful last night was.

"He'll come for you tonight."

"I know." Butterflies took flight inside her belly just thinking about another round of sex with him. "Did you and Marcus have children?"

"Yes we did. A handsome son and a beautiful little girl. I miss them."

A tear dropped on Quinn's stomach. When she looked up, the woman began to fade as she cried, "What happened?"

"We all have our time on this earth, some more than others. Do not waste what you have been given, Quinn. It can slip through your fingers so fast." With that, the woman faded away, leaving her alone once more.

What did she mean? Had she lost her children somehow? Did they die or did she die? Lying there, she drifted between deep sleep and semiconsciousness. Eventually the darkness pulled her under again and sent her on a wild journey.

First she found herself in the field of wildflowers, lying naked among the fragrant blossoms. Then she appeared in the small cabin, singing as she brushed the auburn hair of tiny girl while a teenage boy stoked the fire. Never had she experienced such happiness or bliss.

Then she stood beside a man, Marcus, as they fought a large, deformed, ugly Tulpa. What she noticed was that Marcus trusted her to know how to fight and kill the creature, never once stepping in the way or taking over to protect her. The trust and respect she felt flooded her body.

Her next step through the dreamworld landed her in the pits of hell, evident by the pitiful moans of pain and agony filling the thick, black, stenchy air. As she stumbled through the darkness toward the only light she could see, she froze. It wasn't light really but a glowing ball of fire. It beckoned to her, drew her in and she could nothing to stop it.

Once sucked into the hot ball of fire, she entered a room adorned by large charred wooden carvings of hideous beasts. In the center of the room sat a large bed, twice the size of a king-size bed. On the bed lay a young woman, bloody and restrained by heavy leather straps attached to thick, gnarled bedposts.

The extremely thin, pale woman turned her head and looked Quinn straight in the eyes. "You're here to replace me."

No, Quinn thought to herself. I will not end up like this.

Blood oozed from thick tears and gashes in the woman's flesh. "Please kill me," she pleaded. "I can't do this anymore. I want to die."

A harsh cackle sounded in the darkness. Quinn reached for her blade but came up empty-handed. Her heart beat like a jackhammer inside her chest.

"Please let me die," the woman sobbed.

The room flashed with an eerie orange glow and there next to the bed stood the demon in true form. Its hunched back, scaly skin and red eyes looked down on the raw flesh of the girl. With one quick lash of its forked tongue it struck a new wound and slurped the blood oozing forth.

Quinn tried to move to help but found her limbs numb and still. All she could do was watch as the monster fed from the innocent girl.

"Take her place and I will relieve her of her torment," the creature growled.

"Please," the woman sobbed.

"Come, lie with me, feed me for eternity, and you will know pleasure beyond your imagination."

Quinn shook her head, tried to scream but the sound stuck like a rock in her throat. She didn't want this. She would die before she let herself become the toy of a demon. The room flashed again and this time she saw herself lying there, strapped to the bed. Replacing the demon stood her ex, knife in hand and slicing away at her flesh.

"You do this to yourself, Quinn. You should learn to listen to me and I wouldn't be forced to punish you."

Laughter erupted around the room where his friends stood looking on, refusing to help. The sharp pain as the knife pierced her skin radiated through her entire body. Why didn't they help? Why would they want to see this? And then she felt it, the rough, ragged tongue slip across her bleeding skin. The laughter drowned out her shrill scream.

"Quinn, Quinn, are you all right? Open the damn door."

Garen's worried voice jerked her from her hellish sleep. As he pounded his fist against the door, she crawled from the bed, made her way to the door and opened it.

"Are you okay? Is it attacking you again?" He lifted her naked body into his arms and carried her to the bed.

"Yes, no. I don't know. I think it was just a dream."

He sat down, holding her in his lap as she buried her face in the crook of his neck and inhaled. She felt her other self move deep inside her soul and allowed the woman to enjoy the scent of their man.

"It was just a dream, Garen, a horrible dream."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

Tension in her body melted from his warmth. "Good. That's good." His hand smoothed over the curve of her ass. "Ya know, every time I come here you're naked. You don't give a man a chance."

"I'd apologize but I wouldn't mean it. I never realized it before but I hate clothes."

Garen reached across the bed and picked something up. "I've never seen you wear this before."

In his hand he held a worn leather vest. Quinn blinked twice and then reached out and touched it. This was the same garment the woman wore. Maybe it wasn't all a dream.

"I came to see if you'd go out to dinner with me."

"Huh?" Still mesmerized by the vest, she took it from him and held it. "I'm sorry, what did you say?"

"I asked you if you'd go out to dinner with me."

"Dinner? Sure, I guess." She sat in his lap, enjoying his stroking and staring at the vest. How the hell did an illusion leave something behind?

"Maybe you should get dressed. I wouldn't mind having you sit across from me like this but I couldn't stand the looks other men would give you."

Oblivious Quinn looked down at herself. "Oh yeah, I guess I should put something on."

Crawling off his lap, she held the vest close to her. After grabbing a pair of jeans, she slipped them on and then held out the vest. Did she dare?

"Go ahead, put it on. I'd like to see you in it."

She slipped it on, buttoned it up over her breasts and then tugged it down into place. When she turned to look at herself in the mirror, she was met with the smiling face of the woman who left it. Garen stood behind her and for just a moment she swore four faces reflected back. The woman met the eyes of the man, Marcus, and the smile they shared warmed her heart.

Garen swallowed hard. "Who are they?"

"Marcus and, well, I don't know her name exactly but they're us." Jeez, did she just say that so nonchalantly? When did life become so ordinarily bizarre?

"Us?"

"Long story." The ghostly visions faded, leaving only their reflections in the mirror. "Are you ready? I'm starved."

"What do you mean they're us?" he asked as she slipped on her boots.

"I'll explain it while we eat." Quinn headed to the door only to have Garen stop her. He turned her toward him, let his gaze linger up and down her body and then kissed her, gently touching her lips with his. The wave of pleasure she experienced made her knees buckle.

It wasn't a hungry, lusty kiss but a loving, caring kiss. She didn't want to like it, tried to force herself not to like it but fell into him helplessly. That's all he did, kiss her like she was the most precious woman on the face of the earth and, damn it, she didn't want that.

As if sensing her apprehension, he pulled away. "I'm sorry, I don't know what came over me." He touched the small knife prick under her chin. "Did I do that today?"

"Don't worry about it. It wasn't exactly you in that room. I understand that. How's Tyson doing?"

"He's good. He and Donald are busy pouring over those old books. Tyson is the one who told Tab to break out the knives to get you out of that building." He opened the door and followed her out into the warm early evening air. "He asked a million questions, wanting to make sure you were okay. Only after I convinced him everything was okay did he let me go."

Quinn smiled. When this was over she'd have a tough decision to make about him but right now she didn't want to think about it. Garen opened the car door for her and then closed it like a perfect gentleman. It was getting harder to remember she'd have to leave him.

Changing her train of thought, she gave him a huge smile. "So where are we going?"

"I found a nice little restaurant, small but I think you'll like it."

It didn't take them long to arrive and after he parked, he ran around the car and opened the door for her. Maybe enjoying his attention wasn't such a bad thing for right now. Really, when would she ever be treated so well again? Probably never.

As usual he was right. The restaurant had only a few tables inside and some outside on a very pretty deck covered in bright flowers. Quinn closed her eyes and enjoyed the beautiful aroma.

"Some day I'm going to have a place surrounded in flowers."

"Where you can walk around naked in the sun," Garen added. "Whoa, where did that come from?"

"From Marcus." After the confused, almost fearful look that crossed his face, she decided maybe he should get the whole story, at least what she knew anyway.

The waitress delivered their wine and after a few bracing sips, she began. He listened intently, never interrupting, and digesting every word. When she finished she swallowed the rest of her wine and waited for the onslaught of questions.

"We're like Tyson then. Old souls who came back to finish a job. Wow."

"Did you not hear the part where I said they were in love, had a family?" She didn't want him having any delusions about the two of them finishing out the ancient romance and living happily ever after.

"I heard. Do you talk to this woman a lot?"

"It just started a few days ago when I met you."

"Was that you last night or her?"

His sharp tone didn't escape her. "It was all me, Garen." She reached across the table and laid her hand over his. "You bring out the animal in me."

"Good. I just wanted to make sure."

With that the topic dropped and they ate dinner having light conversation discussing movies, cars and his comic book. When they finished eating the scrumptious food they shared a dessert that made Quinn groan in delight. After, they walked hand in hand down the street just talking.

As they headed back toward the car, Quinn felt heaviness in her chest and a sick, slimy feeling wash over her. "Something isn't right, Garen. Do you feel it?"

"No, I don't feel anything. Maybe your food isn't sitting well with you."

"That's not it. It's evil."

Garen looked around but saw no immediate danger. "Come on. Let's get out of here."

They all but ran back to the car and he wasted no time in driving back to the hotel. A few hookers took advantage of the nice warm air and hung out front of the rundown building. A few shouted offers to Garen that even Quinn didn't think she'd be able to do. He ignored them, removed a bag from the backseat and then hustled her into the room.

"What, you aren't interested in the offers?" she teased.

"The only thing I'm interested in is what you're offering tonight." He tossed the bag on the bed. "Do you have any idea how hard it was to keep my hands off you tonight? That top is fucking hot, the way it shows off your cleavage."

His eyes darkened with a hunger she knew too well. "What's in the bag?"

"A surprise but we'll get to that later."

Chapter Fourteen

With his blood running hot and heavy through his body, Garen watched her closely. It dawned on him their last two encounters started in conflict but tonight nothing but ease ruled the evening. He had no idea how to approach her this way and that made him feel like an adolescent.

Did she have any idea how sexy she looked, standing there in that leather vest as it hugged and molded to her torso? Probably not. All night he'd wanted to touch her, run his hands down the broken-in leather where it curved over her breasts, showing just a peek of her fleshy round mounds. Even now his throat dried up like sand looking at her.

Quinn Hurst was nothing short of absolute sexuality and good looks. Garen clenched his fists at his side, wanting to run his hands through her wavy brown hair that brushed her shoulders. She looked at him now, those smoky brown eyes filled with heat and hunger, fueling his lust and hardening his body.

"Are you just going to stand there?" Her husky voice made his cock jerk inside his pants. So she wanted him to take the lead tonight. He could do that. Hell, he wanted to do that.

"Take off your clothes but leave that vest on," he demanded in a whiskey-smooth tone. He wanted to feel that leather on her, smell it and taste it.

To his surprise she obeyed without a second's hesitation, unsnapping her jeans and wiggling the denim down over her hips. With a turn she bent slightly, showing him her well-rounded and firm ass as she slid the material down her legs, igniting an inferno in his groin.

She wasn't wearing underwear and the sight of her naked flesh made him moan out loud. Never had a woman affected him on this level before. Not just her body and the pleasure she could bring him but her strong will, her underlying duty to her fellow man and her ability to put aside past hurts and move on. Everything about this woman made him feel alive, as if he'd been walking through life numb until he met her.

Quinn kicked her jeans off to the side and flipped her lovely hair back out of her face. "Awaiting my next command."

Oh yeah, she knew the game and her willingness to play excited him heart and body. Circling her, he took in every exposed inch of creamy flesh. He wanted to take, his thick iron-hard cock throbbing with anticipation, but he also wanted to enjoy, to prolong the game until she screamed his name a dozen times before he allowed his own release.

Grabbing her by the arm, he pulled her hard to his body and crushed his open mouth to hers. She tasted like wine and chocolate as he swept his tongue through her mouth before sucking the tip of her tongue. Both hands grasped her ass and squeezed. He didn't think he'd ever get enough of touching her.

While they feasted on each other, Quinn managed to unbutton his shirt and push the material out of the way, pressing her palms against his chest. Her hands were like torches on his skin, burning him with sweet, painful fire. She flicked one of his nipples and he nearly crumpled to the floor from the painful pleasure.

Needing air, he pulled away from her mouth and panted as he continually ran his hands over the curves of her ass. Quinn latched on to his nipple, flicked the hardened nub with her tongue and then sucked gently. The room spun as sweat broke out on his brow. Each tug on the oversensitive bundle of nerves made his cock pulse.

Wild with desire, he shoved her away and pushed her down on the bed so that her feet still touched the floor. Dropping to his knees, he forcefully pushed her legs apart and settled himself between her luscious thighs. The heady aroma of her excitement filled his senses. Instead of diving in and lapping up her sweet juice, he started at her knees, kissing and licking his way up her quivering flesh.

When she reached down to grab his head and pull him forward, he wrapped his fingers around her wrists and held her hands to the mattress. He waited a few seconds to see if she objected to this type of confinement, when she didn't, he continued on, running his tongue over the silver scars marking her legs.

Her small sighs and desperate groans urged him on as more juice dripped from between her naked, full outer lips. He wanted to wait but her intoxicating aroma pulled him in. With two fingers he separated her outer folds and blew his warm breath across her swollen clit.

Quinn jolted on the bed, cried out and tried to raise her arms. He wouldn't allow it. She'd remain still and let him pleasure her in his own time. From the way her juices flowed he knew it wouldn't take much to shatter her so he carefully touched the tip of his tongue just below her engorged clit, swirling around the nub, down to her opening and then back again. Raising her hips, she tried desperately to guide him where she wanted.

"No, Quinn, not until I say." Putting pressure on her pelvis, he held her down and teased enjoying her sweet honey on his lips.

Small mewls and sobs flew from her throat as her head thrashed back and forth on the bed. "Damn it, Garen, you're killing me."

Smiling, he slowly pushed two fingers deep inside her wet, tight tunnel. Her body tensed and she cried out his name. Her silky-muscled walls grasped his fingers as he slowly pulled them back, stopped and then curled them to brush the upper wall.

"Oh God!" Her entire body trembled on the bed, her legs shaking and bouncing up and down. "Please!"

"Please what?" he panted as his heart hammered away inside his chest. He'd had no idea how turned-on he could get from her begging.

"Make me come, please make me come!"

Rewarding her, he pumped his fingers in and out of her tunnel at the same time taking her throbbing clit between his lips and sucking hard. He felt the shock waves travel through her body when she bucked her hips up and raised her torso off the bed. Her inner muscles pulsed around his fingers and drenched them in her thick cream.

He continued to pump in and out while keeping pressure on her pink nub. After freeing her hands, she fisted the comforter and rode out her orgasm, thrashing and grinding her cunt against his mouth.

Feeling the spasms ease, he removed his fingers from inside and gently licked at her dripping pussy, getting drunk on her intoxicating nectar. When her breathing slowed and her body relaxed, he crawled up the bed, ran his hand through her thick hair and kissed her.

"Taste how sweet you are," he whispered against her lips.

Hesitant at first, she licked and nipped at his lips until she too shared in his enjoyment of her. Wanting to give her a little time to recover, he focused his attention on the sexy leather vest. Running his tongue across her skin, he worked his way to her cleavage, dipped it in the valley between her breasts and inhaled the mixture of rawhide and sweat. None too gently he ran his hand over her midriff, up and cupped her breast through the leather.

"You were born to wear this but right now I need to see you, suck on those perfect breasts." He quickly unbuttoned the garment and shoved the material aside, exposing her perfectly round, swollen breasts and pebbled nipples.

His desire running rampant and causing him discomfort, he didn't tease or explore but lowered his head and sucked one exquisite pearl into his mouth. Quinn arched her back, feeding him more and ran her hands through his hair as he feasted. She liked this, he could tell by the way she reached up and cupped her free breast, pinching and rolling the nipple with her fingers.

Reaching around for the bag, he snatched it up, fumbled inside and pulled out one of her surprises. Thank God he'd had the foresight to prepare everything beforehand. Taking the small, bullet-shaped device, he reached down and slipped it inside her still-dripping pussy.

"What is that?"

"Just wait and see." Feeling around for the remote control, he flicked it on and waited for her reaction.

"*Oh. My. God.*" Instantly her hips began to move from side to side and up and down.

He looked up as he sucked her breast and watched her face contort into many different levels of pleasure. Her eyes rolled around and went blank as her breathing

became shallow and quick. Whimpers and groans filled the room and he had to move to keep up with her thrashing body. Knowing she neared another orgasm, he flicked off the remote.

Quinn gasped and stilled.

“Not until I say.”

She narrowed her eyes and furrowed her brow. “Paybacks are a bitch.”

“I look forward to it but tonight I run the show and I want you at my mercy. Wild.” He bit lightly on her nipple. “Horny.” He took her hand and placed it over her other breast. “And savage,” he conclude.

She simply stared at him so he turned the remote back on and waited until she fell back into the game, arching her back, squeezing and rolling her nipple. And then he turned it off again.

“I won’t survive this, Garen.”

He sat up, held the remote in front of him and turned it back on. “Work with it, Quinn. I want to watch.”

He played with the various speeds taking her up and down as she slipped her hand between her legs, rubbing her aching clit, waiting until she neared release and then stopping it again. She swore at him in a not-too-convincing tone but continued to pleasure herself, rubbing, slipping her finger in and out of her opening, cupping and squeezing her breasts.

Garen licked his lips, removed his shirt and enjoyed the show she put on for him. Her perfect, petite body writhed on the bed at his will and what a rush it was to know he could do that to her and she trusted him to do it. After ten minutes of watching her suffer the delicious torture, he couldn’t take it anymore. He had to have her.

Turning up the speed, he leaned over her pussy, looked up at her, and said, “Come for me, baby.” With that, he wrapped his lips around her clit and sucked.

Quinn exploded off the bed, screamed his name at the top of her lungs and then dropped back down, shuddering with each wave of spasms. He allowed the tiny bullet to run for a short time before shutting it down and removing it. Tenderly he stroked his fingers up and down her body until she calmed.

“Why do you still have your pants on?”

Garen couldn’t help but chuckle. “I had to keep them on, if I didn’t we wouldn’t have made it this far. Now that you have your breath back, you can take them off me.”

A wicked little grin pulled the corner of her mouth up. “It would be my pleasure.”

Together they climbed from the bed, her leather vest still hanging from her shoulders, gaping in the front and looking too sinful with her breasts bouncing as she moved. She started with his shirt and slid it off his arms, allowing it to fall to the floor and then she dropped to her knees. Garen’s breath shuddered in his lungs when she released the button and tugged down the zipper.

After working his pants down to his ankles, she slipped them off his feet, dug around for a condom and tossed them away. Giving him another wicked grin, she ran her hand over the bulge in his boxers. Her warm hands might as well have been a fiery blowtorch to his overextended, throbbing cock.

"Be careful, Quinn. I'm a ticking time bomb ready to go off any second."

She worked his boxers down his hips carefully and inhaled sharply when his erection sprang free. The movement had him groaning in pain and pleasure. She made quick work of removing them the rest of the way and then cupped his heavy sac in her hand.

"You have the most beautiful body, Garen." She leaned forward and kissed the tight flesh, flicking it with her tongue.

The simple act had him fisting his hand in her hair and pulling her away. For just a split second he saw fear in her eyes. His stomach knotted in anger or disgust, which he wasn't sure. "Don't do that, Quinn. Don't look at me with fear. I would never, ever hurt you."

She smiled at him. "I know that." Taking the condom she'd found in his jeans pocket, she opened it and quickly slid it down over his steel rod. She stood then, raised her arms over her head, offering her entire body to him. "At your command."

That quickly the game was back on. Garen pushed her back onto the bed, jerked her down until her ass rested on the edge and lifted her legs, resting them on his shoulders. Pressing his swollen cock head against her opening, he braced himself.

"I won't break. Take what you need and don't hold back."

In her own way she offered what she could to him and for that he was grateful. He only wished she would offer the rest, but for now he'd take what he could get. Pressing forward, he entered her slick, satiny, tight tunnel. His eyes rolled back in his head as her heat surrounded him, opened for him and allowed him deep inside heaven.

He wanted to say the words, to tell her how he felt but he knew as sure she lay here, open for him, she'd close down upon hearing his declaration. Biting his tongue, he pushed away the urge to speak and forged on, pushing all the way inside her body. When he buried himself to the hilt, he stopped and tried to catch his breath.

Quinn lay there looking like a goddess, her hair splayed out, her body glistening with sweat and holding him like he'd never been held before. If he died right now, this second, he'd die the happiest man on earth.

As if sensing him taking this too seriously, she clenched her walls around him, snatching him back to the here and now. *Be happy with what you have*, he reminded himself, and pulled back. Quinn arched her back and groaned.

Raw with desire and unable to hold back any longer, he plunged inside her body hard, over and over again. Each time her body swallowed him with hunger. With every devastating stroke her body jerked, her breasts bounced and she met him pump for pump.

The storm built to a head inside him, the flames of passion becoming too much to bear. All the blood in his body rushed to his cock as her walls tightened around him, lubing him with her honey and drenching him in heat. Already she neared the edge of the cliff and he wanted desperately for them to go over together.

“Come with me,” he panted.

Quinn nodded and ground herself against his groin. Garen reached between them as his control slipped. He pressed his thumb against her clit, at the same time watching himself slam back inside her body.

The world crumbled around him as together they exploded. His cock pulsing with sweet release as her walls milked him. Knowing she preferred him to keep moving, he continued pumping in and out in rhythm with his orgasm. The room went black and then bright white. The sound of her cries muffled in his ears.

When he could no longer stand, he pushed her legs to the side and fell forward on top of her spent body. And then she did the most unexpected thing, she wrapped her arms around him, held him tight and kissed him with such tenderness it brought tears to his eyes.

Was there a spark of real emotion in that kiss or did the high of the greatest sex he’d ever had distort the simple act? When she stroked his hair and then his back and then once again kissed him with feeling, he knew he’d broken through some of the outer crust of Quinn Hurst. Hope sprung wide in his chest.

“Wow,” he said, pushing the heavy emotion from his voice.

“Ditto. I don’t think I can move.”

Garen pulled out of her body and then moved to her side. “I think my brain melted.” The loss he felt leaving her warmth took his breath temporarily. To substitute, he pulled her next to him and pressed her back against his chest, tossing his leg over hers and encircling her with his arms. She didn’t seem to mind, wriggling up nice and tight.

“You make a good Dom yourself, you know that?”

He hadn’t thought of himself like that but she did bring out all sorts of unique qualities in him. “Learn something new about yourself all the time.”

Cozy in the tangled position, they lay there listening to the sound of their own breathing. Garen took a few moments to think about what had happened. He always guarded himself in relationships to some degree, especially after being dumped on his ass but with Quinn he wanted to give everything. Did it have something to do with this Marcus he was supposed to be part of?

What about Quinn? Would the woman residing within her soul push her toward him or would she come on her own? Too many complicated twists and turns for him. He wanted to love a woman because he loved her, not because the man he used to be insisted on it. Did it all matter in the end?

“You think too much,” she yawned, and then placed a kiss directly over his heart.

Swallowing hard past the lump springing up in his throat, he stroked her back. "Never been accused of that before." He shouldn't read too much into it but, damn it, affected him, as if she reached right inside his chest and held his heart within her grasp.

He walked a fine line here. She could do him in for the rest of his life or make him the happiest man walking earth for the rest of his life. Right now it was a risk he wanted to take.

"That's some toy you found. It makes me think you've had plenty of experience in that department. What else do you have in that bag?"

