

Six

A Demon Hunter Romance #1

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Table of Contents

[Dedication – For you :\)](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Sneaky Peek from the next in the series](#)

[I Want More](#)

[Sign Me Up for Free Stuff](#)

[About Carrie](#)



This one's for you! Who me? Yeah, *you*. Some fun paranormal... but rooted in normal ;).

~

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Six



Chapter 1

Coast Guard Vessel Valkyrie, Two Miles Northwest of Wainwright, Alaska. Tonight.

A chill breeze whistled through the open window. Patrolling the eerily calm Arctic waters, Ryan steered the Valkyrie through the Chukchi Sea along the Alaska coastline. He scanned the area for anything that stood out, any sort of unusual activity. Not an ordinary Coast Guard vessel, the Valkyrie and her crew ran a covert mission to protect humanity from their darkest fears.

Ryan wasn't the captain, nor did he have any intention of becoming so. Just over a year he'd been assigned to the Valkyrie. After several years of making his way up the Coast Guard ranks, he caught wind of trouble off Dutch Harbor... the sort that scared the hide off even the roughest fishermen. Realizing he had the perfect opportunity to use his inherited skills, without finding a new team, he presented an idea to his captain.

Miraculously, Willa Price hadn't had him committed when he'd told her about the very real monsters that threatened their world. As the captain of a ship that had sunk for no good reason a few years back, having lost most of her crew to a mysterious tragedy, she was all ears. Nor had the idea for coastal patrol targeting the paranormal surprised Admiral Jenks, as he'd been considering something similar for years. Sailors were a suspicious breed, and for good reason. It had taken a lot of time and planning, but about a year ago they had recruited the best of the best, well, the most open-minded anyway, and shipped out on their first deployment.

"How's my favorite demon hunter this evening?" Ryan didn't jump at the sound of Willa's voice, but he was surprised at the interruption from his captain in the middle of the night.

"Keep it down," he mockingly shushed her, scanning the empty bridge, raising his eyebrow in jest.

Despite her rank, she was casual with her XO and the rest of the crew. She had to be on this boat. They saw the weirdest shit in the Coast Guard and were as top secret as they come. Without the tightknit camaraderie, they'd drown fast in their one-hundred-percent sink-or-swim expedition.

Willa handed him a hot cup of coffee in his favorite mug, massive and lidless. He braved a testing sip as the steam billowed in turbulent spirals out the top. "Not many awake tonight. Besides, they've already figured out you're different. Ryan, it's time you just told it to them straight. After the Kappa you took out in Bristol Bay last month when it went for Manuel... that was incredible. Remarkably super-powered. I didn't know you could move that fast. Or tear a creature's head off with your bare hands." Amazingly, the pride in her voice outshined any alarm. He'd been so damn lucky to land this position.

Not bothering to hide his scowl, Ryan gratefully savored the bitter heat of the coffee to avoid responding directly, instead muttering, "What are you doing up at this hour?"

“Couldn’t sleep. There’s something in the air.” She tilted her head, gesturing to the still ocean, the calm breeze, the cloudless sky. She looked quite the captain tonight with her dark, salt and pepper hair wild from tossing and turning, sleepless in her bunk.

Turning the ship ten degrees south-southwest, Ryan scanned the horizon and nodded. “I feel it, too. You know, for a human, you’ve got some good instincts.”

Scrunching up her nose in delight, she quirked her head to the side in consideration. “Maybe I’ve got a distant demon hunter in my pedigree.”

He gulped too big of a swig of the scorching coffee and cringed as he burned his throat. Distant would be fucking fantastic. His demon blood ran thick as lead through his veins. Briefly running a hand through his military short, dark brown hair, he set down his drink and scanned the starry sky. Something was up alright.

A minute speck in the distance was rapidly morphing into something threatening. “Shit... do you see that?” he asked, squinting to catch a better glimpse of the bizarre phenomenon.

Moving to the window in a flash, Willa followed his line of sight. “Is that... water?”

Rapidly adjusting course, he tried to turn away from the massive jet of water that was headed straight for them like a ballistic missile. No more than ten yards starboard, the projectile crashed into the ocean and abruptly terminated.

Leaving Willa to takeover at the helm, he tore down the ladder and shined a floodlight on the landing site.

Dean ran up beside him to check it out. “Is that...?” The newest member of the crew couldn’t even finish the thought; it was too farfetched to consider.

Glowing in the spotlight, Ryan could just make out the figure of a woman. Against protocols, but what the hell, wouldn’t hurt him any, he dove into the water. A shock of icy razor blades lashed across his skin as he plunged into the Arctic. Within a few quick strokes, he reached the body.

Floating on the surface like an otter taking a peaceful nap, a pale, wisp of a woman lay before him. Chest slowly rising and falling, she wasn’t dead. Yet.

Ryan’s pulse thundered more against the startling realization than the cold. Somehow, before he’d even reached her, he’d known she was alive... despite the frigid temperatures and crazy trip through the air, across what he suspected had been hundreds of miles.

