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TEARS OF THE  
QUEEN

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BETHANY DRAKE



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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Eclipse Press' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

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## Chapter 1

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A cold chill raced down Alicia Braswell's spine as she walked through the darkened alley. Maybe taking the shortcut to her apartment building wasn't that smart of an idea.

Her sixth sense kicked in. Something didn't feel right.

Her low heels clapped against the concrete, filling the area with an eerie echo. She tightened her grip on her purse. The bright light of the streetlight at the end of the alley beckoned. Not much further to go. She knew how to protect herself, so she took a deep breath then increased her pace.

The off key tune of *Pop Goes the Weasel* bounced off the walls. The high-pitched whistle grated on her nerves. She picked her pace up another notch. She had promised to stay out of trouble, but it seemed to follow her.

The hairs on the back of her neck stood up and her muscles tightened. Her sixth sense went into hyperdrive. She slowed her breathing and focused on her surroundings. Darkness surrounded her. Whoever her assailant might be would be out of sight until he pounced. Her hearing picked up the harsh breath of the whistler. He was close.

The streetlight tried to break through the gloom. A few more feet and she would feel the glow of it surround her. Alicia kept moving, staring at the light, and hoping she could make it to the street before anything happened. This was the last time she would use the shortcut when she decided to grab a quick bite at the pizza parlor around the block.

A shadow fell across her path. "Where you going in such a hurry, sweetness?"

The raspy voice made her skin scrawl. Taking one last look at the light, she focused on the problem in front of her.

She was making a bad habit of defending herself. Some of her friends thought she had a death wish, but Alicia didn't do these things on purpose. She just wanted to get home and the shortcut would let her get to her apartment quicker.

Ducking her head, she kept walking. Maybe this guy would leave her alone when she ignored him. She sure hoped so. People were still talking about the last incident. Another one would make matters worse. "I don't want any trouble."

She tensed and hunched her shoulders slightly when he blocked her passage. A sigh escaped her when she realized a fight was coming her way. A smart woman would do as he asked so she would limit the chance of getting hurt. But a part of her knew she could wipe the floor with him. Her pride told her to kick his ass.

"You're a pretty little thing. Quite tasty." Light flickered against the six-inch tanto blade he held in his hand.

"Not really." The blade didn't frighten her. She could take it from him in the blink of an eye. Being a black belt had some perks. "I'm nothing but gristle. I'm sure you can find something more to your liking down on Wilkenson Avenue."

She stepped to his left. If she could reach the busy street he'd probably back off.

"No, honey. You're just what I'm looking for." His meaty hand grabbed her forearm and pulled her toward him.

“And what is that?” She looked up at him and smiled even though her heart beat hard in her chest. Why was she egging this guy on? She should walk away, but the adrenalin running through her veins kept her from running.

Maybe she wanted a fight.

Stupid girl.

His eyes held a wicked gleam in the darkened alley. His gaze darted around as he held her tight. “Fresh meat.”

“Sorry. I don’t date dumpster divers.” Dirt crusted around the folds in his neck. His rumpled clothing smelled like he hadn’t changed in a couple months. There was no way he would get the best of her.

He inhaled deeply. “You smell like you need a man.”

“I have AIDS.” She needed to give him one more chance.

“Good, so do I.”

Great. An idiot. “I must tell you I’m a black belt in taekwondo.”

“And I have a blade.” He slashed it in front of him for effect.

At that her smile widened. She couldn’t help herself. As a third degree she could hand him his teeth, but it was her job to get out of fights when necessary. “So?”

Her would be assailant hesitated. Good, she’d caught him off guard. This might become a winnable situation. Alicia stepped back to see if he would let go without a fight.

“Sorry, lady. I have the weapon.”

“And I am a weapon.” She sighed again as she centered herself. Pivoting and pulling her knee to her stomach, she shot out with a side kick, hitting him in the solar plexus. Hard.

He exhaled his air with a wheeze as he plopped on his butt.

She went into a sparring stance, waiting for his next move. It didn't take him long.

He shot to his feet and growled, shifting the knife from hand to hand.

The knife flashed and she used a butterfly block to stop it, grabbed his fingers at the juncture of the thumb and twisted his arm down. The knife clattered to the ground. "Now, I want to go home. You are going to let me pass and you're never going to accost anyone else."

"My arm," he whined.

"I'll break it if you persist." She twisted his limb in the opposite direction and pinned it up against his back, then stomped on his foot for good measure. Pain would be racing up his arm as it deadened.

"I-I promise."

"Good." She let go as he crashed to his knees. Hitching her purse up on her shoulder again, she stepped around him, and walked toward the lighted street and her apartment. Her eye caught the impression of something hiding in the shadows. She would have stayed to get a better look, but knew she had to leave the alley before her attacker became stupid again and changed his mind.

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HIS CLAWS CLICKED against the concrete when he moved deeper into the shadows. He didn't want her to see him this way. It was too soon. He watched as she hurried out of the alley. She had defended herself quite well. Better than he thought she would. A yawn ripped through him, catching him off guard, and making him take his eyes off her attacker for just a second. When he looked back he found the man gone.

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He scratched himself behind the ear. The man wouldn't get far, but if he gave him a head start, he'd at least have a little sport as he chased him.

The woman he'd deal with later.