"You aren't ready for the last toy yet, as for being experienced, not really, not when it comes to gadgets in the bedroom."

"So this was something new for both of us?"

He couldn't help the feeling of exhilaration knowing he'd given her something no other man had. "I guess so. Did it bother you?"

Quinn lifted her head, looked at him with shiny eyes and smiled. "Did it look like it bothered me? Really, Garen, does your ego need to be stroked that much?"

"Every time you scream my name my ego gets stroked, besides, that's not what needs stroking at this particular time."

She laughed, a sweet, childlike sound that made his stomach tingle. "Not right now. You'll have to give me time. I don't think I could stand another assault and live."

Completely understanding, he sat up, crawled from the bed and headed to the bathroom. When he returned, he found Quinn stretched out on the bed, her eyes closed and her chest rising and falling in a steady manner. Quietly he took the small bullet, cleaned it and placed the device back in the bag.

He'd go to his grave remembering how she looked lying there writhing while he brought her to the edge of orgasm. When he bought the thing, he wasn't sure how she'd react to it, now he couldn't imagine anything more fantastic. Imagine a lifetime of experimenting with such toys.

Not feeling the least bit sleepy, he pulled on his jeans and shirt and went to his car. Luckily he'd remembered to pack one of his small bags with a fresh change of clothes, toiletries and his notebook for writing his next comic. With the deadline only two weeks away he really needed to get some work done. What better way than to lie next to a naked, sleeping Quinn and write. Yet another aspect he could get used to rather quickly.

As he headed back toward the room one of the hookers approached.

"That's a nice car ya got there."

Garen took in her damaged bleached blonde hair that hung in clumps down to her shoulders, her tired, sunken eyes and entirely too-thin face. The top she wore might as well not have been on. It was so thin he could see right through it. Her collarbone protruded as her skin stretched taut across it.

"Thanks."

She couldn't be more than twenty but looked like thirty.

"I don't know what you were doing to her but she sounded like she was having a fucking good time."

Oops, he'd forgotten about the thin walls in the old place. "Sorry, didn't mean to disturb you." He tried to pass her but she jumped in front of him.

"You didn't disturb nothin'. I was just wonderin' if she isn't enough for ya I could step in, I got my own talents. I could give ya a good time."

Garen's stomach turned. This girl should be in dorm room somewhere studying or giggling with her friends, not selling her body to strangers. "No thanks. She's more than enough for me."

Real disappointment settled on her face, her sad, pale blue eyes sinking farther back in her head. "I just thought, well, finding a man who can make a woman scream like that is rare. She's lucky."

Great, how did he respond to that? "I'd say I'm the lucky one." Again he tried to step around her but she insisted on keeping him from leaving.

"If you change your mind," the young girl lowered her shirt exposing one of her tiny breasts.

Garen turned his head. "Look. I'm not interested. Why are you out here anyway? You should be planning your future, hanging with your friends or something. You're young and have your whole life ahead of you."

As she pulled her shirt back up, he saw her eyes swim with tears. When she turned to walk away, he reached out and gently gripped her bony arm. "I'm sorry. That was cruel."

"You don't know nothin' about me, mister, so don't judge me."

"I'm not judging you, just worried for you. Why are you doing this anyway?" Not that he expected a truthful answer but, hey, he cared.

"I'm no junky if that's what you're thinkin'."

The thought had crossed his mind.

"Not everyone is born with a silver spoon in their mouth. Some are lucky if they have a plastic one to eat off, that is when they do get to eat. I don't live off the state so people can't bitch that they have to take care of me. I take care of myself with what God gave me."

"What's your name?"

"Destiny," she said, jutting her chin out.

"Your real name."

She swallowed hard, pushing back the tears. "Christine."

"Pretty name. You do know there are organizations out there that would help you get a decent education so you wouldn't have to do this. All you have to do is ask for their help. I know, I've been there."

She looked at him with surprise. "You?"

"I didn't grow up with much either but I guess I had more than you. I at least had parents looking after me. We had to turn to those places for help from time to time. It's hard to swallow your pride and do it but once you do you see how fortunate you are."

"I've thought about it." She kicked a stone and wrapped her arms around herself. "I came close to walking into one of those places a few times but couldn't do it."

Garen chucked her under the chin, bringing her dull eyes up to meet his. "The first step is always the hardest but each step after gets easier. You deserve better for yourself, Christine, once you realize that, the whole world will open up for you."

He swore he saw a light flicker in her eyes, like a realization that, yes, she did deserve better. God he hoped so. "I need to get back in. Think about it, make the kind of life you want for yourself. Don't struggle in a life that you hate."

She gave him a pretty smile, revealing the young woman he knew she could be. He reached into his pocket and pulled out some money. "Here, take a cab to that place on me and walk inside this time. Tell them you're ready to live."

She reluctantly took the money and he walked to the door.

"Hey, she really is lucky. I hope she knows that."

So did he. Garen stepped inside the room, wondering if Christine would get that cab or tuck the money away, laughing that she just played him for a fool. Well, it was worth the risk. What would life be if no one ever took risks?

Quinn rolled on the bed, curling onto her side and sighing. All thoughts of Christine disappeared when he saw his sexy woman. Tossing his bag aside, he took his notebook to the bed, removed his clothing and settled down next to her. Already his cock began to stiffen but he knew she needed her rest.

Focusing on his work, he began to delve into the world of Dark Payne. It was time for Payne to find what he looked for from the very beginning of the story and Garen knew exactly what that was.

* * * * *

Quinn floated in dreamland, walking among wildflowers and enjoying the beautiful sunny day. Bees and butterflies worked the pollen, fluttering from flower to flower. She spent hours wandering the open fields, picking blossoms to decorate the small cabin that sat off in the distance.

When the midday sun became too warm, she dropped her white cotton dress to the ground and let the summer breeze feather across her flesh. Feeling his presence before actually seeing him, she turned and smiled. Coming across the field in his worn britches and tattered work-shirt was the love of her life, her soul, her reason for being.

Not Marcus but Garen. Her heart fluttered inside her chest anticipating his kiss and touch. No matter how long they lived together she would never tire of him or his love. Unwilling to wait any longer, she headed toward him, closing the distance. Already her

skin tingled and her blood ran hot and thick through her veins. Out here in the field the children wouldn't be able to see as they joined their bodies.

A dark, thick curtain of blackness slammed between them, cutting her off from her love. Fear squeezed her heart and nausea rolled in her stomach. The stench of rotting flesh filled the thick air, gagging her.

"Garen, where are you?" Her voice echoed back, a hollow eerie sound.

A cyclone of icy-cold wind whipped around her body, biting at her flesh and sinking its teeth into her bones. The excruciating pain ripped a scream of terror from her throat. Crouching to the ground, she balled herself up for protection against the frigid air circling tight and holding her in place.

Something sharp sliced across her back, leaving burning, stinging scratches. She fought against the onslaught of wind and stood, wanting to escape before whatever whipped around struck her again. For every step forward, the wicked tornado pushed her back three. Instead of moving on, she found herself being directed backward until the ground under her feet disappeared and she plummeted into a pit of darkness.

Shaking with fear, she couldn't even force a scream from her mouth. Holding Garen's face in her mind, she closed her eyes and said a silent prayer to make her death quick and painless.

"You pray to the wrong being, woman. You should be praying to me." The malevolent voice rumbled around her in such a deep roar she winced in pain. "I hold your pitiful life in the palm of my hands. I alone decide how and when you die."

Suddenly she hit a solid surface with a bone-jarring thud. The air in her lungs whooshed out, leaving her gasping and struggling to breathe. Acute, piercing pain radiated throughout her body, leaving her to believe every bone shattered into a million pieces. As she lay there stiff with pain and trying desperately to drag life-giving air into her lungs, an orange glow surrounded her.

No, not again. I can't be back here again. Her body rose from the ground, floating in the air and slammed into a hard brimstone wall. She slumped to the floor in a heap and did her best to gather her wits. Her brain sloshed from side to side in her skull as nausea roiled in the pit of her stomach. Blood trickled from an open wound on her forehead.

The faint sound of sobs bled through the fog. Quinn looked around, her bleary eyes refusing to focus. Hazing, blurry images surrounded her. Something large moved across the room and the sobs erupted into horrifying screams. The girl, this was the girl she saw the last time. Oh God this couldn't be real.

Quinn rubbed the blood from her eyes. She needed to see if she wanted to fight. Pushing herself to her feet, she ignored the mind-numbing pain.

"Help me, please help me."

Turning toward the direction of the voice, she blinked several times, cursing that she still couldn't see clearly.

"Help me," the demon mocked in an echoing voice. "Help her, slayer. Don't just stand there. You were born to protect your fellow humans. Do it or are you more concerned with protecting your own life?"

Quinn stumbled forward. She had to do something but she couldn't see.

"Those pathetic priests are cursing your cowardice. Imagine their disgust in the puny human they helped create."

Frantically rubbing her eyes, she let her anger build. Anger would help her. Anger would give her strength.

"I'm afraid you're doomed, my dear. The almighty slayer refuses to defend those she was sworn to protect."

Again Quinn stumbled forward, tripping and falling into a gooey, slimy mess. Bracing herself on her hands and knees, her vision cleared enough to allow her to see the grotesque horror she sat in the middle of. Blood, rotting flesh and organs hung from bare bones, the stench and sight so foul she gagged.

Staring up at her were the cold, foggy, dead eyes of the young girl she'd seen strapped to the bed earlier. "No!" Scrambling away her stomach heaved and spewed its contents as she huddled within herself, blood dripping from her face and hands in globs.

"The young thing didn't have the will to live," the demon laughed. "When they lose hope they aren't much fun and don't satisfy my appetite. You had the chance to save her but turned your back. Will you do it again, I wonder?"

If this wasn't the girl from before, then whom did it have now? Quinn looked up to find yet another young blonde female splayed out on the horrid bed, her arms and legs pulled tight to the corners. The demon lashed out its tongue, cutting deep wounds into her tender flesh.

The earsplitting scream filled the room and Quinn covered her ears. Groaning and moaning, the hideous demon slurped at the blood oozing from the wounds.

"Help me," the girl pleaded as her body shook in pain and terror.

"Yes, slayer, help her. Turn yourself over to me and I'll let her go." The monster's six-inch-long nails scraped down the girl's pale cheek.

Do not listen to him. He tricks you. The other part of her soul came forward, shoving her way to the front of Quinn's mind. *Giving yourself to it will only strengthen the creature to wreak more destruction on the world.*

What was she supposed to do, leave the girl to die a long, horrid death? Quinn stood again, shook off the dripping blood and took two steps forward, trying to get a good look at the young woman. Did she know her?

"A tasty little morsel, isn't she?" The deformed, half-dead creature leaned over and swiped its tongue across her face. "Your lover thinks so."

Garen? Did he know this girl?

"When he finished using your body he slipped away and looked for another to satisfy him."

It lies. Do not listen. Our love would never betray us like that.

Quinn ignored the protest from within and shuffled forward to the bed. The girl looked at her with pleading, desperate eyes. So young. So damaged. The beast couldn't have had her for more than a few hours and already she looked to be broken-down and half-dead. No, it didn't do this to her. It found her this way. The horrid creature needed another victim for persuasion.

Crouching down, she cupped the girl's face.

"It wants you, doesn't it?" she sobbed.

Quinn nodded her head.

"You can't let it have you. Kill me."

Shocked, Quinn shook her head. "No."

"Do it and go back to him. I'm dying anyway."

Tears rolled down her cheeks. This once-beautiful girl offered her life to save someone she didn't know.

The beast growled in protest to the whispering and once again lashed out with its forked tongue.

The girl cried in pain. "Kill me. Put me out of my misery."

Instinctively Quinn reached for her blade, quickly realizing she didn't have it. How could she do it?

"Make your decision, slayer. Save the girl or know she suffers for eternity because of you."

The girl mouthed the words once more. "Kill me please."

Quinn leaned over her, tears streaming from her eyes. "Okay. Okay," she repeated over and over again as she held the girl's head between her hands. "You'll be fine now." Giving her a kiss on the cheek, she wrenched, snapping her neck like a brittle twig.

The beast howled, striking at Quinn and sending her flying across the room, smashing into the wall and crumpling to the floor again. Anger replaced fear. Angry she was forced into killing a young innocent, angry because this bastard wouldn't stop until she found a way to destroy it and most of all, angry because it dared lie to her about Garen.

Sure of nothing else on this earth, she knew without a doubt Garen would never, ever betray her as long as they were together. Shooting to her feet, she stormed across the room toward the ugly creature still screaming about the death of his victim.

"Stop your damn pouting, you putrid beast. You picked the wrong slayer to fuck with. I may not know everything there is to know about my heritage but I know you can't keep me here without my permission."

The creature's tongue lashed out. In fight mode now, she snatched the gristly piece of flesh with her hand and yanked. The demon whimpered like a hurt pup as it tried to pull free. Quinn looked around the room for something, anything, to hack the rough, scaly thing off. Finding nothing, she moved to the bedpost and tied its tongue in a knot.

"You're damn lucky I don't have a weapon on me right now," she growled, jerking extra hard. "Now send me back before I tie more of your sickening body parts into knots."

A blast of icy cold air shot her back off her feet and sent her flying through the air. What felt like razor blades sliced at her skin as she hurled through dark space. The overwhelming pain had her screaming at the top of her lungs until she fell with a thump onto something soft.

Chapter Fifteen

"Quinn, Quinn, wake up, honey. Wake up."

Feeling Garen's warm arms embrace her, she curled into his body and shook violently. He stroked her hair, muttered words of comfort and let her hang on for dear life. Moments passed before her shaking subsided into trembling.

"Was it a dream?"

She didn't know for sure. It all felt so real. Remembering the pain in her body, she pulled away, jumped from the bed and ran to the mirror. Twisting and turning, she checked her reflection. No marks, no cuts, no blood, nothing.

"Quinn, you're scaring me. What's going on?"

"I guess it was just a dream."

Garen walked up behind her and rested his hands on her shoulders.

"It felt so real."

"Will you tell me about it?"

With an exhausted sigh she leaned back into him and met his gaze in their reflection. "It isn't a pretty story."

"Nightmares usually aren't." Lifting her off her feet, he carried her back to bed, laid her down and snuggled up against her. "You feel cold." He covered her with the thin sheet and then waited.

Forgoing the first part of her dream, she explained everything that happened, every smell, every sight and gory detail. When she came to the part where the demon told her he went in search of another woman to satisfy him, his body stiffened.

"Don't worry. I know better than that. I didn't believe it for a second. In fact it pissed me off that the bastard had the audacity to entertain the idea I would believe it."

She went on then, explaining how she had a decision to make. Give herself to the devil to save the girl or kill her. Thank God it was all just a dream.

"It's over now," he whispered.

"I know, but, Garen, I swear it all seemed so real. I won't sleep peacefully again until this demon is gone for good."

"I won't let him have you," Garen whispered in a thick voice. "He can't have you, Quinn."

She believed him. For the first time since her father died she believed a man would actually protect her and that was scary. Because believing meant he'd worked his way under her skin and it would make walking away that much harder.

Turning in his arms, she looked up into his warm eyes. "Make me forget, Garen. Make me forget everything. Please."

Stroking her face with the backs of his fingers, he smiled, leaned down and kissed her briefly before moving onto her neck where his tongue lit tiny fires everywhere it touched. As he moved farther down to her shoulder, she slid her fingers into his soft, mussed hair. She'd gone from hell to heaven in a matter of minutes.

Garen moved, positioning himself over the top of her, bracing himself on his elbow as he continued to set her flesh on fire. Already his iron-hard erection pressed against her mound. Reaching between them, she gripped his cock and stroked up and down.

When she felt the bead of pre-cum, she smeared it around his head and enjoyed the slick feeling. That little bit of attention had him diving for her breast where he sucked her into his mouth. Each tug of her nipple pulled at her womb. Arching her back off the bed she offered more, wanted him to take more.

Garen pulled away, leaned over the bed and removed a condom from his jeans. After ripping the package open with his teeth, he handed it to her. Quinn gladly placed it over the head of his penis and rolled it down, watching the euphoria on his face as she sheathed him.

Once securely in place he kissed her again, probing her mouth with his tongue as he repositioned. When she felt his head press against her opening, he ended the kiss and gazed down at her as he gently pushed his way inside her waiting channel.

Her lungs froze as he stretched and filled her ever so gently. He wanted it slow this time but she didn't think she could do slow. When it came to Garen, she needed him hard and fast. But the exquisite feeling of him entering her body filled her senses to overflowing.

Buried to the hilt, he stopped. "You're like a warm silk glove," he said, and then began to pull back.

She could feel every inch of him touching her inside, caressing nerve endings until they sang with bliss. He dipped his head and sucked at her nipple as he pushed slowly back inside. In and out he pumped in such a slow rhythm she thought she'd lose her mind.

Her need built slowly but no less powerfully. In fact it strung her so tight she feared she'd burst apart before she had the chance to come. Every muscle in her body tightened as he slid in and out, kissing her, nipping at the flesh on her shoulders and neck. It was a slow, seductive, wonderful torture that had her gripping at his shoulders, locking her gaze with his and panting as he took her to new heights of ecstasy.

"Oh Garen, don't stop."

"Never." When she closed her eyes, he protested. "No, look at me, babe."

Obedying, she held his gaze as he watched her with awe and wonder that made her feel like the sexiest woman on earth. Her inner walls tightened around him, her heart beat a rapid tattoo inside her chest. She could feel him growing thicker and hardening farther inside her body. This wasn't just sex, this was more. This was him loving her.

The steady rhythm brought her to the peak of the world. Quinn wrapped her legs around his waist. "I can't wait," she whimpered. "Oh God, Garen, what have you done to me?"

Her body and mind shattered as her powerful orgasm ripped through her from womb to head. Bucking her hips hard, she drove him in farther as she gripped and released his throbbing cock. Garen tossed back his head and let loose a deep growl as he joined her for the fall.

Brilliant colorful lights exploded in her eyes. Her body floated to the ceiling as wave after wave of spasms rocked her. Each pulse of Garen's cock triggered yet another wave. By the time her body exhausted itself she floated back to the bed in hundreds of tiny confetti-like pieces.

In one smooth motion Garen rolled, taking her with him until she lay on top, still holding him tightly inside her body. Exhausted, sated and never wanting this moment to end, she closed her eyes and willed away the outside world.

"Let's just stay here in this crummy hotel forever," he whispered.

Quinn laughed. "Funny. I was just thinking along those same lines." But she couldn't. A tear spilled from one eye and dripped onto his chest. Not wanting to look like a crying fool, she moved, slipping him from her body and went to the bathroom for a hot shower.

When the bathroom door closed, Garen looked down and with the tip of his finger scooped up the single tear from his chest. Quinn Hurst wasn't dumb by any stretch of the imagination. She knew what had happened between them. This wasn't just a round of sex for either of them and it scared the hell out of her.

Whether she wanted to admit it or not, she felt more than just lust. At every turn she tried to demean their relationship and he met her head-on with a counterattack. It looked as though he'd broken through more of her defenses. Why did it scare her? Why couldn't she simply let go and let nature take its course?

"I'm sorry, Quinn, but it won't be that easy to get away from me. You're mine and I intend to fight for you."

* * * * *

After they both showered and dressed, they were about to head out the door when a shrill scream stopped them both in their tracks. Still touchy from her nightmare, Quinn bolted through the door, Garen hot on her heels. She stopped, looked around and saw one of last night's hookers stumbling around the corner of the building.

The woman continued shrieking as they ran for her. While Garen checked to make sure the hooker was unhurt, Quinn turned the corner and felt the world drop out from under her feet. There, sprawled out in the middle of the dirty alley lay the girl she thought she dreamed about last night. Only this was no dream.

Deep, bloody cuts covered her gray, naked skin. Blood caked her bleached blonde hair and her eyes stared up into nothing. Her head tilted sideways on a broken neck. Quinn slapped her hands over her mouth and dropped to her knees.

Garen came around the corner, spotted the corpse and let out a string of curses that would make the devil blush. He dropped down beside the young body, fisted his hands and released a heart-wrenching howl.

Quinn couldn't catch her breath. All she could do was stare at the wounds on the body and know she'd watched as they were inflicted upon her. This couldn't be happening. She did not kill that girl yet there she lay with a broken neck.

"No. No." Garen walked to her, wrapped her in his arms and held tight. "No," she screamed, fighting him off. "It can't be her. It was just dream. Just a fucking dream, it can't be her."

"What? Are you telling me this is the girl you saw in your dream?"

Jumping to her feet, she tried to get away from him but he held her arm tightly. "How can this be real?"

"Quinn, stop, damn it."

Suddenly realizing he knew the girl, she looked up at him. "How do you know her? Is she the one you propositioned last night while I was asleep?"

"You know better than that," he growled.

Right now she didn't know anything. Nothing made sense. "She is, isn't she? That's why it picked her. The bastard followed us last night. That's what I felt and then when I went to sleep he watched as you —"

"As I what, Quinn? I didn't do anything but talk to her when I came out to the car to get my stuff. Jesus, you can't honestly believe I would go from you to a hooker, do you? Get a fucking grip. Don't you see, this is what the monster wants?"

"What it wants is me and it will keep killing until I hand myself over. Hell, it didn't even kill her, I did. Who's next, Tabitha? Ruth? Tyson?" Tyson, she needed to talk to Tyson.

"You aren't giving in to this, Quinn. I won't let you."

Sirens sounded in the distance. She needed to go, now. If the cops looked into her background she wouldn't have a chance to finish this and she'd be looked at as the suspect in this murder. Turning and leaving Garen there to deal with the police, she ran to her car and took off down the road.

There had to be a way to end this without sacrificing herself to hell for eternity. Glancing in her rearview mirror, she saw two police cars pull in front of the hotel. Garen would be tied up with them for a while, giving her time to figure out what to do.

When she reached the garage where the Rosses and Tyson holed up, she slammed on the brakes, jumped from the car and ran inside the building. "Tyson. Tyson, where are you?"

Ruth and Tabitha met her inside the door.

"Quinn, what's wrong? Where's Garen?" Ruth asked, following her into the large bay.

"Tyson, I need to talk to you." He looked at her with a hint of fear in his eyes. "There has to be a way to destroy this demon. You know there is, tell me."

Tabitha stepped between her and the boy. "Slow down, Quinn, and tell us what's going on. Where the hell is Garen?"

"He's back at the hotel. That fucking demon struck again and left a present for me outside."

Donald entered the room. "What kind of present?"

"A dead girl. A fucking dead girl that I killed in a dream only it wasn't a dream. The bastard used me to kill someone and I need to kill it now!" She knew she sounded hysterical but, damn it, she couldn't risk them. The creature would surely take one of them if she didn't turn herself over.

"Calm down, Quinn, and start from the beginning."

She didn't have time for this. "I had a dream last night that it took me back to hell again. In its lair it had this young girl, blonde, thin, sickly. It told me if I gave myself up willingly it would let her go. She pleaded with me to kill her, that she was dying anyway and I did it. I snapped her neck like a fucking twig."

"What do you mean it took you back to hell again?" Donald questioned. "Did you have a dream like this before?"

