



Having the
DRAGON'S
BABY

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MILLY TAIDEN

HAVING THE DRAGON'S BABY

SHIFTER SURROGATE PROGRAM

BOOK 3

MILLY TAIDEN



CONTENTS

About the Book

Having the Dragon's Baby

1. [Rachel](#)
2. [Marcus](#)
3. [Rachel](#)
4. [Marcus](#)
5. [Rachel](#)
6. [Marcus](#)
7. [Rachel](#)
8. [Marcus](#)
9. [Rachel](#)
10. [Marcus](#)
11. [Rachel](#)
12. [Marcus](#)
13. [Rachel](#)
14. [Marcus](#)
15. [Rachel](#)
16. [Marcus](#)
17. [Rachel](#)
18. [Rachel](#)
19. [Marcus](#)
20. [Rachel](#)

About the Author


Also by Milly Taiden

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are fictitious or have been used fictitiously, and are not to be construed as real in any way. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locales, or organizations is entirely coincidental.

Published By
Latin Goddess Press
Winter Springs, FL 32708
<http://millytaiden.com>
Having the Dragon's Baby
Copyright © 2023 by Milly Taiden

All Rights Are Reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Property of Milly Taiden
September 2023

 Created with Vellum



ABOUT THE BOOK

Tired of her humdrum life in a quaint town's diner, Rachel Brookes is ready to make big changes in her life. Ideally with motherhood and a loving partner. Since that's not happening, she settles for being part of the Shifter Surrogate Program. **This puts her on the path of the strongest, hottest and baddest dragon shifter ever.**

Marcus, alpha of the Artemis dragon thunder, can't find the source of young shifters vanishing, leaving a chilling trail of kidnappings across various clans and packs. Along with that, his family and den are pressuring him to secure an heir. **When he meets his new surrogate, he discovers they have a deeper bond than he could have imagined.**

An elusive adversary threatens to destroy their newfound happiness. As the shifter world trembles, Marcus must protect his fated mate and the life they've created. **Can he find the unknown enemy and safeguard their love? And will Rachel embrace the unforeseen risks of love in a world of supernatural danger?**



HAVING THE DRAGON'S BABY

SHIFTER SURROGATE PROGRAM 3

NEW YORK TIMES and USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MILLY TAIDEN

—For all my readers,

Thank You!

ONE



RACHEL

“Blow it out your ass!”

Of course, Rachel didn't say that, but she sure as shit wanted to. Instead, she bit her tongue and smiled pleasantly. “Right away, sir. I apologize for the inconvenience.”

She turned away with the returned plate of food and headed to the kitchen.

“Stupid fucking people. If it was so bad, then why would you eat almost *all* of it, then return it and ask for a new plate because it's ‘not how you asked for it to be cooked?’” she mumbled to herself as she pushed her hip into the swinging kitchen door. “Oh, wait, I know! Because you're a lying fat-ass!” she half-shouted once the door had shut behind her.

The line cook looked at her with a raised eyebrow and smirk as she tossed the plate on the back counter.

“Someone piss you off again?”

“I don't even want you to cook them another plate. Look how much they ate before they had a problem with it,” she huffed, pointing at the almost empty plate.

“Well, we'll give them some of the old meat and cook it perfectly. That way, we aren't out of anything, and I don't have to waste our fresh stuff on them since they clearly enjoyed it the first round.”

Rachel nodded and went back out to tell the customer that the new order would be out soon.

She was tired of waitressing at the local diner for lazy creeps who constantly played the system. Her manager never wanted to do anything about it since he was afraid of losing customers, but if this kept up the way it

had, the diner would become bankrupt.

She rolled her eyes, knowing the real reason he did nothing about it. The owner was scared of being called a bigot if he were to turn away someone who ended up being a shifter.

It may have been a small town, but shifters and humans coexisted quite peacefully. There were no issues between the two species. In fact, Rachel thought most shifters were better mannered than humans, but the fear of being blacklisted was too horrid a thought for the owner. Apparently, he'd rather go bankrupt.

After another hour, Rachel was finally through with her shift. She saluted the kitchen staff and headed out the back door, still smelling like grease and stale coffee. She got in her pickup truck and let her mind go blank during the always monotonous drive home.

The truth was Rachel loved living here. The small-town life suited her. But the older she got, the more she felt restless. It was as if she were destined for something bigger than waitressing at the local diner.

Maybe she had just been doing it too long. There had to be something else she could do, something better.

Ten minutes later, she was at her small house. She turned off the old truck and looked at the dark windows of her home.

She knew what she really wanted. A family. Kids. She had wanted that for a long time now, and it seemed it was getting further and further away. Almost to the point where she thought it might never happen.

Rachel shook her head, hating that she was feeling sorry for herself.

She had always been fine with being independent, and there was nothing she couldn't do, including being a mother. But if it wasn't in the cards, then that's the way it would be.

She was done trying to find Mr. Right. The world was full of losers, and she had plenty of the customers at the diner trying to woo her or leaving her their numbers, but none of them were to her liking.

She wasn't sure there was anyone in this town who suited her. She had too much fire and ambition for all of them. And she didn't plan on changing for anyone, especially to make them feel more like a man. That was their own issue.

Rachel walked inside and flipped on the lights as she pulled her messy, dirty-blond hair out of its ponytail and combed her fingers through it.

She quickly stripped off her work attire and jumped in the shower, not

wanting the smell of the diner to linger. Feeling revived after the mildly cool rinse-off, Rachel threw on her sweats and baggy T-shirt and settled in for the evening.

She had no plans besides checking her email and the news. The rest was a toss-up between a book or a show, depending on how the mood struck her.

“Just living the dream,” she grumbled to herself as she started up her laptop.

She began with her email, quickly deleting all the junk. She almost deleted one labeled SSA but stopped when she read the header that went with it.

Good afternoon, Ms. Rachel Brookes. We are reaching...

She clicked on it since it used her full and correct name, just to see what they were selling. Most spam used the fake name she used when buying things online.

Her eyes grew wide as she read the rest of it.

... out to you today to see if you would be interested in interviewing with us. We are an organization called the Shifter Surrogacy Agency, and you have been recommended to be a possible candidate through our facility.

If you would like to accept the interview, reply to this email with dates and times that work with your schedule. You can also call us at the number below. We would be happy to answer any questions you may have for us via the interview and proceed from there.

We look forward to hearing from you. – Sylvia

Rachel stared at the email for over ten minutes, reading it over and over.

Is this some kind of joke? I've never heard of this place. And who the hell would have recommended me to them? Her mind ran through a short list, but she kept coming up empty.

It piqued her interest, that was for sure. She'd been ready to be a mother for a long time, but she knew surrogates usually didn't get much say in the upbringing of the child. Then again, it depended on the program. Or so she'd heard.

It wouldn't hurt to reach out and get a feel for what they were really about, would it?

“Maybe Luna's heard of them,” she said to herself as she grabbed her cell and called her best friend. She seemed to be in the know about most things.

“Hello?” Luna's singsong voice came over the speaker.

“Hey, it's me. I have a question for you.”

“Shoot.”

Rachel told Luna about the email and read it to her. “Have you ever heard of this place or why they would reach out to me? Or should I just delete it?”

There was a squeal on the other side. “No! Don’t delete it.”

Rachel narrowed her eyes in suspicion, even though Luna wasn’t there to see it. They had been close enough for a long enough time that she knew Luna could sense it.

“What do you know?” Rachel questioned.

“I can tell you’re glaring at me. Don’t do that! I may or may not have been the one to sign you up.”

“You what?” Rachel was taken aback. This was a bold move for the laid-back Luna, who usually was the exact opposite of Rachel.

“I signed you up. I heard about this place through some people at work and looked into it. It seems like a great opportunity for someone like you.”

“Someone like me?”

“Oh, you know. Someone looking to have a child but more than capable of handling her own self. You like adventure and a little spice, so I figured shifters would be right up your alley, especially since you deal with them on a regular basis at the diner. Some people don’t know anything about them or are terrified. You’re good on both counts.”

Rachel sighed, intrigued but slightly terrified. “I honestly don’t know that much about them.”

“That’s the best part. It doesn’t matter.” Luna was definitely doing the big sell. “The agency will fill you in on everything. Any questions you have, they answer them. I promise. Besides, from what we do know and what I was able to find out, shifters seem more your type than humans.”

Rachel laughed. “Oh? Why is that?”

“Well, for one, they’re very family-oriented and protective, just like you. They don’t lead the ordinary, mundane lives that we humans do, and you would constantly be learning new things. I heard they usually want the mother to have some inclusivity with the child, and I know that is something you want as well. Plus, you’d be more than set for life if you had one of their babies.”

“You know I wouldn’t be in this for the money,” Rachel protested.

“I know, I know. I’m just saying. It’s usually alphas looking for an heir, and they take extremely good care of their child’s mother.”

It all sounded quite lavish and almost too perfect.

“What’s the catch?”

“What do you mean?” Luna asked.

“What else is there to this? You’re giving me the selling points, but why isn’t every woman doing this if it’s so great?”

Luna laughed. “Because shifters are picky, but the agency seems to be even pickier. They have a specific process of evaluating potential prospects so that they find the best choices for the shifters and the humans. SSA is very proud of their results, and it sounds like they aim to keep it that way.”

“How did you learn so much about them?”

Luna let out a sigh. “I told you, people I work with know people who did it, and all the stories are the same. Rach, I think it would at least be worth doing the interview. You can always tell them no thanks if you don’t like what you hear.”

Luna was right. Rachel just wasn’t sure how to take all of this. It seemed so sudden that she wanted to sit on it for a while, but she knew that if she did, she’d either miss her opportunity or put it to the back of her mind altogether. Then it would be her own damn fault for letting the opportunity pass her by.

And right now, it was the only chance out there.

Rachel took a deep breath and made the choice.

“Okay. If you say it’s legit and worth checking out, I’ll go see. Especially since you went through the trouble of already signing me up.”

She smiled as she heard Luna cheer over the phone.

“Okay, good. And be sure to let me know how it goes and what you think. I’m eager to know more as well.”

“I will, and Luna?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for looking out for me.”

Rachel heard the smile on her best friend’s face. “Well, someone has to. You protect everyone but yourself, so that’s what I’m here for. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

Rachel ended the call and stared at the email. She took a deep breath and clicked reply.

She quickly typed that she was interested in interviewing and what days and times worked for her. She edited it and pressed send without hesitation, knowing nerves would get to her if she delayed too long.

She let out a breath as she pushed herself away from her laptop. That was it. She had accepted the invitation to interview to be a shifter’s surrogate.

Holy shit, was she really doing this?

TWO



MARCUS

“What do you mean we haven’t been able to come up with anything?” Marcus barked over the phone.

He was sitting in his office, trying hard not to rip his jet-black hair out of his head. He and the other alphas had been working together to discover why shifters were suddenly coming up missing.

Marcus had his own dragon den out scouting for any leads or suspicious activities and was coming up empty-handed. He was losing both patience and sleep over it.

“How do they not know *anything* about their abductors?” he seethed, knowing the unlucky enforcer he was on the phone with was probably cringing. “You’re telling me that two of our own were almost kidnapped, and they saw *nothing*? How?”

He tapped his fingers in irritation, trying to hold back the inner fire of his dragon.

“It was dark, sir.” The enforcer definitely sounded like he was cowering. “They were attacked from behind, and they never got a good look or even a whiff of their attackers. And whoever it was took off as soon as help showed up.”

Marcus blew out his annoyance. “I’ll meet with them myself and see if they remember anything. We need some hard information before this gets even more out of hand. All the clans, thunders, and packs are taking these hits. And since it’s the young ones, it’s destroying our numbers and making us look weak. It needs to stop. It cannot and will not be tolerated!” he yelled before slamming the receiver down.

He threw himself into his chair. He wasn’t necessarily angry with his den.

He was angrier at himself for not being able to protect them from such a threat.

He didn't even have a place to start looking. No one did.

It was, in fact, the first time in a long time that all the local alphas were communicating and working together, which showed how bad it really was. Worse, no one had a lead.

The only thing Marcus could surmise was there had to be another shifter behind it. They would be the only ones with enough knowledge or capability to overtake young, strong shifters from multiple clans.

Marcus rubbed his eyes as if it would help him think. He glanced at his reflection in the glass cabinet and noticed how bloodshot his green-gold eyes looked. The bags underneath them didn't help. His strong jawline was even covered in scruff, something he usually kept under control.

Everything seemed to be less important now with the crisis at hand. Still, he needed to act and look his part. He needed to appear civilized or at least make the attempt.

He headed to the bathroom to throw cold water on his face and slow down his mind. Not that it helped all that much.

When Marcus got back to his office, Vincent, his beta and most trusted, was sitting at the desk, his blue eyes bright with mirth.

"I hear you've been busy."

Marcus shut the door behind him and sat down, folded his hands on the desk, and let out a heavy sigh. "It's a shit show, Vince. Have you heard anything about the missing shifters? Anything new, that is, besides nothing."

Vincent shook his head. "Not a word. But that's not what I'm talking about."

Marcus gave him a curious look. "What else could you be talking about? This is the only matter the den is concerned with. Or it should be, anyway. There are no rivalries happening right now since we've called a truce. At least until this matter is cleared up." He suddenly sat up, concern in his eyes. "What else has happened?"

Vincent's grin widened as he relaxed in his chair, kicking out his long legs. "Nothing. Besides the news of you finding a potential mate through the Shifter Surrogacy Agency."

Marcus's eyes narrowed, but he kept his demeanor calm. "You heard about that, huh?"

"You thought that could be a secret? Come on, I'm your beta, Marcus."

We all know you are an only child, and your family has been on your ass about producing an heir.”

It was no secret. Marcus was getting older and wasn't interested in the mundane dating scene. He needed a child for when he retired or died, but he was losing hope.

He wouldn't dare tell his family that, though. He wanted them to assume he was too busy with his alpha duties to pursue a mate. It suited his persona. But in reality, Marcus had found nothing but garbage when he had, in fact, taken the time to look.

His mother had pushed him into signing up with the Shifter Surrogacy Agency just to give it a try.

Marcus fought it at first, not wanting to leave his future in the hands of some program. If he couldn't do it on his own, then how the hell could an agency do any better? He just didn't want more people involved in his private affairs. His family was more than enough.

Then, while talking to some other alphas about their current missing shifters problem, Marcus inquired if any of them had heard of SSA or had tried it. He admitted he was a bit annoyed at the positive responses.

But since he wanted his family off his back, he signed up.

“Do you think it will work?” Vincent asked, amusement still in his eyes. “I'm just curious. I don't know much about it.”

Marcus glared. “Me either. All I know is that the others I talked to about it raved about how well the companionship setup was articulated. One even told me he had met his fated mate through it.”

Vincent's eyes widened. “Fated mate? That is impressive. But the likelihood of that happening is like...”

“Low, I know. You don't have to remind me.” Marcus sighed as he ran his hands through his already tousled hair. “That's the thing that surprised me since dragons seem to have a harder time finding their fated mates than most shifters. But if the agency is that good...”

“Have you heard back from them at all?”

Marcus shook his head. “Not yet, but it is what it is. At least my family can lay off me while we focus on what needs our attention most right now. And with what's going on with the kidnappings, I don't know if now is even the right time to start a family. Frankly, my problems are nothing compared to the disappearances. So, let's switch gears.”

Vincent nodded in agreement as Marcus thumbed through the notes on

his desk for a moment before slamming the useless notepad shut and shoving it aside.

“Temper, temper,” Vincent said with a grin. “You’re going to catch everything on fire if you don’t calm down.”

Marcus shot his friend a glare but took a deep breath and nodded. “Okay. So, here’s all I know. These young shifters are all from different thunders and packs. Male and female. There is no structure or pattern to them, except they seem to be on the younger side. Young enough to be manipulated into ... I don’t know what. But I would hope that most are smarter than that.”

Vincent leaned forward in his chair, his face worried and grave. “Have you heard anything at all? Even a whisper on a theory?”

Again, Marcus shook his head, frustrated. “I told you. It’s a shit show. We have absolutely nothing. Not one iota of why or who, so we can’t even get a step ahead of the son of a bitch that’s destroying us one member at a time.”