Wrapping his arms around her in a safety hold, he swam them both carefully toward the ship as Dean lowered the hoist. On deck, Dean reached out to take her.

“No, I got her,” Ryan abruptly responded. Helpless in his arms, impossibly fragile considering what she’d survived, he just couldn’t seem to let go.

Any jostling, and her heart might pump faster; the rapid influx of colder blood from her extremities could trigger cardiac arrest. No doubt, she was inhumanly tough, but not immortal. Holding her close against his chest, he pulled them both up the ladder.

Carrying the vulnerable ice cube as steady as he could, he felt the slow movements of her lungs expanding and releasing. He breathed a long sigh of relief, willing her breaths to match his own, her pulse to beat steady with his.

Harry, the resident medic, came sprinting ahead of them to the infirmary. “How’s she doing?” he demanded as he quickly set up for hypothermia protocols.

“I think she’s going to be fine once we warm her up. Toss me those scissors,” Ryan nodded to Harry, gesturing to the supply cabinet.

What the hell? She was dressed in dark cargo pants, a bulletproof vest, and wore holsters for daggers strapped to her legs.

A deep pit formed in his gut. He knew exactly what she was. No other way she could have survived travelling by a massive waterspout, landing in the Arctic. Alive.

Where had that massive jet of water come from? Clearly, she was in the midst of something big. A major op that must have gone terribly wrong. For a moment, as she'd crashed into the sea, he'd thought her a demon. No, he had no doubts now that she was a hunter.

Shaking off the dread that muddled his thoughts, he unstrapped her vest, cut and peeled off her frozen, sopping wet clothes, and carried her to the medical bed where the heating system waited.

Harry had warm IV fluid going before Ryan could even step out of the way. Within minutes of being warmed from the inside and out, color began to return to her pale cheeks.

Before she awoke, he needed to ditch her and leave Harry to take over. He wanted nothing to do with a damn demon hunter.

Heading for the exit, he moved to alert Willa of the true nature of their stowaway - if she hadn't figured it out already. They'd stop at the nearest port and drop her before she knew what they were about. If necessary, dump her with the closest vessel. Throat constricting, he fought the impending panic attack.

Nearly to the door, her soft whimper stopped him dead in his tracks.

Turning, he saw her brow scrunched in fear, anguish. Fury. In pain or reliving the moments before her arrival here, he couldn't be sure.

In a heartbreaking, gut-wrenching instant, he was back at her side.

Without realizing what he was doing, his hand was gently cradling her cool cheek, whispering that everything was going to be ok. That she was safe and in good hands.

Moron. Like so many foolish men before him, he was suddenly a sucker for a pretty face and a helpless cry. Even though he knew she wasn't vulnerable in the least, he couldn't help but feel protective instincts drenching him like a monsoon.

Berating himself and his initial hatred towards a total stranger, he remembered that Sunshine Hunt hadn't raised him to turn his back on someone in need. No matter his personal feelings against other demon hunters, this woman was barely holding on and needed *his* help.

At least until she was back on her feet. Then she was gone.

Even a demon hunter deserved a fair chance at life.

Maybe.

With worry in his eyes, Dean shifted from left foot to right foot and back again in the medical bay doorway, finally speaking up. "You staying with her?"

Another damn sucker.

Puffing his cheeks up with air as he held his breath, Ryan nodded. "Yep." He managed to exhale slowly, fighting the dizzying internal battle over whether he should throw the damsel back in the water or hold her hand all night. Torn between the ruthless hunter he was born to be and the peace-loving man he was raised to be.

Finally, he knew he couldn't ignore his deeply ingrained upbringing and pushed his fears to the back of his mind. Voice dry as the damn Mojave in August, he found himself asking, "Mind grabbing me some dry clothes? And maybe some for the stowaway?"

Obedient, Dean disappeared down the hall.

Yawning so wide Ryan could see straight down his throat, Harry rubbed his sleepy eyes now that the urgency was over. A seasoned medic, poor guy had seen way too much death and near death to get worked up over a late-night rescue. "She's stable. If you're parking here for the night, I'll grab some rack time," he smacked his lips with fatigue and scratched his half bald

head. “You’ll call me when she wakes? I think she’s going to be okay...” Harry stared at their patient, his gray unibrow furrowed in deep, stuttering concentration. “Amazingly. She... she’s like you, isn’t she?”

Yeah, Ryan knew he ought to have spelled it out sooner. Better than the not-so-discrete rumors from the crew. “Yep.”

Nodding, Harry backed away and walked slowly out the door. Ryan knew that despite his fatigue, he was bursting with questions, but the medic knew better than to ask now. No way he would have missed Ryan’s indecision in how to handle the situation.

Ryan was left alone, dripping and pacing around the infirmary, revisiting his ridiculous internal dispute, even though he knew exactly how this would end.

Efficiently, Dean returned with a pile of clothes and a dry towel. Maybe the kid was worth keeping around. Pulling off his sopping shirt, Ryan started to dry off.