"Yes, earlier, before Garen showed up. I was so tired all I wanted to do was sleep so Garen dropped me off at my hotel and I had a dream." Quinn paced back and forth as she spoke. They were wasting time.

"Quinn, did you kill this girl?" Donald asked staring at her with a wealth of compassion.

His kindness broke her, tears welled and spilled down her cheeks. Her shoulders shook as the reality of what she'd done hit her. Two people dead because of her. Donald took her in his arms and held her, much like her father did when she'd had a meltdown.

"Let it out, Quinn," he soothed. "We'll figure this out together."

After Quinn cried all her tears, Donald led her to a chair and sat her down. She took a few cleansing breaths and looked up at Ruth, Tabitha and Tyson. Their sad, concerned faces touched her.

"Ready to tell us?"

Quinn launched into the story, giving every sordid detail. When she reached the part where she killed the girl, a fresh batch of tears flowed. "I really thought it was a dream. I didn't have any of the cuts or blood I had during the dream. How can that be, Donald? How could I come back without a scratch and she still be dead?"

"I'm not sure, sweetheart, but I don't think you killed that young girl, not really."

"I broke her neck. She's lying in that alley with a broken neck." Oh man, she felt sick to her stomach.

Ruth sat down next to her. "That doesn't mean you did it, dear. This demon is sneaky. If he planted that dream in your head he was prepared to kill that poor girl and let you believe you did it."

That made sense. If he could control her dreams he could make her think anything. Still, that didn't mean the danger to the rest wasn't real. "It doesn't matter. Tyson knows a way to kill the bastard and I need to know what it is."

"I don't think I do, Quinn," Tyson said, avoiding her eyes.

He was protecting her, sweet but not necessary. "Can I have a word with Ty alone?"

Ruth and Donald left. Tabitha hovered around until Tyson gave her the nod to go.

"I know what you're doing, Tyson, and I appreciate it, really I do but you haven't seen what this demon can do. I have. I've felt his wrath and the last thing I want is for Tabitha, Ruth, Donald, Garen or you to suffer because of me. I either kill it or I walk willingly into its grasp for an eternity of torture. You tell me how to kill this thing or I'll do whatever I can and hope like hell it doesn't kill me in the process."

She didn't mean to scare the boy but he needed to hear the truth and, by God, she gave it to him.

"You can't do it alone, Quinn. It'll take all of us, including me."

"Bull!"

"I'm serious, Quinn."

"Fine." She stormed for the door and then stopped. If she didn't come back from this there were a few things she needed taken care of. Ruth would be the one to handle the details.

Blasting into the small room they used for the kitchen, she grabbed Ruth by the arm and dragged her out into yet another part of the garage. When Donald and Tabitha tried to follow, she turned, gave them a harsh glare and continued out until she and Ruth were alone.

When Ruth began to speak, Quinn put her hand up, stopping her. "I need you to listen to me carefully. If I don't come back I want you take care of some things for me. First and most importantly I want you to take Tyson and give him the life he deserves. Please don't send him back into the system. He belongs with you and Donald. You understand him, you can teach him what he needs to learn. In the few days I've known you I can see your capability to love unconditionally."

Ruth's eyes misted.

"Next, take my stuff and do whatever you want with it, give it to charity, sell it, I don't care. I would like you to give my knife to Tyson but the rest I don't care about."

Ruth's lips quivered. "And what about Garen?"

No, she couldn't think about Garen. He would only cause her to rethink her plan and she absolutely would not allow this demon to continue terrorizing innocent people, using her as the pawn. Besides, he'd won the game and made her genuinely care for

him and now she couldn't let him near the beast that would rip him apart just to get to her.

"He's a big boy, he'll go on."

"What is it you think you can do, Quinn? Exactly how do you think you're going to vanquish this monster on your own?" Ruth's anger showed in her eyes and the way she crossed her arms over her chest.

"She can't do anything on her own except get killed," Tyson said from the doorway.

"I have an option. I didn't want to use it but I will as a last resort."

"I talked to Garen," Tab injected. "He says they're considering the girl's death part of the massacre that happened yesterday. They're even talking about a serial killer. He'll be able to leave in about fifteen minutes. Stay until he gets here. Let's talk this out and figure out a plan we can all take part in."

"You don't understand, Tabitha." She looked at the girl she considered her friend. No way in hell could she live with herself if Tab became a victim because of her. The hooker was just the beginning. The bastard demon would move on to those closer to her. "I have to go."

Quinn turned and ran for the door, Tyson calling after her as she rushed out and jumped into her car.

Ruth would see reason and explain it all to Tyson—one life for countless others. Peeling out of the parking lot, she kicked loose gravel up into the air and knew in her heart she wouldn't be returning to this place.

Speeding toward the city, her mind raced through her options. She really didn't want to turn herself over to that creature but what else could be done? Why the hell wouldn't Tyson tell her how to kill it? It didn't matter now.

"Okay, what do I know about demons." She knew the last one fell to her blade but then took up residence in her body. That meant she could kill the body this demon inhabited but it would more than likely seek refuge inside her.

The last demon was weak and still nearly managed to take her over. This one would surely overpower her will and quickly. But if she acted fast, as soon as it crawled inside she could take her own life before it had a chance to stop her, which could work, except then it would simply move into another unsuspecting victim.

What did Donald say? If the demon didn't find a host, then it had to return to hell, so that meant she had to make sure she closed herself off from anyone, giving it time to weaken and then slither back to the pits it belonged in. All buildings had some kind of out-of-the-way, closed-off space she could lock herself in.

"It's a scatterbrained plan," she huffed. But the only one she could come up with in a pinch. She just knew that if she didn't end this today someone she cared about would be dead by morning.

Her heart sank to her stomach as Garen's smiling, handsome face floated to the front of her brain. Even in the midst of the crisis she could still see him. His musky scent

lingered in her nose. At least she had one last chance to give what she could to him early this morning and he gave her everything. If her plan didn't work and she ended up the prisoner of a demon, she could hold the memory of his lovemaking in her mind.

No one could take that away from her. She only hoped that he would understand her actions. Nearing the part of the city where the office building of hell stood, she slowed and began hunting a parking space.

Traffic seemed light today. What day was it anyway? Saturday, Sunday? What difference did it make?

She parked two blocks away and laid her keys on the floor. The Rosses would find it and at least have a way to drive it off. Grabbing a piece of paper from her glove compartment, she scribbled a note and let it sit on the seat. Resigned to her fate, she crawled from the car, made sure her blade still rested in her back jeans pocket and headed toward certain doom.

Only a block away, a wall of chilling cold air blasted her, stopping her mid-stride. She looked around the empty streets and saw no one—no cars, no people, nothing. A wave of nausea swept through her body and she knew she was in trouble.

“Can't wait for me to get inside, can ya?” Her blade heated and vibrated, humming its song of destruction. The warmer it got and the louder it sang made the illusion waver and warp until it broke, melting away and revealing reality. Once again the streets buzzed with people and cars.

Either the beast grew weak or her newly blessed blade grew more powerful than she thought. Banking on the latter, she continued on. Only half a block away she began to tremble. Every instinct told her to turn and run but she knew that option didn't exist for her now. The muscles in her legs quivered, making each step feeble and her resolve crumble.

Looking ahead, she pinned her gaze on the front of the building. *Focus. Remember what will be saved by my death.* Tyson, Ruth, Donald, Tabitha and Garen, she said their names over and over in her head, saw their faces, heard their voices and laughter. They were the true slayers, obeying the rules laid out when their ancestors were chosen.

She broke the rules, taking a life. A human life, even a vile, destructive human life was looked upon as sacred in the eyes of the slayers. So this was her punishment. Sacrifice. Quinn always knew it would catch up with her one day but never imagined her punishment would come at the hands of a demon.

A sickening, slimy feeling erupted in the pit of her stomach. Her visions darkened as a filmy heavy haze sank over her eyes. It knew she was coming, peeking in to make sure she didn't change her mind.

“Go fuck yourself, demon,” she whispered so only she and it could hear.

Cackling laughter filled her head, letting her know it heard and found her amusing. Only feet away from the front, heavy glass doors she slowed took a bracing breath and counted the steps until there really was no turning back.

“One, two, three, four, five.” She gripped the cold metal handle with her trembling hands and pulled.

A rush of toxic, freezing-cold air engulfed her body, stealing her breath and filling every molecule of her being with a sense of hopelessness and despair. The building reeked of the coppery aroma of fresh blood, rotting flesh and brimstone. A weight of a thousand pounds settled on her chest, making her physically slump and unsure whether or not she’d be able to move farther into the building.

With great effort she put one foot in front of the other until she stood completely inside the confines of the abode of the damned. The door slammed behind her, turning, she reached for the handle, knowing that life on the other side no longer existed for her. Giving a hard tug, she nearly sobbed when it didn’t budge.

Quinn pushed her hair back from her face then swiped at the tears trying to escape her eyes. She would not cry. She would not give the beast the satisfaction of her tears.

Across the vast lobby the elevator door opened, beckoning to her. Oh yes, it waited for her, opened the way so she could come willingly, just the way it knew she had to. Quinn forced her legs to move as her insides cringed and cramped, trying to keep her still.

The simple walk took her several minutes, her legs buckling, making her stumble from side to side. She pressed her hand to her stomach as it rolled and heaved. When she finally reached the open car, she used the last of her energy and flung her body inside, falling to the floor in a heap.

The doors shut, closing her in the temporary prison. The lights flickered twice before dying out completely, leaving her to sit in darkness. Quinn took the opportunity to gather herself, breathing in and out of her mouth.

“Get a hold of yourself,” she ordered. “Don’t let it see your fear.”

By the time the elevator car stopped she managed to bring her violent shaking down to a more controllable tremble. The thick doors slid open, revealing a long hallway lit by dim red bulbs.

“How dramatic,” she sneered, pulling herself up to her feet. “What’s next, fake skeletons popping out at me?” Sarcasm helped steel her resolve and remind her that she was strong.

On semi-sturdy legs she made her way down the hall toward two large wooden doors carved with distorted, hideous faces—only they weren’t carved, they moved. Mouths twisted and pleaded for help, their cries of despair and pain echoing toward her. Eyes bulged and reflected the emptiness their eternity offered.

Quinn slapped her hands over her ears, trying desperately to block out the shrieking noise. Is this where her soul would end up, on display for others to witness her pain and sorrow? Trapped forever in a tomb of wood?

The ominous doors swung open wide. Quinn hesitated and then stepped through. As soon she did, the doors creaked closed and the room lit with an orange, fiery glow that she recognized. She’d just stepped into hell itself for the third and final time.

Her soul died a little then, withered and dropped away like a heavy stone to her feet. The demon wouldn't imprison her in a wooden door. He'd hold her for his personal enjoyment until her body and blood gave out.

"Step forward, Quinn Hurst." The booming voice surrounded her, making it difficult for her to tell where it originated from.

Quinn took one wobbly step and the room lit up. Dozens of Tulpas surrounded her in a circle, wearing long black robes with hoods. His minions, his army of the soulless created to do his bidding. On cue her blade heated to an intensity she'd never experienced before, burning through her jeans and blistering her flesh.

Her head filled with loud chants that she fought to suppress so the demon wouldn't peek inside and hear. The last thing she needed was it handing out punishment that would weaken her further. The blade's call for death gave her an inner strength, helping her face hell and her destiny.

Looking straight ahead, she clenched her jaw in anger and disgust. A large stone altar stood in the middle of a ring of fire, its flames snapping high in the air. On the altar lay a naked man, strapped at the ankles and wrists. He looked to her, pleaded with her to free him. Something seemed familiar about him. She'd seen him somewhere.

Unable to stop herself, she walked forward, never taking her eyes off his face. Not until she stood only a few feet away did she remember. The electronics shop, the swimsuit girls. This man created the two Tulpas she'd vanquished in the filthy alley.

"You recognize him." The demon stepped forward in human form, dressed in a long red robe, his coal-black hair shimmering in the glow of the flames.

Quinn nodded, never taking her gaze from the young, condemned man.

"You thought you saved him but all you did was take away his pleasure for a short period of time, killing his creations."

The demon raised his hand over the flames. They wavered and an image appeared. The young man lay naked as his two perfectly created female creatures took turns riding him. He was sucking and groping at their nude bodies. An act on their part, a lie only to appease the creator until his usefulness ended.

"Every human who accepts the lessons to create the Tulpa seals their fate to become a sacrifice to me. They offer their blood and souls to feed me in return for the opportunity to create their version of the perfect mate."

The young man shook his head violently, blubbing how he didn't know. Quinn understood perfectly. As with any deal made with the devil, the consequences weren't easily understood.

"His destiny was final with or without his creations." With a flick of the demon's wrist the vision evaporated into a cloud of smoke. "So you see all your effort is wasted."

Quinn lifted her head and looked at the demon, seeing past the handsome human illusion and right through to the evil blackness of the beast. "Not wasted. Those empty

beings are gone, a pile of dust blown away on the wind. Let him go. I came to you of my own free will. Take me instead of him."

On a howl of laughter the demon stretched out his arms, casting the entire room into an inferno of flames that licked at Quinn's flesh, singeing the fine hairs on her body and searing flesh. She winced from the pain and smell of own body burning, cowering away from the beast's wrath until the hell subsided.

"Foolish, pitiful human." Long talons speared from its fingers into blade-like points. In the blink of an eye the beast thrust its fork-like hand into the gut of the young man.

Quinn stumbled back, nearly falling to the floor, as the victim screamed in agony. Unable to take her eyes away from the carnage, she watched as the demon ripped organs from a living being and devoured them like candy. Frozen with shock and horror, she could do little more than stand and retch. The human male's cries diminished as the demon continued to split flesh and slurp life-giving blood.

Not until the last breath was drawn did the beast stop. Wiping its grotesque, bloody mouth with the sleeve of its robe, the demon flashed a heart-stopping smile that, had it been human, would have melted the hearts of women across the globe.

"The deal was between him and me. Not even you could break the contract."

Reaching deep inside, she gathered all the strength she could find. "Then there is no deal between us."

The brilliant smile twisted until the demon's lips pulled back, revealing jagged, piercing teeth. "I anticipated a reaction such as this."

Quinn turned her back on the foul being and headed out the way she'd entered. The surrounding Tulpas converged, blocking off her path. These she knew how to deal with and welcomed the fight. Pulling her blade from her back pocket, she allowed her body to absorb the energy from the hot steel and let her mind be filled with the chants of the ancients.

One by one she sliced and cut each Tulpa that came within striking distance. The air soon filled with floating ash as if a volcano had erupted. A few got in punches or blows but mostly they were young and inexperienced. It didn't surprise her that the beast would surround himself with inadequate soldiers. The more powerful would be its last line of defense.

Quinn vanquished a good dozen or so, dodging blows and striking out with her blade in her usual casual, controlled movements. She'd just hit her stride when the demon's loud, rattling voice filled the room.

"Enough."

Quinn and the Tulpas halted, freezing like stone statues.

"Come to me, Quinn Hurst."

She turned on her heel and glared back at the handsome demon. "No. I do not come to you willingly."

In a burst of anger the demon roared and set the torn and tattered body of the young man ablaze. Quinn pressed the back of her hand to her mouth and nose as the sickening smell of burning flesh filled the room. Within the flames a gold ball of light swirled. The demon caught the sphere in its hand and hurled it toward her.

She ducked and turned in time to see it hit the wooden doors and absorb into the porous material. Yet another soul captured for all eternity. A face pressed from the inside out, desperate, painful cries pierced her ears.

“Come to me, Quinn Hurst,” the beast howled again.

“Never!” she screamed, refusing to look back.

A hard force snatched her body up into the air, flipped her around and flung her back to the altar. She crashed to the floor, every bone and muscle rippling with pain. The stone altar moved, standing upright. Quinn looked up at the slab as it floated in midair and saw yet another sacrifice strapped down and felt her heart turn to a block of ice.

“No!”

Chapter Sixteen

Quinn scrambled to her feet and reached up, touching the heavy booted feet. Garen's head lolled back and forth, his eyes rolled around as he tried in vain to focus on her. She clawed and jumped, trying to reach his chest, her bruised muscles protesting every movement.

"A little insurance policy in case you changed your mind," the demon cackled, running its sharp green talon across Garen's face.

A trickle of blood seeped and dripped down into Quinn's face, splattering on her cheek. A dam of emotions broke free just then. Tossing her head back, she cried out, yelling her rage and pain for the man she'd vowed not to care for yet allowed to find his way into her heart. He would not suffer at the hands of hell because of her. He would not lose his life as she stood by and watched. Hell would take her eventually. She just hadn't planned on it being so soon.

The other part of her soul lashed out, swelling with the wrath of vengeance and weeping uncontrollably for the man who meant so much to her. The two parts of her soul joined with a violent clash, her body jerking and flying back, landing on her ass. Her blade still in her hand, she felt the other woman within grip it with her and the power surged.

Intense heat seeped into her hand, up her arm and down into her chest. Electricity surged along her nerves, snapping and crackling until she could no longer be still. A red haze settled over her tunnel vision, not from demon tricks but from her personal fury. One angry woman meant hell, but two residing in one body meant a wrath of hell that hell itself had never witnessed.

Jumping to her feet, she brandished her blade, the fires of the room glinting off the steel and casting an eerie glow. Like an angry, hungry, feral animal her lips peeled back from her teeth as a low, menacing growl rumbled up her throat and released into the room.

The demon's smug, satisfied grin melted away, replaced by a look of shock and concern. He hadn't prepared for her fight and she knew it, just as she knew she'd never look upon Garen's face again. Taking advantage of the demon's shocked senses, she charged forward, her blade at the ready.

With cold, stunned eyes the beast sidestepped her thrust, the point of her blade catching its robe and searing the material. Stunned and releasing a howl of outrage, the demon flicked its wrist and the smoldering garment disappeared. Quinn wasted no time dropping to her knees and lashing out at its ankles.

The smooth, effortless connection caused a thick, black-like substance to ooze from the false flesh and a shriek of pain and surprise to wrench from its throat. The

satisfaction of drawing first blood sparked her on. Tossing her blade to her other hand, she spun on the ball of her foot and cut across the human form's thigh.

Another yelp of pain and anger split the thick air. Quinn stood, only to find herself soaring through the air and crashing to the ground at the feet of the surrounding Tulpas. Shaking off the bone-jarring pain, she leapt up as dozens of hands reached for her.

"Join your master in hell," she snarled, slicing and stabbing every bit of flesh she could reach. Coughing on the ash of the destroyed creations, she turned and pinned the demon with her hard, cold eyes.

It changed form, back to its original hideous slimy shape. She didn't remember it being so massive, its shoulders nearly six feet wide and its torso so broad and muscular. Every creature, no matter how vile and grotesque, had a weak spot. She simply had to find it.

A shift of movement disturbed the air behind her. Without looking, Quinn tossed her blade, caught it at a different angle and bent her elbow, raising it up and stabbing behind her. She didn't need to see to know she'd pierced the skulking Tulpa in the throat. The gurgling, choking sound and then the explosion of ash in the air confirmed the kill.

Alarmed, the demon stepped toward the floating altar and used his bargaining chip to stop her. Quinn froze in horror as the beast positioned its sharp talons over Garen's chest. Ice flowed through her veins as her breath crystallized in her lungs.

"Drop the weapon," the beast snarled, thick slimy drool dripping from its jowls.

"Don't do it, Quinn." Garen's hazy eyes met hers. His voice sounded too faint and distant. "Get out of here. Go."

The demon struck out at Garen's defiance, lashing his body with its long, whip-like forked tongue. Blood blossomed under his shirt as the shredded material gapped open.

"No!" Fury so bitter and foul rose within her, souring her mouth and tensing her muscles into painful bunches.

"Refuse me and he watches while I feast on his organs, a very slow death I assure you," the creature hissed. It dragged another pointed talon down Garen's face, bright red blood blooming in its wake.

He didn't scream, didn't give the creature the satisfaction of hearing his pain, but Quinn could feel it right to her bones. Her flesh stung and burned with him. The combination of fear for him and the bitter cold growing inside her body made her teeth chatter uncontrollably.

She couldn't allow this to go on. Garen would suffer immeasurably for her—she who didn't stand a chance at this point. Forcing her stiff muscles to move, she crouched to the floor and allowed her blade to drop from her hand.

"No, Quinn, don't do this. Go. Get out of here now." Garen's pleading voice ripped through her like a sword.

The demon chuckled as she shook her head, looking at her lover with sad, apologetic eyes. "Let him go."

"Come to me," the monster demanded.

Quinn lowered her head and forced her aching legs to move.

"For God's sake, Quinn, stop. You know it won't do any good. He'll continue to kill after he's killed you. This won't change anything."

"It's not my death it wants," she told him as she stepped up to the altar and gazed into Garen's watery, bloodshot eyes one last time.

Garen struggled against his restraints as confusion and terror filled his eyes. "What do you mean? What the fuck does it want then?"

Instantly Quinn's body lifted into the air with a jerk. Her arms stretched out to the side and her legs parted. Still, she kept her gaze locked on Garen's.

"Let him go, demon. I haven't given myself to you yet and I won't unless you let him go."

"Jesus, Quinn, as soon as you do he'll kill me anyway. Stop this madness now and get the fuck out of here."

"A contract, demon," she demanded, shifting her gaze from Garen. "I give myself to you and you cause no harm, no malicious behavior against anyone I love or know. You leave them alone for the rest of their lives. I will see him returned before I make my vow to you."

"Quinn, no! Please don't do this. I love you, I'll die for you. Let me go and leave."

He thought his words would change her mind but they simply strengthened her resolve to end this. He loved her. She knew that this morning when he slipped inside her body and held her tight. She knew because he took his time with her, made her feel what he knew he couldn't say.

"Oh God, Quinn, don't do this." The torment in his voice shredded her heart.

"It doesn't matter, Garen. We could never have been together anyway. Not the way you wanted. I'm sorry if you believed that but I was damned when you met me."

"What? What are you talking about? I don't care, just stop, tell it to let you go and get the hell out of here."

"Hell is exactly where she's going," the vile monster snarled. "A contract then, female. My end, if you give up your breath without a fight I chose one of the four to replace you." The demon snorted and snarled at its intelligent wager.

Shit, that meant she'd have to endure the torture forever to ensure none of the rest fell victim to this beast. Her plan had been to go willingly and suffer until she felt sure the Rosses and Garen were out of town and then give up, take her own life. That all changed now.

"You'll destroy all the Tulpas you're responsible for creating, cleansing this city of your evil and create no more," she demanded as if she really had a right to make such a demand.

When the demon simply howled at her audacity, she held her chin high. "Slayer blood is powerful, isn't that why you want me? Go ahead, taste."

"What are you doing, Quinn?" Garen struggled against his restraints until blood trickled from his wrists.

"Slayer blood is powerful and sweet but I could find another slayer anytime I want. You," the beast pointed a blood-encrusted talon at her, "you are different. You broke the sacred rules of the slayers. You took a human life, not once but twice and that makes your blood more powerful to me."

Quinn paled. Twice? Garen stared up at her, his face contorted and bloody. She couldn't look at him. Now he knew the truth, now he'd understand why she couldn't stay with him no matter how much he tried to persuade her.