He abruptly stood and started pacing. In spite of Vincent’s warning, his inner dragon roared at his inability to do anything.

His whole den was in danger. Hell, *all* of the clans were in danger, and he sat here talking about his pain of not having an heir. How pathetic. It made him even angrier thinking that he had allowed himself to be distracted by the thought of a surrogate. Family nagging or not.

Marcus growled as he backhanded a paperweight off his desk and against the wall, leaving it stuck in the hole it created.

Vincent let out a low whistle. “I wasn’t kidding about the fire thing. I know this pisses you off, but getting to your boiling point won’t allow you to think any more clearly.”

Marcus kept pacing, not trusting his serpent tongue to speak at the moment.

“Why don’t you let me question the two that were almost taken?”

The alpha spun on his heel. “I can do it myself.”

His beta stood slowly and cautiously walked over to him. “I know you can. But look at you. Our lack of knowledge is pushing you over the edge. You’re beyond stressed about this, and it’s also my job to help protect the thunder ... and you from yourself. Right?”

Marcus lifted his head slightly but said nothing.

Vincent continued. “I’ll go talk to them. Maybe they’ll loosen up and remember something that will give us a lead. You stay close and up to date

with the other alphas. Let me help where I can.”

Marcus’s nostrils flared as he restrained himself from protesting. Vincent was right. The young ones might be too intimidated and would probably close up even more if their alpha couldn’t control his rage.

He blew out a frustrated breath. “Fine. You talk to them, but let me know if anything they say is new. Take everything into consideration. I want a full report of their conversation with you the next time we talk. Meet with them today if you can.”

“I will make it happen.”

“Good.” Marcus sat and opened his desk drawer, pulling out a bottle of whiskey and two tumblers. He filled them halfway and slid the second to Vincent.

“Here’s to taking down this asshole,” Vincent said as he raised his glass.

“Here’s to getting the shifters back,” Marcus countered as their glasses clinked, and then he took a swig.

Vincent reclined in his seat. Marcus could feel him watching his moves.

“If you have something more to say, just say it,” Marcus said, trying to hold off on his bitterness.

Vincent took another sip as he smirked. “Just that I can’t wait to see who they think will be a good match for the hot-headed alpha dragon.”

“I told you, I’m not going to worry about that now.”

“Now’s the perfect time to worry about it. Maybe getting your mind off the missing shifters will help you see the situation more clearly. A new perspective. Hell, it may even make you happy.”

If Marcus was in his dragon form, steam would have rolled out of his nostrils. Deep down, however, he hoped Vincent was right. The SSA was his last hope at not only finding a mate but securing his name and future.

THREE



RACHEL

“Are you Rachel?”

Rachel was sitting and nervously tapping her foot when the question startled her out of her anxious silence.

“What? Oh, yes.” She stood and forced a smile on her face for the older, dark-haired lady who had suddenly materialized in the waiting room.

Sylvia seemed to be polite enough, but Rachel was apprehensive, nonetheless. Her appointment with the Shifter Surrogacy Agency had come much quicker than she had anticipated, and she hadn’t really let it sink in. Not until she was sitting in the waiting room for her interview.

Now it was too late for second guesses.

Sylvia stuck out her hand to shake. “Nice to meet you.”

Rachel shook it. “You as well.”

Sylvia opened her office door for Rachel to enter. “I’m so glad you chose to accept our request.”

Rachel walked into the roomy office and took a seat opposite Sylvia’s desk as the representative took her own and flipped open a leather-bound book, pulling out a sheet with Rachel’s info on it.

“So, tell me, Rachel. You’re here looking to be a surrogate for a shifter, correct?”

“Uh, yes. My friend actually recommended me. I’ve been wanting to be a mother for a while, but I never heard of the agency until now ... through my friend,” Rachel stuttered out in explanation.

Sylvia smiled and set her pen down before folding her hands on her desk. “That’s not a problem. Between the information we had you fill out before our interview and what we have been told by your friend, it sounds like you

would be a great candidate for our agency. In fact, we might already have a possible match for you.”

Rachel was speechless. She wasn't even sure if she wanted to do this. Everything had happened so fast that she really hadn't had time to fully think it through. She was just here to get a feel for the land. And now, they already had a match for her?

Sylvia smiled warmly. “I can tell you weren't ready to be set up so quickly, especially not knowing much about us.”

Rachel nodded, thankful that Sylvia was perceptive enough to not be offended by Rachel's reaction.

“No worries. First, let's start with your role here. You would be a surrogate for a shifter. In this case, a very powerful shifter, and honestly, we don't get a lot of this specific variety, but you seem like a strong fit for him.”

Rachel's curiosity got the best of her. “What sort of shifter is he?”

Sylvia smiled again. “He's a dragon. The alpha of the local thunder who is in need of an heir since he is an only child. The agency may be quick with its turnaround process, but it is precise.”

Rachel felt her eyes widen. No kidding...

“You two would meet and decide if you want to move further. He, of course, would get the final say about whether he chooses you for a surrogate. Just because we match the best we can doesn't always guarantee the shifter connects with the potential partner in the way we hope.”

“A dragon?” Rachel was still stuck on that aspect.

She had met a lot of shifters in her day, especially at the diner, but she never knew for sure what they were most of the time. Honestly, she didn't even know if she had met a dragon before, but her adventurous side spoke loud and clear that this might be worth trying for the experience if nothing else.

Rachel quieted her wild side and thought about what else Sylvia had said about how the male would choose if they should proceed. But at least they first met each other in person to see if they thought they were compatible, not just on paper.

“Okay.” Rachel nodded. “That all makes sense. How involved will I be in our child's life, and how do we go about ... creating it?”

“How involved you are will depend on the shifter and their intentions, as well as yours. Again, he gets the say, but you have the right to say no. Most shifters don't have a problem with the mother being involved with their child.

In fact, they often prefer it. As for the making of the child, that will be between you and the shifter. Literally.” Sylvia paused, obviously waiting for a reaction from Rachel before continuing. “Your child will be made the old-fashioned way.”

That was what Rachel had assumed, but hearing it seemed so forward. Especially given the day and age they lived in.

She swallowed the lump in her throat. “If you don’t mind, may I ask why it’s not like other surrogate agencies where it’s all done in a lab?”

“It’s actually very simple. The shifter wants to make sure it is his genes and traits that are being passed along, as well as the potential mother’s. That’s why our interview process is so specific and extensive. It also allows for more effective results, given that you two need to be comfortable enough to sleep with each other more than once. The success is proof enough for that reason alone.”

It all made sense. Especially since the shifters wanted their shared genes passed on and not tampered with. She didn’t blame them for not putting their future in the hands of a human lab.

“How involved will I be with the thunder?”

“Depends on what the alpha wants. They are all very family-oriented, so I suspect you will have dealings with them on a regular basis as long as the alpha permits it. As for specifics, I can’t really say. I’m also aware that you are quite comfortable with shifters and have a general knowledge of them.”

Rachel adjusted herself in her seat, trying to not show her sudden onset of cold sweating. “That’s correct. I don’t know any species specifics, but I do have some knowledge.”

Cold sweat aside, she was more than intrigued by this situation. It called out to her as the change that she had been looking for, but she was still full of fear and doubt about actually going through with it. She just didn’t want the fear to run her life and make her miss out, but it did make her hesitant.

“That’s good to know.” Sylvia nodded. “We’ll send you all the information, should you choose to proceed, and then your match will be able to fill in any blanks you have or specifics about his particular thunder.”

She couldn’t stop herself from suddenly blurting out. “I don’t really know how to feel about all of this. Don’t get me wrong. This sounds like a great opportunity, but I don’t want to jump into anything just because I want a child. You’ve answered my questions beautifully. I just ... I don’t know. This whole process is foreign to me and hard to comprehend, that’s all.”

That was the best explanation Rachel could give. She wasn't one to admit that she had doubts or fears about anything, so she went with her rendition of the truth. She was scared and nervous about it all, sure. But she also didn't want to completely blow her chances either. She waited to see how her words hit her interviewer.

Sylvia nodded in understanding and gave her a serious look. "I appreciate your candor. It actually makes you appear even more fit for this type of program and the potential shifter we have chosen. That being said, I don't want you to be uncomfortable by any means. Make the choice that is right for you.

"But may I suggest, since you are so uncertain whether this is a good fit for you, maybe meeting with this alpha would at least give you more of an answer as to whether you want to proceed or not. As I said earlier, you do have a choice here, even after you two meet and talk about what you want from this."

Sylvia wasn't pushing her into a corner. She was just making some very valid points. Ones that Rachel's logical side couldn't argue with, especially since she was on the fence.

"Would it be like a date?" Rachel asked. Not that it mattered. She was just buying time.

"Usually, yes. But not this time. We are hosting a mixer in a few days where you will be able to meet your match. One-on-one but with much less pressure. Does that sound more to your liking?"

"Yes," Rachel answered without even thinking. Was she really agreeing to this?

Sylvia looked satisfied. "So, are you ready to give this a chance?"

"Yes," Rachel responded again. She couldn't believe she'd reacted that quickly, but now it was too late. At least to back out from meeting her match.

"Perfect." Sylvia pushed away from the desk as Rachel stood. She opened the door. "I will send you the details via email this afternoon. Remember, don't hesitate to reach out if you have any questions. Melinda will give you the shifter intel documents on your way out."

Rachel smiled, nodded her thanks, and went into zombie mode as she gathered her documents and headed out to her pickup.

It was as if she were having an out-of-body experience. And now, not only was she trying to come to terms with what she had just decided to do, but she was also meeting her parents and Luna for dinner to discuss her day.

Which, of course, sent her anxiety skyrocketing the moment she pulled up to the quaint restaurant she and Luna frequented. She saw through the window that her family and Luna were already seated and waiting for her.

She took a breath and convinced her legs to lead her inside.

Luna was the first to see her and waved her over. “Rach!”

Rachel’s parents turned and smiled at their daughter as she came to join the table.

“Hey, honey. How was your day?” her mom asked. “Luna said you had some exciting things going on.”

Rachel gave Luna a disgruntled look, but she wasn’t sorry. Her brown-haired friend simply smiled unapologetically.

“Yes, I do. It was Luna’s idea, but she convinced me it may be a good one, so I went along with it. I had the interview today.”

Their server came over and took Rachel’s order. When he left, her father and mother were looking eagerly at her.

“Interview? For what? How did it go?”

Her family knew what she had wanted for a long time. They never doubted her and had always stood behind her. This just felt rash to Rachel, and very unlike her, so she wasn’t sure how they would take it. Having Luna in her corner helped, but that was momentary.

Rachel looked at Luna for courage and just let everything come out about the agency, the interview, the surrogacy, and the mixer.

Luna looked ecstatic, but Rachel’s parents were quiet.

“So? Thoughts?” was all she could ask.

After a moment, her father spoke. “We have lots of questions and our own opinions, but first of all, are you sure?”

“I wasn’t, but the more I think about it, the more I want to take this opportunity and see where it goes.”

Her father nodded and gave her a quiet smile. “Then we support you, no matter what. You know that. But now we have questions.”

FOUR



MARCUS

Marcus wasn't exactly thrilled about having to attend the mixer. But it was a practical, necessary step that had to be taken before being able to gain himself an heir. Getting to know the woman who could potentially hold the key to his legacy would be a good idea. Plus, he had to keep up his reputation as a class act ... he was, after all, the alpha of a rather notorious dragon thunder.

Marcus had a lot on his mind that night, like he did every night. Namely, the missing shifters. He still didn't think it was the best time for him to be deciding on a surrogate, but it was far too late. Vincent, along with the rest of the thunder and his close family members, had been rather adamant about the matter.

He thought about the fact that they weren't entirely wrong as he polished the final touches on his appearance in his bathroom. He was getting older by the second, and that meant he was only that much closer to retirement or death. Without a proper heir, the thunder would have to find an entirely new family to lead them, and that was another part of his legacy that he didn't want to have stained.

Marcus adjusted his tie, a soft pale-rust shade of paisley, moody and autumn-themed, just like the party he was invited to. He dressed it up with a mahogany jacket and slacks, keeping the look formal and serious with a sprig of zest and personality.

Not that zest was a vital part of his personality. It was more Vincent's attempt to mask his stoic demeanor.

"You want her to actually like you, right?" Vincent jested when Marcus was selecting his outfit.

Marcus let out a sharp grunt. "It's the theatrics I'm not a fan of. The

pageantry and all that bullshit,” he replied.

“Get used to it,” Vincent said, rolling out the burnt orange paisley patterned piece. “She is going to see you first, and you have to make a good impression. If you want this to work, of course.”

Vincent, as usual, had been right. He was a good man whom Marcus trusted with the optics of his leadership as well as some blunt truths the rest of the den wasn’t keen on delivering. He finished off with a mist of a fine musk cologne along his neckline and wrists, then pushed out into the night.

It was an elegant garden party, taking place on the grounds of a rather quaint estate in the countryside. Marcus wasn’t sure if it belonged to Sylvia, the woman who ran the agency, or if it belonged to one of her associates. He had been told that he would meet the woman who had applied to the agency and who could possibly be assigned to him. But there was no contract signed yet. That all depended upon this first meeting.

The aesthetics were appealing, with fairy lights strewn around shrubs and tall maples drawing the eye to multiple white tents that were set up for the event. It was a semi-casual affair with humans and attractive and rather wealthy shifters alike.

His heart raced in his chest as he walked to the bar. It had a charming lavishness about it, with the kaleidoscopic shade of the different, glistening liquor bottles.

He figured he could have a few drinks before meeting the potential surrogate and stood there adjusting his tie while drumming his fingers against the wood surface. Being nervous was a rare sensation for Marcus. He was normally able to leap headfirst into any situation without blinking. That was the nature of alphas, along with an extra layer of critical thinking and quick decision-making.

“Two fingers of Jameson, neat,” he ordered.

The bartender, like the rest of the servers, was dressed in all black. He nodded and got to work. Marcus dropped his gaze to the grass below, which was pristine and had most likely been recently curated by landscapers.

Get it together. You need this. It’s for the thunder.

“Come here often?”

A voice snuck between his reverie. It was sweet, like a bird song at dawn.

Marcus lifted his head and regarded the woman who had come over to the bar while he had been distracted. In front of him was a vision striking his heart like a gong for the first time in his long dragon existence.

She wore a sundress in a crisp shade of coral, resting against the creamy skin of her shoulders and cutting a sharp V-shape down her neckline. Her sandy-blonde hair, wavy and carefree, kissed her collarbone. She stood with a glass of scotch in her hand raised triumphantly over the bar. And then, there were her eyes, a glimmering sea green that somehow highlighted the dusty blush of her cheeks and lips.

Something moved inside him at that very moment. It was a lot like feeling the Earth shift, all while the din of the party rang out, and no one else noticed.

He knew then, without knowing how it happened, the true reason he had been brought there.

“Sorry?” he said, swallowing to remedy his dry mouth.

The woman tittered, leaning forward against the bar. “I’m the one that should be sorry. I’ve always wanted to use that line.”

She approached him, and something exotic and noble, like the scents of lilacs and eucalyptus, wafted in the air around him. She reached for his hand with hers, a smile resting on her face as blinding as the sun.

“My name is Rachel. I’m your surrogate.”

Marcus reached out to take her hand, which was silky smooth but also strong and bold. She shook his with a firmness very few women had ever been capable of.

“Yes, yes, I’m sorry,” he said, forcing a smile to veil his awe. “I wasn’t expecting to meet you so soon.”

Rachel narrowed her eyes at him, her grin melting away. For a beat, Marcus thought he had said something wrong.

“If we’re going to get to know each other, you’re going to have to stop apologizing so much.”

The bartender placed his drink in front of him while the vibrant, enticing image stood at his side. After a few long seconds, her face brightened, and she lightly brushed a hand against his forearm with a playful slap.

“Wow, I didn’t know shifters couldn’t take a joke!” she said with a smile.

Marcus was beyond charmed. He had known her for barely a second, and she was already making his dragon whisper. Could she be it for him?

He smiled broadly, feeling young and boyish.