Dean stepped closer to their patient, sappy eyes admiring the innocent-appearing face. Without looking away, he informed Ryan, “Leah’s not your biggest fan anymore. She looked to be about the same size, so I woke her and convinced her to lend some clothes. She was pretty stingy.” Dean winced, like he was almost as terrified of Leah as he was of Ryan.

Amused, Ryan nodded. Although hand selected by Willa, Dean had only been on board a few weeks, since they’d left port for their current deployment. He didn’t yet realize that Ryan talked tough but was a total softy. *Thanks for that, Sunshine.*

After changing into dry clothes, Ryan pulled up a chair and parked himself at his patient’s side. Plopping his feet up on the side of her bed, he crossed his arms and settled into his chair at her side.

As Dean’s footsteps faded in the distance, Ryan began to quiet the incessant worries that cluttered his mind. Panic continued to bubble under the surface, but as he settled, curiosity and interest stirred more strongly. Blinking his eyes slowly, he let his gaze rest on the intruder, hoping he could figure her out before she awoke.

She was ridiculously attractive. For a demon hunter. As her hair dried, he could see the fiery red waves. Not a freckle to be found on that porcelain skin. Not very big either, compared to the handful of other demon hunters he’d met, but she’d be stronger than she looked.

Incredible body, too. Not that he’d looked, of course. He’d been delivering emergency medical care. Now that he knew she was ok, he wouldn’t be a total cad to remember how perfectly pert those breasts were, how she had some serious muscle from training, not just genetics.

Not going there, he tried to convince himself. Tried and failed. Miserably.

Chapter 2

Sitka, Alaska. Six Days Ago.

“Just cut her head off,” Quinn offered helpfully to her cousin, each crunching step on the snowy sidewalk bringing a guilty-pleasure smile to her face. Treading synchronously with her cousin, she grinned over their markedly differing styles. They looked like cousins for sure, both shorter than the average demon hunter, similar features and expressions. But that’s where it ended. Quinn had lazily wavy red hair, Lana had wildly dark curls. Quinn’s seasoned hiking boots left deep waffle prints behind her, whereas Lana’s heeled knee-high boots left delicate imprints.

She shook her head as she imagined anyone believing Lana to be delicate.

Distracted, green eyes aimed straight ahead, Lana flipped her black hair into an elegantly efficient ponytail and gestured with a subtle nod of her head. “Three of them. In Sitka. Are they daft?”

Swaggering across the moonlit, barren street ahead was a tall, dark, and dangerous trio. “And here I thought this would be yet another dull night of research.” Quinn sighed in melodramatic woefulness.

Her demon hunting team of five had spent weeks in the damp town for the final stages of one mission. Potentially, their upcoming mission was a critical push against one of the nastiest monsters of them all, so, yeah, Quinn was glad they’d be as prepared as possible. But, this time, she just wasn’t feeling it. At least Sitka had been pretty for a few hours, all white and sparkly with the surprising spring snow, but now everything was turning into a nasty, half-melted mush.

Flashing a foolproof - or fool-catching - smile, eyelashes batting over dreamy emerald green eyes, gaze hungry with lust, Lana initiated her favorite ploy. Not so flirty, as she felt downright awkward when she tried, Quinn adapted more of a bored expression, pasting a blasé smirk on her face. Together, they slowed their pace to intersect with their prey as they reached the alley.

The most forward of the trio stepped closer to Lana, with an oh-so-clever come-on of his own, “Good evening ladies.” Ridiculously handsome, appealing as vampires tended to be, he pasted on the same fuck-me smile and smoldering look that Lana wore. Quinn tried not to gag. “We’re just in town for a few days. Can you recommend a place for drinks this evening? Perhaps join us for a *bite*?”

“What a coincidence, we were just headed to our favorite club. This way,” Lana beckoned them to follow her into the dark alley.

Absurdly pleased with their luck, the last of the trio licked his lips, flicking his tongue over his sharp canine in anticipation of a scrumptious dinner. Who fell for this tripe? Quinn rolled her eyes and waved the others ahead, checking the street one last time for any potential witnesses.

Mr. Forward-Blood-Sucker was already making a move on Lana as the trio followed her deep into the alley.

Drawing the Rambo-style bowie knife that had been hidden under her motorcycle jacket, Quinn swiftly reached around the nearest vamp's chin, pulled back sharply, and jabbed the blade into his throat.

He fumbled, struggling to pull her off him.

Anticipating resistance, Quinn sliced. Her stomach roiled at the disgusting crunch through his trachea. After she'd severed most of the major structures, his head hung loosely on his stump of a neck.

Quinn shook the blood off her hand. Why did the whole pointy stick and dusting parts of vampire mythology have to be the made-up part? Humans trying to sleep better at night, no doubt. Nobody wanted to think about the revolting parts of demon hunting. Far less romantic.

The nearly-dead vamp sank to the alley floor at her feet, his bloody puddle creating a red snow cone effect on the slushy pavement. His friend glanced back to check on his progress. Observing the precise opposite of what he was expecting, his toothy mouth gaped open, his pale eyes grew wide as the moon.