"You're mistaken, you filthy slime. I took only one human life." She choked on the words, humiliated that she had to admit her sins in front of Garen.

"In this life."

Before she could form a question in her mind, the demon waved its thick, sharp fingers and a wall of flame appeared before them. Within the flames a picture formed. The woman who shared her soul walked down a wooded path, her leather skirt and vest moving against her flesh as if caressing her.

In her hand she loosely carried her blessed sword used for vanquishing Tulpas. Tears stained her cheeks, her red-rimmed eyes sank into her head and her lips trembled. When she reached a clearing alongside the road, she stopped, knelt and placed the butt of the sword to the ground with the point resting at the base of her throat.

In the blink of an eye the woman thrust forward until the sword pierced through her flesh and ripped through the back of her neck. Quinn gasped in horror.

The woman sharing her soul released a bloodcurdling scream that only Quinn could hear. Deep, heartbreaking pain rippled through her body.

Why? You had everything. A man who adored you, children who loved you. Why?

My baby, my precious little girl. I lost her to those that I hunted. The sound of sobbing echoed and bounced around in her head. Tears swam on Quinn's eyes. How did any mother survive the death of a child?

I'm so sorry.

You are our second chance and it appears that is now lost. He must be allowed to live, dear Quinn. I sacrifice myself for his life.

Her entire being in agreement now Quinn held her head high. "It appears I have more to bargain with than I thought." She announced to the smirking demon. "The sin of suicide, the sin of taking a human life, it must make me invaluable to you."

The demon lashed out its rope tongue and struck her across the abdomen. Biting back a curse, she merely flinched as blood welled across her stomach. Garen cursed a blue streak at the demon, growling threats Quinn knew he wouldn't be able to pull off.

"I didn't offer my blood and you took. What are the penalties of that infraction, you spineless cretin." A flicker of hope to save Garen and the rest sparked to life. She really did have a bargaining chip.

The demon shrank back like a frightened kitten suddenly not so fierce and menacing. So there were rules to be followed when it came to taking a slayer, a legacy into hell. Too bad she didn't know that before.

As she hung suspended in air her mind raced how she could use this bit of information to her benefit. She couldn't do a damn thing strung up like a piece of meat. "Put me down, slimeball."

The demon hissed, its fierce red eyes flaring with anger and — *Wait, was that a hint of fear? Oh this couldn't be. I've stumbled onto a pot of gold here.*

"I said put me down. Now." As if the world vanished under her, she dropped like a stone to the ground, her legs screaming in pain from the shock of the stop. *Okay, be careful what I demand. Lesson learned.*

Pulling herself up and trying hard not to let the bastard see her pain, she glared. Garen still fought his restraints to no avail, never taking his eyes from her. Damn, she wished he wasn't here and regretted more than anything that he'd heard her admit to taking a human life.

Looking down at the wound the beast had inflicted on her, she smeared her finger through her blood, held up her red fingers and waved them toward the demon. The drool factor increased as the thick slime dripped and glopped from its slobbering jowls to the floor. Quinn stifled a gag.

"You want this? Let him go, release him gently, lower him to the floor and let him walk out of here. Never, ever go near him again." She didn't want to risk Garen being hurt from a harsh fall. She didn't want to risk Garen at all so the sooner she could get him the hell out of here the better.

"Quinn," Garen growled her name and then jolted when his arms and legs freed and he floated to the ground, gently landing on his feet.

"Go, Garen. Get out of here and take the rest back home." She couldn't look at him. If she did she'd cry for the loss and, by God, she would not do that, not now. Already her heart wept and the fucking demon would use that against her, against him.

He moved to her, gripped her by the arms and shook her violently. "What the hell are you thinking? You can't do this. I won't let you do this."

The pain in his voice killed her, cut her straight to the bone. His fingers dug into her, bruising flesh, yet she didn't care. All she wanted was for him to leave so she could finish this once and for all.

"Garen, please." It took everything she could muster to keep her voice steady and even. "Go before the bastard changes its mind and realizes I don't know what the fuck I'm doing."

"I won't leave you."

The demon groused and grumbled, its temper flaring as they spoke. She didn't know how much longer she could hold it off before it decided to take them both.

"Get the fuck out of here, Garen," she snapped. "This is the way it has to be."

His eyes shimmered with moisture as he shook his head. "I love you," he whispered.

Those words, spoken so sincerely and from the heart, nearly brought her to her knees. She crumbled inside, a rush of tears and emotion that threatened to be her undoing. He loved her and she loved him but none of that mattered. Not here, not now.

He wouldn't leave and, by God, she would not stand here and witness his torturous death. "You don't know the first thing about me," she hissed. "Didn't you hear, weren't you paying attention? I killed an innocent human. I broke the laws, both slayer and human. I did it willingly, I wanted to do it and I damn well enjoyed it."

Garen's face hardened. "I don't believe you."

"Believe it," she grumbled from deep in her throat.

The demon raised its meaty arms into the air and howled in frustration and anger. Time was up. Garen had to leave now.

Quinn gripped Garen's strong biceps and turned him toward the door she'd come through. "Get out," she shouted, and then pushed him hard. He stumbled backward, still staring into her face. "Get out." Another hard push shoved him into the crowd of Tulpas standing, watching the events.

She didn't think they would touch him, not without a direct order from their master but she didn't want to take that chance. "I don't want you, Garen. You were nothing more than entertainment, that's all." The bitter words spewed from her mouth with venom and fury while her insides screamed in pain and loss.

The Tulpas closed around him, affectively shutting him off from her and then steadily moved, forcing him back toward the door. Not until she heard it open and close and Garen disappeared into the darkness did she turn back to the beast ranting and raving like a spoiled child.

"Now let's get down to business."

* * * * *

The thick, heavy doors slammed, closing him off from the vast room where Quinn planned to offer herself up for sacrifice. Agonizing moans and groans of pain filled the air. He looked down at the contorted, undulating faces jutting from the wood and took a step back.

He hesitantly reached out to touch one of the grotesque features, the tips of his fingers brushing against coarse, living timber. It moved, screaming in pain as its eyes bulged from the surface. Garen snatched his hand back.

"What the hell is this?" Jesus, had he walked into a freaking movie or something?

His cell phone vibrated in his pocket, startling him. He pulled it out and flipped it open. "What!"

"It's about damn time. Where the hell have you been? We have a problem," Tabitha scolded on the other end.

"That problem just got bigger. I don't know where the hell I am. I was getting into my car when the lights went out. Next thing I know I'm strapped to a fucking stone table and watching Quinn hand herself over to that demon for my release."

"Oh no." Tabitha relayed the information to the rest and he could hear commotion in the background. "Look around, Garen, what do you see. Give us something to go on so we can find you."

He turned and looked down the long hall lit by red lights. At the end were elevator doors. "I think I'm in a building." It dawned on him then. "I must be inside the office building." Of course, where else would he be. This was the base of operations for the filthy bastard after all.

"We're on our way. What's happening with Quinn?"

Good question and it elicited horrible visions inside his head. He couldn't fathom that monster touching her, hurting her. "I don't know, Tabitha. I can't get to her." His hands trembled at the thought of losing her forever.

He didn't believe a word of what she said. If she did kill a human, then there had to be a damn good reason for it and he knew deep down to his core that she didn't enjoy it. "Hurry, Tab. I can't lose her, not again."

The line disconnected. With them all together they would have a fighting chance to beat the beast. He just hoped they made it in time. If he walked into that room and found one more ounce of her blood spilled or worse, that she was dead, he'd lose his mind.

Something inside him moved, stretched from the deep recess of his soul and reached for the surface. Violent anger erupted like a volcano inside his chest, building until the pressure became too much to contain. Tossing his head back, he howled his fury like a wild animal.

"She will not do this!" The voice didn't belong to him, yet it did. Two people inside one body, combined, echoing and menacing. He'd never been this angry.

Jamming his phone back into his pocket, he stepped up to the doors, balled his hands into fists and began beating on it. Shrieks and screams from those poor souls trapped within vibrated against the walls, shattering light bulbs. Garen blocked them out. He heard nothing other than his own howls of fury.

He'd find a way back inside. He had to find a way back inside even if meant ripping this building apart with his bare hands. There had to be another way. This couldn't be the only door on this floor.

Sweat and blood trickled down his face. The sting of the scratches was numbed now from the adrenaline coursing through his system. He bunched his fists and

punched at the walls, driving through the drywall. This was it. This would be the way in. The stupid fucker had an immovable door but didn't bother to shore up the walls. If he could break through to the other side, then he'd be in.

* * * * *

The putrid, stupid beast circled her, its toxic drool dripping at her feet and fouling the already-rank air. It could smell her blood, the very thing it lived for and she felt sure would do just about anything for. Some of the pieces fitted together in her head now.

Her past self had taken her life, tainting the rich fluid that flowed through her system. She now, in this life, had committed murder against what some would call an innocent, further tarnishing her. The blood of a slayer apparently tasted like a rich liqueur to demons. The tainted blood of a slayer was rare and sought out.

Unless she died or surrendered herself she would lead the top ten most wanted list in hell, hunted for the rest of her life. Yet another reason to keep to herself, that is if she got the fuck out of here. No one would be safe around her.

"Back off, you wad of snot. We finish the contract first."

The horrible creature sniffed at her, reached out to touch but then backed away, just a step, still within striking distance. She still didn't understand this business about how the demon couldn't just take her like it took others. She had to go willingly. Why? Did it matter? She could bargain.

What could she bargain for and how could she work it so she had a chance of escaping with her life? She didn't want the Rosses or Tyson to be hounded or harmed, that was a given. Tulpas, the bastard couldn't create any more Tulpas. The world crawled with enough of them. It would have to destroy all the creations it sent out around the world along with the ones in this city. The list mounted but she still couldn't figure out a way to manipulate for her life.

"Enough," the beast snarled. "What are you waiting for? Make the contract now. I grow impatient."

Quinn flipped it off with a blood-smeared finger. She knew she pushed her luck and was certain the beast would make her pay if she didn't figure a way out. Still, being able to taunt and smartmouth a demon wasn't something she got to do every day.

"Before I surrender, you destroy all the Tulpas you've created here in this city and those you've sent out around the world to kill innocent people."

The beast cracked its forked tongue in the air, just inches from her body and then blasted her with a hideous, foul-smelling growl. Her stomach heaved but she did her best to act nonchalant, as if it didn't affect her.

"Blow all you want. I do nothing unless my demands are met."

"The contract is not official until it is complete. I do nothing until then, bitch."

Damn, she hadn't thought about that. "How do I know once you have me you won't discard the contract?" Once she was bound to the demon she would be helpless to do anything to stop it from hurting her friends.

A ball of fire appeared in the air before her. It flattened, stretched and then morphed into a blackened sheet of paper.

"Once completed, we sign in blood. A broken contract is a null contract. You will be free to go."

"And what happens if I break it?" She really, really didn't want to know the answer to that question.

The demon stood tall, its features wavering like a mirage in the desert until the façade of a man appeared, coal-black hair, pitch-black eyes with fiery red pupils and a tight, muscular body. It gave a sexy, toothy smile.

"Then I can do whatever I wish with you."

Quinn didn't like the sound of that. "So let me get this straight. As long as the contract holds, the only thing you can do is feed off my blood for as long as I hold out but if I break the contract then you, what, kill me? Hmm, I hope you aren't that hungry."

The demon-man reached out and grasped her wrist with bone-crushing strength. She tried to stop the gasp of pain but it slipped free.

"Make no mistake, Quinn Hurst," it hissed. "Killing you will come much later down the road if you choose to break the deal. I have many ways of torture and delight in exacting them. Your death will be a slow, painful one where you plead with me to kill you."

The demon in men's clothing waved its hand. Her clothes vanished as if dissolving away. She held her head high and clenched her jaw as it ran a perfectly manicured finger down her stomach to the clotted wound, stopping before actually touching it.

"I do like your body and the sins of the flesh are one of my favorite. I much prefer your blood but will have both should you decide to do something stupid. Either way I win this battle."

She tried to swallow around the huge knot in her throat but couldn't. "It's not like I can break the damn thing anyway." Really, how could she?

"Let me lay out the rules for you, female human. Every time I come to you to feed you must give me permission. The first time you don't the deal is over and I get full possession of you, body and soul. Have no doubt I can keep you alive for centuries, taking you to the brink of death only to snatch you back for more fun."

This just got worse by the second. So there seemed to be no possible way for her to break the contract and come out alive. She needed to trick him into breaking it. Quinn heard commotion behind her, as if a big giant rat tried to eat its way through the wall. And that big giant rat would probably be Garen. This contract needed to be completed now.

“Okay, number one. Garen, Tyson, Tabitha and the Rosses cannot be touched or harmed in any way by you or your Tulpas ever again.” The words burned onto the sheet of black paper in deep red, making it damn near impossible for her to see.

“You destroy all the Tulpas you created, the ones here and the ones you sent out to wherever they are and you never create another one and you can’t take any more innocent lives.” The sound in the wall behind her grew louder, the demon so taken off-guard by her demands it didn’t hear.

“You only get to keep me for one year and then you let me go.” She spoke the words so fast the beast couldn’t reject the demand before it burned permanently into the contract. “And if you lie to me about any of these conditions you will return to hell never to walk the earth again.”

The demon’s façade shuddered. “You play a very dangerous game,” it growled. “But I will sign this contract.” With one long, pointed talon it pricked its finger and pressed the droplet of thick black blood to the paper.

Quinn took a deep breath. So this was it. She’d managed to finagle only a year of her life but would she survive that year? If she did, what kind of person would she become after being drained to the point of death?

Better get this over with before Garen burst through the wall and suffered the demon’s wrath. She looked down at her naked belly and the wound the beast had inflicted earlier. She pressed her finger into the gash, opening it and letting fresh blood leak out. With her finger sufficiently coated, she reached out and pressed it to the black paper.

It might look like paper but the fire it originated from seared and burned her flesh. She bit her lower lip to keep from crying out in pain. As soon as her blood was accepted, she jerked back her finger.

The contract folded in on itself, a few tendrils of flame sealing it before it vanished into midair. Done. Her life now belonged to the demon.

“Destroy the Tulpas,” she insisted as tears coated her throat and eyes.

The false man shook its head and smiled. “I don’t recall you putting a deadline in the contract for their demise. Never mind though, they’ll be dealt with in due time.”

Son of a bitch, she thought she’d been so careful. “Destroy them now.” Her body shook with fear for Garen.

“Your demands are over, bitch.” The demon flung his arm, striking her across the face and sending her sailing back through the air.

Quinn landed with a thud. Before she could pull herself upright the beast whipped her with its tongue, breaking the skin. The burning sting had her yelping in pain.

In a whirlwind of movement she found herself floating through the air again, flipping like a rag doll until she slammed against the stone altar. The leather straps cinched around her wrists and ankles so tightly she thought for sure her skin would tear. There she lay, splayed out for the demon to do his will and her helpless to stop it.

“You’ve delayed me long enough.”

Quinn blinked back her tears to find the demon back to its hideous self. Drool oozed and splashed to the ground as it crept nearer to her. Its tongue snaked out across her body, lapping at the fresh blood while it groaned at the pleasure of her taste. With her insides revolting and her body violently shaking, she closed her eyes and prayed she either died or her blood would somehow turn to poison.

“Allow me to feed,” the bastard snarled.

The words wouldn’t come. They lay lodged in her throat like a bone stuck sideways. She knew if she denied it her soul would be forfeit and Garen’s life would be endangered once again.

“Do you do resist?”

“No.” She tried to swallow once more and forced the word through her lips. “Feed.”

Grunting, the monster lashed at her again and again until dozens of long, bloody cuts marked her body. The intense pain burned through her system but paled in comparison to the feel of the rough, disgusting tongue that licked at her like a dog. Like a pressure cooker, the horrid experience built inside until she had to let it out.

Sucking in all the foul air she could, she released it with a bloodcurdling scream.

Chapter Seventeen

Garen beat his fists bloody as he forged his way through the never-ending wall. He felt no pain. Not the deep gashes that nearly exposed bone or the flecks of drywall embedded in his eyes. He felt nothing but rage that his Quinn, his love would be tortured in unimaginable ways.

"Garen. Garen, where the hell are you?"

Tabitha's voice wormed its way through the fog in his brain. He stopped beating at the wall and plowed back through the debris to the hall. When he stepped through the hole he'd created he found them.

Ruth, Donald, Tabitha and even Tyson. They'd all come to save her. Their presence calmed him a bit, a flicker of hope in the pits of hell. He looked to Tyson, the young face with the wisdom of the ancients in his eyes. The boy had only known Quinn as long as he had and yet he too loved her immensely.

"My God, Garen. What happened to you?" Tabitha stepped to his side, lifted his bloodied and bruised hands, inspecting the wounds. "Mom, he's hurt bad, real bad. Did that fucking demon do this to you?"

"No, Tabitha." Donald shook his head slowly and pointed to the wall. "He did it to himself. She's on the other side isn't she, son?"

"I can't get to her. She pushed me out and I can't get back in." He looked back to Tyson. "You can save her." He dropped to his knees and bowed his head. "Please, priest. Help me save my love. Don't take her from me again."

When he raised his head, they all looked at him with their mouths hanging open.

"What's wrong with him?" Tabitha knelt next to him, sliding her arm around his shoulders and holding on tight. "Why does his voice sound so weird?"

"One soul, two men," Tyson whispered. "It's the oldest part of his soul from their past life. They've joined to save her."

"Please, priest, help save my Anya."

"Anya," Ruth repeated as a tear slid down her cheek.

"Anya took her life after her daughter was killed by a Tulpa." Tyson stared down at him, his eyes going vacant.

"No," Garen shouted. "Do not blame her weakness. Our children were our lives."

"The demon tried to claim her then but couldn't in death. It needed her alive. Then Quinn was born and Anya's soul became hers. Quinn thinks she's broken slayer law and so does the demon. It wants her blood to feed from and her soul for strength. She thinks by sacrificing herself she can save us."

"I don't care who broke what law, that girl is part of our family now and we'll do everything we can to stop this madness," Ruth spat in anger. "Get up, Garen. We have work to do."

Tabitha helped him to his feet. Why was he on the floor anyway? Just what the hell had happened to him? His knuckles burned with pain and his eyes felt like someone had dumped a ton of sand in them. His brain floated back and forth inside his skull like a fish in a tank.

As Ruth opened her mouth to speak, a soul-wrenching, piercing scream ripped through the door, bounced off the walls and ricocheted around inside Garen's chest. Quinn. His Quinn.

"No!" He echoed back. The sound filled with grief. "We have to do something now." He turned to crawl back through the hole in the wall.

Tyson stopped him, gripping his arm and yanking. "Not like that." The boy pulled a blade from his pocket. "Do you have yours?"

Garen looked at him blankly for a second and then reached under his shirt, pulling his knife from the scabbard around his waist. The rest removed their blades and held them out. The steel heated until it glowed, the carvings etched on the blades sparkling with electricity.

Garen allowed the chants of the priests to fill his head, his chest and his soul, so loud, so demanding and so powerful. His arm vibrated with the energy traveling through his body.

"Does Quinn have hers?" Tyson questioned in a calm tone.

"No, she surrendered it to free me." Speaking the words tore at his heart. She'd never convince him she didn't love him. No one, absolutely no one walked into the arms of hell for another without feeling something for them.

"Does the demon have it?"

"I don't know. When she shoved me out the door it was still on the floor. That room is full of Tulpas. She killed dozens but there must be hundreds in there."

Tyson gave him a wicked little grin. "They don't matter." The boy walked to the heavy door and gazed at the horrific faces staring back at him. "You'll be free soon. I promise," he told the lost souls. Their cries of agony were silenced.

Tabitha stepped up next to him. "What is that?"

"The souls of the creators. He used them for sacrifices and then imprisoned their souls here so he could see them."

"Sick bastard," Tabitha bit out.

The boy turned back to Garen. "Come on, we have to get started. She's suffering."

Garen rushed up beside the kid, ready and willing to do anything that needed to be done. Donald and Ruth joined them. He instructed them to rest their knives against the door and join hands. As soon as they did Garen's head rumbled with a loud roar of voices. Tyson quietly chanted foreign words.

Tabitha gripped his wrist tightly, a reassurance that everything would be all right. He looked into her sympathetic eyes and squeezed her hand back. With all of them working together Quinn would survive this and they would free her. If they didn't, he'd be an empty man wandering the earth with nothing to live for.

Tyson raised his voice, shouted a few bizarre words and suddenly bright gold rays of light beamed from their blades, spread out and connected until a wall of shimmering gold light stood before them. The power of the light sucked the breath from Garen's lungs but he held steady not wanting to break the spell.

Without warning the doors burst open and brilliant spheres of white burst from the wood. They swirled around Tyson and then raced high into the air, disappearing through the ceiling. Garen looked into the dark room but could see nothing. He moved to rush in when Tyson put out his arm and stopped him.

"Wait."

The boy moved through the door, his blade held high and still radiating beams of gold light. Another barrage of odd-sounding words flew from his mouth. He motioned behind him for them to follow. Garen stepped up first followed by Tabitha and her mother and father.

"Everyone put their hand on mine," Tyson instructed.

Without question they obeyed and the beam of light jetted up in the air lighting the dark room and revealing hundreds of robbed Tulpas with blank looks on their faces. Toward the back of the room the demon screeched as it leaned over Quinn's naked, bloody body strapped to the stone altar.

She lay there lifeless as the abomination fed from the open wounds. Then a roar of sheer fury mixed with anguish ripped from Garen's throat, startling everyone including the demon. The beast jerked around, hissed a protest at being disturbed and then licked its bloodstained jowls.

Garen's muscles bunched, ready to tear across the vast room and plunge his blade deep inside the beast's grotesque body. Once again Tyson fought to hold him back.

"She's alive. It won't kill her. She's useless to it dead."

Garen didn't understand and didn't care. All he knew was the love of his past and present life lay bound and helpless while a spawn of the devil fed off her. Why were they standing there instead of destroying the beast?

"Release her, demon," Tyson demanded in a surprisingly commanding voice. "She doesn't belong to you."

Sliding its black, thick arm across its jowls, it cackled in amusement. "She came willingly, signed a contract. You can do nothing, pitiful human." With that it waved its thick, long fingers toward the hordes of Tulpas.

"Quick," Tyson ordered. "Everyone back to back and raise your knives."

They did as ordered, Garen never taking his eyes off Quinn's unmoving body. The Tulpas began to move, encircling them.

“Raise your blades and touch their tips together over our heads.” Tyson began to chant once more, the strange-sounding words causing the soulless beings to halt temporarily.

Garen wanted to cut from the group and run to Quinn. They didn’t have time for this. Every second that monster spent with her was a second he couldn’t save her from agony.

“Stay with us, Garen. Don’t break the circle,” Tyson shouted. He slipped back into his chanting, his voice growing louder.

A sudden rush of electricity flowed through his body from the tips of his toes to the tips of his fingers and surged through the steel in his hand. A bone-numbing crack sounded and an arc of electricity zapped from the knives, zipping through the air. Every hair on Garen’s body stood on end as his skin tingled.

“On the count of three swing your blades down and point them into the crowd.” Tyson’s voice could barely be heard over the loud volts snapping and cracking in the room. “One.”