“Oh, well, yes, we can take a joke,” he said, lifting the smokey whiskey to his lips. “But only jokes most humans would never understand.”

A pink tongue slid between her teeth, and she raised her glass to her

mouth, taking a sip. Her eyes hadn't left him for a second, and he was glad. He was entranced, entirely taken in by his mating pull.

"You are going to have to teach me about that then," she whispered.

The hubbub of the party around them may as well have been muted. Some cosmic force drew a bubble around them, encasing them in a private, magical universe. Rachel also had a way about her that transcended the mating pull. She was direct, unwavering, naturally enthusiastic, and intriguing.

Marcus sensed she was longing for adventure. And judging by her body language and the way she bent toward him, there was a longing for him, too.

Her gaze escaped him as Sylvia approached, her smile threatening to shatter her cheekbones.

"Oh, I see you two have already met," she said, holding her arms open to him. "I'm so glad we could finally make this work, Marcus."

"So, that's your name then," Rachel said, coolly leaning up against the bar on her forearms. She flashed him a wink that made him feel like fainting.

What enchantment is this?

"Yes," he replied, turning to Sylvia to conceal the faint hot rush of his cheeks. "I am also very happy we could make this work. Rachel already seems rather magnetic."

"Oh my." Rachel raised her eyebrows, hiding her fetching smile behind the glass.

"So, since introductions have already been made, would you like to have a little tour around the estate? Or would you like to get further acquainted first?" Sylvia asked, her eyes flickering with excitement.

Rachel and Marcus looked at each other at the same time, a spark radiating in Rachel's shimmering green eyes. Marcus cleared his throat and gave Sylvia a look, and he thought she could see everything he was thinking.

"Let's do the tour. We can have a few drinks and a dance after if you're interested."

He dared to turn to Rachel, who finished off her drink swiftly. She wiped her mouth delicately, still beaming at him.

"That sounds wonderful. Lead the way then, Mr. Alpha."

Marcus held out the crook of his arm to her, and she took it, sliding a strong hand through and hooking her arm around his. Up close, she was even more divine. Her body appeared lean and athletic beneath the thin satin of her dress. Her hair smelled like a blend of citrus and lavender.

“All right then, let’s start with the gardens first.”

Sylvia guided the two, arm-in-arm, around the back of the property to a flourishing botanical display. It was rather ironic that it was a garden party, but no guests were permitted to visit the actual garden itself. The moon had slipped out from behind the cloak of the clouds, painting petals and vegetation in a moody luminescence. It all felt so incredibly romantic, a sensation Marcus had rarely, if ever, explored during his lifetime.

Once they finished walking through the gardens, Sylvia showed them the inside briefly. The interior was just as majestic and expansive as the exterior. Marcus supposed the Shifter Surrogacy Agency had been thriving.

But that wasn’t what Marcus was paying attention to.

Throughout the entire tour, Rachel had her hand tucked under his arm, fingertips resting along his bicep. It would have been barely perceptible to the average gentleman, but to Marcus, it may as well have been embers from a fire skittering across his skin.

She never let go, not once. They shared a few laughs, Rachel’s exciting spirit breathing life into Marcus. She was quick-witted and passionate regarding everything she spoke about, and that was invigorating.

Eventually, Sylvia departed, leaving them to get to know each other without her accompaniment. They were standing in front of a small stage where musicians strummed acoustic guitars, and soft piano music played when Rachel skated her hand down Marcus’s forearm, then settled between his fingers.

That gravitational pull, that frisky intrigue in her eyes ... it was all he ever wanted to see.

“Ready for that dance?” she asked.

Marcus nodded, then pulled her across the grass onto the dance floor. It was a slow, mellow, jazzy tune, which allowed them to talk while they swayed. She placed her palms against his chest while he rested his hands politely along her waistline. Her breasts brushed against him lightly, a rather dizzying sensation.

She had emboldened him, though, so he wanted to make an impression. He pulled her closer rather firmly, and she gasped, staring at him with wide eyes.

Marcus smiled as they rocked back and forth.

“What?” he teased her. “I thought you might enjoy this kind of vigor.”

A warm rush of red bloomed along her cheeks. She looked away, but the

smile remained.

“What makes you think that?” she said, her eyebrows raised.

“You have been very forward this entire night. I like that.”

Rachel sighed, her eyes scanning his own, then moved to his lips ever so briefly. When he caught her ogling, she giggled.

It was a rapturous sound.

“I will always be forward with you, Marcus. As long as you are with me.”

Soothing jazz continued as the stars emerged in the velvet sky. Marcus nodded as his hands moved to her hips. “I will be,” he murmured. “I promise you.”

FIVE



RACHEL

Leaving the mixer at Sylvia's estate, Rachel sat captivated in the cab that would take her to her hotel for the night. She'd been so focused on wanting a family that she had forgotten about the thrill of the means by which she would be impregnated. Sex was fun, but the experience had grown dull as she moved through the dating pool.

Marcus had lit something inside her, and she lavished in it as the cab rolled into the night. Her heart pounded in her chest while adrenaline surged through her veins. She hadn't felt this excited about anything in a very long time. She was positively vibrating in the back seat, knowing she wouldn't get a wink of sleep.

Marcus hadn't said anything about the contract, but there was a mutual sensation of attraction between them, so she thought she knew what the answer would be. His fingertips on her skin were like fire, stirring a passion for life that left Rachel rather breathless.

It lingered on her as she climbed out of the cab and into the chilly air. As she entered her room and flicked on the light, she noticed a manilla envelope placed on the coffee table near the window. She found herself tracing her lips with her fingers as she moved toward it, nearly floating.

For Rachel was written on the cover.

"Hmm," she said.

She ran her fingers around the writing, noting the swooping, whimsical font. Rachel mused about Marcus touching his tongue to the pen, applying an old-fashioned medium of feather to ink. Her skin prickled hotly with anticipation.

Rachel ripped open the envelope to find a contract, the one that Sylvia

had discussed with her prior to her meeting Marcus. She quickly flipped to the last page where her signature was required, found a pen, and laid it all out on the line.

When she finished, she backed away, like the paper was a bee that had stung her. Her heart galloped inside her chest with a pleasant madness. She had made the decision. It was as final as final could get. Everything involved was for the rest of her life.

THAT NIGHT, Rachel slept like a lamb despite the thoughts and visions of the future that danced around her mind. The next morning, she received a message from Sylvia, who inquired about the contract and whether or not they could move forward.

I've signed it, she texted back, sitting up in bed. I'm ready for the next steps.

Rachel sensed Sylvia's exuberance through the phone. It reflected her own. She was plummeting into the depths of the unknown, and for the first time, the uncertainty felt good.

"Splendid! I will let Marcus know and set up a date to meet the thunder. You are going to be so happy, Rachel."

Rachel pushed the phone against her chest, biting her bottom lip. The adventure was beginning.

After only a few hours, Sylvia got back to Rachel about meeting the thunder that very day. She would no longer be their chaperone unless things went south. Rachel loved the idea of getting some alone time with Marcus. He had charmed her with his quiet strength and the firm way he held her body close.

Unsure about where she was going to stay for the night, she packed her things and headed out to the car Marcus had sent for her.

The place had a rustic, dreamy, romantic feeling to it, which wasn't at all what Rachel had imagined when it came to a dragon's den. It had the feel of a small town, a community where the majority of the inhabitants just happened to be dragon shifters. She was escorted through a wrought-iron gate, which was covered in lush honeysuckle, by the driver, who was exceedingly tall and broad, and into an area where a wonderful flowering of camellia grew along

the walkway.

“Good afternoon.”

A suave, deep-timbered voice caused Rachel’s eyes to dart away from the vivid shrubbery and upward several feet. Standing there was Marcus, still looking dapper in jeans and a soft teal polo.

Rachel’s heart fluttered, her lip sliding under her teeth instantly at the sight of him. She wore a terra cotta-colored jumpsuit, and it hugged her slender, fit form. The buttons ended just above her breastbone, allowing a sneak peek of her cleavage.

His dark, forest-green, golden-rimmed eyes never descended downward, but that didn't mean he wasn't attracted to her. Rachel got the feeling that being a gentleman was a big part of being a dragon shifter ... especially as the leader.

He approached her and held out his arm just as he had at the garden party. And just like then, she hooked her hand under his elbow and nestled against his bulging bicep. They sauntered along the trail, which broadened into a wooden walkway with immaculately cultivated greenery lining their pathway.

“I’m so glad you’re here, Rachel. I had so much fun last night. I hope you were able to get some sleep.”

Rachel gulped, wanting to maintain the allure of the sarcastic jokester that had clearly appealed to him the night before. She was anxious, without a doubt, but not in a way that was dreadful.

“I slept like a baby,” she responded, gazing ahead at the gathering of people. “Though, I was a little hopped up when I got to the hotel.”

Marcus chuckled. It was a lovely sound, like the ringing of a bell.

“Why is that?” he asked.

Rachel inhaled deeply, holding onto his arm a little tighter. She wanted to be honest with him. In fact, she needed to be if they were to form any kind of relationship.

“Well, for one, I’ve never signed a surrogate contract before.”

They stopped just before a large gathering of shifters standing beneath a canopy. Marcus turned to Rachel and took both her hands in his, which was a big surprise.

“I want you to know that I will never force anything on you. I want you to be comfortable. This isn’t a normal thing for me, either. It's also *my* first time.”

His inky, black hair was pushed back out of his face and gave off the gloss of a raven's wing. She started to daydream about what those eyes of his could do to her under the cover of a dark bedroom when he flashed a sly smile as if reading her mind.

Rachel stuttered slightly, feeling her cheeks flush. It wasn't an effect anyone had ever had on her.

"I appreciate hearing that," she said, speaking coyly. "I have never met a dragon that I know of, but I'm very excited about it."

For a moment, Rachel thought Marcus was leaning down to plant a kiss on her forehead. Her heart felt like a steel drum in her chest as she caught a whiff of his essence, smokey sage, and cedar wood.

He turned toward the gathering of his people, sliding his hand into hers. Their fingers intertwined like they had done it a thousand times.

"Here's your chance then. You're going to love it," he said.

Marcus led Rachel to where the shifters were gathered. He introduced her to a few of them, including Vincent, whom he called his beta, along with a handful of other den members who appeared to be slightly lower in rank than his beta. They were all friendly, incredibly tall, robust with strength, and captivating in their mystical appearances.

Rachel watched as a few of the young shifters were being trained, turning from human to dragon in a matter of seconds. She marveled as bright, iridescent shades of scales popped out from beneath their skin, jaws elongated, tails sprouted, and fire purged from gaping jaws. She sat with Marcus next to her, his hand resting on her knee in reassurance.

They were sublime and dazzling, though it was difficult for Rachel to believe that everything in front of her was not a mirage.

"Holy shit," she muttered.

Marcus laughed, sliding his hand higher up her thigh. It was pleasantly distracting from the images of creatures that she once believed only existed in the world of fiction. He placed his other hand on her lower back, and he turned to face her on the bench.

"Tell me what you're thinking," he inquired.

Rachel inhaled sharply as she wrung her hands and then forced them apart, resting them on the hand that was stroking her outer thigh. She faced him directly, and she judged by his amazed look that it wasn't what he was expecting.

"They are incredible, Marcus. It's just so ... bizarre. I feel like I'm high

on acid."

Marcus snorted with laughter, which spread to her. She chuckled, too, the swirl of his thumb along her flesh intensifying the growing bond.

"I like your honesty," he murmured. "I haven't ever known anything else, so it's normal for me. I can only imagine what it would be like seeing it for the very first time."

"Don't get me wrong. It's beautiful. Stunning and a bit shocking, but still beautiful."

Marcus showed off his pearly teeth, his eyes twinkling and showcasing the amber light of his iris. She watched as he languidly studied her eyes and lips, circling back till his voice deepened to a sultry and dusky lilt.

"I think you're pretty beautiful yourself."

Rachel beamed. Her heart felt like an insane, fluttering bird in her chest. She took his hand and glided it slowly toward the inner walls of her thighs.

"That was very smooth," she whispered back.

Before either of them could take advantage of the sensual moment, Rachel felt a stern grip take her by the wrist. It ripped her out of the trance-like state she was in.

"Don't hog the woman all day!" a redheaded female shifter proclaimed. "We want her to meet some of the kids."

Marcus sighed and then shrugged, removing his hand swiftly from between her legs.

"Do as you will then. Don't scare her too much, though."

Rachel was led by a flock of women, all unreasonably attractive with curvy, voluptuous shapes ... though they were also all unreasonably muscular and looked very strong. The redhead's name was Christina, and she did most of the talking as they walked toward the cabin that was deemed the nursery.

"Three of us just gave birth," Christina said, walking Rachel through the cabin. "I thought you might like to see what your offspring will look like when you mate with Marcus."

Offspring. Mate. The words would be considered highly animalistic and insulting in human company, but it was entirely normal around shifters. It gave her a jolt of anxiety, thinking that she had signed her life away to something she didn't completely understand.

But the second Christina and the four other women welcomed her into the bedroom, all of those fears soared away.

Some of the newborns slept, while others cooed and wiggled their tiny

bodies adorably. They looked just like human babies, beyond the length of their bodies and eyes that glowed like stars. Rachel's hands went to her chest while a glow of her own bloomed in her heart.

She wanted more than anything in the world to be a mother. Seeing the innocence and beauty of the shifter babies reinforced the feeling that the decision she had made was a worthwhile venture into the unknown.

"What do you think?" Christina whispered.

Rachel's vision blurred, and tears cascaded down her cheeks. For the first time in ages, she was speechless with happiness.

SIX



MARCUS

Watching Rachel walk away with several of the women stirred something inside Marcus. He had been reluctant to sign up with the surrogate agency despite knowing the crown of being alpha was a heavy weight to carry ... and it included finding a mate and reproducing, whether that person was your fated mate or not.

He was the son of Artemis, the noble alpha of the dragon thunder, and the sole heir. He proudly took on the mantle once his father passed away. He was considered a bit young by those around him, but none of the idle chatter ever stopped him from ruling with a quiet yet stern empathy.

Finding a mate had been on the horizon the second he took his father's place as alpha. But he had placed it somewhere in the back of his mind for safekeeping until the den and Vincent reminded him of its vital position in his world.

He sat on the bench while the training shifters, all of them young, learned to hone their skills in shifting. It was easy to become egotistical and bloodthirsty with such capabilities, especially when the hormones of puberty were thrown in. Marcus mused about who he had been at that age and how quickly he was forced to grow up when his father passed.

He swirled the ice of his cocktail around, feeling nostalgic. Meeting Rachel had flushed out a lot of pleasant memories that he thought he had forgotten. Learning to shift himself, being taught about patience, and making calculated moves on the battlefield. The way his mother taught him to never lose sight of the needs of others and even the needs of the enemy.

The memories were intricately woven stitchings of the tapestry that made Marcus who he is today. There wasn't a single act, thought, value, or notion

that wasn't produced by his parents before being reformed and shared with his shifter community.

Rachel was his future. He knew it the same way a dragon could sniff out fear. It was a cosmic sensation that humans could never fully understand. And he had to, somehow, explain it to Rachel.

He rose from the bench, ready to save her from the swarms of shifter women who would likely be asking her every question under the moon about human life. Marcus resolved to keep the whole fated mates reality a secret ... for now.

He walked to the cabin where the nursery was, following the sound of excited women to where the newborns slept. When he walked around the corner, he was struck by the sight of Rachel holding one of the twins who had been born only a few weeks before.

"He's so beautiful," Rachel said, whispering with a look of complete awe as she stared down at the infant.

The women sitting around Rachel all chuckled. She was sitting on a rocking chair near the window of the nursery, which looked out to a sublime waterfall scenery. Marcus found himself frozen to the spot, watching Rachel smile her radiant smile, cooing and rocking the swaddled child.

It was one of the most peaceful sights Marcus had ever encountered. He felt the coil of dread that had been tied in his gut ever since he learned he had been accepted by the agency release its hold. Looking at Rachel had defrosted that cold sensation like the sun on a snowy day.

"Get over here, you."