Grinning, Quinn beckoned her surprised prey closer.

Nearly to the faded green door at the end of the alley, Lana slammed her head back and clocked her boytoy in the nose.

Swinging her knife, Quinn used a similar trachea-crunching neck-slice to take out number two while Lana swiftly took out number three with the dagger she pulled from her tall boot.

"Not very tough, were they?" Lana asked as she crouched down to clean her dagger on the dead vampire's shirt.

Must have been young. Where were their sires to tell them not to venture down dark alleys with overly eager women? Realizing she'd been splattered in her final strike, Quinn's lower lip pouted out pathetically. "Eww. These were new jeans, too."

Nodding, Lana looked equally grossed out at the mess, "I swear, these nasties were particularly bloody." Her face fell into a heavy frown. "Bet they already had dinner; we were to be a fortuitous dessert."

Dammit. Born to save humanity from the things that go bump in the night, Quinn took each loss personally. She knew the rest of her team was equally committed to their birthright. Not all demon hunters took their work so seriously, but all were sworn to keep the monsters from flooding the streets.

"I'm going to clean up before dinner. You mind calling the coroner?" Quinn cleaned the mess from her knife as Lana had done. Dead monster carcasses were becoming increasingly difficult to subtly dispose of. Centuries ago, their demon hunting ancestors had realized they needed help. Already dealing with the dead and undead alike, coroners were their best option for keeping humanity out of the loop, and demon hunter identities secret. Thus, part of routine, and certainly lesser-known, coroner training included recognizing and destroying demon and hybrid carcasses.

"Sure thing. I'll have your beer waiting." Lana was already pulling out her phone. Both eyed the ground and the blood that was turning into a revolting red lake as it melted through the wet snow.

Swinging back to the short-term apartment she shared with Bennett, Quinn freshened up with a hot shower and a change of clothes. Recharged, she ran back through the particularly chill night against the frozen rain that had begun to pelt the soggy ground. Sadly, her motorcycle jacket had been splashed in the mess too, so she had done a brief scrub and gone without. She didn't care for the prickling cold against her skin, but she wouldn't be slowed by it.

Stepping into her favorite place on the planet, aside from her aunt and uncle's house on the hill, and her parent's place outside of San Francisco, or her own shoebox apartment... ok, so she had a lot of favorite places, Quinn took a quick pause in the doorway to inhale the welcoming scents wafting about the ancient wooden structure. The savory grilled yumminess from the kitchen. The rank, yet oddly homey, odor of muddy snow from dozens of sailor's boots. And, her favorite, the indescribable aroma of a massive cedar cabin that had been built by her ancestors, all warmed by the chatter of folks unwinding after a hard day's work.

From behind the bar, her cousin Missy took a quick break from pouring drinks to wave hello. In their family for generations, Missy ran the tavern with Lana and her father. Ignoring the partying fisherman and rowdy Coasties, Quinn pushed through the buzzing crowd to join her team in the secluded nook in the back. In front of a toasty fireplace, cozy leather couches and chairs surrounded a wide coffee table that was stacked with ancient texts.

She sank into the buttery soft leather couch next to Bennett. Her feet landed with a resounding thunk on the dilapidated wooden coffee table as she settled back for another night of lengthy, strategizing debates.

Lana appeared a moment later with her promised beer. Gratefully, Quinn took it and savored the first sip of the smoky porter that warmed her straight down to her toes. Best thing about demon hunting superpowers was her alcohol tolerance. Okay, maybe not *the best*; that sounded terribly asinine. There were many other, far superior perks; little rewards for risking life and limb for the good of humanity. After a long day of hacking and slashing through the creatures of the underworld, a few beers and a double bacon cheeseburger were a well-deserved reward.

And, she was a grown up. Even if she had yet to believe it. Although, at thirty-two, she was a wee babe in the lifespan of a demon hunter. Plus, it was still not wise to imbibe to excess, especially when planning an attack on one of the world's most venerable, yet mysterious creatures. Staid Bennett would remind her of that little tip anyway.

They'd been on this mission for years, yet somehow things weren't coming together. Two years ago, to the day, actually, they'd been hanging out in Quinn's apartment in San Francisco, her windows wide open so she could hear the comings and goings around Alamo Square. On that fateful day, as Bennett referred to it, Astrid, the self-declared bookworm of their ragtag demon hunting team, had nearly dropped her pizza when she stumbled upon the prophecy. Astrid had been perusing one of the older books from Quinn's ceiling-height bookshelf that took up the largest wall of her living room. Who read through prophecies for fun? Well, Astrid did.

She hadn't been looking for trouble, just enjoying an ancient book of prophecies from Quinn's library. For some reason, Astrid had been immediately convinced that it referred to their team. Not any of the other puzzling prophecies she'd read that night, it was just this one that seemed to strike a chord.

Bennett had jumped on board. Headfirst. Why wouldn't he? It was an incredibly romantic tale. Typha, the beautiful, notorious monster that was said to have taken their demon ancestor prisoner millennia ago, destined to be slain by a fearsome team, including a star-crossed pair of demon hunter lovers.