Garen shifted his gaze to the empty bodies heading toward him and flexed his fingers on the handle of his knife.

“Two.”

He vowed to God that he’d never let Quinn out of his sight again if she lived and came through this a whole woman.

“Three.”

All five lowered their arms and pointed their deadly, electrified blades toward the mass of Tulpas. Large, thick arcs of deadly voltage swung out like whips, striking one and then jumping to another Tulpa. One by one they screamed their fate as their bodies were torn in two from the current traveling around the circle. Heavy ash filled the air, drifted and then settled to the floor.

Garen’s ears rang with such a high-pitched noise it made him dizzy. He stumbled, righted himself and looked toward Quinn. The demon waved its thick, meaty arms in the air, howling at the destruction of its creations. They’d have to move fast now. This monster would use Quinn in every possible way to keep them at bay.

“You are no human,” the beast roared, and then jammed one long pointed talon into Quinn’s thigh.

Her piercing scream of pain and bucking body along with the fountain of blood that spurted into the air had all five screaming in horror. The fucking monster deliberately spiked an artery, which meant Quinn could bleed out in a matter of minutes. Again Garen tried to charge forward but Tyson’s unrelenting, powerful grip held him in place.

“No, it won’t let her die. It can’t.”

“Damn it, the bastard is torturing her, boy. I can’t stand here like a scared little girl and let it happen.” Oh God, his soul was screaming for revenge, ripping to shreds and

tearing him down inside. A maddening tremble took over his body as it demanded he run to her.

"She has a contract with the devil, Garen," Ruth whispered. "Unless the demon breaks the contract or we can kill it there's little we can do."

"Fuck the contract." Anger, rage, fury roiled in his chest until he couldn't breathe. "She's mine and I will gladly die to spare her this fate." Jerking free of Tyson's grip, he ran toward the altar.

The demon had turned to slurp the gushing red nectar spewing from her leg. Quinn's head lolled to the side as she groaned in pain, too weak to do anything more. Garen saw her then, her vacant, glazed eyes, her pale face and her blood-encrusted hair. The sight only fueled him on. With his blade held firmly in his hand he raised it and on a growl heavy with hate he plunged it into the back of the thick-skinned beast.

Even with the extra power surging through his system he could only embed the steel half an inch. Thick black ooze seeped from the minor wound. The beast reared back, flinging him through the air. Garen had the good sense to hang on to the knife, ripping it from the leatherlike flesh and taking it with him as he sailed.

He braced himself for the landing and felt every bone in his body jar when he hit the floor. Tabitha and Tyson ran to him but he pushed them aside.

"All that's gonna do is make it worse for her," Tyson said in a calm voice. "You can't kill it like that."

Can't, can't, can't. He was damn sick and tired of hearing that word. "Don't tell me what I can't do. Tell me what the fuck I can do."

"We need to find her blade. Without it we can't summon enough energy to kill it. Think, where did you see it last?"

How the hell was he supposed to know? There were more important things to worry about than where she laid the knife. As he looked into Tyson's calm and much older-looking face his fury eased slightly. Quinn believed in the kid, believed he knew how to kill the demon, trusted him. If she believed, then maybe he should.

"She laid it on the floor somewhere. Back there." Garen pointed farther back in the room. He dragged himself to his feet and ran, kicking through the thick ash of the vanquished Tulpas.

"Look on the floor for her knife. We need that knife," Tyson shouted to the rest.

On hands and knees they scoured through the black ash, feeling blindly for Quinn's blade. Garen made sure he kept one eye on the demon and one on the floor. "I hope you know what you're doing, kid."

"I don't know how but I do." Suddenly Tyson stopped moving, fell back on his ass and stared blindly ahead.

"What is it? What's wrong, Ty?" Tabitha shouted from across the room.

He closed his eyes as his lips moved silently. Garen felt his blade jiggle in his hand. Tab, Ruth and Donald all looked down at theirs as if they had come to life.

"He's calling for it," Ruth announced.

Garen heard the stone altar shift and turned. The beast raised its arms. Quinn rose from the stone and hung suspended in midair, her pale arms and legs dangling. God, he could see the deep lacerations from here. The pain she must be suffering through had to drive anyone mad.

"I think it's getting ready to do something," Tabitha announced. "Whatever it is you have planned, Ty, you'd better get to it."

The demon ignored them as if they didn't exist inside the room. It stretched its putrid body and actually seemed to grow larger right before their eyes. If he could only distract the beast it would give the rest time to do what needed to be done. Garen scrambled over to Tab.

"We need a diversion."

"No," she protested. "For God's sake listen to Tyson. He knows what he's doing."

The demon waved its arms and large, gaping, orange hole opened in the wall.

"We don't have time. He's going to take her back to hell and we'll never be able to reach her." That knowledge terrified him. At least here they had a fighting chance. In the depths of hell no one would ever be able to help her.

His argument apparently made sense because Tabitha gave a shaky nod of her head. "Be careful."

Garen moved toward the demon, crawling on his hands and knees. As he grew closer he moved off to the side and behind a wall of flame. With his knife gripped securely, he charged forward and drove the blade into the less fleshy part of the monster, right into its foot.

The roar of pain reverberated around the room as it thrashed its arms wildly in the air. Quinn's body dropped hard to the ground. Garen wasted no time. He grabbed her by the wrists and dragged across the floor. Her moans of agony and pain-filled eyes tore at his heart and soul.

Had her body survived only for her soul to wither during the torture? "Hang on, baby. We'll get you out of here."

"No," she whispered. "Let me go."

"Never."

The furious beast reached down and picked Garen up by the arm. It pointed its talon directly at his throat and he prepared for the death sure to come.

"You can't hurt him." Quinn's thin, tiny voice could barely be heard. "The contract. I bind you the contract."

Weak and suffering, she still bargained for his life.

The beast raged in Garen's face, its foul breath washing over him like a thick slimy scum seeping into his pores. "Let me guess," Garen snarled right back. "You hurt me and the contract is broken, freeing her. Well, what are you waiting for? Snap me in half,

rip me apart, eat my organs." With his blade still gripped in his hand, he hacked away at the leatherlike flesh, daring the beast to break the contract.

"Come on, you bastard." Garen aimed for the throat and caught a bulging vein. Thick black slime bubbled and spewed.

The demon shrieked, tossing Garen to the floor and then covering the wound with its hand. Shaking off the bone-crunching pain, he crawled back to Quinn and continued to try to drag her away.

"I've got it," Tyson yelled. "Bring her back here."

Tabitha ran toward Garen and helped heave her body across the floor. Too weak to fight back, all Quinn could do was verbally protest.

"You don't understand. It can't hurt you, I made sure of it. Go, leave me and it'll never bother you again."

"We go as a group or we don't go at all," Tabitha hissed back at her.

Donald and Ruth dropped down to her side. Tyson put her blade in her hand and then wrapped his hands around hers.

"Touch tips like we did before," the boy instructed.

Five steel blade tips came together and the power of the ancients surged through their bodies until it converged in the steel. Quinn's weakened body convulsed and bounced. Garen, Tabitha and Ruth held her down while Tyson continued to keep her grip on the blade. Fresh blood wept from the deep lacerations as she reopened them.

Garen leaned down next to her ear. "It's okay, baby. I won't let you go. I'll never let you go. We live together or we die together."

The beast lumbered forward, snarling, growling and drooling. "Mine. We have a contract. You risk her soul by interfering."

Tyson looked down at Quinn and with the most gentle, encouraging eyes, spoke. "It's up to you now, Quinn. Only you can kill it. We can't. You have the power in the blade but you have to act fast."

Her body shivered as she returned his gaze. "Let me go. Get away." Her teeth chattered as she spoke.

"Don't wait too long," Tyson repeated, and then leaned down and kissed her cheek. "I love you, Quinn, you're like my sister."

When the boy pulled away, a single tear flowed down her cheek. Her gaze darted from Donald, Ruth and then Tabitha. She refused to look at him, not even a brief glance and that added to the pain racking his body.

"Go now," Quinn demanded.

Reluctantly they all stood and backed away. Tabitha had to force Garen to move. He didn't want to leave her there, lying naked, cold and on the verge of death. What if it didn't work? They were betting her life on the word of a kid? What if she didn't have the strength to force the blade through the beast's thick, leathery skin?

The demon waited until they were far enough back not to interfere with him. It turned to toward Garen and snarled fiercely before letting loose a wicked cackling laugh. Approaching Quinn, it lifted its arms, raising her into the air.

“Feed me.”

“You’ve nearly drained her dry, demon,” Tyson spoke calmly. “You risk the contract by taking again so soon.”

“I risk nothing. She risks her soul by refusing me. Push me, priest, and I will claim your soul instead.”

Ruth stepped up and wrapped her arms protectively around the boy.

“Don’t worry. It can’t hurt me and it knows it. Lies are the way of demons.” Tyson gave a cocky smirk a normal teenage boy would give, signs that the boy still existed, not yet taken over by the old soul residing inside.

The demon lashed out with its tongue, just missing Tyson who didn’t even blink.

“Blame your lover for the loss of my strength and your continued pain. Feed me.”

Quinn nodded her head. “Yes.”

With a growl of satisfaction it opened yet another fresh wound with a sharp talon, slicing down her side until the skin split open. Quinn’s scream of agony nearly brought Garen to his knees. Tabitha held him tightly in her arms and buried her face in his shoulder, weeping.

Fighting back the need to gag and beat at the hideous monster as its disgusting tongue snaked along the painful wound, slurping and lapping at his precious Quinn, Garen prayed silently that this plan would work. She had to pull it off, she had to. He couldn’t live without her.

Whimpering, shaking and nearly unconscious from the pain, Quinn lifted the blade with both hands, holding it over the demon’s head. If she hit the back of its neck with a direct hit it was all over. But her hands and arms were unsteady. Garen looked over at Tyson. The boy stood tall and strong, not the least bit worried that she’d accomplish the kill.

Screaming at the top of her lungs, she plunged her blade down into the base of the skull. Black, syrupy blood bubbled and gushed as rays of gold light burst through the beast’s eyes, nostrils, pinhole ears and mouth. As it bellowed, twisted and turned with gold fire bursting from its body, Quinn dropped to the floor.

Her blade jarred loose from the flailing demon and clanked to the floor. Without thinking, Garen picked it up and ran to her side, scooping her up and clutching her frail body to his. Blood smeared his hands as she cried out from the movement.

“Hold on, baby. It’s almost over. Hold on.” Garen watched the frightening sight of the demon glowing from the inside out but nothing more happened. He expected it to burst into ash like the Tulpas or at the very least go up in the flames of hell. But it simply howled and growled while it stumbled around. “What’s going on, Tyson? Why isn’t it dead yet?”

“She didn’t go deep enough, Garen. She needs to do it again.”

Do it again? She couldn’t hold her head up, how the hell would she be able to strike again?

“She can’t, Tyson. She can’t do it.”

“Let me go.”

Garen could barely hear her over the rumblings of the demon stomping and whelping. “What, baby? What is it?”

“Let me go. Let me finish this.” She gripped the front of his shirt, pleading with her eyes.

“You can barely move. How are you going to drive that fucking blade through its skin?” This was insane. He just wanted to take her and run but if they didn’t finish it the demon would lay claim to her soul for all eternity and hell would freeze before he allowed that.

Quinn pulled herself from his arms. Slick with blood she struggled to try to pull herself to her feet. Sick of seeing her fight, Garen stood her up, braced her against his body and helped her walk toward the screaming beast.

“No. Let me do this, Garen, please. I don’t want you hurt.”

Her words tugged at his frayed heart. “That’s nice to hear, honey, but you can’t shake me now. We’re a team.” He moved her forward, wrapped his hand around hers so she could hold her knife with confidence and hoped like hell this worked. She shook so severely he didn’t know how much longer she had.

“Hey, reject from hell,” she taunted.

The demon spun, yelping and flailing, trying to strike anything it came in contact with. Garen dodged the wild arms, making sure the talons didn’t make contact and do any more damage to her already-brutalized body.

“Be ready. Let me make the move,” she told him. “What’s the matter, you stupid piece of shit. Can’t see me?”

“I will taste your soul.” Its voice changed to an earsplitting, painfully high-pitched screech.

“Taste my steel.” Quinn drove her hand forward and with the extra help of Garen the blade punctured through the belly of the beast, right up to the hilt.

As soon as she connected, her body let go and crumpled against him.

“Hold the blade there, Garen. Don’t remove it until the demon is destroyed,” Tyson shouted over the pitiful shrieks of the beast.

The foulest, sickest smell he’d ever experienced filled the room, rolling off the demon as blue flames shot through the wound, licking at his and Quinn’s hands. Garen clenched his teeth, fighting the need to pull their hands away as he held on. Tyson’s words rang loud and clear in his head. He couldn’t let the knife fall out. They had to hold steady until the beast fell once and for all.

Echoing howls pieced his ears and made his bones vibrate painfully. Still he held on, twisting and turning the blade through the searing pain of flesh charring on his hand. Quinn cried out, a sound he would never forget if he lived a thousand lifetimes. Even as he endured his own physical pain he felt life slipping from her body and his soul weeping for her.

He wouldn't lose her like this. Mustering all the remaining strength in his body, he jerked the blade up, ripping a wide gash from the beast's gut to its nonexistent heart. More flames erupted, shooting out of the gaping wound and wrapping around their bodies. Garen could smell his clothing burning but managed to wrap himself around Quinn, trying desperately to protect her naked body from the heat.

In one giant explosion the beast burst into a fireball and detonated like a bomb, shooting chunks of flaming remains through the air and dropping them to the floor with sizzling thuds. Garen stood, Quinn slumped against his body and their joined hands still clutched the knife as if the beast still stood before them. She no longer sobbed or whimpered in pain, only hung over his arm like a worn rag doll.

Though excruciating pain racked his body like a million poisoned needles, he could only think of her. "Quinn?" his hoarse voice choked out through his raw throat. "Quinn, talk to me, baby."

Tyson and Tabitha ran to their side. Their touch felt like torches being poked into his flesh. He didn't want them touching her. She'd suffered enough. "No! Leave her alone!"

"It's over, Garen," Tyson soothed. "Let me take care of her now before it's too late."

Garen looked at the boy through hazy eyes.

"Come on, Garen," Tabitha urged. "You both need help now. Let Tyson help. You don't want to lose her now after going through hell to keep her."

Tears gushed down Tab's face. Tyson stood stoic and calm, a picture of authority in the biggest fucked-up mess anyone had ever experienced. He allowed the boy to take her in his arms and settle her body to the floor. As Ruth and Donald knelt down beside her, he got the first real look at his precious Quinn.

Her beautiful thick, brown, wavy hair was now matted and singed. Her creamy-smooth face appeared black with soot and burns. Her body—*oh God, her body*—was heavy with open, deep, weeping wounds. How could anyone survive such torture? Why would anyone want to survive?

Tyson gently laid his hand over her forehead, chanting quietly. Ruth and Donald bowed their heads and joined him. How would this help her? She needed medical attention. Was she even breathing? He didn't understand.

"Garen?"

Tabitha gripped his arm, sending pain rippling through his body. He didn't have time to worry about his injuries. All he wanted to do was hold his precious Quinn and hear her say his name and look into his eyes.

“Garen!”

Tab’s voice sounded so far away yet he knew she stood right next to him. A loud roar filled his ears just before his vision flashed a brilliant white light and he plunged into empty darkness. The last thought skittering through his head was if Quinn didn’t survive, he wouldn’t either.

Chapter Eighteen

Muttered voices seeped through the darkness, dragging Garen from his painless, empty sleep. He listened carefully, trying to identify the people milling around by their voices. It took a few minutes to hack his way through the thick fog clouding his memory but once he managed to surface, he knew right away who the voices belonged to.

Tabitha and Tyson were holding a fierce conversation, Tabitha clearly not winning. He could picture her in his mind, flapping her arms up and down as her mouth ran a hundred miles an hour about something he wasn't sure of yet. Tyson, on the other hand, remained calm and tossed out a smart remark simply to inflame her temper further. The kid had a serious crush on Tab and knew exactly how to handle her, something that had taken Garen months to figure out.

Why were they arguing anyway and why did they choose to do it in his bedroom? Couldn't a guy get a good night's sleep without his privacy being invaded? Like an erupting volcano the memories gushed, filling his brain with scenes of fire, blood and Quinn.

"Quinn!" He sat up in bed, shouting her name at the top of his lungs and reaching out for her. Where was Quinn? He had to save her from that snarling, disgusting beast that wanted her blood. "Quinn!"

"Shhh. It's okay, Garen. You're safe."

"Where's Quinn?" he asked, gripping Tabitha's arms hard. "Where the hell is she? We need to get to her."

"Calm down." Tabitha's voice held a hint of pain yet she tried to be sooth him as his fingers dug into her flesh.

"Don't tell me to calm down, I need to save her."

Tyson's hand settled on his shoulder, a warm, gentle touch that had him jerking his head around and meeting his gaze. "Where is she, Tyson? Is she dead? Did I lose her?"

"She's here, she's alive."

"Alive." The word stuck in his throat like a ball of slime, sticky and choking. "She's alive?"

"She needs her rest, Garen." Sadness filled Tab's eyes.

Okay, okay she was alive and here. Where was here anyway? Garen looked around and quickly recognized the old garage they'd taken up residence in. "How long have I been out?"

"Two days. You were badly burned." Tab gave him a weak, slight smile.

He remembered that, remembered smelling his flesh burn but he didn't feel any pain. Looking down at his naked chest, he couldn't see any blisters or red marks, none on his hands either where they should have been the worst.

"Tyson worked his magic on you."

Good, if he could heal him then he damn sure healed Quinn. Relief flooded through his veins. He'd taken her pain away. Donald and Ruth walked through the door then. God, it was good to see those two. Ruth gave him a gentle hug and Donald patted him on the back. They exchanged brief comments and then Ruth sat down next to him.

She wore her long hair in a braid, something she rarely did but looked rather nice on her. Some new lines had found their way around her eyes but then he guessed they all bore some new wrinkles from the hellish ordeal. Donald still looked the same, his fatherly eyes wise and soft yet holding something behind them Garen had never seen before.

After giving them all one more quick glance, Garen said, "What aren't you telling me." Something wasn't right. He could feel it like a thick smoke filling the room. "What's going on?"

Ruth cupped his cheek with her thin hand. "You should eat something. You'll need to gain your strength."

Quinn, whatever was wrong had to do with Quinn, he felt it in his chest. "I don't want to eat. What's wrong with her? Something's wrong with her, I can tell by the way you're all looking at me." Garen looked up at Tyson. "You said she was alive."

"She is."

But not whole, that had to be it. That bastard demon broke her mind. "I have to see her." Jumping off the cot, he didn't care that all he wore were his boxers, he needed to see Quinn.

Donald gripped his arm. "Hold on there, boy. There's some things you need to know before you go charging in there hell for leather."

Garen looked into his face. "What?"

"What's the last thing you remember?"

Searching his brain, he pieced together the last moments before darkness swallowed him. "The three of you were chanting over her." That's all he could dredge up, nothing more.

"You passed out, Garen. Your body went into shock from the pain you suffered. For two days you lay there in that cot. Tyson healed your burns but he couldn't heal your mind, couldn't take away the memories of seeing her tortured and suffering. You had to deal with that on your own and when you did you woke up."

Garen blinked at Donald. "What are you saying?"

Ruth took his cold hand then and kissed it. "She isn't awake yet, Garen, and shows no sign of waking any time soon. Tyson still has a lot of work to do on her body. Her

wounds were so severe and deep that he can't get them healed all at once. She still looks raw and just plain awful but it isn't her body we're worried about, honey."

Not able to stand it any longer, he bolted past them and followed his heart. It led him straight to her. A room Ruth had set up just for Quinn. He opened the door and the world dropped out from under his feet.

His Quinn, his heart, his soul, his reason for breathing lay under a thin white sheet, her body pale and marred with deep cuts. Her eyes were black and sunk into her head. He fought to drag breath into his lungs and his chest heaved as though he carried a ton of weight on it. The others stood behind him. He felt them there but no one said a word.

"I want to be alone with her please."

Without a word they all backed away and closed the door. Garen walked slowly to her tiny cot and knelt down. He wanted to take her hand but feared putting her through any more pain.

"Quinn, honey, wake up."

When she didn't respond, he asked again. He knew she wouldn't but he had to try, just like he'd try every day until those warm, beautiful eyes opened and met his. Reluctantly he reached for the sheet. He had to see for himself how bad her wounds were. With shaking hands he pulled back the covering slowly, all the way down to her feet.

Many of the cuts were gone but many still remained. On her thighs, on her stomach, her arms. God, she looked awful. The wound the demon opened on her side looked the worst. Ruth had tried to close it with butterfly bandages but still it gaped open.

"It's dead, Quinn," he whispered to her, dragging the sheet back up her body. "You killed it and it won't ever harm anyone again. You did that, ended its miserable life."

Gently he took her hand in his and kissed a spot that wasn't slashed open. "We'll get through this. I'll bring you back, show you the way." Laying his head down on the cot, he drifted off to sleep.

Sometime later Tabitha nudged him awake. "You need to eat. Mom made lunch and insists you eat or she'll force-feed you."

"I can't. I need to stay with her." He couldn't leave her. Not ever again.

"She isn't going anywhere, Garen, and making yourself ill won't help her one bit. Come on."

He allowed her to lead him back to his room.

"Put some pants on," she ordered, and then crossed her arms over her chest while he absently dressed. When he finished, she led him out to the large bay where Ruth had the table set.

He allowed Ruth to fill his plate with steaming potatoes, warmed-up roast beef and a heaping pile of cooked carrots. Normally he wouldn't hesitate to dive in but now he

simply didn't have an appetite. How could he eat while Quinn lay there suffering looking so frail and weak. How would she eat to gain her strength?

"I'm going to move my cot in with her," he announced to the group.

"Now, Garen—" Ruth started.

"I think it's a good idea," Tyson interrupted. "If anyone can bring her out of it he'll be the one. If she doesn't wake soon we'll have to take her to the hospital."

"That'll open up a can of worms we won't be able to deal with," Tab whispered.

She was right. The authorities would be called in and how the hell would they explain what had happened to her? A report would be filed. A nonexistent attacker would be looked for, all wasting precious time and resources that should go toward looking for real criminals. Still, if she didn't wake soon they'd have to do something.

With Tyson's input they all agreed he would move into her room with her. That settled, he felt as though he'd regained some control in his life. Now he'd be able to eat, at least a little anyway.

After lunch Tyson washed up and headed back to Quinn's room. Garen followed.

"You might not want to see this, Garen. It isn't pretty."

No, it probably wasn't but he needed to watch as the boy tried to heal her. "I'll be okay."

Tyson knelt beside the cot, placed Quinn's blade in her hand and then pulled back the sheet, exposing her naked, abused body. Normally Garen would object, a young boy looking at the woman he loved, but this wasn't your everyday, teenage kid and it needed to be done.

Tyson wrapped his hand around hers so they held the knife together and began to chant. Instantly Quinn's body bucked as if in pain. Her thin, drawn face contorted and she gasped for breath. Garen bolted across the room. Before he could touch her, Tyson turned and looked at him with shimmering eyes.