Christina had spotted him while she held the second baby in her arms. They were both her children. She motioned for him to cross the threshold, and that was when Rachel looked up.

She had been enchanted by the child in her arms, her eyes sparkling like gems. Her beauty was obvious to anyone who looked at her, but it was the substance underneath that beauty, that contagious element of her hope and joy, that really pushed Marcus over the edge.

It would be a beautiful tumble, and he was already halfway there.

"Marcus, come hold this one's sister," Rachel said, whispering but exuberant. "I have held babies before, but never anything like this."

Marcus moved across the room to Christina, who was standing next to Rachel in the rocking chair. The baby was asleep while the one Rachel held cooed and yawned, stretching out its miniature arms while everyone

applauded. It was a wholesome sight that made Marcus feel like he was in a dream.

“Come, she’s not made of glass,” Christina said, taking her daughter under the neck and slipping a palm beneath her bottom. “Support her head, then use the other hand here.”

Marcus felt a wash of unease move through his body for the first time in years. It wasn’t his territory to care for the babies. He was the leader of the den, making the rules as both king and political leader. Feeling his hands shake slightly when holding them out, palms up in the air, was a humbling and strange sensation.

“You can do it,” Rachel murmured, swaying the baby boy back and forth.

He grinned at her, her charm an endless sea. He was going to have to be okay with holding babies if he wanted to have a few of them ... and if he wanted to gain Rachel’s affection. Christina guided the baby’s head into his big hand.

“Her name is Sandra, and that is Gerald,” Christina said softly, eyes big as she crooned over her newborns.

Marcus held the child, which did indeed feel like he was holding a glass vase. But to him, it was something far more delicate. He was holding their future as a thunder. He pulled little Sandra in close to his chest, cautiously taking a seat so as to not upset the baby.

Rachel snickered next to him, little Gerald awake in her arms and wiggling with excitement. Rachel was literally glowing. Marcus could feel the pheromones of her maternal instinct seeping from her pores, creating an aromatic bouquet of wonder. It overwhelmed him to the point of considering handing the child in his arms back to Christina.

Then Rachel licked her lips, her bowed lips a flawless shade of cherry red, and gazed down at Gerald, whose arms were stretched out in amused delight.

“I can’t stop looking at him. There’s just something so ... enchanting about them.”

You are the one who is enchanting.

It was then that Marcus saw through time like an interstellar wormhole had opened up. He saw Rachel, just as she was, holding a baby in her arms in that very spot. Except, she would be holding their child, and they would have her remarkable eyes and brave spirit.

It took a lot to do what she was doing. Jumping into an unknown world

and agreeing to take a life inside of her without really knowing the person she was going to share it with. That was a fierce boldness Marcus admired.

The thought and image hit him like a punch to the gut. Sitting with Sandra drooling against his chest, he wanted it right then more than anything in the world.

Rachel made silly faces at Gerald, and he let out a singsong giggle that made everyone in the room laugh along. Rachel widened her eyes, pursed her lips, and stuck out her tongue, a natural entertainer.

“He already loves you,” Christina chimed in.

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” Rachel said, her eyes still glued to the baby.

They sat with the twins for a few minutes longer. When Sandra began to fuss. Christina took her children from the alpha and his potential mate and cuddled them back into their cribs, enfolded with soft blankets and love. Christina had a glister in her eye when Marcus passed by while Rachel was still chatting with the other women and saying farewell to the twins.

“What?” Marcus said.

“You know what?” Christina returned, giving him a friendly elbow. “I can see you’re smitten. We all can.”

“Is it that obvious?” Marcus glanced at Rachel.

Christina then tugged at his arm the way a young child would. It peeved him slightly, so he turned back to her, kind of irked.

“What was that for?”

Her big, round blue eyes darkened with a midnight blue flicker, one only observed in dragon shifter types, but only for a moment. He knew what she was going to say before it came out of her mouth.

“Don’t screw this up, Marcus. I know you’re the alpha, and it’s your decision...”

“Yes, it is...”

“But we really need this. I can see your bond already, but humans aren’t like us. Humans need to be shown affection to prove that what you feel is real.”

She was only trying to help, but her grip on his arm was annoying. He was the alpha, after all. No one should be telling him what to do.

“Christina...” he muttered with a bit of a snarl.

She removed her hand and then lowered her eyebrows.

“I know. This is new for you. I believe you can show her how you feel.”

Rachel walked over, and Christina embraced her. Marcus felt guilty about snapping at Christina, especially knowing that she was quite correct. He didn't really know much about making women swoon. Usually, women came to him. But no one had ever been like Rachel.

His palms began to sweat when they said goodbye to the other women, who were also leaving to let the newborns sleep. He and Rachel walked side by side, her presence next to him both exciting and soothing.

"So, how was that for you?" Marcus asked, hands in his pockets as they sauntered around the grounds.

"I think I was just thrown into the deep end, but luckily, I'm a good swimmer," Rachel remarked with a wink.

"I think you are a lot more than that."

They approached the den again, and Marcus wanted to make some kind of gesture. He stopped her by touching her elbow, and she swiveled on a dime.

Her gorgeous green eyes looked up at him, and her plump lips stretched into her usual clever grin.

Marcus had to be bold, no matter how much the touch of her skin tore him apart. He took her by the hands, feeling the crackle of a spark ignite.

"I wanted to see how you felt about staying the night. No expectations, of course," he said, grinning. "I wanted to get a chance to talk with you about what comes next. Without all the pageantry, I mean."

Rachel's eyebrows flew up, and for a moment, Marcus thought he had made the wrong step already. But then, somehow, her smile grew even wider, something Marcus didn't think was possible.

"That sounds great, Marcus. I'm looking forward to having some more time with you ... alone."

She pursed her lips again, sliding out that bubblegum pink tongue. His cock twitched in his pants, and exhilaration pooled in his stomach.

"I like the sound of that," he murmured.

Rachel folded her fingers between his as they turned around to walk toward the others. Then they looked at each other at the same moment, dusk falling over them.

He wanted to be alone with her, too.

SEVEN



RACHEL

The party had died down, and all the guests had slowly meandered home, leaving Marcus and Rachel alone at last.

Rachel's heart had pounded uncontrollably when Marcus had asked her to stay the night. She hadn't realized how much she had hoped it would happen until he had asked.

Marcus showed a side of himself she hadn't expected, and it turned her on more than anything else had. He was downright hot, but when they were in the nursery together, she got to see a softer side of him. Almost as if he was scared of the children.

Not in a bad way, but afraid of anything so small. Rachel thought it was endearing.

A big, bad alpha male was nervous around babies.

To her, it showed how good a father he would be. Not the timidness but knowing how fragile they were. It all rolled together and gave off a need inside Rachel to bear his children all the more. Even more than she had already convinced herself of.

It reaffirmed her choice and settled her worries that she had made the right choice for herself and the rest of her life.

But now that it was just them, Rachel was more hesitant when thinking about being alone with him. She still wanted to, but she was definitely feeling more pressure about what was expected from her.

They'd been one-on-one talking, but this was different, and she didn't want to fuck it up.

Out of nervousness, Rachel started to clean up the few things that had been missed or left out from the party.

“What are you doing?” Marcus asked when he came back inside from saying goodbye to his last guest.

“Just trying to get things tidied up,” Rachel responded, reluctant to make eye contact.

Marcus placed his hand on hers. She finally forced her gaze to meet his green-gold eyes. She was breathless for a moment, swept up in the color and the desire that radiated from them.

She could sense how badly he wanted her, making her ache for him even more.

“You don’t have to do that. This all can wait until the morning. But now that it’s just us, why don’t we talk about how we want this to work out so we are on the same page?”

She nodded and smiled as he took her hand and led her to his overly large couch.

“So, I guess the first thing to address is what role you would like to play in our child’s life.”

This is it, Rachel thought. Now is the time to tell him exactly what you want and get a sincere reaction from him.

“I want to be involved. Not just in carrying it, but I want a say in what happens in their future. Like their schooling and how they are raised.” She held her breath, waiting for his response.

To her surprise, he smiled at her and leaned forward from the armrest to turn and face her more personally.

“Good. That’s what I was hoping you would say. I want you to be a part of it as well. We are all about family here, and just because you aren’t a shifter, it doesn’t exclude you from this thunder by any means. In fact, you being the alpha’s partner in parenting would give you the right to make the calls on a lot of things. No one would question you. I would always ask for you to just speak your truth and your mind. Hold nothing back.”

Rachel let out a small chuckle. “You might regret saying that.”

“I highly doubt it,” Marcus responded with mirth dancing behind the glowing, golden flakes in his eyes.

The space between her thighs throbbed with heat as she tried not to blush, looking at his captivating smile that was only for her.

“I will say that I want our child to attend all the den-specific schooling and training. I feel that is the best decision given his or her set future in the den. I know how it’s run, what they are taught, how they are trained, and so

on. You, of course, can add anything you want as well to the agenda.”

“That makes sense. Would it at least be possible for me to look at the school, meet the people in the system, and just get a general lay of it all?”

She wasn't sure how involved she was allowed to be. She knew Marcus said as much as she wanted, but she wanted to tread carefully, given that she had never been very involved in the shifter world. All she knew was it was always a tight-knit group, so she wanted to make sure that was respected.

“Of course you can. Whenever you want to. You can even help out should you desire to. They are always looking for extra hands when it comes to the care and education of the children.”

Rachel grew more and more relaxed with every word Marcus said. This would be better than she thought possible. Almost as if this was a normal relationship, and they wanted the best for their child.

Except it's anything but normal. Rachel tried not to giggle at her intrusive thoughts.

As the night progressed, the air between them grew more comfortable.

They discussed their hopes and dreams for the future. Much to Rachel's joy, a lot of what they shared, specifically for the little one that would hopefully soon be a reality, were the same.

Rachel was continually surprised at how paternal Marcus was, especially when she considered his initial outward appearance.

He kept showing her that his soft, caring side was a lot more dominant than it appeared to be. She held on to the feeling that he was careful who he showed this side to and felt more than privileged that he chose and trusted her enough to share it with her.

Listening to Marcus being vulnerable made Rachel fall for him even harder. Not only that, but she felt safe. And the fact that he was a dragon and an alpha had nothing to do with it. It was his sureness in being able to handle any situation as well as his purpose behind it ... looking after his family.

“There is one thing, though, that I will not budge on,” Marcus said, adjusting his position to a more serious one, eyes sharp.

Rachel almost laughed at the sudden change of demeanor. “And what is that?”

“I want you to move in with me.”

Rachel couldn't suppress a giggle this time. “Oh, really?”

She realized his face held no humor in it. He couldn't be serious, could he?

“Yes,” he answered plainly. “As soon as possible, in fact.”

“Wouldn’t you just want that *after* I’m pregnant? I don’t want to be a hindrance.”

“No, I insist on it, Rachel. I want you to learn about and become a part of this den, especially with how involved we both want you to be as part of our child’s life.”

Rachel couldn’t hide her shock at the request.

He wanted her to be fully involved as soon as possible.

Her.

Surprisingly, it didn’t scare her. Rachel realized she wanted that also. Everything seemed to be going too smoothly, and she didn’t want to ruin it. She was still thrilled by the request.

“I mean, if you’re sure...”

“I am.” Marcus smiled and grabbed Rachel’s hand.

Her heart fluttered as the heat rose to her neck.

There it was again. That look, as if he wanted to share something more with her but was holding back.

His mouth had opened, but Rachel saw him quickly withdraw whatever he was about to say.

He looked almost the same as he did in the nursery. Unsure of himself.

She was curious about what he was holding back but felt it was for a good reason. She couldn’t explain it, but she trusted him. He had already shared and shown so much she had no reason to question what he chose to keep to himself for the time being.

It made Rachel even more aware of how much depth Marcus had to him.

He didn’t have to be a shifter to be more man than any of the other losers she had been with. It showed in how he handled and held himself. It was how in touch he was with every part of himself. Rachel could see that, and it was a major turn-on.

She wanted him more and more as she continued to figure him out. She didn’t want to make the first move, but she wasn’t sure how much longer she could control herself.

Wait, didn’t his asking me to stay the night initiate the first move? she wondered. If so, then me leaning in to kiss him wouldn’t be too forward. Or would anything be too forward? We have already agreed to having a baby together.

Her mind stayed preoccupied with overthinking, not allowing her to

notice that Marcus had moved closer.

He tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear, causing immediate goosebumps to prickle over her heated body.

Her nipples hardened under her shirt. She subconsciously bit her lower lip.

“Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

Marcus placed his thumb on her lip gently. “Make me want you more than I already do.”

His voice had turned soft but dripped with an undertone of need.

She clenched her thighs together as the softest part of her body pulsed with the heat of her desire. She shivered as his voice sent streaks of pleasure trembling down her spine.

Marcus kept his thumb on her lip and moved it to her chin, pulling her face closer to his.

Her heart pounded as their lips touched.

It was unlike any kiss she had ever experienced.

Her body vibrated with pleasure as they connected. The kiss was slow and deep, but only for a moment.

The energy from him surged through her, creating a hunger for more than just his lips.

She decided there was no use in holding back any longer. Rachel pressed herself against Marcus, expressing her urgency and desire for more.

He responded by kissing her deeper, pushing his tongue into her mouth. Rachel’s lips parted without defiance and let him explore her as her own tongue tangled around his.

He moved his hand from her face to the back of her neck, holding her close as his other hand pressed against the small of her back, restricting her from going anywhere.

It was unnecessary because Rachel had no intention of pulling away. The connection between them was intoxicating, and she was more than willing to give herself completely to it.

She ran her hand up his thigh and felt his impressive bulge hardening through his pants. A groan rumbled low in his chest as she gripped his cock.

Marcus slowly laid Rachel back on the couch as he pressed into her.

Fear and doubt had been long gone. She knew what she wanted and had never been more sure of anything until now.

This is what she had been waiting for. A child and a chance at change. Marcus offered both and much more.

She closed her eyes and gave in to her inner calling, letting passion rule her.

EIGHT



MARCUS

Marcus was in a really good mood, even though he was in the middle of a meeting. He wasn't going to allow that to ruin the high he was sitting on. And the topic certainly was the type that would sour his mood quickly. He was trying to at least stay in a decent frame of mind for most of it.

Someone cleared their throat, and he turned his attention to his beta, who gave him a look of *are you paying attention?* He had probably zoned out again, and it wasn't the first time in the meeting either. He kept thinking back to last night, making his dragon flare with every memory.

"Sorry, my mind was elsewhere," he said, readjusting himself in his chair. He fiddled with his shirt, trying to at least look like he wasn't daydreaming about fucking Rachel again.

He kept picturing her orgasming over and over. He could hear her moaning and the way she told him she was close. It gave him a hard-on just thinking about it.

"We know," Lucas smirked as he leaned forward in his chair. "Care to share? Anything you want to tell us?"

He thought about how much he cared about her. He smiled to himself, picturing her naked in his bed. He wished he was still there instead of at the meeting.

He had a really hard time leaving Rachel when he woke up this morning and saw her. He couldn't help but grin. Her ass was the most perfect one under the sun, and her nipples shined in the light. To pull away from her hurt.

Marcus had taken a shower after he slipped out of bed, hating the fact he was about to clean her scent off him, but he needed to focus, and having her smell clinging to him would pull his attention away from a serious problem.

So he painfully pulled himself into new clothes and headed out.

He'd written her a note and left it on the side of the bed. He just wanted to inform her he was going to be gone at a meeting most of the morning and not to worry. If she needed to go anywhere, she was free to, but he would be back, hopefully soon.

He also said in the letter that he would be available if she needed him during his time away. He had his phone on him in case she called or panicked to see he'd left her. He wasn't the type that liked to leave in the morning, but he didn't have a choice.

Sighing, he looked at the guys, feeling like the meeting had already been going on forever. He'd only been there a little while, and the meeting hadn't gotten far because he kept letting his mind slip away.

He straightened his back and quickly shook his head. He needed to focus if he wanted the meeting to be over so he could get back to Rachel. His dragon thrashed in protest at waiting any longer.

Ignoring his dragon, Marcus leaned forward in his chair. "All right, sorry, where were we?"