Dropping into the deep club chair across the table, Lana's arrival brought Quinn back to the present. "What were you saying about just cutting her head off?"

Quinn took a deep breath and smiled. "Simple plan, but it works on most monsters. Like tonight's vampires."

Sweeping her sleek blond hair over her shoulder, the corner of Astrid's lip lowered in an unhelpful scowl, "Nice try, but that wouldn't even finish the job on the vampires. They won't be truly finished until they're cremated."

"Fair point," she conceded. Raising her glass, Quinn let the ale slosh dramatically, not losing a drop to her smartass theatrics.

"And," Astrid continued, clearly prepared for this argument. "As we learned months ago, Typha may have hydra features."

Rolling her eyes, Quinn downed the last of the hefty brew and rested the empty glass at her side. Always a glitch; never an easy fix. Not that she minded; she actually enjoyed a challenge in her job. Birthright. Whatever. "No one has ever even seen a hydra. Maybe the head regrowth takes a while, like a lizard or starfish. Actually, that makes more sense; limb replacement rather than heads. Having multiple heads would be awfully confusing; would it grow extra brains each time? Sounds impractical." The corner of her mouth turned up in an impish smirk.

Astrid attempted to argue, but Quinn shook her head and smiled.

"Sorry, Astrid. I'm cranky and uncertain, and therefore ornery."

At her side, Bennett leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. His face serious, he was clearly in full Bennett-broody-mood tonight. "We're ready; I know some of you are uncertain, but we're running out of time. I'm sick of waiting for the final answers to magically appear. We have our route planned, ship stocked, bags packed. Activity in the Bering Sea has been picking up substantially, and I have little doubt it's Typha growing stronger and expanding her sphere. The prophecy is starting to unfold."

Quinn sealed her eyes shut to mask the impending eye roll. Nasty habit. Never complimentary. The trouble with using the gesture so often in jest, was that it came a bit too naturally when the situation absolutely did *not* call for it. "As much as I don't doubt there is something to the prophecy, we don't even know that it is referring to Typha specifically. I mean, yeah, it probably is. But it only refers to a team, two of which are demon hunter soulmates, that will defeat the monster that imprisoned the demon mother and threatens the veil."

Serene in his countenance, as usual, Bennett covered her free hand with his. "Most tales point to Typha as Deandra's captor. Many have tried to defeat her before." His eyes softened as he gazed at his and Quinn's joined hands. "But this, this is what our ancestors lacked."

"I'm not risking all of our lives on a multi-century game of telephone," she freed her hand and tied her shoulder-length red hair into a messy bun. She'd recently gotten carried away and cut some of the layers a bit too short, and a few strands refused to cooperate, falling back into her face. "We are five of the five hundred demon hunters alive today. Even the best of the best, those that studied the prophecy as well as we have, and with more experience, sought her and were never seen or heard from again. Although romantic relationships between demon hunters are rare, we are certainly not the first, nor will we be the last. I'm not sure that we are so special as to have been prophesized about millennia ago."

Prophecies, legends, rumors... all could be sources of critical information, Quinn had no hesitations about that. These stories came from somewhere, and none could be discounted. Hell, most of the creatures they faced were well documented in folklore. However, assuming blindly that one coincidence was the embodiment of such an important prophecy, even a rare romantic relationship between demon hunters, was downright dangerous. Flippancy and sarcasm kept her sane, but she was as dead serious as the rest of them when it came to keeping humanity safe.

Lana sat up in her cushy club chair. “Why do you think that is? We’re a sexy bunch. I’m not one for eugenics, but the theory could hold true for demon hunters.” She grinned, raising a wicked eyebrow and saluting with her double tequila before shooting it in swallowless gulp.

Chuckling in amusement, Quinn rejoined her hand with Bennett’s and kissed his knuckles. “Lana, I’m never bored, or lacking for strange thoughts when you’re around. Maybe it’s because most demon hunters are too weirded out by the shared ancestor thing.” She flashed Bennett a whimsical wink.

Bennett pulled her hand back down, linked their fingers together and rested their joined hands on his lap. “Very funny. Or, it’s because demon hunters are more closely related to the mythical world and tend to settle with their soulmates. As we are substantially fewer in number than the general population, it’s statistically much less likely that we will find that in another hunter.”

Again, Quinn struggled to refrain from rolling her eyes. Yeah, she believed in demons and monsters and everything that went bump in the night. She’d seen it; couldn’t miss a werewolf swinging its claws at you. But soulmates, true love, foretold fates... that was more likely to be a story to help lonely people sleep at night. Just because some myths were based in truth, doesn’t mean they all were. Even demon hunters could be fantastical in their thinking, maybe more than most full-humans.

Standing and smoothing the wrinkles from her super-slim skinny jeans and lacy top, Lana patted Bennett on the head, messing up his mid-length hair. “You’re cute. On that note, I’m going to find a little soulmate sort of action for myself.” Swinging her hips, she strode into the thick of the tavern’s hullabaloo of happy sailors.