"Don't interfere," the boy shouted in a deep, thundering voice, stopping Garen in his tracks.

What the hell? That wasn't the kid's voice and they sure as hell weren't his eyes. The ancient priest sharing Tyson's soul had taken over. Garen backed up a step and forced himself to stay still.

Slowly lacerations on her legs and stomach began to close, the redness fading while she bucked and shouted in pain. Sweat rolled down the boy's face as he clutched her hand. The blade emitted a fierce, brilliant glow that began to surround her body. Garen's head filled with the chants of the ancients. He didn't understand their words but knew they were singing along to help aid the healing.

They should be using the power of all the blades, not just one. Why didn't the kid use them all? Garen left the room to retrieve his blade. When he returned his knife heated, glowed and pulled him toward Quinn's bed as if it knew exactly what needed

to be done. Kneeling, he touched it to her forehead and she instantly stopped convulsing in pain.

Tyson looked over at him, those strange, shimmering eyes smiling and continued to chant. Closing his eyes, Garen willed all the energy of his body into Quinn's, pleading with the powers that be to make her well, whole and healthy, bargaining for her life with his own. He would gladly change places with her if it meant he could look into her eyes once more.

When Garen gazed at her again, he noticed the wounds on her body healing faster. More gashes had closed, the swelling ebbing and even the huge cut on her side seemed to be closing. After what seemed like hours Tyson stopped chanting and collapsed against the cot. Sweat rolled down into Garen's eyes and he fell back on his backside.

Quinn looked better, a hell of a lot better. In fact he couldn't see one single laceration on her body. The butterfly bandages Ruth had put on the biggest and deepest cut fell away, leaving nothing but a light pink line indicating anything had happened. It had worked. The kid had healed her.

"You did it, Tyson," he said, patting the boy on the back. "You did it. Look at her."

"We did it."

Ruth and Donald opened the door and gasped. Donald ran to Ty and lifted him up off the floor, cradling him in his arms.

Ruth inspected Quinn's flesh. "How did you do it, Tyson? What did you do differently?"

"Garen." The boy's voice was a mere whisper. "Garen did what needed to be done."

When they looked at him, he simply shrugged his shoulders. "All I did was get my knife. I figured it wouldn't hurt."

"We tried that. It didn't work," Ruth said, shaking her head.

"It needed to be Garen," Tyson said on an exhausted sigh.

Ruth covered Quinn's body with the sheet. "All that's left now is to wait for her wake up."

Garen spent the rest of the day by her side, talking, trying to convince her to return, all to no avail. Only when Ruth dragged him out to eat supper did he leave. For the next two days he sat by her, bathed her, combed her hair and begged. Sleep came in hour increments. He'd wake, whisper in her ear, yell, do whatever he could and then return to his cot exhausted and frustrated.

When morning came, Ruth pulled him from the room and made him eat. "Where's Tab?"

"She's gone back to clean up the rest of the Tulpas that keep drifting in." Ruth gave him a small smile.

More? Didn't they get rid of all of them?

"It seems the ones the demon sent out are returning because they don't have a leader and don't know what to do. Makes our job easier I guess."

"I should go help." He wanted to but he also wanted to remain here in case Quinn woke up. He wanted his face to be the first she saw when she opened her eyes.

"That would be nice. I worry about her out there alone."

He didn't blame Ruth. After everything they went through and saw, who knew what could be lurking inside that building. "I'll call Tab, have her meet me outside the building." He stood, turned and then stopped. "Ruth..."

"I'll call if she wakes up."

He nodded, that's all he could ask for.

He and Tabitha vanquished six Tulpas that day. It really didn't take much. They seemed completely confused and lost, not even attempting to fight them. Tab bought him lunch and for the first time in days he smiled and laughed. He could always count on Tab to lift his spirits.

By the time they returned that evening exhaustion dragged at his body. Waving off supper, he went to the room, sat down next to Quinn and felt tears sting his eyes. God, he missed her.

Missing her touch and warmth, he slipped into the cot next to her and snuggled against her body. "I'm so tired, Quinn. I miss the sound of your voice, your laugh and smile. Wake up, baby. Wake up so I can hold you in my arms again, kiss you and taste you. Wake up so I can bury myself inside your warm body where I belong. Please, baby, just wake up."

A tear dripped from his cheek and landed on hers. Quinn moved slightly and then, sighed. She actually sighed in response to him. Taking that as progress, he slid his hand down over the sheet, feeling every curve and dip of her body.

"You are so beautiful. The most perfect woman in the world." When he brought his hand back up he cupped her breast and flicked her nipple through the fabric.

A very soft moan escaped her now-parted lips.

"You like that?" He leaned over and rested his lips against hers and flicked her nipple again. The small nub pebbled hard and she breathed heavily against his mouth. *Why didn't I think of this before?* "Okay, baby. Just relax and I'll make you feel."

Pulling the sheet away, down her body, he first made sure she didn't have any sore spots that he'd irritate and then brushed his fingertips over her pale flesh. Up and down he stroked like a feather across her breasts, down her belly and over the soft hair beginning to grow back on her mound.

Again she moaned. A slight flush washed over her, making her pasty white skin a healthy pink. Her nipples pebbled into tight little peaks, inviting him to taste. He lowered his head and drew one into his mouth while he teased the other with his thumb.

Quinn arched under him, moaned and then sighed.

"That's it, just feel, Quinn," he whispered, and then sucked her nipple hard into his mouth, rolling it across his tongue.

He could feel her heart hammering against her chest. Warmth returned to her body.

For several minutes he sucked and toyed with her swollen breasts, making sure she felt his hands on her body. When he slid his hand down between her legs, he froze. She actually parted them for him, allowing him access. Not wanting to disappoint her, he slipped a finger between her outer folds and then moaned himself.

Warm, slick juice coated his finger. "Aw hell, baby. What am I supposed to do?"

To his surprise, she jerked her hips up, encouraging him to continue.

"Okay. I don't have to be asked twice." Garen slipped his finger deep inside her warm, wet sheath and sucked her hard nipple into his mouth. His palm pressed against her swollen clit as he worked two fingers in and out of her body.

Little mewls of pleasure escaped her lips as he took her up further and further until he felt her satin-lined walls grasp at his fingers. Releasing her breast with a pop, he smiled. "Not unless you wake up." He stopped all movement and removed the pressure on her clit. "You have to wake up if you want to come."

Her hips bucked, trying to reach for the climax so close yet so far away. She tossed her head from side to side and panted.

"What do you want, Quinn? Tell me what you want? Talk to me."

Her lips moved but nothing came out. Garen curled his finger inside her channel and brushed her sensitive spot. "Talk to me." He kissed her hard and nearly jumped when she returned the kiss, driving her tongue deep into his mouth.

Okay, big step. Pulling away from her mouth, he leaned down to her ear. "Tell me what you want, baby. I know you can. Whisper it to me."

Just when he thought she wouldn't be able to he heard her faint voice. "Please, make me come, Garen. Please."

An explosion of joy rocked his body. Tears welled in his eyes and he crushed her mouth with his. Again she stabbed her tongue deep into his mouth where he sucked it as she rode his fingers. Her walls tightened around him. Sweet honey flowed over his fingers and into his hand.

Pulling free from the kiss, he looked into her face. "Open your eyes, Quinn. Look at me when you come. I want to see your eyes."

Her long, thick eyelashes fluttered and then opened. Even while she worked her hips against his hand she struggled to focus on his face. He knew the moment she saw him clearly those big brown eyes sparked to life. He also knew the moment of her release. Lunging her hips into the air, forcing his fingers deeper, her wet pussy tightened like a fist around him and her eyes went blank.

Garen stole her scream with a kiss. The last thing he needed was the rest of them hearing her and come running. Not now, not while they were sharing this special moment.

As her body rode the waves of pleasure, he nipped, licked and sucked her nipples, heightening her orgasm. He didn't want her slipping back into the empty darkness. He wanted her to have a reason to stay with him.

When her body relaxed, he removed his hand, licked her sweet, hot lava from his fingers and stared down into her eyes. "Welcome back, honey. I missed you."

She raised her shaky, weak arm and brushed a tear from his cheek. "How long?"

Her raspy, horse voice tore at his heart but he could deal with it. She was back. "Four, five days. Tyson healed your body but couldn't wake you up."

"I didn't want to come back. Didn't want to deal with the pain."

"How do you feel now?"

He watched her take stock of her body, moving her arms and legs, touching spots. "Like new. Is it—"

"It's dead. You killed it." Maybe she'd remember later, maybe she wouldn't. He'd be okay with it if she didn't. "Are you ready for the gush of attention you're going to get when they hear you're awake?" Garen brushed a few stray hairs out of her face.

"Not really. I'm still so tired and I can barely move."

"You haven't eaten in days, honey. Your body needs fuel. Let me go see if I can sneak something back here. They'll probably catch on so prepare yourself." He hated leaving her, the warmth of her body, the closeness, but she needed to eat and getting her back on her feet came before his needs.

Garen slipped from the cot, made sure she was sufficiently covered and then kissed her forehead. She gave him a weak smile and closed her eyes. As he suspected, Ruth knew right away.

"She woke up. I can tell by that silly look on your face. How'd you do it?"

"Don't know." He had to turn away from her. The stupid look on his face got worse.

"Un-huh. I may be old, Garen, but I'm not dead and cold in the ground yet. Women my age know that look of sex when we see it. I don't care how you did it I'm just glad you did. Tabitha, Donald, Tyson, Quinn's awake."

"She's tired, Ruth," he said quietly. "Weak and not up for a lot of questions and fuss."

Ruth patted his arm. "Not to worry, dear. We won't wear her out. I'll make her some soup, it'll be easier on her stomach. You go along and make sure the others don't fuss over her too much."

After giving Ruth a quick peck on the cheek, he returned to find Tabitha, Donald and Tyson surrounding Quinn. They needed to see her, talk to her, know that she'd be okay. He understood that but couldn't shake the selfish feeling of wanting her all to himself. They had issues to discuss but he didn't want to rush her. All he wanted to do was hold her in his arms.

Quinn might not have wanted the fuss but she seemed to be grateful for it. Her smile actually reached her eyes as her gaze darted from one to the other when they spoke. Garen leaned against the doorjamb, crossed his arms and watched. She'd won Tabitha's heart. It took him a few days to figure out why the girl seemed so pissy and then he'd figured it out. She'd worried like hell over Quinn. He'd actually heard her crying late one night, something he'd never seen Tab do before.

Donald was smitten as well. He treated Quinn like another daughter and it didn't bother Tab at all but then that's the kind of people they were. Tyson of course looked at her as if she could fly through the air, stop bullets with the wave of her hand and stomp evil into the ground with little effort.

Garen still struggled with the two sides of the boy. All the wisdom of a thousand men wrapped up in a gangly teenage body. God help anyone who ever crossed the kid in a big way, they might end up in a million pieces.

Yeah, they all loved Quinn but not nearly as much as he did. He didn't care that they'd lived another life together. All he cared about was now and right now he needed to let the rest of the family have their time with his woman.

"Make way," Ruth ordered as she hustled through the door with a steaming bowl of soup. "The girl needs to eat."

Quinn thanked Ruth and Garen swore he saw drool at the corner of her mouth. He wanted to rush them all out and help her but knew better. He'd have all the time in the world to spend taking care of her. They could have their time now.

When Quinn finished eating, she yawned widely and looked embarrassed. Ruth gave her a kiss on the forehead and in her take-charge way scooted her family out the door. Garen remained, taking in the sight of this beautiful woman as she lay naked under a thin sheet.

"I take it you've been sleeping in here," she stated, pointing to the extra cot.

"Yeah." He couldn't tell her the bone-deep fear he'd felt every night when he closed his eyes, not knowing if she would ever wake up.

"You don't need to do that."

"I know I don't need to. I want to."

She shrugged. "Suit yourself." With that she yawned again and closed her eyes. "I'm so tired."

Him too. Now that he knew she'd be okay he wanted to drop and sleep for a week. "If you need anything wake me up."

Quinn nodded and then drifted off. Garen remained, not ready to leave her, a niggling fear that she wouldn't wake back up plaguing his mind. Eventually he quietly made his way to his cot and flopped down on his side, Quinn in his direct line of sight.

He was still there. She could feel him in the room. She hoped he'd give her some time alone but that wasn't going to be the case anytime soon. In fact none of them were going to leave her by herself.

She hadn't counted on the rush of good feelings that swamped her when Tab, Donald and Tyson came rushing in or when Ruth kissed and fed her. They were all such good people. And then there was Garen.

Content to drift in the eternal blackness, she'd stirred as soon as he'd touched her. It'd felt like a crack of electricity zooming through her body and bringing her nerve endings to life. She'd fought it at first but his touch had stimulated her mind and soul. His voice had drifted through the darkness, pleading with her and she couldn't resist him, nor could she resist his hands.

Next thing she knew he'd had her climbing that peak of ecstasy and begging to plunge off the cliff but, oh God what a way to be dragged from the pits of hell. He truly owned her heart and body like no other could. The old worries resurfaced. She couldn't recall much from her time with the demon but she was certain the bastard had told him of her sin.

He probably hadn't believed it and she didn't know whether to be grateful or not. It didn't matter either way. She still couldn't stay with him. He deserved the life he'd worked hard for.

Right then and there she made up her mind. As soon as her strength returned she'd be on her way.

Chapter Nineteen

Quinn walked on eggs for the next couple of days. She didn't want to give Garen or the rest of the Ross family any hope that she'd stick around. While she rested, ate and built back her strength, Garen and Tabitha went out every day, looking for stray Tulpas. Tyson eyed her suspiciously when he thought she wasn't looking.

Her dilemma over what to do with him had already been solved and she refused to feel guilty over it. He would have a much better life with the Rosses. They could nurture his mind, give him the kind of education he needed and deserved. The only problem would be telling him but being the smart kid he was he'd understand.

Even the Rosses would understand. She felt sure of it. Oh Tabitha might curse her out but she would deal with it. Quinn wouldn't expect anything less from her. The problem wouldn't be her friends, it would be Garen.

Every evening he came back from the hunt with Tab and tried like hell to get her off on her own. She didn't dare leave the safety of the others. If she did she wouldn't be able to resist him or the call of her soul. All it would take is one touch and she'd be stripping him naked, throwing herself at him.

No, it was time to get out of here before she made a terrible mistake and began to believe she could actually have a happily-ever-after life with him. There was no such thing for her. She still felt a little weak but nothing she couldn't cope with. Time to get the ball rolling.

Quinn went in search of Ruth. Considering the time of day she knew exactly where to look. When she pushed open the door to the small area used for the kitchen, she found Ruth hard at work making lunch.

"Come to help?"

Quinn smiled at her. "Sure, if we can talk while we work."

Ruth's busy hands halted briefly. "Is it that time already? I hoped you'd give us a few more days to convince you to stay."

With a shake of her head Quinn helped pull out the dishes and silverware. "How do you do it, Ruth? How do you know what's going on before anyone else?"

"You learn things with age. Besides, dear, the way you've been walking around here the last few days and avoiding Garen screamed 'ready to run'."

"That's the way you see it? I'm running?" Of course she did. Everyone saw her as a runner. Hadn't Garen accused her of that?

"It's not my place to judge, Quinn." Ruth filled a serving tray with glasses and a pitcher of iced tea and then turned to her. "Look. I don't care what you did before we met you. No one does, especially Garen."

So the bastard demon did tell them. "You don't understand, Ruth."

"Maybe not but then I can't if I don't know what happened."

Quinn couldn't talk about it, not with Ruth, not with anyone. "Will you take Tyson? Will you finish rearing him? He needs good people like you around him."

"Of course we will. Donald and I love that boy as much as we love you." Tears filled Ruth's eyes as she turned and finished filling the tray with cold cuts and bread. "I don't understand why you insist on being so stubborn about this. Whatever haunts you could be better dealt with if we helped you."

Touched by Ruth's true emotion, she walked up behind her and wrapped her arms around the woman who had quickly become a mother to her. "I'm sorry, Ruth. I wish it could be different. I plan on checking in with you frequently. I'd like to talk to Tyson from time to time and make sure he's doing well."

Ruth's body shuddered slightly and when she spoke her voice held thick tears. "You better check in on him. It would destroy that child if you walked away and he never got to speak to you again. He thinks the world of you."

"Make him a good man, Ruth." She couldn't take any more. This was tearing her heart out and she still had to talk with Tyson. Pulling away from Ruth, she walked out of the small room and found Tyson sitting at the table, his hands folded in front of him and a very sad look in his young eyes.

"Hey, what's got you all bummed, buddy?"

"You're leaving."

Could they all read her mind? It didn't seem fair somehow. "I have to, Tyson," she said, sitting down across from him. "You saw what I did."

"You protected yourself, no one can blame you for that."

"I wish that were all it was but it isn't. Look, Tyson, you'll have a good life with the Rosses. They'll give you everything you need to make a good life for yourself and they love you."

"Is it that easy to walk away from me, Quinn? Am I that easy to discard?"

"You know better than that and don't you ever say it again. You're special and need the proper people to take care of you and help you deal with your special gifts. I can't do that. I can't do anything but drag you around the country, living out of hotel rooms and staying out of the cops' way." Her voice hitched and she tried to swallow past the lump in her throat.

"You deserve better than I can give. I'll call and keep tabs on you. If the Rosses don't treat you right you tell me and I'll come running, you hear me?"

Tyson nodded, tears filling his eyes and spilling down his cheeks. "I don't understand why we can't all stay together like we are now."

"I can't, Tyson, I can't talk about it and I can't bring my sins on this family. They don't deserve to suffer from my wrongdoings." God, this ripped her heart into shreds.

She had to go now. "Take care of yourself, Tyson." With that she rose from the chair and turned only to run right into Donald.

"You always have a place to come if you need one." His soft, gentle eyes shimmered with tears. "You're family now and we take care of our own." He hugged her then, a warm, strong embrace that reminded her of her father.

"Thank you, Donald. Tell Tabitha I'm sorry, tell her—"

She couldn't do this. The words were too hard to speak and the emotions were as torturous as the demon's wicked tongue. "I'm sorry." Quinn ran to her makeshift room and gathered her belongings. Before she left she looked over at Garen's cot where he slept, watching over her at night and waking her from the nightmares that threatened to steal her mind. She could take care of herself now, she had to.

"We didn't bring all your things from the hotel. You'll have to go back and pick up the rest," Tyson said from the door. "We thought maybe you'd want to go back there when you felt better."

Quinn turned to him and blinked in surprise at the strange, knowing look on his face. "Thanks. I'll stop and pick up the rest of my things. Please, Ty, take Ruth and Donald to the kitchen until I leave. I can't see them now."

He nodded in understanding and then turned and left. She gave them a few moments and then headed out. Stopping in the garage bay, she looked at the table loaded with food. She'd miss this, eating with other people, having normal conversation and being a part of something. At least she had the memories to hold on to. They would get her through the lonely nights.

Feeling as though her body weighed a ton, she trudged to the front door, opened it and walked out into a dismal, rainy day. The weather reflected her mood perfectly. Carefully closing the door, she went to her car, tossed her belongings into the backseat and crawled behind the wheel.

Halfway into the city she realized she'd been crying, not a trickle of tears but a flood that had her face drenched and her nose running like a faucet. The pain the demon inflicted on her body didn't compare to the pain ripping and tearing at her heart and soul. Banishing this grief would be easy. All she had to do was turn around and go back but that just wasn't fair to them.

She lived on borrowed time as it stood now. How long until the police caught up with her? Surely Dave's friends had told the police about her, fingered her for his murder and all it would take is a traffic violation for them to discover a warrant for her arrest. What would that do to the Rosses or Garen?

No, she'd made the right decision and would live with the consequences of her actions alone, not drag innocent people down with her. No matter how much she loved them.

When she pulled into the hotel parking lot, she glanced around. Yellow police tape flapped in the windy rain at the corner of the building. Yet another wound opened in her heart. Another death she was responsible for. She still didn't know whether or not

she'd killed the girl with her own hands or if the demon had tricked her into believing she did. It didn't matter either way.

Quinn crawled out of the car and walked slowly to the door of the room she'd used as her home for the last couple of weeks. Trashy as the place was, she liked it. The graffiti-covered building held good memories for her.

As she rooted around in her bag for the key, the rain picked up, pelting her with fat drops of cold water. It seemed the closer she got to leaving the worse the weather became, once again mimicking her mood. She imagined she'd never walk through rain again and not think about this day.

Pushing away any thoughts of the future, she jammed her key into the lock and walked inside. The sheets on the bed hadn't been changed. They still lay rumpled and tangled from her and Garen's last sexual encounter. The one where he took his time with her, made her feel how much he loved her without saying a word.

A sharp pain struck her in the heart, as if someone had used her own knife to pierce her. No other man would take his place. No other man would be able to make her laugh or smile the way Garen did. A rush of hot tears flowed and she allowed herself to openly sob. God, she loved him with every fiber of her being.

After gathering the remainder of her belongings, she stuffed them in a duffle bag and then went to the bathroom to splash some water on her face. As she looked into the mirror she saw the other part of her soul staring back.

"We both look like hell," she whispered. She dried her face, turned off the light and prepared for her final walk out the door.

With no idea where she'd go, she gave one last look around the room, gripped the door handle and after releasing a long, shaky sigh pulled it open. A flash of lightning and a crack of thunder illuminated one very drenched and pissed off Garen glaring down at her. Her heart did a quick flip inside her chest and her stomach dropped to her feet.

Water dripped from his soaked hair. His eyes flashed and burned with rage while the clenched muscle in his jaw pulsed. Even his nostrils flared like a bull's, ready to charge. Furious, he stormed through the door. Quinn barely got out of the way in time, backing up until she bumped into the bed.

When she opened her mouth to speak, he stopped her by gripping her arms, jerking her into his body and forcefully kissing her—nothing sweet and endearing but harsh and painful. She didn't care. She deserved it and if this was the last contact she'd have with him she'd take it.

After what seemed like five minutes he pulled away and glared down at her again. "You were going to leave without talking to me. You were going to run away and leave me twisting in the wind like some damn piece of trash you were finished with," he growled in a low rumbling voice.

Quinn licked her swollen, bruised lips and shook her head. "No."

"Like hell you weren't," he snapped. "If Tyson hadn't called me I would have returned tonight and found you gone and don't fucking deny it."

She looked away. She couldn't deny it. All she'd wanted to do was avoid a heart-wrenching scene like this one. "I have to go, Garen. I told you I couldn't stay. I can't be a part of your life."

"Why, Quinn? Why can't you? What's stopping you?"

Reaching deep inside for strength and courage, she forced herself to tell the biggest lie she'd ever spoken. "I don't love you."

"Like hell you don't. As fucking harsh as that kiss was, you responded."

I did. I couldn't help myself.

"We're going to work this out and we're going to do it here and now."

Fear whipped through her like a flash of lightning. Not fear of him, never fear of him. But fear she wouldn't be strong enough to walk away.

Clenching her fists, she glared back at him, hoping she could pull off the anger she didn't feel. "I'm going and you can't keep me here."