"We ..." his beta, Vincent, said, waving a hand around the group while raising his eyebrows, "were chatting about what we were going to do about all the missing shifters. There was another one reported last night. A young guy went out for an evening run and never returned home. His mate reported it early this morning."

Lucas nodded, leaning forward in his chair. He was a taller man with short brown hair, but another person Marcus trusted. "She was pretty upset and wanted to know why we weren't handling this with more concern."

He rubbed at his forehead. He knew that was going to come up. They had been trying to solve this without people really finding out, but the number of people missing kept growing, and it became a little hard to just brush it under the rug.

Not that he didn't want to tell people ... it was more he didn't want to scare the den over something that was simple. But now, that simple problem seemed to be growing.

"How many is that now?" he asked, placing his hands flat on the table.

"That's eight," Zander said, shaking his head. "We've spoken to all the families and tried to calm them the best we could."

Lucas gave him an irritated expression. "Three women and five men. Three were when they were out running, one was driving, and four while they

were preparing to take a vacation."

He looked down at the map they had spread out over the table. They had marked Xs on the spots where people suspected something had gone down. They also marked other information, such as where everyone lived and worked. There was nothing that connected.

He remembered when it had just been one person, and now the map was littered with information. His head pulsed with stress as he looked over the still-senseless information.

There was no overlap, and none of the victims had crossed paths before. It was like all eight people were just selected at random. A vein throbbed at his temple as his stress levels rose steadily.

They needed to get a handle on the situation. If more disappeared, people were going to start knocking down his door. He was surprised they weren't already.

"What else do you have?" he asked, looking at each of his men. They didn't call a meeting to tell him they had nothing. He knew there was more.

Lucas and Zander looked uncomfortable, and he narrowed his eyes at them. "What?" he asked, feeling his voice growing clipped. "What now?"

"We know that people are being picked at random," Vincent said. "There's no overcrossing, no one working with another, no one is related. But we did find a possible line of connection."

"Which is?" he asked, not understanding why they didn't just come out with it.

Zander swallowed. "We heard a rumor about an underground trafficking ring."

He stared at them because this had to be a bad joke, even though his dragon was already thrashing, knowing it wasn't. If that was true, they were in for more trouble than they thought. But none of them said anything, and the silence told him that they were being serious.

He pinched at his eyes, feeling a headache forming at the base of his skull. Just hours ago, he was making love to Rachel, and now he was dealing with the possibility of a trafficking ring. Damn, he should've stayed in bed.

He felt he was failing as an alpha, even more so when he looked at his beta and saw the frustration written on his face. He was failing everyone, starting with the missing shifters.

"All right, what do you know about this ring?" he asked, leaning back.

"My informant said they sell shifters to the highest bidder. They go into a

building, and they don't come out. Or at least, they aren't seen walking out."

He had twenty more questions blooming in his head with each answer he was getting. "And we don't know what happens to the shifters? Who's attending these events?"

The room fell silent, and he didn't like it. He looked at Vincent, who looked extremely uncomfortable.

Vincent squirmed in his chair before he swallowed. "We aren't sure, but we can guess."

"Which is?" he asked, growing frustrated.

"Sex trafficking. Personal slaves. Take your pick, and you are likely right. Whatever is happening isn't good. People will pay big money for shifters, and they'll pay even more the younger they are."

He swallowed, not liking how that sat in his stomach. If someone was running a trafficking ring, that was bad enough, but targeting shifters was even worse. He ran a hand through his hair. "Okay, we need to figure out where this is happening and when. We need to contact the other alphas in the area and see what they know. Put them up on the big screen."

A couple of minutes went by, and everyone was in motion, calling and pulling up all the alphas on a large TV screen. He felt his stomach dip, sitting in front of all of them. He hated the fact that he was about to be the bearer of bad news. But someone had to do it.

"What did you call this meeting for?" Liam, alpha of the Boren bear clan, asked, sitting in his office. Liam looked irritated, and he understood that. None of them looked happy.

He looked from him to the other alphas before he pulled himself up from his chair. He straightened his back and took a deep breath in. "I've called you all because we have a situation on our hands. It's just come to my attention that we possibly have an underground trafficking ring picking up our shifters and selling them."

He watched a few of the alphas stiffen, and their nostrils flared. Liam looked at him with a neutral expression, but his hands had clenched into fists.

"My beta and team managed to gather some information about it. Have any of you had any more shifters go missing recently?"

"We had a couple of girls go missing over the past week," Weston said. "You think it's connected?"

He nodded. His dragon flared, telling him it was. "I have a strong feeling it is. We all need to think of a plan on how to move forward and how to put a

stop to this criminal group. It's already caused more problems, possibly more than we are aware of."

He looked at his beta to take over so he could take a quick glance at his phone. He slipped out of the meeting room and checked his phone. He noticed a message from Rachel letting him know she'd gotten his note and to take his time. He was grateful to have her. And his heart skipped a beat, knowing she was in his corner. He needed someone he could look to for comfort, and she was it.

He looked back at the meeting and didn't want to return to it. But he knew if Rachel was a missing person, he would be in there without leaving. He would be storming around the country to find her. So, he straightened his back and marched back in, prepared to find an answer.

Everyone was talking all at once, and he quickly seated himself.

Liam was speaking. "We need to know who's gone missing and from what clans. How long ago did this start?"

Another alpha, Thomas, hardened his voice. "We noticed about a few weeks ago, but who knows how far it goes back. People leave the pack, and you don't hear from them sometimes. It happens."

So all this could have started earlier than we thought, and we just never noticed until now, Marcus thought to himself frustratedly. He handled the meeting the best he could, and when he was done, he thanked everyone for their help and adjourned but held his beta back.

"I need you to find out more. We need as much detail as we can get to move forward."

Vincent nodded before he left the room.

Marcus sighed, taking a deep breath in. He needed to calm himself. He didn't want Rachel to know how tense he was when he arrived home. He checked his phone once more and headed out.

NINE



RACHEL

Rachel was awakened by the sun shining in through the window. She rolled over. "Marcus, can you close the blinds?"

She was met with silence and rolled back over. She peeled her eyes open and found the other half of the bed was empty. She scowled and quickly sat up, doing a survey of the room. There was a towel set out with a note, but no Marcus.

She swallowed and slipped out from beneath the sheets to see what Marcus had left for her. She lifted the message, reading over the letter carefully.

Dear Rachel,

Some things came up that required my attention, and I had to slip out for a morning meeting. I will likely be gone most of the morning, but I'll be back as soon as I can. Shower and do whatever you will. You're free to check out the area more if you wish. I'll talk to you when I get back.

P.S. You can message me if you need me.

She chewed on her lower lip for a moment before she set the note down and took the towel into the bathroom to shower. She could smell that he'd been in there recently.

She bathed and roamed around his room for a while. After she looked around, she slipped into the kitchen and made herself a little something to eat.

She slipped out to enjoy the community after flipping through the television stations and finding nothing interesting. She'd sent Marcus a quick message and then found herself standing in front of the nursery. She smiled as she observed the children, who ranged in age from infants to toddlers.

A couple of women were caring for the children. One woman helped a

group of kids pick up toys while another was feeding a bottle to a baby while rocking her back and forth. Her heart fluttered at the sight.

"They are so sweet," Rachel said to herself with longing in her heart.

One of the women, Sasha, walked up, and Rachel hoped she didn't think she was weird standing outside the glass and staring at a group of children. "I'm sorry," she said, waving a hand. "I'll move."

"Oh heavens, no, please stay." Sasha gave Rachel another smile. "They are all so cute. I wish I could just stand out here and watch them like that. Especially the babies."

Rachel blushed because she'd just been thinking the same thing. Sasha looked at Rachel, taking in her outfit. It was very different from last night. She was wearing light gray jeans paired with a fluffy teal shirt. She had her hair up in a messy bun, completing the outfit.

"You look like you're heading somewhere. Don't let me keep you." Sasha tilted her head and then looked around as she asked, "Where is Marcus?"

Rachel waved a hand. "He had a meeting this morning, so it's just me for now. He should be free soon, so I'm waiting."

Sasha's face fell. "Oh, goodness, no. Come join me for breakfast."

Rachel waved a hand, feeling her eyebrows raise. "Oh no, I can't impose on you like that."

"No, please. It's just a brunch with the girls you met last night. They won't mind another person, and it's a communal breakfast, so you're more than welcome to join us."

Rachel chewed on her lower lip. She looked back at the babies and swallowed. She didn't want to get in the way.

Sasha took a step toward her. "Please? I can't eat breakfast knowing you're standing here looking at babies because Marcus left you for the morning."

"He didn't leave me. He had a meeting."

Sasha hooked her arm through Rachel's. "I'm not taking no for an answer here. These dragon shifters are like that, but you don't have to wait around for him."

Rachel smiled. Honestly, she could use a little female companionship. She had a wonderful time last night, and she would love to speak with the girls more. Besides, she didn't want to be known as the woman who stared at the kids in the nursery.

Sasha took her to a small cafe where three other girls from the other night

sat talking. They all waved, holding big grins as they got to the table. "I caught Rachel on the way here and invited her."

"The more, the merrier," Jenny said, waving a mug of coffee at her. "Come sit. We just ordered drinks."

They both slipped into chairs, and she expected to feel uncomfortable, but she didn't.

"So, Rachel," one of the girls began. "How much do you know about the den?"

She swallowed between sips of coffee and looked embarrassed. "Not much, I'm afraid."

The girls smiled. "Oh, that's okay. That means we get to tell you everything." One of them clapped her hands. "We have annual dances, and you will just love them."

Another nodded. "Oh, yes, you have to attend."

"Speaking of dances, where is Marcus this morning? He joins us sometimes."

Her eyebrows went up at that. "Marcus joins you for breakfast?"

They all nodded. "Oh, yes. He takes his alpha duties very seriously. He's different from some other alphas we know. He makes everyone feel important when he joins."

She realized she knew hardly anything about the thunder or his life, and her curiosity overwhelmed her. If she was going to be with him, she needed to know. She would likely need to be part of this.

She leaned forward. "In that case, tell me everything I need to know."

They all giggled. Each of them gave her advice and a little information that she wouldn't have known otherwise. And in the midst of all of this, she didn't realize someone was walking up to the table.

"Well, good morning, girls. Have you seen my Marcus?"

She glanced up at a stunning woman. The woman was amazingly beautiful, and it took her breath away for a moment.

She then realized what the woman had said. *Her* Marcus.

"Marcus isn't here. He's in a meeting." Sasha said, glancing over at Rachel. "Rachel, have you met Julia?"

She looked at her, shaking her head. She gave the woman, Julia, a smile. "No, and you are?"

"Oh, silly me. I'm Marcus's mother."

She quickly jumped out of her chair, tipping it backward. Her eyes

widened. This was Marcus's mother?

"You're ... oh ... oh!" She moved around the table. "I'm Rachel. I, um, I ..."

Sasha came to the rescue, smiling. "This is Rachel. She's still learning everything. She and Marcus are dating."

Julia's smile brightened the room instantly. "You're the girl who's seeing my son. Well, aren't you a beautiful woman?"

Julia pulled her in for a hug. "Oh, I know I hardly know you, but we are so glad Marcus found someone." She pulled back, smiling at her. "Just remember, if he ever insists he's right, you can always call me."

Rachel laughed, feeling herself relax.

Julia joined the conversation, and Rachel laughed at everything she said. Julia proceeded to tell her about the time Marcus super glued his hands together, trying to prove he was stronger than the rest of the boys. She told her he was afraid of water until, finally, when he was eight, a friend of his pushed him into the river.

Julia told her all the cute, funny baby stories, even the ones Marcus would likely be mortified to have her hear. But Julia said to keep that between them.

After a while, Rachel spotted Marcus coming into the cafe and waved at him. He smiled at her, and then his eyes became worried when he saw his mother sitting with her. "Well, I see you met Rachel."

"Where have you been hiding her?" his mother asked, looking at him with a loving expression. "She's simply amazing. I like her."

Rachel smiled, looking at Marcus, who looked like he'd had a rough morning. She could imagine he needed relaxation.

He gave his mother a kiss and seated himself next to her. Most of the girls had gone, and it was really just Rachel and his mother now. And it was a little past noon, so lunch was right around the corner.

"How was your meeting?" she asked, knitting her hands together in her lap.

He sighed. "It was a lot, but I'd much rather not talk about work at the table."

He looked at his mother, and she nodded. "Yes, that's always been a rule of mine. I didn't like when his father brought work home."

She smiled, liking the idea.

"Oh," Julia said. "I have to get going. I have an appointment with Dr. Lue."

Julia stood, still smiling. "It was great meeting you, Rachel. Until next time."

"Have you had lunch?" Marcus asked after his mother left.

She shook her head. Her breakfast was light, so she could eat again.

"Well, how about I make lunch for you back at the house?" he asked, pulling himself up and extending an arm out to her. "I promise it will be fun." He gave her a wink, and she understood what was going through his mind.

She took his hand, allowing him to lead her. It wasn't a far walk, and she enjoyed having his hand to hold. She leaned into his arm, basking in the moment. She thought back to the babies and felt that tug once more. She desperately wanted little ones to shower with love.

"I'm sorry I was gone most of the morning," Marcus said.

She gave him a gentle grin back. "I was fine. I watched the children in the nursery before Sasha ran into me. I looked like a stalker, but I was grateful she didn't point that out."

He snorted, his shoulders shaking. "I'm sure it wasn't like that, but thanks for the picture."

"I had a good morning talking with some of the girls."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that."

"And you?" she asked, looking at him. "We aren't at the table anymore."

He frowned and looked at her. "We can talk about that over lunch."

Her stomach dipped at the idea, but she tried not to let it show on her face. She instead gave him a nod as they arrived at his house.

They headed inside, straight for the kitchen. Marcus pulled out bread and a bunch of items from the fridge. She grabbed a knife and started slicing up tomatoes and cheese. They worked alongside each other really well. She made the sandwiches while he made a small salad and grabbed a picnic basket off the top of the fridge.

She laughed. "Where did you get that? And better question, *why* do you have that?"

He blushed. "Believe it or not, occasionally, I like a little picnic away from home."

She stepped into his space, placing her hands on his chest. "Well, it's nice to know you have a soft, sweet side."

A smirk formed on his lips. "Versus the beast side you slept with?"

She blushed, her mind going back to last night and the body-rocking orgasms that came with it. She swallowed, nodding. "I like both of them."

His hands swooped around her, caging her against him. He smiled, dipping his head down and pressing his forehead against hers. "Good, because I really like you."

Her heart skipped a beat. If this kept up, they weren't going to make it to lunch. But she intuited that Marcus wanted to tell her something, and they couldn't delay. Even if that meant not getting another mind-altering orgasm right now.

She pulled back, grabbed the basket, and smiled. "Well, we better get a move on then."

She took a couple more steps back, waving the basket at him. "Are you going to join me?" she asked, teasing him.

He smiled at her, pushed off the counter, and walked toward her. "I'll follow you wherever you go."

Her heart pounded, and she couldn't help falling for him.

TEN



MARCUS

Marcus and Rachel found a nice spot to settle down at the local park not far from his house. A couple of other people were out enjoying the nice weather, but for the most part, it was just the two of them.

The breeze was cool, and they were just a few feet from the river, which was splashing softly against the shore. It was the perfect location to have a serious conversation with Rachel.

Rachel unpacked everything as he watched her. He watched the way her hair blew in the wind and how she smiled as she moved. She was happy.

He hated to ruin the peaceful look on her face. His dragon protested even more. He wasn't sure how she was going to take the news, and he wanted it to go well. He needed it to go well.

His stomach had been tight since the meeting. He needed to have a conversation with Rachel about all the missing shifters, and even more so now that they were talking about a trafficking ring.

The idea made him want to vomit, but Rachel was his other half, and she deserved to know. She had to know if she was going to be his co-ruler, the one people talked to if he wasn't available. He had to keep her in the loop.

"Wow, it's beautiful out here," she said as she allowed the lid of the basket to smack shut. "We should definitely come out here often."

She held up an unwrapped sandwich to him, giving him a smile. "Hungry?"