Cousins close in age, Lana and Quinn definitely enjoyed the playful side of life; Lana a bit to the extreme sometimes. Lana had more in common with their grandfather, who hadn’t married and had children until he was a hundred and twenty, having enjoyed his bachelorhood so thoroughly.

From the darkened corner in their secluded nook, atop his stool, elevated above the rest, Vann kept his arms folded, his lids hooded as he spoke. “Even if you share the love foretold, with the power to defeat Typha, we are still five. *A team of six* is said to fulfill the prophecy.” The bass of his voice, although barely above a whisper, was penetrating, in stark contrast to the cacophony surrounding them of the crowded tavern.

Joyous laughter reverberated off the walls of the tavern. More so as Lana joined their revelry. Fishing had been unusually favorable in the seas surrounding Alaska for months, maybe even a year now. Experts attributed the good fishing to all kinds of environmental factors; although none had any evidence. Some said it was the declining sea ice coverage, others claimed it was the polar vortex, and more yet said it was another climate regime shift like in the mid-70s.

Quinn and her team knew better. Something was driving the fish, and it wasn’t mother nature.

Bennett sat up and took a ruminating pull on his scotch. “Astrid found that number documented once. In one book. We’re the closest anyone’s been to finding Typha in centuries. With each rising inch of the seas, she grows more powerful. With the timing... Quinn and me coming together, Vann joining us, Astrid finding the prophecy... this isn’t a coincidence. We have no choice but to take the risk. I know, with everything I am, that we are the team to defeat her.” His chocolate eyes were swirling with gravity, his mouth turned up in a half smile that exuded overconfidence.

From across the room, Lana embraced the handsomest fisherman in the room. Quinn couldn't help but smile. Poor guy didn't have a clue what he was getting into. Out of his league was an understatement.

Astrid shook her head again. Poor thing was going to wrench her neck with all the dissent tonight. "I agree. We are the team described in the prophecy, but we aren't complete. From what I can find, Six cannot be just any old demon hunter. Without Six, defeating her will be impossible. Deandra, our demon mother, is still said to be held in Typha's dungeon. I don't know about you, but I'd rather be disemboweled than end up the captive of such a demon."

Rising from the worn-out sofa, Quinn dropped Bennett's hand. "We've been working on this for two years. But our research has stagnated. No new information in months. Certainly, no sixth hunter looking to join our team. We've read every book, contacted every expert. I agree; things are accelerating, and the time is now, but we're not ready. The boat's ready, our gear is packed, the waters are passable as the sea ice is receding for the year... this feels like it should be the right moment. Let's fly out to Dutch Harbor, as planned, get on the boat, and do a little recon."

Vann nodded, rising from his own chair. Standing nearly a foot taller than the rest, he rested his elbow on Quinn's shoulder. Amused by his teasing antic to exaggerate their height difference, she pinched his ribs. "Agreed. We aren't learning anything more from here. Let's verify her location, check out her lair. See what we're up against. Maybe we'll stumble upon Six along the way."

Quinn nodded in agreement, yet hesitated. "Not sure we're that lucky. We're a strong team, one of the best, but part of what makes us good is caution."

Reaching out her hands, she offered a boost to Bennett. Mouth turned down gravely, he relented and accepted her recon suggestion. On his feet, squeezing her hand in his, Bennett led her outside.

She knew he was disappointed they weren't going all-in against Typha. When Bennett was set on something, there was that little could be done to change his mind. His bravery, his daring, was part of why she'd agreed to move beyond friendship. Going on two years now as a couple, and a lifetime of friendship, they had a comfortable rhythm.

Outside, the biting wind, unusually cold for the coastal town, sliced across the skin of her cheeks and bare arms. Missing her jacket, she shrugged and powered on anyway, ignoring the wintry blast. Among their abilities, demon hunters were extraordinarily resistant to cold. Still, she didn't like it.

Across the street, they politely nodded to the night clerk of their small apartment, extended-stay hotel really, and headed up the creaky stairs to their room. In the past, she'd always bunked with Lana and her family, but Bennett had wanted their own space this time as they were staying so long. While she missed visiting with her aunt and uncle at their grand cabin, she typically saw them often enough at their tavern. Sadly, she was going to miss her uncle this trip, as he was out on his own demon hunting mission with his team in Australia.

Turning the key in the lock, Bennett pushed open the dense wooden door. Although groaning on its arthritic hinges, the door didn't dare resist the force of his hand. Releasing his other hand, Quinn headed straight across the wide-plank refinished floor to the bathroom.

It took an extra jiggle, but the crystal knob cooperated and granted her entrance. The black and white tile floor was gleaming; almost blindingly shiny. Quinn was grateful for the weekly room service, and that they had been in today to refresh their towels and soaps. Despite the charming character of the old building, with its plush towels, Egyptian cotton sheets, and massive wood-burning fireplace, she really missed her hole-in-the-wall San Francisco apartment.