Quinn pushed past him, storming, almost running to the door, nearly reaching it when he dug his fingers into her arm and jerked her around. He forcefully yanked her bags from her hands and tossed them into the corner of the room. Now anger came full force, smacking her in the face like a bucket of ice water.

"What the hell do you think you're doing? You can't keep me here. You don't own me, Garen."

"Like hell I don't." He pushed her back against the door, used all his strength to restrain her balled, flailing fists and forced her arms high above her head, leaving her defenseless.

When she tried to knee him, he effectively countered and then, using his knee, spread her legs wide and pressed his groin into her pelvis. Suddenly stricken by her old panic attacks she began to pant and tremble from the feeling of being helpless. Blood rushed, roaring through her ears as her lungs began to seize.

"Stop it, Quinn. Stop it now. I'm not him and don't you ever, ever think I am again," he bellowed.

"I can't...breathe," she gasped as the room began to dim.

"Fuck." Garen kissed her then, gently breathing into her mouth until she matched his steady rhythm and began to calm.

He tilted his head, deepening the kiss and covering her lips with his. When he stabbed his tongue into her mouth, she knew she would lose the battle. With one last half-hearted protest she jerked her head sideways, ripping her mouth away from his. Undeterred, he simply took advantage of her neck, kissing, sucking and biting at her flesh until she could no longer think.

Every touch of his tongue set fire to her skin until it consumed her body. Her rushing blood thickened, heated and boiled between her legs and in the pit of her

stomach. With one hand holding her arms up, he used his free one to jerk her shirt and bra up and over her breasts.

When he drew her already-pebbled nipple into his mouth and sucked hard, she cried out from the force. Her womb clenched with each harsh tug and her nerves sparked and sizzled, making every inch of her body sensitive to his touch. Already she felt his long, thick cock growing inside his damp jeans.

As best she could, she ground her hips against him, drawing a deep moan from his throat. The sound vibrated against her breast. While he sucked and fed from her breast, he fumbled with the snap on her jeans, yanked down the zipper and slid his hand between her hot skin and her panties.

As soon as his fingers brushed her outer folds, she jerked with pleasure. Slick juice wept from her body, preparing her to take him. Wanting better access, Garen removed his hand and worked her jeans and panties down over her hips and then quickly returned to her wet, hot pussy.

"You're ready for me aren't you, baby," he whispered, sliding his fingers between her outer lips and coating them with her honey. "Always ready for me, just like I'm always ready for you."

Quinn bucked her hips forward, wanting him to plunge inside her. He slid his hand up, found her engorged nub and lightly pinched it. The room spun as she thrashed her head back and forth against the door in pleasure.

Quickly he returned to her sensitive flesh, slipping two fingers deep inside her body. "Oh. God," she shouted, and pushed her pelvis forward to drive him in deeper.

Wanting to punish her, he removed his fingers, held his hand in front of her face and showed her the glistening juice coating his fingers. Her body quivered with need when he slowly slipped them between his lips and sucked them dry.

"Do you get this wet for anyone else, Quinn? Tell me!"

"No. No," she whimpered. "Please, Garen. I can't take it." She felt as though she'd explode if he didn't finish her off.

A wicked smile curved his lips. He released her hands, took one and pressed it over the hard pole inside his jeans.

"I don't get this hard for anyone. What does that tell you, Quinn?"

Before she could form any words he pulled her away from the door, kissed her hard and walked her toward the bed. When the mattress hit the back of her legs, he pushed her down. Her eyes flew open to find he was already sliding his jeans and boxers over his hips. His thick erection bobbed as it sprang free of its confinements.

"Get rid of those jeans," he ordered.

Quinn obeyed, helpless to do otherwise. As she wiggled out of the denim, Garen stood before her, his hand wrapped around his hard cock and stroking up and down. She wanted to do that, she wanted to feel him in her hands one last time. Garen tossed her a condom when her pants dropped to the floor.

“Put it on.”

Again she obeyed, willing to do anything for him at this point. She placed the thin latex over his bulbous head and smoothly ran her hand down his shaft. Garen groaned, tossing his head back and fisting his hands in her hair. He jerked her to her feet, gripped her hips and led her toward the dresser.

Unsure of what he planned, she simply followed his direction. With bruising hands he lifted her and flopped her down hard on the edge of the dresser, pushing her torso back against the mirror. Greedily he sucked her nipple in his mouth and nipped with his teeth.

The exquisite pain rippled through her body and a gush of thick juice oozed from between her legs. Garen reached down, slipped his finger between her lips and moaned. He looked into her eyes and she shivered from the pure raw, carnal lust reflecting in his smoldering eyes.

Without warning he lowered his head between her legs, swiped his tongue between her wet lips and released a sound she'd never heard before. Like a starving man he dived in, lapping, licking and sucking her dry until she couldn't stand it anymore. Her body writhed with pleasure, her hands fisted and pulled at his hair and she did her best to grind her sopping-wet pussy into his mouth.

When he'd had his fill, he rose, gripped his throbbing cock at the base and pressed it against the opening of her dripping tunnel and then stopped. With his free hand he grabbed the back of her hair, pulled back and then impaled her.

Quinn screamed from the forceful entry. Her tight walls stretched to the limit as he slammed all the way inside. He held her like that, her head jerked back, his pulsing cock filling her to the brim and then feasting, sucking at her nipples with such ferocity it made her shake. She wanted him to move, to pump in and out of her but he wouldn't. He just held her there, torturing her.

“Oh God, Garen, move. Please.”

He bit down on her nipple again and then quickly soothed the hardened nub with his tongue. He released her head then, slid her ass closer to the edge of the dresser and began to pull back slowly. Nerves inside her tunnel screamed with an aching pleasure as he touched every inch of her inside.

She sobbed from the sheer bliss and then gasped when he plowed back inside her. Holding on to his hard, muscled shoulders and wrapping her legs around his waist, she rode him as he worked his hips like a piston, thrusting in and out of her body. He took them up fast and hard and she could tell by the way his face stiffened he wouldn't last much longer.

Releasing her hips with one hand, he licked his thumb and then circled it around her aching clit. Just before he plunged over the cliff and into oblivion he pressed against her clit and sent her diving head first into heaven.

Quinn shouted his name as her orgasm tore through her, consuming her, flooding her with ecstasy and turning her brain to mush. With each wave that crashed over her

she felt him pulse inside her and she would never forget that feeling of coming together.

Exhausted, she let her legs drop and dangle from the dresser. Garen rested his head between her breasts, kissing and licking at the tender flesh. She wanted to hold him, wrap him in her arms and never let him go but she couldn't. He thought he could change her mind but all he had accomplished was delaying the inevitable.

When he finally pulled away from her, she slipped down off the dresser and moved away from him. Garen discarded the condom and then picked up his clothes, slipping on his pants and shirt.

"You can't leave, Quinn."

"I have to," she responded quickly as she tugged on her panties and jeans and then pulled her shirt back into place.

"You're still going?"

The hurt in his voice was like a fist to the gut. "What, you thought a quick fuck would change my mind? I never lied to you, Garen. I never gave you any reason to believe I would stay with you. I'm sorry if you did but that's your problem."

"So that's it. You walk out that door and I'll never see you again."

"Yeah, that's about the size of it." God, she hated this. It was killing her.

"Son of a bitch!" he shouted, and then gave a weak laugh. "You know something, Quinn, you're just as soulless and heartless as those fucking monsters we hunt."

She flinched from the barbed words. He might as well have stabbed her in the heart like he did Tulpas. A huge chasm opened in her chest and she knew nothing would ever fill it. Tears swam in her eyes but she fought to keep them at bay. If making him hate her was the way it needed to be, then so be it.

Garen stormed through the door out into the pouring rain. Her breath hitched in her lungs as she struggled to stay on her feet. If a black hole opened right now and swallowed her she would be grateful.

"You might as well keep this. I don't want the fucking thing and you'll need it to keep your icy heart warm." Garen tossed the leather coat he'd bought at her. "Sell it if you want. I'm sure it holds more monetary value than it does anything else." With that he turned and slammed the door behind him.

Seconds later she heard his BMW spin the tires and tear out onto the street. Quinn collapsed to the floor, clutching the coat to her chest and crying violently from the deep pain coursing through her body. She'd never felt loss like this before, not even when her father died.

She couldn't survive it. She didn't want to survive it. Curling into the fetal position, she held the leather to her face and allowed her tears to flow over it. Hours passed until the last tear fell. There were no more to cry. She'd used up all she had. A dull ache settled in her head and her chest and stomach felt knotted.

Pulling herself up off the floor, she stumbled to the bathroom and without warning heaved. Her stomach clenched for several minutes until it too became too exhausted to continue. She rinsed her mouth out and then splashed cold water on her puffy eyes and face. This time when she looked into the mirror she only saw her own sad, pathetic face looking back.

“Abandoned me, huh? Don’t blame you.”

Making her way out to the bed, she collapsed. Garen’s scent still clung to the sheets and right now she needed that. She buried her face in deep, breathed him in and then silently drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Twenty

Six months later

Warm sun and a cool breeze tickled Quinn's skin as she sat on the beach, watching the waves crash on shore. Down the beach a few children played in the surf as their mother looked on, snapping pictures. She couldn't have found a better place to crash for a few months and earn some money to fill her pockets.

That day after the world came to an end, as she referred to it, she got in her car and started driving, stopping only to get gas and sleep. For months she roamed aimlessly, not really looking for Tulpas but finding them anyway. It turned out to be a good way to release her anger and guilt. A quick stab to the throat of a thought form and then several gashes about the body made her feel oddly better.

When she got to Florida she realized she was running critically low on cash and began looking for a place to hole up and find a job. It didn't take long to find a waitress job in a beachside restaurant and luckily one of the other waitresses knew of a little bungalow for rent on the cheap.

One room and a bathroom. Hell, it was just like a hotel room except she had more privacy. The best part was she could walk about half a mile and sit on the beach, soak up the sun and try hard not to think about the past. Even the job worked out well. The pay sucked but the tips more than made up for it. All it took was a friendly smile, a little harmless flirting and her pockets were stuffed full at the end of the night.

Taking over shifts for girls who had social lives helped too. Quinn figured she had enough money to live off for the rest of the year. Yeah, she liked it here. Still, nights were a challenge. Plagued by nightmares of the demon, she rarely got a full night's sleep and when the demon didn't haunt her, Garen did.

Looking down at her watch, she decided it was time to head back to the bungalow. Her shift started in a few hours and she still wanted to call Tyson. Quinn made it a point to contact him every other week. He sounded good, like the teenage boy he was supposed to be, not the scared street kid he'd been.

Ruth and Donald sent him to a private school where he'd made only a few friends but seemed happy enough with that. Since starting, he'd made the honor roll every marking period and even participated in the school science fair where he came in second. Ruth and Donald were doing well, he told her, as was Tabitha. He never mentioned Garen and that was fine. She'd done the right thing leaving him with the Rosses.

After a pleasant and casual stroll down the beach to her bungalow, Quinn poured herself a tall glass of iced tea took her cell phone out on the small porch and called Tyson's private number. When he answered, her stomach fluttered to life.

"Hey, kid, what's up?"

"Hi, Quinn. Can you hold on a minute?"

"Sure." She could hear other voices in the background and wondered if the Rosses were having a party or something.

"Okay, I can hear you better now. What's new?"

"Nothing. Sounds like you're having a party."

"No, just me and the guys discussing the prom."

"Prom?" She couldn't picture him all dressed up and dancing.

"Yeah, we all have dates and were trying to figure out how much it would cost to rent a limo to take us all. There's a fancy restaurant we'd like to take our dates to so we're just trying to figure out if it would be better to pool our money."

"Wow. A date, dinner, dancing. I don't know you." It seemed he was growing up fast and she was missing it.

"Ruth and Donald are going to pay for my tux but I insisted they let me take care of the rest. It only seems fair. Is there any place I can send some pictures to?"

"When is this prom?" She didn't want to see him in pictures. She wanted to be there when he walked out all dressed to the teeth with a pretty girl on his arm.

"Next week. Why?"

She could hear the inflection in his voice. He knew exactly why she wanted to know. "I thought maybe, if it would be okay with you, I'd come by and see you all dolled up like a man. If you don't want me to, that's okay."

"Of course I want you to." His voice softened. "It would make the night perfect. I miss you, Quinn."

"I miss you too, buddy." A tear tumbled from her eye.

"Should I tell Ruth and Donald to expect you?"

Quinn thought a moment. "Has Garen been around?"

"He left yesterday to head out on a hunt. We don't expect him back for at least two weeks."

That would give her enough time to breeze in, see Ty and leave without having to deal with Garen. "Yeah, tell Ruth I'll be coming. I won't stay long, maybe two or three days. I'd just like to catch up with you and then get out before the storm blows back into town."

The line fell silent for a few moments. No doubt Tyson sided with Garen but there wasn't much she could do about that.

"That's cool. I have so much to show you, Quinn. I can't wait to see you."

"Me either, buddy. I'll let you go so you boys can hammer out the money issues and I'll see you next week."

"You have the address right? Call me if you get lost and me and Donald will come find you. I don't want you to miss out on one single moment of our visit."

"I have the address and strangely enough I do know how to find my way around. But I'll call if I have a problem. Love you, Ty."

"Love you, Quinn."

Quinn disconnected and began running plans through her head. She'd need to see about getting some time off from the restaurant and if they didn't let her she'd have to quit. No way would she miss Tyson's first prom. Genuinely happy for the first time in over six months she all but skipped back inside the bungalow and got ready for work.

* * * * *

The week had dragged by but today was the day she finally got to set out. Two days on the road and she'd be in North Carolina with Ty. She even went out and bought herself a camera so she could take her own pictures of the kid. It felt like a real vacation.

With the radio blaring, she pushed her little worn-out Subaru to its limit and made good time. When she pulled up in front of the Ross' house she sat and stared at it. She'd expected a mansion-like home. Instead they lived in a brick two-story. The property was vast with two smaller houses sitting off to the side a good mile away.

One of them was where Garen lived she supposed and quickly pushed that thought out of her mind. Taking a deep breath, she walked to the front door, smoothed out her brand-new sundress and then knocked and nearly fell to her knees when Tabitha opened it. She hadn't expected to see her and wasn't sure how she'd be received.

"Well, well, well. Long time no see."

"Hi, Tab." The girl wore fishnet stockings, combat boots, short leather shorts and a sheer white tank top. Her hair was done up in about a dozen braids. So Tabitha. "Is Tyson around?"

"You only come to see Ty?"

She couldn't lie. "No," she said around a lump in her throat. She didn't realize how much Tab meant to her until she saw her standing there. "I missed you guys."

"Good, 'cause we missed you too." Tab grabbed her by the hand and dragged her through the door into a hard bear hug.

"It's so good to see you."

Tab released her. "Let me get a good look at you. A little too thin but bronze. You've been in the south."

"Florida and don't you talk about being too thin. I have a long way to go to get as willowy as you."

"Willowy. No one's ever described me like that before. I like it. Come on in. Mom and Dad are about ready to burst they're so excited about you being here."

Tab led her into a large, open kitchen with a professional stove, an island and lots of pots and pans hanging above it. It smelled wonderful, like fresh blueberry muffins.

"Look what I found skulking outside our door."

Ruth spun on her heel and tossed her arms up in the air as she ran toward Quinn. The woman still looked perfectly put together and gorgeous as always. When she hugged her, Quinn couldn't help but feel like she was home.

"Oh we missed you so much, Quinn darling. You look wonderful, all tan and oh my, a little too thin."

"She looks perfect, Ruth." Donald ambled over and hugged her tight. Tears swam in her eyes.

"I hope I'm not intruding," she said, trying to force away the tears.

"Nonsense. We have a room all ready for you upstairs and we won't take no for an answer. We want to spend every minute we can with you."

Quinn hadn't counted on staying with them but why not? It would ensure quality time with Ty and them. "Thank you. I'd be delighted to stay here."

"I'll go bring your things in and move your car around back to the carport," Donald said, giving her another hug.

"Now then, sit down and have a nice warm blueberry muffin and a glass of iced tea." Ruth fussed about the kitchen like a humming bird, flitting from one thing to another.

"Mom likes to feed people and fuss over them in her kitchen. It makes her feel useful." Tab rolled her eyes.

"So tell us what you've been up to," Ruth all but sang as she gently pushed Quinn on a stool at the bar.

Quinn sat, bit into the muffin and groaned aloud. "These are heaven."

"Don't gush too much, it gives Mom a big head," Tab snarked as she copped a muffin of her own.

The three of them were sitting, eating muffins and sipping tea when Donald sauntered back in. He joined them and Quinn continued telling of how she'd spent the last six months. She appreciated the fact that they didn't question what happened between her and Garen and they didn't force him into the conversation. Still, part of her desperately wanted to know how he was doing.

Later, when she and Tyson were alone she'd ask.

"You have a wonderful home, Ruth."

"Maybe tomorrow morning when the sun isn't so warm I can walk you around the property. There's a lovely stream that leads to a pond back in the woods. I think you'll like it."

"Probably. I didn't realize how much I loved the ocean until I started living there. I can sit on the beach for hours and walk away feeling renewed."

"That's because water is a great conductor of energy." Tyson's voice boomed behind her.

She jumped from the stool and drank him in. Gone was the gangly, shabbily dressed kid. A young man stood before her, filled out, dressed in new jeans and a short-sleeved polo and sporting a nicely shaped hair cut that accented his face with sweeping bangs. He even had sideburns.

"Tyson."

"Hi, Quinn." He held out his arms and she shamelessly ran into them.

The tears she'd fought earlier gushed now, streaming down her face as he held her so tight she thought he'd break her ribs. So what if he did, it felt good to be near him again.

"You look so different," she said, brushing away the tears. "So grown-up and handsome."

Ruth and Donald smiled with shimmering eyes.

"Yeah, and has about a hundred girls calling the house all the time. The kid's a regular Don Juan."

Girls. Oh she'd missed so much. How could he change so in such a small amount of time?

"You look awesome, Quinn, all tan and so thin. I could feel every bone in your body. Haven't you been well?"

"Enough about how thin I am. I feel fine and I'm so glad to see you."

Ty hugged her again and then stood next to her when she sat back down. "So tell me everything, Ty. I want to hear all about what you've been up to."

For the next forty-five minutes she listened intently as he told her of every little event that occurred in his life since coming to live with the Rosses. He truly seemed happy here. Sure he could tell her that over the phone but until she could look in his eyes she wasn't sure.

"Ruth dear, we have a meeting in half an hour. We should get going."

"Oh my, I completely forgot about that. Well, you kids have fun catching up and we'll be back later this evening. Tabitha maybe you could take Quinn out to eat, show her our wonderful little town."

"I know the perfect place."

Before she knew it, Ruth and Donald were gone. Tab excused herself, promising to be back before Tyson took off. When they were finally alone, Ty sat down and took her hand.

"So how are you really and please don't lie to me, Quinn. You do it every time you call. What's going on?"

Sometimes she forgot he carried the wisdom and knowledge of an ancient soul. "It's been hard, Ty. Really hard but getting better by the day."

He reached out and touched her temple with the tips of his fingers. "You have bad nightmares."

"Well, yeah, but I guess that's to be expected after all. Please don't worry about me. I always find my way."

"It scarred you, Quinn, and not just your body. I can feel the turmoil inside you. You shouldn't be alone all the time."

"I've been alone for six months, honey, and I'm just fine. Besides, I'm not sure it's the demon causing the turmoil. I haven't seen my other half since I left. I kind of got use to seeing her in the mirror when I looked at myself."

"She's still there."

He didn't have to tell her that. She knew. She felt the woman weep inside late at night. "Tyson, how is he?"

"Good. He goes out a lot, hunting the Tulpas. When he isn't hunting he's holed up in his house, working on his comic book. Tab says that isn't all that unusual. He dates once in a while."

Oh that last bit of information was like a knife to the heart but what did she expect. She chose to live alone, he didn't. "That's good."

"No it isn't. Look I have to go get changed. Me and the guys have a final fitting for our tuxes tonight. Come on, I'll show you to your room."

When she stood and turned around the air left her lungs and her knees buckled. Tyson grabbed her by the elbow and held her steady. She looked into eyes she hadn't seen for six months and the last time she saw them they were flickering with anger the same way they were now.

Ty cleared his throat. "Garen, you're home."

"I didn't want to miss your prom," he replied, still staring at her. He gave her a sweeping look from head to toe and she swore his hands touched her.

He looked good, a little tired but good. He'd cut his hair short, giving it a tousled look and the jeans and t-shirt he wore hugged his nicely toned body. Why? Why did he have to be here?

"Did you finish already?"

"Yeah, I did. We'll talk later okay, Ty." Garen turned and walked out of the kitchen.

As soon as he left, Quinn dropped down on the stool and struggled to breathe. Sweat beaded on her forehead and her heart raced. What was happening to her?

"Quinn, you okay?" Tyson knelt down in front of her, cupped her cheek in his hand and looked at her with such worry.

"I'm fine. I just wasn't prepared to see him that's all."

"I swear, Quinn, I didn't know he was coming back. If I did I would have warned you."

"It's okay, buddy."

"Hey, what's going on?" Tabitha asked strolling into the kitchen. "Quinn, you okay, you look a little pale?" Tabitha knelt down next to Tyson. "Whoa, you look really odd."

"Garen's back. He surprised us."

"Uh-oh. I thought he'd be gone for another week. What'd he say?"

"Nothing, Tab," Quinn said, smiling. "He didn't say anything. I just wasn't expecting to see him." After a few deep breaths she felt better. "Maybe I should go check into a hotel. You can call me and let me know when he isn't around."

"Nope." Tab grabbed her by the hand. "Mom and Dad have been fussing over that room upstairs since Ty said you were coming. I won't let you disappoint them. You and Garen are adults, you can deal with this. Go freshen up. You and me, sister, are going out on the town."

"Ah Tab?"

"Save it, Tyson. We girls need to talk and we'll do it Tabitha-style."

"Good luck, Quinn." Tyson said, giving her a peck on the cheek. "I'll see you later tonight."

When Ty left, she turned to Tabitha. "What did he mean 'good luck'?"

"I don't understand my family sometimes. They think I'm some sort of blood-drinking vamp or something. If they only took the time to get to know me they'd find out who I really am. Come on. I'm ready for a drink, aren't you?"

Oh God, was she. A good slug of hard liquor would be nice right about now. After a quick change, she followed Tab to her car and suddenly remembered her driving. "How about I drive, Tab. I won't mind, really."

"Sure, why not." Tabitha tossed her the keys.

They didn't go far, about ten miles into town and Tab instructed her to park in front of a rather simple-looking restaurant. When they entered, Quinn was pleasantly surprised. The small restaurant was elegantly decorated with small tables and flickering candles. The waitress waved at Tab and said her table was free.

"This is where I come when I want to be alone. They have great food and the bartender is top-notch. I haven't been able to stump him yet with a drink. After dinner hours are over they move the tables around and a band comes in. I know, where do they put a band?"

Quinn sat down, ordered a Black Russian and then looked over the menu. She chose the spaghetti and then relaxed in the chair. "This is really nice, Tab. I like it."

"Me too. So how bad was it seeing Garen?"