He looked at the sandwich and then back at her. She had a goofy smile as he leaned forward.

He took a bite, and she giggled as she pulled it back, taking a bite herself. He watched mayo slip down her lip, and he leaned over to wipe at it. Her

eyes tracked him, her mouth pausing.

He pulled his hand back, licking the mayo off his finger. She swallowed, licking her lips. Her face flushed, and for a solid minute, he forgot all about the problems.

It was just the two of them out having a peaceful moment together. There was no trafficking ring, no missing shifters. It was a perfect world.

She took another bite of her sandwich, her eyes flickering toward the river. "You do that again, and I'll jump you."

He chuckled, leaning back into the grass. He looked up at the sky, allowing her to continue to eat.

He heard her pop a bag of chips open, and he looked at her. She sat cross-legged now, staring at him. "It is really nice out here. The weather is beautiful today."

He nodded in agreement and looked around the park. A woman pushing a stroller walked by, and he thought back to Rachel's comment earlier. She'd been watching the kids in the nursery.

"How was Sasha? Did she give you a hard time?"

"She was wonderful, and she's so sweet. She invited me to join the girls for a chat, and they told me all about the rules and regulations of the den. I didn't know you had meetings once a month to talk about problems."

He nodded. "It helps keep everyone calm. They are mostly for the den to bring any problems to my attention."

She raised an eyebrow. "And that told me you sometimes join their communal breakfast?"

He nodded again. It seemed the girls really were telling her everything. "Yes, it's actually a great way to stay in touch. It was really helpful when I first took over the role. It allowed me to talk one-on-one with my people. And I enjoy the time together with everyone."

She looked away, her eyes looking around at the trees and shrubs. "I understand that. It was nice. Everyone seems to be welcoming. And your mom is sweet."

He would have to ask his mother what she said later. The woman liked to talk and likely told some very embarrassing stories about him. He didn't mind if Rachel knew, but he would much rather be able to defend some of them.

He leaned forward, guilt cutting at him. "I'm sorry I wasn't there to introduce you to her. I will make that up to you at some point."

She waved a hand, smiling at him. "Oh, that's okay. The den needed you

for the meeting, and I had no problem being alone or getting around. Speaking of the meeting..." She looked at him, her eyes giving him a concerned look. "What was it about? You seemed tense when you got back. Has something happened?"

He was stressed, more so with his dragon flailing. He was unable to figure out how this organized crime was happening. He licked his lips and sighed.

"Well, actually, something did happen that you should know about. Over the past few weeks or so, some shifters have gone missing."

Her eyes widened, and her fingers paused on the potato chip bag. "Missing?"

He nodded. "Yeah, just disappearing without a trace. It seemed like a case of runaways at first, but it was happening in other clans as well. We've been trying to get a handle on it, but the issue seems to be growing."

She tossed the bag aside and rubbed her hands together. He dreaded to keep going. He hadn't even gotten to the bad part.

He exhaled and straightened his back. "We uncovered an underground trafficking ring, and I had to involve some of the other alphas to talk about how we wanted to proceed."

Her mouth dropped open, and she ran a hand through her hair. "Jesus, holy shit Marcus. That's really bad!"

He nodded, sucking in some air. "It's a lot, I know. I just ... I don't like to think of you having to be part of that, but you should be aware. You're going to be around this, and if you're with me, people are going to look to you for guidance just as much as they do me."

She pushed herself up and began pacing. She ran her hands through her hair, and worry stretched across her face. "Have you spoken to all the families of the missing people? Are there any connections?"

He shook his head. "None. We talked with all of them, but they were all at random times at random places. There was nothing connecting anyone together. We figured maybe it would have been a club or a bar, but it wasn't. Different ages, clans, even genders."

She turned, crossing her arms. "How do you know it's a trafficking ring?"

That was a tricky question. "I have people that know how to get information out of other people. Let's just go with that."

She fell quiet for a moment, her mind seeming to be churning. She looked back at him. "Okay, what can I do to help?"

He pulled himself up. "There isn't much you can do, Rachel. I just wanted you to be aware of what was going on."

She shook her head, waving her arms. "Don't say that. I can't just hear about such horrible exploitation and sit still. I need to be able to help wherever I can. So tell me what I can do."

He smiled, liking that she was so quick to want to remedy this situation. He felt grateful. He expected her to feel overwhelmed and ready to run. Anyone else in her shoes would have wanted to get as far from such a problem as possible.

But not Rachel.

He walked over toward her, taking her hands. "Just being able to talk to you helps me. You don't have to do anything, Rachel."

She shook her head again, biting at her lip. "As much as I love helping you, I also want to be able to help others. I want to help keep the people and the children here safe. I don't want to imagine another person disappearing, Marcus."

He pulled her close against his chest, inhaling her scent.

She gripped his shirt, her fingers tight against the fabric. "So, can I talk to people? Can I make phone calls? What can I do?"

Marcus held onto her tighter. He was sure he already loved her. She wanted to make the thunder better and safer, and she didn't even know she was his mate. She just was ready to do what was needed.

His concern over her abandoning him vanished. He didn't need to worry whether she wanted to stay because she did. She wanted to help him with this.

He looked forward to the future where she stood beside him. She was going to be amazing.

Marcus wanted to keep her safe at home and let her handle the situation, but he knew that wasn't going to work. Rachel wanted to get her hands dirty. He wasn't going to let her do anything dangerous, but that didn't mean she couldn't participate.

He released her, turning back to the picnic. "I'll think of something. In the meantime, if you see anything, you tell me right away. If you hear anything, let me know."

She nodded, returning to her spot next to him. "I can do that."

Marcus pulled her into his arms, kissing the top of her head. His mind calmed from having her against his skin. He closed his eyes and just held her.

He felt angry over the people disappearing, but he swore he would find them. He was getting to the bottom of the situation, and now he had Rachel by his side to help him do so. All his worries melted away.

"Do you think you are going to find the missing people?" Rachel asked in a whisper. Her voice cracked, and it almost sounded like she was crying.

He tilted her head back, seeing a few tears break free. It yanked his heartstrings, making his dragon crazy. She'd only been there for such a short time, and she already was attached and cared deeply about everyone.

Marcus wiped at her eyes and gave her a soft smile. "I hope so."

She looked away at the river. "Who would do something like that? And why? Why steal people?"

He didn't know the answer to that, but he knew he was going to find out. The idea made his stomach churn with disgust.

"I don't know," he said, kissing the top of her head again.

"I feel for everyone who's had a family member go missing," she said. "I can't imagine what their parents must be thinking. Or the spouses and children. To just suddenly have someone gone. If that was you, I'd be heartbroken."

Marcus tightened his hold on her. In his mind, he was imagining her disappearing. He'd rip the world apart to find her.

He swallowed. He wouldn't allow it. He was going to get to the bottom of this before it got worse.

He thought about those who were missing. He knew each of their names. He felt for the families knowing they were being torn apart by everything. He reminded himself to speak to the families again and try to help if he could.

But for now, he was going to enjoy Rachel and having her support. Something was bound to break their peaceful time together soon, so he was taking it in while he could.

He listened to the wind and the sound of the water. Rachel leaned farther back. "Thank you for telling me," she whispered. "I'm happy to be in the loop."

He tightened his hold once more, feeling grateful.

ELEVEN



RACHEL

Rachel was devastated by the news Marcus had shared with her over lunch.

She cared for his people. They were now her people as well. And hearing they were being kidnapped and there was nothing that she could do about it was the worst feeling of all.

If she felt this bad, she couldn't begin to imagine how Marcus felt. Especially as an alpha dragon shifter, this must be hard to swallow.

He was in charge of protecting his den. He probably felt as though he was failing them miserably. She needed to find a way to help. Maybe there was a side to it all that hadn't been explored yet. An outsider's perspective could help open doors that had been left unseen.

He was doing all he could, and keeping her in the loop with den business made her feel grateful and privileged. He continued to show her how much he trusted her. She wasn't going to take his trust for granted. She would do all she could to figure out who was behind the shifters being taken for him, the den, and their future.

But even with the horrid news, she'd still enjoyed their lunch.

It was full of peace and an unspoken connection that ran deeper than she'd realized. And him trusting her and making her his confidante pushed the strength of that connection to unbreakable.

They had attempted to comfort each other and, in doing so, had made the afternoon salvageable, though they couldn't forget the looming darkness.

After lunch and some tender moments by the water, Marcus stood and reached for Rachel's hand. "Up for a walk?"

She smiled and took his outstretched hand to stand.

She wiped off her pants, gathered their things, and inhaled the refreshing

breath of nature.

“It’s rejuvenating to be out like this. It almost feels as if nothing else is real or even happening besides this moment.”

Marcus smiled at her, his eyes dotting. “It is. That’s why I enjoy it so much. It clears my mind when it overloads.” He grabbed her hand, making Rachel feel as though she were in middle school and her crush had touched her fingers at the movies.

She intertwined her fingers with his, and they began their walk.

Rachel looked at everything, absorbing the beauty around her. She didn’t think the sight or the serenity it brought her would ever grow old.

Before she knew it, they were back at his house. For a moment, she was sad that the lunch had ended, even though that didn’t mean their day was over.

“Follow me,” Marcus said as he walked around the back.

Rachel did, excited that there would be more to their lunch.

When they got around the house, Marcus pulled on a fire escape set of stairs that blended perfectly with the house. Rachel hadn’t even seen it. It was tucked away so nicely.

“This takes us to the roof.” He turned to start climbing up and then looked as if a strange thought had hit him. He turned back around. “Heights don’t bother you, do they?”

Rachel couldn’t help but giggle at the thought of dating a dragon and having heights be the issue. “No.”

He looked relieved as a grin spread over his face. He bowed dramatically before her, indicating that she should climb first.

Rachel did a shallow curtsy before grabbing the metal and heading to the top.

When she reached the precipice, her eyes widened.

“Wow.” She stepped over the lip of the roof and looked beyond the house.

It was a breathtaking sight, being able to see as far as she could of the panoramic view she was lucky enough to see.

Mountains, trees, water, animals, everything. It was all laid out in front of her like a map in a fantasy book. It almost appeared surreal to be able to take in such beauty.

“It’s something, isn’t it?”

Marcus had quietly approached from behind and wrapped his arms

around her as she stared in awe.

She put her hands over her chest. "It really is."

She suddenly realized that the whole back side of the roof was completely flat, like the tall buildings in the city.

The odd part was his house had vaulted ceilings on the inside, so what was the need to create extra space for a flat roof?

He must have sensed her puzzlement as she looked around.

"Pretty spacious roof, huh?"

"Yeah, I noticed that."

He took a step back from her as she turned and looked at him.

"I use this roof as a lookout a lot of times. The area is spacious enough to allow me to patrol in a hurry if need be."

She was still slightly confused about what he meant.

"It's so I can shift up here."

Now, it made sense. She took in just how big the area was and began to wonder how large Marcus's dragon was.

"Would you like to see my shifter side?"

Rachel wasn't sure how to respond.

Of course, she wanted to meet his dragon and see the magnificence of the shift, but a part of her was nervous, given that she had never seen him shift before and wasn't sure how intimidating it might be. It had felt different watching the children shifting at the gathering the other day. This was more private, just her and Marcus.

"I promise there's no change in personality like those terrible werewolf movies," Marcus said with a chuckle.

Apparently, Rachel's thoughts had been plain on her face.

She nodded. "I would love to see it."

His smile widened as he stepped farther back. "Don't be nervous. You'll see why."

Within a flash, his body morphed and stretched before her eyes. Quickly, there was a massive red-gold dragon that sparkled under the sun in front of Rachel.

Her mouth fell open as she looked upon Marcus's dragon.

He stood proud with his head raised, looking satisfied at Rachel's response.

Impressive, isn't it?

Rachel jumped back. She heard a laugh rumble as she looked around for

the voice she heard in her head.

Yes, I can still talk to you.

She focused her mind and thought toward him. *Can you hear me?* When he didn't reply, she realized that this type of communication was one way. That was okay because she wasn't sure she wanted a virtual stranger hearing her thoughts.

She studied Marcus's eyes, and they wrapped a calmness around her. He was still him, just in a different form. It was all so new to her.

She knew this world existed, and she was now a part of it, but seeing it was a whole other thing.

Marcus lowered his massive head and moved it closer to Rachel. She held out her hand, and he placed his snout in it and nuzzled her.

She nervously laughed as his scales tickled her hand.

See, it's not so bad, he soothed.

"You're right. But I still feel silly thinking I'm just responding to a voice in my head."

She heard him laugh in response.

"Can everyone hear you when they are around, or just me?"

It depends, he answered telepathically. *Right now, just you. But I can connect my inner dialogue to the whole thunder or a group should they be around. Though the other dragons don't have to be in range for me to talk to them in dragon form.*

"So, I am talking to myself."

Well, yes. I mean, if anyone were to overhear you, his voice in her head answered.

She saw the laughter in his eyes. She couldn't help but smile in return and shake her head.

You said heights don't bother you, right?

"Right."

The dragon turned sideways and lowered his body.

Good. Get on.

"What?"

Rachel may have thought about seeing a dragon, but she never thought about *flying* on them. She suddenly felt that it would be belittling to them were she to climb on top of one like a horse. *I promise you'll be fine. I would never let anything hurt you. Especially me.*

"It's just, I ... I don't know ... I never ..."

Never thought you would ride a dragon? Now's the perfect time to start. As long as I'm your first and last. He winked his golden eyes at her.

“Okay, don't get mad at me if I grab onto something I shouldn't or hurt you.”

A full belly laugh echoed from the dragon.

Hurt me? I don't think that's likely, but I promise I won't get angry. Now, just climb on and hold on around my neck. You'll feel more stable until your legs stop shaking, and you can just grip me with your thighs.

“Oh, you'd like that, wouldn't you,” she muttered as she took a deep breath and threw a leg over the beast.

Sitting on top of him made her feel powerful and giddy with excitement. She was still freaking out a bit, but she focused on the excited part and braced herself as he had told her.

Hang on!

He opened his wings, and in one beat, they were off of the roof.

His wingspan was much larger than his body, and the air vibrated around Rachel as they took off higher and higher.

She forced herself to look out and didn't regret it.

Her fear was replaced with amazement, which seemed to be a reoccurrence when she was around Marcus.

He flew high above the trees and then extended his wings to soar.

It was nothing like she had ever experienced. The roof had been impressive enough for a view, but this was insurmountable.

She had never felt freer than she did sitting atop a dragon. *Her* dragon. As she rocketed across the sky, they skimmed tree tops and lowered themselves enough to catch their reflections in a body of water.

It was indescribable.

In just a matter of days, Marcus had allowed Rachel to feel more capable and freer than she had ever felt in her entire life. She had always questioned her choices, but for once, she was certain there was nowhere else she was supposed to be.

The flight had gone by too fast, as all things seemed to when her time was spent with the shifters.

Marcus circled his rooftop before landing. His wings created a thunderous sound as they beat against the roof in slow motion to lower them. She realized why they called their unified group a *thunder of dragons*.

Rachel's leg felt stiff as she tried to swing it over while dismounting. She

was still breathless from the flight, adrenaline running high.

By the time she was off and turned around, Marcus had shifted back into his human form. Naked.

Rachel felt herself blush as she quickly averted her eyes from Marcus's nude god-like physique. She heard him chuckle as he walked away.

Looking slightly up, she saw him head to a wooden bin stashed in the corner of the roof.

"Don't be so modest," he teased as he threw on a long, dark robe of sorts.

"I just didn't want to be rude," she protested.

He strolled toward her and lifted her chin, forcing her to look at him as he often did.

"You've seen me like this before. And you'll have to get used to it. Not just from me but from everybody. No shifter is clothed when they change back."

Rachel had never thought about it before, but it made sense.

He laughed at seeing her face as he took a seat on the edge of the roof.

She sat beside him and looked over the landscape.

"It's a lot to get used to," he said. "I hope it's not too much."

Rachel leaned her head on his shoulder and whispered. "Not at all." She lifted her head as he turned toward her, his eyes glowing with the sun.

"Good." He pressed his lips against hers, setting fire to her world.