Maybe Bennett was right, and there was something about demon hunter relationships at least being different from an ordinary pairing. Marriage wasn't an expensive ceremony with tuxedos and a white dress, it was a ritual involving a permanent binding. After the ritual, the hunter's mate would take on some of the demon hunter's abilities to heal and live long lives, in order for the pair to form lifelong partnerships and parent their children together.

It was nearly impossible for demon hunters to have children outside of that binding, when their fertility windows began to sync with their partner. Being actively fertile only about once a year, at most, demon hunters often took decades to conceive. If on a mission at that time, the window didn't even open that year. Hell, Quinn had only experienced the unusual sensation four or five times in her thirty-two years.

Made sense; most demons were immortal and would have some serious population problems if they could procreate like rabbits. As human-demon hybrids, like their lifespans, demon hunter fertility was somewhere in between humans and demons. Of course, the occasional nutcase could try to spread their seed far and wide, causing some serious changes in humanity's connection to the paranormal, so limited ability to create offspring made sense for maintaining secrecy. Not likely what Deandra had in mind when she'd created their breed.

Not something Quinn wanted to imagine at this point in her life anyway. She'd rather follow in her grandfather's footsteps and wait another century. At least another half century would be preferable. Where Bennett may be ready for all that, she was a long way off.

"Quinn, can I come in?" Bennett knocked from outside the bathroom door she'd left ajar.

"Yeah, come on in," she answered back as she spread her favorite winter-fresh flavored toothpaste over her electric toothbrush. Meticulously, with perfect circles, she scrubbed the pearly whites. Rapid healing, strong immunity, physical prowess, three times the average human's lifespan... yet Deandra, their powerful demon ancestor that bred with a human and begat the first demon hunter thousands of years ago, hadn't included no-cavities in the special abilities she'd passed to her offspring.

Realizing she was still getting ready for bed, he stepped back and apologized. Poor, squeamish man. At least she wasn't peeing this time. He'd been horrified the first time she hadn't closed the door to use the toilet.

Spitting out the glob of toothpaste from her mouth, Quinn rinsed and dried her minty lips. "What's up?"

"I love you, Quinn," he began, then stopped. He ran a hand over his chiseled jaw, over his perfectly manicured eyebrows - not on purpose, he was born that way - over his patrician nose, down his subtly dimpled chin.

Long pause.

"Love you too..." Pulling out a long strand of floss, she continued her evening routine.

"Have you decided yet?" he asked, his puppy-pitiful chocolate eyes wide with hope. He leaned against the sage-green tile countertop and impatiently awaited her response. Again.

Finishing the back molars, she rinsed her mouth and brushed past him. Moving to sit on the foot of the cushy bed, she pulled her hair out of the messy bun and toyed with the rubber band.

"Can we talk about this when we get home?"

Bennett sat next to her. Several inches taller than her slight 5'4" frame, he was so densely packed with muscle that the bed sank under his weight and threw off her center of gravity. Slipping until she was glued to his side, she sighed through her nostrils.

"I think part of why we aren't ready to face Typha is because we haven't moved forward. When we join, it may set things in motion..." His eyes were dead serious.

Quinn couldn't ignore the sinking feeling in her gut. "The prophecy is very non-specific. It mentions true love between demon hunters, not marriage."

He continued with yet another reason they should settle down. "My mom has finally decided to settle permanently at the house in Washington. Dad's convinced her to give up the home in British Columbia. It's a great house. As soon as you say yes, I was hoping we could have the ceremony there. Then, maybe move in and start that family we always talked about?"

Quinn was surprised by the uncertainty in his voice. Perhaps all her hedging was taking its toll on his confidence. "This is a really big decision. We're so young--"

"Not that young," he interrupted, shifting to defensive.

"Just... let's talk about it again when we get back. We'll know more about what we're facing then anyway, and maybe I'll be ready then."

He nodded, the corners of his mouth turned down. "Okay. Come on, let's get some sleep."

Rising from the bed, Quinn flicked off the overhead light and shed her jeans and tee before joining him between the sheets. Knowing sleep wasn't going to come easy with the impending mission, she grazed her hand over his chest.

No reaction. Sliding her hand down, she tried to stir a little interest.

"Quinn, stop. We need rest. We have a long journey ahead." His tone was resigned, downright didactic.

With a rapid inhale and release of a useless breath, she pulled her hand away. "Okay," she offered in as bright a tone as possible.

Staring up at the dimly lit ceiling, she tried to calm the adrenaline coursing through her. Something stirred inside her, knowing this recon mission would turn the tides. That things were about to change.



Blaring like an air raid, the incessant beeping of her alarm clock drilled into Quinn's sleepy brain. She could survive with very little sleep, but she really liked a good night's rest. Last night hadn't been as restorative as she'd hoped.

Vivid dreams had inundated her, pulling her into a heavy state of unfamiliar longing. Must have been all that talk of soulmates. Tossing off the blankets, she passed Bennett as he set the coffee pot to brew.

She cranked the shower on hot and let the water cleanse her wandering mind. Something was different. All night, images of heart-wrenching passion, obsessive need for another, of penetrating emotion, flashed through her mind like memories that had yet to occur.