"Like my blood drained from my body. He looked so angry."

"You hurt him badly, Quinn. I don't say that to be mean, just to let you know the facts. He loved you with all his heart. I swore I wouldn't tell you this but you should know. That day when you left Tyson called him and told him you were headed to the hotel room to collect your things. He never came back that night so Mom and I went looking for him. We found him in a bar, so piss-faced he couldn't even stand up. He cried, Quinn, like a baby, all the way back to the garage."

Her heart sank, twisted and turned into a painful knot. She'd never wanted to hurt him like that. She'd tried not to let it happen.

"I sat with him all night while he cried and talked about how much he loved you and how you couldn't care less about him. I knew better. I knew you loved him but for reasons beyond our understanding you had to leave. I was hoping one day you could tell me what those reasons were."

Quinn took a long drink and let the alcohol slide down her throat. It helped loosen the damn knot that had formed and wouldn't go away. This was supposed to be a nice visit with Tyson and the Rosses. Somehow it had turned into an emotional atrocity.

After a few more drinks of the strong alcohol her tongue and throat loosened. She explained to Tab she'd never meant to hurt him and would give anything to make it right. When their food arrived, she ordered another drink and dived into her spaghetti.

By the time they finished eating and she finished up her third drink she felt loose and relaxed. Tab suggested she slow down but she didn't want to. While they sat and waited for the band to arrive, Quinn leaned over the table.

"Can I tell you somethin'?"

"Have at it," Tab replied.

"I love him, more than I've ever loved anyone or anythin'."

"Then what's the problem? Why do this to yourself and him?"

"Because he deserves better."

Tab snorted.

"Seriously. Look, he worked hard to be successful with his comic, right? He has a career, right? If I stuck around and the powers that be found out about me it would ruin him and I couldn't live with that." Quinn waved her hand loosely in the air. "He doesn't need a murder in his closet to disrupt the life he built."

"Whoa, back up a minute, missy. Murderer? Who the fuck did you murder?"

Quinn slugged down more of her drink. "Dave, the guy who did this to me." She pulled her dress off to the side and exposed the long silver scars covering her breast.

Tab swallowed hard. "My God, Quinn. I don't know what to say. I mean I saw the scars but had no idea how you got them."

"Nothin' to say. I killed the bastard with my blade and ran. I'm a wanted woman."

Tab waved at the waitress. "We'll take another round. Damn, I knew it had to be big but not this big."

"Well, now you and Tyson know. That's why I can't stay in one place too long and won't risk the life Garen's built."

Tab raised her fresh glass of wine. "You have bigger balls than I do, Quinn. If you ever need any help, you know where to find me."

The rest of the evening they drank and danced to the music, too drunk to notice Garen in a dark corner, watching.

* * * * *

When Quinn woke the next morning, a jackhammer was busy at work inside her head. She stumbled downstairs and found Tyson eating breakfast.

“Late night?”

“You don’t have to yell, Ty. I can hear you just fine.”

He walked to her, pressed his fingertips to her temple and silently chanted. Instantly the throbbing pain eased. He smiled and returned to his meal.

“Thanks.” He’d worked on his healing powers over the last six months. “So tonight’s the big night.”

“Yep. I can’t wait for you to meet Brenda. She’s real pretty and makes me laugh.”

“That’s good, that’s important.”

“Have to go. Early test this morning.” He kissed her cheek, grabbed his backpack and headed out.

Quinn fumbled around the house for a while until Ruth made an appearance. As promised, she showed Quinn the beautiful bubbling stream and the large pond with a tree in the middle. As she sat looking at the lonely tree, she realized it symbolized her life. Standing alone with so much life around yet doomed to only observe and never truly experience it.

She and Ruth chatted about nothing special for about an hour until Ruth announced she had to get back. Quinn assured her she could get back on her own and continued to sit by the sparkling water, listening to the birds and bees buzz around. On the other side of the pond lay a wide-open field, much like the one she saw in visions.

Feeling a strong urge to wander through the wildflowers that grew haphazardly, she stood and made her way to the field. She walked from one end of the field to the other, knowing every inch as if she’d been here before. How wonderful it would be to build a house and live out the rest of her days here.

Garen watched silently as Quinn meandered among the wildflowers. She belonged here, with him, in this field. His trip to Chicago had proved to be enlightening and tonight she’d discover what he’d found out. What she did with that information would prove to him once and for all whether or not she loved him.

When he saw her yesterday, sitting in Ruth’s kitchen with Tyson, he’d thought his mind was playing tricks on him. She was far too thin but looked as beautiful as ever. His lungs had frozen mid-breath and his heart had nearly beaten out of his chest. He’d had to leave. If he hadn’t he’d have grabbed her like some crazed caveman and dragged her off to his house and held her captive.

It had taken him months to realize she’d lied through her teeth to him as she’d stood in that horrible hotel room. It also took a long conversation with Tyson to understand her reasoning for leaving. Who knew he’d be looking to a teenager for advice in his love life.

Good thing he did. It all made sense now. Quietly he crept out of the woods toward his house. He didn't want to risk running into her until tonight.

Chapter Twenty-One

Quinn sat in the kitchen, camera in hand and waited very impatiently for Tyson to come down the stairs in his tux. Of course the fact that Garen sat across from her didn't help. The tension in the air nearly choked her. Ruth, Donald and Tabitha milled about but she couldn't tell exactly what they were doing.

"You guys ready?"

Quinn jumped from her chair and darted into the living room, followed by the rest. Ty strolled down the steps, looking every bit the man he was. Quinn snapped pictures absently as she looked through watery eyes.

"What do you think?"

"Oh Ty, your parents would be so proud," she said, and then hugged him with every bit of strength in her body.

"Thank you for that," he said, and returned the hug.

Pictures were taken with everyone until the limo honked outside. When they went to the door, three young men dressed in matching tuxes leaned against the long white limo. Quinn quickly snapped a picture and followed Tyson out.

"We're going to pick up the ladies and then we'll be back. Don't go anywhere."

Watching the limo drive off with her adopted little brother, she hugged her arms around her torso. When it drove out of sight, she turned and found Garen standing directly in front of her. Unsure what to do she sidestepped him and ran toward the house.

All those old feelings came rushing back when he put himself so close to her. Did he do it on purpose? Of course he did. He wanted to punish her for breaking his heart and she deserved it but she wasn't sure how long she could resist him. Maybe that's what he was up to. Make her come to him and then slap her in the face like she did him. Well, he wouldn't get the chance.

"I'm going to my room. Call me when they come back."

After running up the stairs, she turned around and saw Garen standing at the bottom, his arms crossed and a dark look in his eyes. Just plain pissed now, she stormed off to her room and slammed the door.

"I must have been out of my mind thinking I could do this." Quinn paced the floor, muttering under her breath about his arrogance.

An hour later she heard Tabitha hollering up to her that the limo was back. Anxious to see Tyson's date, she ran down the stairs and right into Garen. She didn't want to do this, not now, not on Tyson's big night.

Giving him a stern glare, she pushed past him. Ruth, Donald and Tab were already outside, waiting. Being the gentleman, Tyson helped his date from the car and Quinn felt her heart tip. The young lady wore a simple white evening gown that fell to her ankles.

Her long black hair hung straight down her back and was adorned with tiny sprigs of baby's breath. When she looked at Tyson her big hazel eyes sparkled. Tyson's aura shimmered with colors of joy and happiness as he walked her over and introduced her.

"Brenda, this is Quinn."

"Nice to meet you, Ms. Hurst. Ty's told me a lot about you."

"Nice to meet you too. You look beautiful, Brenda. May I take some pictures?"

Another round of pictures was taken before Tyson finally objected and insisted they had to go if they wanted to make their dinner reservations. Reluctantly Quinn let them go and once again watched the limo drive off as the sun began to set. She realized tears were streaming down her face.

"We need to talk."

She jolted at the sound of Garen's voice. "We have nothing to talk about."

He grasped her by the arm and spun her around. "Yes we do."

Before she knew what was happening he had shoved her in his car. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Taking you to my house so we can finish this."

"Fine." If he wanted to finish it, she'd finish it. It was about time she told him the truth.

When they pulled up in front of the small house he rented from the Rosses, she jumped out of the car and stomped to the front door. Garen opened it, let her in first and then closed the door and locked it.

"That isn't necessary."

"I don't want any interruptions. You want something to drink? A Black Russian maybe?"

"What? You were spying on me?"

"No, just watching you drink yourself silly with Tabitha. I followed you two home to make sure you made it."

"What do you want, Garen? You want to know why I ran from you? Fine, I'll tell you. I didn't just walk away from the man who did this to me," she said, pointing to the scars on her body. "I killed him. He'd just finished another cutting session and let me lie there in my own blood. Earlier I'd hidden my knife under the mattress and when he finally untied me I reached for it and sliced his throat, just like I do Tulpas. Premeditated murder, Garen. I'm a murderer, a wanted felon. I broke the number one law of slayers. I took a human life and at the time I didn't care. I wanted him dead."

The weight of the world lifted right off her shoulders. Telling him freed her somehow. "Is that what you wanted to hear? Do you understand now?"

"You didn't kill him."

Quinn froze as if a blast of frigid air blasted her, unable to move. "What did you say?"

"I said you didn't kill him."

"Yes, Garen, I did kill him and how do you know anyway?"

"Tyson and I had a long chat. He explained to me what he saw in one of his visions, even came up with a name and a place. The kid has remarkable ability in seeing into the past and future. I took what he gave me and went hunting. That's where I was last week."

This wasn't happening. He didn't go searching out her past. "You investigated me."

"Yeah I did and I won't apologize for it. Do you remember frequenting a small diner with him? Benny's Diner?"

"Yes," she whispered. Dave had taken her there all the time.

"I talked to a very nice waitress there. She remembered you. Said she couldn't understand why you stayed with the animal. He apparently had a reputation for smacking around the women he dated. Anyway, you disappeared and he showed up with stitches in his neck. She figured you'd finally got fed up and fought back. About a month later he had another woman in tow. He started the cycle all over again only she did what you didn't. She shot the bastard."

He moved up close behind her now. She could feel his warm breath on her shoulder. She shivered, whether from his closeness or from the information he just laid on her she didn't know.

"He's dead, Quinn, but you didn't kill him."

This couldn't be true. Her body went numb and her legs wobbled. Garen quickly moved her to the couch and sat her down. "I didn't kill him?"

"No. You just bought yourself some time to escape."

All this time she'd thought she'd murdered someone. Running because she thought the police were looking for her. "He's dead?"

"Dead and buried. The girl who killed him walked herself to the police station and turned herself in after she did it. I guess the police wrote it up as self-defense and she got off with a few meaningless charges."

"Too much, this is too much." Her hands began to shake.

Garen held a glass up to her mouth. "Drink this, sip at it."

She swallowed the amber liquid, letting its warmth spread through her throat and stomach. After a few more sips, her hands stopped shaking. "All this time I thought I'd killed the bastard."

"You can let go of the guilt now, Quinn."

Could she? She'd lived with it for so long she wasn't sure she could.

"That's why you were determined to leave. You were afraid to bring me trouble."

"I didn't want to destroy the life you'd built for yourself, your comic books."

"You should have just told me, honey. We could have found all this out together. You wouldn't have had to spend the last six months alone and away from Ty and me."

"I didn't want to hurt you, Garen. Please believe that, I didn't want to hurt you." The world spun out of control. Nerve endings snapped and popped in her brain as it tried to process the fact that she didn't kill Dave—a fact that had become a part of who she was—and now, with just a few words, it had all changed.

"I know that now and I'm sorry for the things I said that day. You aren't heartless. You have the biggest heart I've ever seen."

Leaning back on the couch, she released a long sigh. This changed everything. Looking into his eyes it dawned on her, she could be with him now if he still wanted her. Would he still want her? Something stirred inside her, surfaced and reached out.

"Where does this leave us?" Could he ever forgive her? God, she hoped so because right now it looked as though the world was open to her and she needed, wanted him by her side.

He stood, turned his back to her and scrubbed his face with his hands. Fear and panic surged through her system. He didn't trust her and who could blame him. Then she remembered Tyson telling her he'd been dating. Did his heart belong to someone else now? Had she blown her only chance of happiness?

She wanted to read his aura and get some sort of insight into what he felt but she couldn't bring herself to do it. Already shaky and on the edge of falling apart she wouldn't be able to deal with it if he showed signs of rejection. Instead she rose and walked to the door.

"I understand."

"Tyson told you I've been dating."

Why didn't he just plunge his knife into her chest? It would be a quicker, easier death than withering away like this. "Yes." After disengaging the lock, she put her hand on the knob.

"No matter how hard I tried I couldn't find anyone who compared to you, Quinn. Not even close."

His words froze her in place. What did this mean? Her palms began to sweat and she held on to the doorknob for support.

"I couldn't spend more than an hour having dinner and then I had to leave. I just couldn't stomach looking at another woman."

Why his words heated her blood she didn't know but hot lava coursed through her system. She actually felt her breasts swell and tighten, her nipples pebble into peaks.

"No one can satisfy my mind, soul or body the way you do."

Her breathing grew heavy. She wanted to satisfy his body now. Hold him in her arms and feel him close to her. It had been far too long since she'd felt him close to her.

"Tell me you lied to me that day, Quinn. Tell me you do love me the way I love you."

A touch of desperation tainted his voice and she knew everything would be okay because she did love him, more than she could ever say with words. Releasing the doorhandle she clicked the lock back into place with rock-steady hands and then turned. The ball was in her court now and she intended to play it very smart.

"No matter how hard I tried," she said, reaching behind her and lowering the zipper to her dress. "No matter how hard I fought," she slipped the thin straps off her shoulders and let the dress pool at her feet, "I couldn't stop falling in love with you."

She stood before him in nothing but a pair of white lace panties. He swallowed hard, clenched his jaw and she wanted to run her hand over the pulsing muscle to sooth it but not yet. He needed to hear her first.

"I have ached for you every single day. Dreamed of your touch until I wake screaming from a weak, unsatisfactory orgasm. Not a minute in the day goes by that I don't wonder what you're doing. The thought of you touching another woman tears me to shreds yet I know I have no right to feel that way. My heart has been empty, my soul weeps for you daily and I love you beyond words."

As she spoke, his sad, pleading eyes darkened and warmed until she could feel the heat caressing her body. Now she risked a look at his aura and his colors stunned her. Oh yes, he still wanted her.

"Say it again, Quinn."

His thick husky voice brought her body to life. A small smile tugged at her lips as her heart flipped inside her chest. "I love you, Garen. I love you so much it hurts."

He walked to her, reached out and cupped her cheek with his warm, tender hand. "Then let me take away the pain."

In one quick swoop he lifted her into his arms and carried her down the short hallway into his bedroom. Gently he lowered her feet to the floor and gazed into her face. So many emotions washed over his handsome features, each one touching her heart.

Quinn lifted the bottom of his shirt and pulled it over his head, tossing it to the side. Running the palms of her hands down his sculpted chest and abs, she struggled to take it slowly. When she reached for the snap on his jeans, she felt a slight tremble in her fingers. Garen placed his over hers and helped her finish releasing the snap. This is how it would be from now on. They would work together in everything they did, and an odd comfort filled her with that knowledge.

Kneeling, she helped him out of his pants and boxers and moaned when his large, thick erection bobbed in front of her face. Determined to take it slowly, she cupped his heavy sac in her hand, gripped his shaft with the other and kissed the head.

“Aw fuck, baby. You’re going to kill me.”

She just wanted a taste, a little taste of what she’d missed. Running her tongue down his pole and then back up again, she slipped him inside her mouth and sucked the engorged head. Garen removed the band holding her ponytail in place and ran his fingers through her hair, fisting it.

With the slightest pressure he encouraged her to take him deeper inside her mouth. She guided him in until he hit the back of her throat. The sound of him sucking air between his teeth filled the room. Slowly she enjoyed every inch of his hard cock, running her tongue along the thick vein and then tracing his head with her lips.

When he tugged at her hair and raised her to her feet, she moved slowly, running her cheek along the length of his body until she reached his chest. She needed to feel him close to her, every part of him. His arms encircled her, held her tightly and she could hear and feel his heart pounding away inside his chest. A tattoo of music she would never get tired of hearing.

“You’re so thin, baby. I can feel every bone. Have you been sick?”

“Heartsick. When I lost you I lost my appetite.” His bulging cock pressed hard into her stomach. She didn’t want to talk, she wanted to feel.

Garen released her, lowered his head and kissed her so lovingly she felt the last remaining wall of defense shatter into a thousand pieces. She actually slumped in relief. When he pulled from the kiss and lowered to his knees, she sighed in anticipation. After he slid her panties off he placed a kiss on her outer lips and she felt him smile.

“I love that you shave,” he said, and then ran his tongue across her smooth flesh. “I never thought much about it before but it’s as sexy as hell.”

“I’m very glad you like it.” The words no sooner left her lips when she gasped for air. His tongue slipped between the folds and touched the nub filled with aching nerves. Hot liquid seeped from deep inside and he caught it with his tongue.

“Mmm. So sweet.” He reached up and grasped her ass with his hands, his fingers digging deep into her flesh as he braced her for the ride to come. “Hold on, honey. I’ve missed your sweet taste and plan to get my fill.”

“Oh yes, please do.”

Snaking his talented tongue around her clit, between her inner folds and circling the opening to her aching channel, he drew more slick nectar from her body. Weak with desire she gripped his strong shoulders and held on, tilting her hips to offer him more.

He gently assaulted her drenched pussy until she panted and begged for the release that was so close. Her hips bucked against his mouth and she ran her hands through his hair all while her body tightened and waves of pleasure engulfed her.

Just as she was about to reach that wonderful, critical peak he stopped. “No,” she protested.

He stood, his lips wet with her fluids. "Not like this. Not this time. It's been too long and I need to feel you wrapped around me. I need to feel my cock buried in your hot little pussy."

Quinn nodded her head in agreement. Oh she needed that too. He moved to the nightstand, pulled out a condom and opened it.

"Do you want to put it on?"

Quinn licked her lips. "Let's do it together."

His eyes sparked and then smoldered with raw lust. She reached between them, waited until he had it in place and then together they rolled the thin latex down his steel covered in soft flesh. *Impossible*, she thought, but it turned her on more.

Garen helped her onto the bed, rose over her and then dipped his head and sucked one nipple hard into his mouth.

"Oh. God." She arched her back and he slipped his hand behind her, raising her more, sucking harder and deeper. The pull tugged at her clit, torturing her with pleasure. "Oh yes."

When he pulled away, she groaned in protest.

"Do you trust me, Quinn?"

She looked into his eyes. "With my life, more importantly, with my heart. I love you, Garen."

He took a deep breath. "You don't know what that does to me. I want to give you something you've never experienced before. I want it to be our experience."

Willing to do anything if it meant he would keep looking at her like that, she nodded her head. He moved to the nightstand, pulled out a bottle of clear liquid and something strange she didn't recognize. It looked like a gigantic pacifier.

He quickly poured some of what she now knew to be lube into his hand and rubbed the big knobby end of the pacifier. Understanding dawned big and bright in her mind. Gently he lifted her legs over his shoulders.

"Take a deep breath and relax for me. If it hurts just say the word and I'll stop."

Quinn nodded her head again and took a deep breath, reminding herself that he wouldn't hurt her, wouldn't push her to do something she didn't want to do. As he separated her cheeks and pressed the plug against her puckered opening, she stiffened. Garen stopped immediately and moved his attention to her still wet pussy.

Slipping his fingers inside her, he curled them and lightly teased her sweet spot. Instantly she tossed her head back as her body responded to the immense pleasure. With his fingers imbedded, he circled his thumb around her clit, driving her wild. Lost in the ecstasy she barely felt him press the plug against her opening and gently push.

When the foreign object entered, she gasped and then groaned. It felt oddly erotic, filling and stretching forbidden tissue. She took a few moments and just felt, deciding whether or not she liked it. Garen watched her closely, prepared to remove the plug at the first sign of her protest.

She reached up, pulled him down to her and arched her back, thrusting her breasts toward his mouth. He quickly drew her nipple into his mouth and sucked with such force she cried out his name. With her nerve endings crackling and the plug wedged firmly in her ass she decided she liked the way it felt. In fact, as she moved it touched more sensitive nerves and brought her pleasure to an entirely different level.

“Do you like it, baby?” he asked, rubbing his cheek between her breasts.

“Yes I do but I’d like it better if you were inside me. I need you, Garen, now.”

He sat up, gripped his shaft and pressed his bulging head into her slick channel. As he entered her, she felt a fullness she’d never experienced before and drew in a long, deep breath. Garen continued until she held him completely inside her body.

“Wow.”

“Yeah, wow. Can you feel it, honey? Can you feel me pressing against it?”

She nodded her head. Garen pulled back and the slow movement sent white-hot flames shooting through her body. Oh hell she liked this. He slid back inside faster this time and began a pace that sent her hurtling toward oblivion. With her legs draped over his shoulders she couldn’t grind her clit against him so he reached between them and rubbed the flaming nub as he slid in and out of her body.

“Come with me, Garen,” she pleaded as she hung on to his arms. “Together, forever.”

“I love you, Quinn,” he panted, and then slammed hard into her at the same time, pinching her overly sensitive clit and sending her soaring high into the air.

Their cries of release filled the room and Quinn’s heart opened fully for the first time, allowing the woman within her to finally join the man she loved heart and soul. With her eyes unfocused she watched as their auras flared, merged and combined, engulfing their bodies. Gasping, she felt a warm wave flow through her, filling her with immense love.

He felt it too, she could tell by the way his face softened, almost as if he would cry from the sheer joy. Most people felt love but not on this level, not with every molecule and fiber of their being, not to the point of knowing that without that person there would be no you.

Every orgasmic spasm intensified, flooding her further with intense warmth and filling her heart until it overflowed and spilled out with yet another hard orgasm. The shout of pleasure that ripped from her throat wasn’t her voice but the voice of the woman who had suffered so long without her love. Garen jerked, exploded inside her again and shouted her name.

“Anya.” The thick, deep tone touched her soul and their auras contracted.

The world melted away temporarily and for just a moment she thought they were in the field surrounded by the sweet aroma of flowers and wood smoke. A soft summer breeze kissed her skin and life seemed perfect and then she was back in the comfort and safety of Garen’s room, his bed and his love.

Even as spasms rocked her body she looked into his eyes. He pulsed as she squeezed him tighter and she knew she'd found her true destiny. Slaying might be her legacy but creating a life and family with this man was her true destiny and this time she'd get it right.

When he lowered her legs and fell to her side, she rolled and pressed herself against his body. "Marry me, Garen. Spend the rest of your life with me, start a family with me. Make me the happiest woman on this earth."

"You took the words right out of my mouth, honey. Of course I'll marry you."

She kissed him then a quick, excited, noisy kiss as tears rolled down her cheeks. "Good, now take this thing out of my ass."

They both laughed as the tears flowed and that's how it would be for them always. Laughter, tears, pain, joy. All of it shared together.

About the Author

Robin Leigh Miller lives in central Pennsylvania with her wonderful husband, three children and two German Shepherds. A retired dirt track driver, Robin now gets her adrenaline fix by putting her characters through their paces.

The author 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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