TWELVE



MARCUS

Marcus loved what Rachel's kiss did to him. His whole body vibrated with rapture any time she touched him, let alone kissed him. And the fact that she was his mate magnified every feeling he had for her.

They sat on the roof, making out as if they were teenage lovers.

The sun was beginning to set, and the glorious glow of the setting orb illuminated all of the den's land, not unlike dragon fire.

But despite the beauty of the moment, nothing could outshine Rachel's beauty.

He was drawn to her even more than he had been before now that he had shared his dragon side with her. He felt more free and able to indulge in his true feelings toward her. The hardest part was forcing himself to not word vomit out that she was his mate.

There was a time for that, but right now, he had to focus on not rolling off his roof entangled in his bliss.

Marcus pulled away from a breathless Rachel.

She glowed with passion. The orange colors illuminated the sea green in her eyes as if they were the ocean itself.

Marcus had a hard time not taking her right then and there.

He wanted to be smoother than that. He wanted to love her in the way that she deserved.

It wouldn't be long before he could ravage her the way his inner dragon wanted. Right now, though, he wanted to play the gentlemen and savor every ounce of his delicious human.

He stood and pulled her up from the edge they had been sitting on. He said nothing, just simply drew her to him and pressed against her body.

Marcus's one layer of cloth between him and her wasn't enough to suppress his throbbing cock. He could tell when she felt it. Her eyes widened, and she opened her stance a little more, pressing her pelvis against it.

He let out a soft groan as she gently moved her hips against him.

He hadn't been fully erect until just then. Her pussy screamed with heat, and her pheromones were sky-high with a need for sex.

Marcus took a deep, calming breath as he nipped her ear before heading back down from the roof.

He had her climb down after him so he could help her off the ladder ... and ogle her ass in the process.

He couldn't get enough of her, even when he knew he was about to take her to his room and fuck her endlessly.

Marcus lifted her off of the last step and carried her to his domain.

Her giggles were quickly silenced by his tongue running across her neck.

He tantalized her with what was to come, all the way to his bedroom.

He tossed her on the bed, falling onto her in a wave of desperate kisses.

Their hands worked feverishly at discarding each other's clothes. The need was deep in both of them, and the desire to have their naked bodies pressed against each other was evident.

Marcus only had a robe to discard, but he made quick work of Rachel's clothes.

She lay naked and breathed heavily with anticipation as he stood over her, ready to claim his prize.

Her eyes shot to his erection, and he smiled as he watched her hand glide down to her opening.

"I think I can help you with that," he taunted. He grabbed her lowered hand and pinned it behind her head with the other. He straddled her and placed his over-eager cock right above her plush pussy.

She writhed under him, arching her back to get closer to his body.

He wanted to torment her more. He liked feeling powerful over the one person who had absolute control over him, but he couldn't hold it any longer.

He wanted to feel her encompass his cock inside her tight, wet walls. She was dripping and was more than wet enough to take him.

He thrust himself deep inside her, burying his dick all the way to the hilt.

Rachel moaned loudly as she clenched around him.

It wouldn't be long before he climaxed, so he fucked her as hard and long as he could, their moans and screams of pleasure filling the empty house.

MARCUS HEARD the shower kick on as he slowly roused.

“Are you going to join me?” Rachel’s voice whispered in his ear.

His dick instantly went hard, knowing what lay ahead of it with that voice.

Her lips brushed against his, but when he went to respond, she had already pulled away.

He forced his eyes to open fully enough just to see Rachel’s beautiful body sway toward the bathroom. Naked.

Marcus immediately threw the covers off, almost tripping in his haste to follow his glorious siren to her watery trap.

She was already in the shower by the time he entered.

“Knock, knock,” he teased as he opened the glass door.

“And here I thought that you had left me out to dry.” She giggled adorably.

He threw an arm around her chest as the other shot down between her thighs.

“You? Dry? Never!” He wrapped his arms around her slick, wet body before she could respond with a playful punch.

He was behind her and made sure his cock pressed hard into the small of her back.

“I’m ready if you are,” she grinned, putting her hands against the shower wall and sticking her ass out.

His eyes shot down instinctively.

Rachel took notice and wiggled around, probably watching his eyes follow.

He didn’t care. He couldn’t stop himself if he tried.

Marcus spread her legs after her teasing dare.

Of course, he was ready.

He slid his large, long cock deep inside her, pulling her back against his chest as he tweaked her nipples gently between his fingers.

“Ah, fuck.”

Marcus kissed her neck as he moved in and out. The soap sliding off her body eased his already smooth dick easily inside her lubricated pussy.

“Do I feel ready for you?”

He saw her nails dig into the wall as she moaned. “Yes.”

Her moans became loud and long as Marcus laid victory over his siren, again, again, and again.

RACHEL TURNED off the now-cold water as they dried with fluffy towels big enough to be a blanket.

“You know, if you’re not careful, I could get used to this,” she teased, hanging her towel on a hook.

“I hope you do. I couldn’t stand my mate living anywhere but here.” Marcus froze as soon as the words left his mouth.

Dammit. That was the last thing he wanted to let slip. Being with her had just made him all too comfortable.

He looked quickly at Rachel to see her reaction.

She was frozen in the doorway, hand resting on the frame.

“Your what?”

It was too late now. He better just go with it and admit the truth. They had already come this far.

“I was going to tell you sooner, but I didn’t want to scare you off.”

She turned around and looked at him. “I know what the basics of a mate are, but what makes you say that about me?”

Marcus saw the question lingering in her eyes. She didn’t think she was good enough for him. It almost broke his heart for her to even think she was anything less than she was.

“It’s hard to explain, but it’s true. What you and I have is called true or fated mates.” He watched her blank face. “It’s a lot, I know. Can you let me at least explain over dinner before you freak out?”

Her face softened. “Freak out? No, I just don’t really understand it, that’s all. So, explaining over food sounds good.”

Marcus smiled. “Okay. Thank you. I’ll order some food if you want to pour us a glass of wine.”

He threw clothes on as his mind buzzed over how he was going to explain this to Rachel.

Calling to order dinner gave him enough time to find the right words, but he felt it could still go either way, depending on how she felt toward him.

He knew she felt *something* for him, but he wasn’t sure the level matched

his feelings.

He'd do his best to explain. That's all he could do.

Damn, me and my big mouth. Finally, I let my feelings show, and this is what happens.

He tried to put the negativity away as he dialed one of his enforcers to pick up their meal from the restaurant he had called just a minute before.

He walked into the living room and found Rachel sipping a glass of wine while sitting on the couch where they had gotten their first taste of each other only a few days earlier.

Marcus sat beside her as she offered the other glass to him.

He was nervous and hated that. He took a sip to build himself back up.

"Our food's on its way."

She nodded, taking another sip.

After a moment, she leaned back. "So, mates. Tell me, what does that mean to a shifter exactly?"

"Well, shifters have mates, but only a few, especially dragons, have *fated* mates. That's when there is a biological change, or maybe it's chemistry that aligns, showing that two people belong together without a doubt. There's a pull that can't be denied. A shifter has to acknowledge it because his animal side can't be denied. Once they are found, a shifter grows restless when they aren't with their mate and will scorch the earth to protect them."

Marcus couldn't tell Rachel's true thoughts about everything he had just said. Maybe it was too much...

He didn't dare say anything else until she responded, worried he was going to make it worse.

Finally, she broke the tension. "So, what you're saying is that, without a doubt, you and I are meant to be together? And you feel that strongly toward me? About everything you just said, that is. Not just because you want me to have your child but also because I'm your fated mate. The one person you can't live without?"

"Yeah, that pretty much sums it up."

Rachel's mouth widened in a large smile, taking Marcus by surprise.

"Honestly, that makes me happier than you could imagine."

"It does?"

"Yes. I mean, I knew about mates, and I was actually afraid you would find your mate eventually and move on from me. It sounds selfish, but I didn't want that to happen. I would have been happy for you but sad that I

wouldn't be that person for you anymore. I've seen how shifters look at their mates in the diner, and I ... I have very strong feelings toward you and want this to work beyond just having a baby together."

Marcus's chest roared with fire at the thrill of her words.

"You do?"

She nodded, biting her lip.

He leaned in and kissed her eagerly.

"You don't ever have to worry about me finding another. You're my one and only, Rachel. I can't do this life without you. I knew that from the moment we met, and it echoes more clearly with each passing moment we spend together."

Her eyes glowed as he spoke his truth.

Seeing her happy over something that he had been so worried about made him laugh, realizing that he should've never stressed about it in the first place.

She kissed him again.

He held her face close when she pulled away and leaned his forehead against hers. "You belong beside me in this den. You're mine, and I am faithfully yours. Together, we can conquer anything and have the family we always imagined for ourselves. Together, we're unstoppable."

THIRTEEN



RACHEL

The breeze flowed from east to west. It was soft and smelled of honeysuckle, fresh hay, and decadent jasmine.

“Earth to Rachel. Earth to Rachel. Come in, Rachel,” Luna, her best friend, said jokingly.

“Sorry about that,” Rachel answered. “I drifted on you, didn’t I?”

“Girl, I don’t care that you drifted. I want you to spill the beans,” Luna remarked.

“Go this way,” Rachel said.

They strolled along a dirt lane not far from the den. The road came to an intersection. To the right was a dilapidated covered bridge, a postcard-perfect faded red. To the left was another dirt path lined with buffalo grass and mulberry bushes thick enough that Rachel was thinking she might take her shoes off.

“What do you want me to spill the beans about?” Rachel asked Luna.

“It’s been a few weeks since you’ve been living full-time in the den,” Luna answered. “I mean, you are so wrapped up in the shifter community, especially your dragons. I want to know. Spill the beans on what you’ve been doing. Please.”

“You’re right,” Rachel told Luna. “My dragon den has really taken me in completely. It’s so community-focused. They’re almost hyper-focused on the children. One of my first experiences was with a group of women who stole me away right in the middle of a gathering. The way they treated me, I felt like a prized relative. Like I belonged and was treasured.”

“What do you mean they stole you away?” Luna asked.

“I mean exactly that. The women commandeered me away from the main

activities like I was special, like I was one of them. They showed me all the new arrivals and the older children too. It really put me in a mindset where I knew this was it. This was what I wanted.”

“When you say, ‘new arrivals,’ are you talking about babies?” Luna asked.

“Oh. Absolutely. I held all of them,” Rachel answered. “I kind of got lost in the experience, the smell, the feel. Not quite a déjà vu feeling, but very similar to seeing and feeling a movie trailer of my future.”

“Wow. What a beautiful confirmation of being on the right track.”

“Wait,” Rachel told Luna. Rachel paused in her tracks when she said this. “There is a northern red oak just down the side trail over there. This oak is big, old, and healthy. The lower branches swoop close to the ground and make perfect benches for sitting on and watching the lazy river flow by.”

“Lead the way,” Luna said.

Rachel led them down the path to the tree. The smell of mulberry and the bright violet colors of morning glories along the path were poignant and mesmerizing. However, the flowers and the accompanying smells were not nearly enough to drown Rachel’s guilt for lying. Wanting to sit so they could watch a lazy bend in the river was half-true. The other half was a lie.

These last few days, Rachel had been feeling rough. She was nauseous and super hot all the time, as though someone had submerged her in liquid lava. Nausea had been coming on in waves, and it never came alone. Two days ago, her boobs had started hurting. The boobs hurting was not an aftereffect of her and Marcus’s wrestling.

This was something else.

Rachel had subsequently made an appointment with the healer for later in the afternoon after Luna left. Until Luna left, Rachel wanted to keep things quiet. She didn’t need to alarm or excite anyone yet.

The reason for sitting by the river was to take a pause until the pesky nausea waves found somebody else to pester.

The two women sat and looked over the river. Even though the river really was moving slowly and lazily, there were small water noises in the background. To Rachel, the sounds were ambient comfort, almost as sweet to the ear as the sound of happy children playing in the distance.

“What is your number two favorite thing about this new life of yours?” Luna asked. “I will ask about number one next. For now, tell me number two.”

“Life in the den. I really love this lifestyle. The sounds, the smells, the silence. I never feel in danger, and this gives silence a whole new meaning. I can relax in the silence. I love this feeling of being a living, loving part of something bigger than myself. Waking each morning next to Marcus.”

“That’s beautiful,” Luna answered. “I am not sure I have heard anything as beautiful in a long time.”

“And now you want to know my number one favorite thing about this new life I have?”

“You hit the nail on the head, babe,” Luna answered.

“Training with Marcus. I simply love and feed off training with Marcus.”

“How often do you train?” Luna asked. “And what exactly are you learning during *training*?”

“A variety of fighting styles. High self-defense. I love it. I love the strength I have seen and felt develop in my body. The confidence that comes from drilling self-defense maneuvers. The conditioning that gets worked in is a huge boost to my health. No matter the height of any flight of stairs I have climbed, I do not feel short of breath.”

“That is a lot, honey-bunny,” Luna said. “You are so brave. This new life with dragon shifters. Here, you are getting strong, eradicating physical limitations. You are my hero most of the time, but right now, you are my hero more than usual.”

The brief pause they took to sit by the river lasted a bit longer than the pauses Rachel had taken during prior visits. Rachel had to have it that way. That afternoon with Luna, she was warmer than ever, and her nausea surged over her, strong and uncontrollable.

Rachel and Luna walked back to Marcus’s home while exchanging pleasantries, feeding on the private jokes that were often the staple of their conversations. Rachel could not detect any sort of awareness of her physical discomfort on Luna’s part. Still, Rachel was really looking forward to her appointment with the healer.

When Luna left, Rachel had a small snack, which actually turned out to be a big snack. She also had a nap. After the nap, she did some simple math. Hot flashes, plus increased appetite, plus nausea in the pre-noon hours all pointed to a specific sum. Add to that sum were achy boobs plus an achy back. This upcoming visit to the healer was going to be interesting. Even Luna kept commenting during her visit that Rachel was glowing.

The trip to the healer’s office was mellow. The healer was gentle,

attentive, and the best listener.

“I am sure you already know what I am going to tell you,” the healer said. “I am not done looking at you today. Just a couple more things. I want to make sure we are both on the same page as to where this is headed.”

“You are going to tell me I am pregnant,” Rachel answered.

“Try not to sound so shocked and excited,” the healer responded.

“I am more excited than you will ever know,” Rachel laughed. The confirmation of what she had suspected had sent her body temperature skyrocketing. “And I doubt I’m going to sleep even a wink tonight.”

“Chamomile, lots of chamomile,” the healer replied with a laugh. “I’m just like you. The bigger the news, the more immovable my poker face is.”

“I do have a good poker face,” Rachel answered. “The tears are coming now,” she added as they rolled down her cheeks, fat and hot. Rachel cried steadily as happiness and excitement overwhelmed her.

“I have a couple more things I want to check, and then you need to find Marcus,” the healer told Rachel. “I also want you to come back here in the tenth or eleventh week. We are going to check the baby’s heartbeat and growth. If nature provides the right picture angle, and you are receptive to knowing it, we’ll see what gender your baby is going to be at that time as well.”

“What are the most important things I should know right now?” Rachel asked.

“Find Marcus before you tell anyone else. Tell him face-to-face,” the healer added. “Tell no one until you tell Marcus. You know how rumors and news travel. They fly.”

“I believe you. I know you are right,” Rachel answered.

They discussed a few other things regarding vitamins and how not to be frightened of strange cravings. Rachel was more reassured after her appointment with the healer, and she was ready to tell Marcus.

Searching for Marcus was easy but not simple. He was a man with consistent habits. She started with his daily and weekly haunts. She found him at the second stop.

Marcus was in the training facility, sparring with Vincent. Crazy hard sparring. The two warriors were banging each other up.

Rachel surprised herself at how composed she was. Every time she saw Marcus, no matter how short or long the break from seeing his glorious self, she would have butterflies in her stomach at the very sight of him.

Sometimes, just the thought of him would do it too.

The butterflies were hitting hard when she waved him over.

“You are impeccable with your timing, darling,” he told her. His smile was big, his face shiny with sweat.

“We are impeccable,” Rachel fired back. “First, tell me why you think we are impeccable.”