Her heart thundered wildly in her chest with thrill and desire as he stalked toward her. The corner of his mouth turned up in a flirty smile, silently sharing in a private memory of the night before. Dark eyes met hers. Hands clutched her hips to pull her closer. Soft lips grazed along her collar bone in a blazing trail of need.

Indescribable, gut-wrenching images continued to waft through her mind, bringing an awareness of what love should feel like, the sort the prophecy implied. Whatever happened to her brain during the night, she now knew what was missing.

Drying off, she quickly brushed, flossed, and got dressed. Her knee ticked rapidly as she sat on the foot of the bed, waiting for Bennett to finish getting ready. Like he'd said, but not what he'd meant, deciding would set things in motion.

As he pulled on his boots, Quinn found the courage to speak. “Bennett?” She asked, her voice wavering with a hesitance she wasn’t accustomed to, but she was beginning to realize she felt it all too often with Bennett.

He grunted, his mind clearly elsewhere. No doubt focused on the plan.

Knowing he was at least half listening, she sighed heavily, then found herself saying, “Now’s not the time to shed any doubt; I know that. But something’s not right, and it’s more than just missing a sixth demon hunter.”

“With the increase in demon activity over the past few months, we need to keep moving forward.” Again, he wasn’t wrong. More fishing vessels going missing. Wildlife slaughtered in unusual ways. The entire coast of Alaska was a hot spot for demon activity the past few months. About a year, really, but things were accelerating.

“I agree, Typha is growing more powerful; we need to intensify our investigation. But... Why you and me? We may both be demon hunters, but we’re not anything special.” Those dreams, the impending recon mission that felt so much heavier than it should... like a truth serum, she could no longer silence the doubts that had been brewing. *True love*, if that utter bullshit existed, it wasn’t the temperate relationship they shared.

He sat stiffly beside her, no longer able to pretend his shoelaces needed such focused attention. Did he doubt as she did? Or did he resent her hesitation? Shaking his head, lips pulled tight, his gaze finally turned towards her, searching for what she knew he wished was there. “Don’t say it,” he whispered.

The truth that had been steaming under the surface was boiling over. Filled with restless energy, she rose from the bed and paced the room. Chest aching as she felt the words erupt, she asked, “When has your pulse ever burned when I walked into a room? That you swept me off my feet and needed to make love to me with frenzied urgency? I think...” Her feet froze and she turned back toward him again. “We’re boring.” She knew it sounded a bit poetic, but for someone to crush one of the universe’s most powerful demons in a love foretold for generations... a little passion made for a more compelling story.

From childhood friends to lovers. What could be more romantic? They’d be good together the next few centuries. Quinn doubted she would even question their relationship, if the fate of the planet weren’t resting on the depths of their love for each other.

“We’re not... not *boring*,” he spat defensively, his spine ramrod straight.

“Yeah, we are.” Images of *more* kept pummeling her mind in a blissfully dizzying, heartbreaking awareness. “Have we ever... done it against the door because we were so desperate to have each other?” Her knees suddenly felt weak as she could almost feel the passion stroking across her skin, a love she suddenly craved beyond reason.

“Well, no. But, there’s always a perfectly comfortable bed around.” Ever so practical, he had an answer for everything.

Hot acid formed an obnoxious blurry fluid over her eyes. “Bennett, we’re a good team. The best of friends. But, we’re not some love that was prophesized thousands of years ago. We’re just... I think it’s time to call it quits.” Wiped out, she dropped back onto the bed and sat next to him.

Nodding, his lips drew tight in resigned acknowledgement. “Maybe.” Sighing heavily, he rose and moved toward the coffee pot, but hesitated. “Let’s... Can I have some time to let it soak in? Keep this between you and me for a while?”

“Sure,” she nodded. “Sure.” Quinn felt the tension easing from her aching limbs. Somehow, despite the awful throbbing in her chest, she felt... relieved. Hope bubbled under the surface; a weight lifted from her shoulders.

She should be weeping, distressed at the loss of a certain future with her childhood friend. Instead, something opened up inside her. The promise of tomorrow.

~ Eager for more? ~

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- **Running Home:** *September, 2019.* Payson Roberts is ready to settle down, until her plans are interrupted by the surly, mysterious Ronan McAllister.
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- **Wildest:** *12.26.2020* Bookworm demon hunter begrudgingly joins forces with a werewolf. Need I say more?
- *More to come in 2021!*



About Carrie Thorne

Carrie has long enjoyed the escapism a great piece of fiction can provide. Carrie is both scientist and artist, holding a master's degree in nursing, a bachelor's in geology, and comes from a diverse academic and professional background, which is reflected in the character and quality of her timeless romance novels.

A native of the Pacific Northwest, Carrie enjoys travelling and exploring the outdoors with her husband, their two young children, and their goofy Labrador retriever... and latest edition of a scruffy rescue.

You should write the book you want to read – a motto Carrie lives by. She enjoys nothing so well as curling up by the fire on a cold day with a hot cup of coffee (or wine) and a great book.

Thanks for reading!

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