“You’re right on time. Vincent and I are just about done here. I was thinking I would head to the store and grab some things for an impromptu cookout. I was going to call you to come with me, which is why your timing is impeccable.”

“Great minds think alike,” she answered back. “I am here to steal you away. Gearing up for a cookout is the perfect activity for some Marcus-and-me time.”

Rachel waited while Marcus showered.

They returned to the house, switched to one vehicle, and headed to the farmer’s market.

Marcus parked under a huge sycamore that had plenty of shade. He turned the engine off and faced Rachel with the biggest of smiles. “What is it?” he asked. “You’ve been holding something in since the moment I saw you at the training facility.”

Rachel wasn’t surprised Marcus could tell she’d been keeping a secret. Beneath a sycamore was as good a place as any for this conversation. She squared herself in the seat so she would be facing him directly.

“We’ve got a new arrival coming, Marcus. I found out today. The healer was loving, supportive, and very encouraging.”

Marcus didn’t say a word. He reached forward with long, muscled arms and pulled her into a hug. Marcus was a triple threat of heat. His arms were warm the way a fire was warm. She felt his hot breath on her neck. His tears were a deluge of heat running down her shoulder, back, and into her shirt.

“This is what it is all about,” he said. His words were muffled by her neck and her head. She sensed the waves of gratitude pushing each syllable and each word. “This is right where I have been wanting my life to go. Thank you, thank you,” he added.

FOURTEEN



MARCUS

Marcus was having a tough time focusing. They bought a lot of groceries. The SUV was full enough to feed an army of dragons. He couldn't remember any part of the drive back to the house. What fragments he remembered of the shopping part felt like faded dreams that originally belonged to someone else.

I'm a mess. I'm so happy that it has turned me into a mess, Marcus thought to himself. He knew he had a stupid grin on his face right then.

There was only one scene in his mind that made sense. A bright, clear scene. A scene he would never forget. Sitting in the SUV beneath a huge sycamore tree. He and Rachel were about to go into the farmer's market and load up. He had wanted lots of food for an impromptu cookout. Rachel turned toward him in her car seat, facing him.

They were pregnant. Rachel dropped the best possible gift she could give him beneath the sycamore tree. There was a new arrival coming in about seven months and three weeks.

"Okay. We drove home. We parked. Now you have been sitting here like a statue in the driver's seat," Rachel told him. "I am just curious if you are doing okay. Normally, as soon as we arrive home, you jump out, unload the SUV, and do things. Staring straight ahead like a zombie, this is a new one for you."

"What's that?" Marcus asked. It was just dawning on him that they really were back home, parked in the long driveway, and he really was still sitting in the car with his hands on the wheel like he was driving.

"You are clearly listening to some type of radio or TV station that only you can hear," Rachel sassed back. There was a hint of laughter in her voice.

“Do you remember any of the drive?” he asked. “I am blank after hearing the news. I am high as a skylark. I don’t even remember buying the food and the other things.”

“You know my name is Rachel, right?”

“Ha, ha,” he cracked back. “I also know tonight we are having a blowout cookout. A real ringer. I want the whole den and your family and friends to be invited. We are going to tell everybody that you are my mate and that a baby is coming.”

“Okay. Good,” Rachel replied. “You are remembering some things.”

“Okay, tease me all you want. I am floating. You have brought me the best news today. You are bringing me what I have dreamed of for so long. You and I and what we are building is the legacy I have always wanted.”

“It is three in the afternoon,” she told him. “This late in the day, we have to get moving if we want anything to get done.”

“Absolutely. I know what you are saying,” Marcus added.

“I am saying it’s late. You have a vision of a cookout where we announce that I am your mate. We also announce the new arrival that is coming. We need to get moving.”

“Correct, correct, and correct,” Marcus told her. He could hear a touch of laughter behind his words. “The women of this den are monsters of productivity when it comes to last-minute festivities. We will unload, delegate, beg, and plead for help, and then really get into making this the finest cookout.”

They unloaded the SUV with help from other den members. Then, they moved the vehicle to the back of the property to make room for when the guests arrived.

Inside the house, Marcus got on the phone with Vincent and several other thunder members. He really rallied the crowd. They would be ready, too.

Marcus heard Rachel in the bedroom. She was also notifying her parents and Luna about the cookout.

Marcus felt so good hearing Rachel’s voice, robust with delight, as she invited others. He was really touched by how she was making the rounds on the phone inviting her family for the evening’s cookout, but she wasn’t mentioning the mate announcement or the baby.

She was saving all the glory for him. She clearly wanted him to have the choice to make the announcement or ask her to do it.

The den women working the grill in the back let Marcus know the meat was done. They also told Marcus that a large bonfire had been built in the fire pit at the edge of the lawn, with plenty of chairs gathered around it. He thanked them for their expediency and asked them to let him know when the first guests arrived.

In the kitchen, Marcus found himself confronted with several loaves of freshly baked bread and an equal number of different salads. He was not sure who worked faster, the women on grill duty or the women doing bread and salad. Marcus sincerely thanked the women and left them with the same command as the women on grill duty. They were to let him know when the first guests arrived.

Marcus ran upstairs and tracked down Rachel. Rachel looked stunning in a green sequin-scaled gown. The scales shimmered in the bedroom light. When Marcus entered the bedroom, Rachel twirled like a dancer without saying a word.

“I really don’t have words for how lovely you look,” he told her.

“Then make something up,” she fired back. “Make something up, but sound like you mean it.”

“You look as lovely as the morning,” he told her. “I was in love with you before I knew you.”

Rachel stopped her half-dance, half-twirl, and walked up to him until their bodies touched. She reached her arms up and wrapped them around his neck.

“Tell me this will never end,” she said to him. “Tell me this beautiful dream has no stopping point. Tell me there is no ceiling to this happiness I feel and that we will never be done.”

“I will tell you that I love you. You are my mate. As long as I exist, you are to be with me.”

“You better grab a shower quickly,” she told him. “I hear some guests downstairs. I also hear a car on the long driveway out front revving its engines.”

Marcus hurried and showered, then he outfitted himself with black trousers, a burgundy blazer, and a forest-green turtleneck sweater matching his eyes and Rachel’s green, sequin-scaled dress.

Downstairs, both the kitchen and the lawn were filled with den members, along with Rachel’s family and friends. Everybody was laughing, chatting, eating, and drinking. Children ran this way and that way. Marcus tried to

imagine the house with children running around every day, morning and night.

He couldn't wait.

Rachel walked up from behind him and wrapped her hand through the crook of his arm.

"Soak up what you can of me in this dress, handsome man," Rachel told Marcus. "I have already eaten a horse, and I am still hungry. It's going to be a long time coming before you see me in something so small again."

"I like seeing you in the dress and out of the dress. But I like seeing you out of the dress best."

"So how are we going to do this?" she asked, blushing from his words.

"Do what?"

"You know, the announcement part," Rachel answered. "I'd rather you announce, and I will stand beside you and be supportive."

"As soon as I get the vibe that most of the guests have eaten, at least eighty percent, I'll call everyone together."

"I like that," Rachel told him. "You know, it kind of looks like at least eighty percent of the guests have eaten already, doesn't it?"

"You are dead-on correct," Marcus replied.

Marcus pulled a long and hollowed-out ram horn that had been attached to his belt. The horn was long with a gentle curve. When he blew through the horn, the sound was lovely and a loud key of F. Perfect for reveille and rallying crowds.

Marcus blew and blew until all eyes were on him.

"This is what I know," Marcus told the gathering. What a large and beautiful group. He felt chills on his arms and on the back of his neck. Chills from the love he felt for Rachel. Chills from the love he felt for his thunder of dragons. Two different types of love. Both from that gap between the shadow and the soul where the dragon lived down deep.

"Those who have never loved at first sight have never loved at all," Marcus told the crowd. "This is an axiom that is as old as dirt. Up until five weeks ago, I would have told you it was poppycock."

"You still do say that," someone wisecracked out from the audience.

"I suspect you can all tell what I am about to announce," Marcus continued. "I found my fated mate, Rachel, standing here beside me."

There was loud applause and plenty of hoots and whistles. Marcus waited for the accolades to subside.

“These last few weeks, the way that you have loved and accepted Rachel makes me sure the announcement I just made was no surprise. You, my loving den, knew she was a great fit from the start. This next announcement, I hope, makes all of you proud and happy as well. Rachel and I are expecting.”

The cacophony of cheers and applause and whistles took longer to die down than the previous announcement.

“One final thing. This night is not over. Things are just getting started,” Marcus told the group. He looked out over the many smiling faces and got the craziest butterflies in his stomach.

Such a tribe, such a family. Rachel would lead by his side. Together, they would make the den bigger, happier, and more self-actualized. “Come on up, team. Let them see who you are,” Marcus yelled and waved at a small group of teens gathered at the border between the house and the lawn.

The group of three teen boys and three teen girls walked up to Marcus. Each was carrying a different instrument.

“Here’s the deal,” Marcus roared out to the group. “We have the best little bluegrass band here at my side. Small band, big sound. These folks are going to serenade us through the rest of the night. Thank you!”

As soon as Marcus said, “Thank you,” the banjo and mandolin kicked in. The other instruments followed.

“I appreciate you giving me a pass tonight,” Rachel told Marcus. “I know we’re celebrating. I just didn’t have the juice.”

“You feel okay, though, right?”

“Oh, babe, I am the happiest of happy. All my dreams have come true. This life with you brings out love I had no idea lived inside of me.”

“I feel the same way,” Marcus told Rachel. “Your fans are waving you over,” he added, nodding with his chin toward the group of her family and friends gathered just behind Rachel.

Rachel waved and then walked over. Her parents and Luna were so happy for her, they couldn’t stop hugging her! The ladies of the den reacted the same way.

And it had broken his heart open at how welcoming the den was to Rachel since the day she was first introduced.

Two of the den members came up to talk to Marcus. They offered congratulations and joked about dirty diapers. The strangest sensation stirred when this happened. The dragon, from way down deep, began to stir and pace and move its giant tail.

Marcus gave the perimeter of the gathering a good once-over. All the enforcers were in place, smiling and laughing yet still very alert.

That was when Vincent walked up.

“You are the man,” Vincent said. “The man, the dragon, and the father to us all.”

“Everyone is having a good time,” Marcus answered. He was still feeling a little spooky, feeling a certain something-was-amiss vibe. Even with Vincent right there, he felt the heebie-jeebies stronger than before. Marcus decided he was going to keep the conversation with Vincent simple. This way, Marcus wouldn’t reduce his alertness.

“I bet the rest of the night will be great,” Vincent added. “Especially for your new mate in her green sequined dress.”

FIFTEEN



RACHEL

The teen band finished their last song, and some people started leaving right away. Some stayed. Rachel snuck off and changed out of her sequined dress. She donned loose clothing more appropriate for cleanup. Despite her exhaustion, she felt wonderful.

She didn't need to help, but she wanted to. She wanted to do her part and really be a member of the den.

She couldn't sit still as she was bursting with gratitude. Marcus was the man. Marcus had delivered a great speech, but Rachel was the one who really received the love and the accolades. She couldn't wait to go to bed and snuggle with Marcus. Technically, it would be the three of them, Marcus, Rachel, and the baby, growing and surrounded by their love.

Outside near the grill, Rachel received stern but loving glances from the other women cleaning up. The looks basically warned Rachel to stay away from moving heavy chairs and big cleanup items and said that she had no business jeopardizing her precious cargo.

Inside the house, Rachel didn't receive any fuzzy warm welcomes either. She helped the women in the dining room and the kitchen anyway. They did not, however, shoo her away. The women tolerated her help, but that tolerance was clearly paper thin.

"Girl, don't you want to sit and kick your feet up?" one of the women asked. "We got this. Relax your body a bit."

"I am a doer and a planner, not a sitter and a watcher," Rachel replied. She said it sweetly, making lots of eye contact and making sure to smile with her eyes.

"I love your personality," the woman said. "You are the me that I want to

be. Have you picked names yet, or at least top choices?"

"Haven't even put our toe in the water," Rachel answered. "We just found out today that we're expecting, and I am not sure Marcus or I remember much of the whole day except for learning we're pregnant and having the cookout."

"It'll be like that the whole way," the woman added. "It goes fast, total blur. What you and Marcus have is more important than anyone will be able to tell you. I hope you know you were glowing when you stood next to him in front of the whole crowd."

"That is very sweet of you to say," Rachel answered. "To be quite honest, I have felt myself glowing with joy since the moment I met the thunder."

"Do you have a hunch or intuition on what gender your baby is?" a woman toward the back of the kitchen asked.

"I heard Grandma once mention that the tell-tale sign a girl is coming is you will dream about her before the bump shows," Rachel shared. "I was also told in that same conversation that if it is a boy, the bump will be riding really low. I hope I am remembering this clearly."

"You are correct," two of the women concurred in unison. "Boys carry low," one of them concluded.

"Another thing," one of the women added. "The boys kick more when there is noise or when mama smells food. The girls kick when there's emotional excitement. You find yourself carrying a baby who kicks when there are loud noises, an alpha male is coming."

"I never experienced that," one of the other women interjected. "Both of mine only kicked when I was trying to sleep or concentrate. It's like they were trying to stir the pot before coming out of the gate."

The group laughed. Rachel wasn't sure what to believe. It felt wonderful being included and hearing the variety of insights you can't get from a book. Insight that could only be received from mouth to ear.

"Get as much sleep as you can grab," one of the women added. "The next two years is kind of a contest where you gotta grab it where you can."

"What about cravings?" Rachel asked. She was curious what the group would say.

"If it has sugar in it, pace yourself. Everything else is fair game," one of the women noted.

The cleaning was finished for the most part. Everything shined and smelled good. The giant house and the air that flowed through it felt calm and

peaceful. A contented hush settled over everything. Her family and the rest of the guests had already headed home at that point.

As cliché as it was, Rachel really felt the need to pinch herself to make sure she wasn't dreaming. It would be maybe less than an hour, and she would be in bed, Marcus beside her, the baby growing in her womb.

After the last of the women left, she spotted two bags of garbage that needed to be taken out to the trash cans behind the house.

Rachel grabbed the sacks and dragged them outside. In the waning twilight, just beyond earshot, she noted the faint figures of Marcus and two other men folding up tables and moving them into the far storage shed.

Even at this distance, he was majestic and sexy, screaming alpha in every way. She would never tire of looking at him.

With a happy sigh, she continued around the detached garage where the crickets cried for their mates. The stars above shimmered and twinkled. The faintest of breezes caressed her wrists and ankles and anything that wasn't clothed.

Mother Nature soothed her and praised her for what a fine mother she was going to be. She slung the bags into the large canister and secured the lid.

Then, the crickets suddenly went dead quiet. The abrupt silence set off alarms in her head.

A silhouette materialized out of the darkness in front of her.

Rachel remembered her training with Marcus. *If you are ever accosted, and there is no way to run, pick the biggest of the assailants and hit first. Smash their face and scream as loud as you can. Make lots of noise. Hit again, kick, bite, and gouge eyes. Make no part of assaulting you an easy task. Be a honey badger ... more trouble than you are worth.*

Three assailants surrounded her. They lunged forward fast. Too fast for her to run. Much too fast for her to pick which one was the biggest.

The one in the lead was gifted with the heel of her hand shoved into his nose. She screamed with all her might, kicked, hit, and hit again. When aiming her foot, she didn't bother with shins. She aimed for the most sensitive place on a male and kicked the undercarriage. Once the three assailants had wrestled her to the ground, she bit and clawed.

"Watch her midsection," said the attacker who had the smashed nose. "She's carrying." They had her pinned to the ground. One of the assholes had his hand over her mouth.

This was a serious mental note for Rachel. The lead assailant was strong,

clearly a shifter, and privy to private information that she'd just learned that day. An insider or connected to an insider. She smelled the cheap cologne, sweat, and the faint hint of wet dog from the attackers. They would be wolf shifters if her initial assessment of his strength and scent was correct.

"You have a choice, sweetness," the male whispered to her. He had leaned down to place his lips close to her ear. "We need to gag you. This will protect you and us. Mr. Black here needs to remove his hand for this to happen. He wants to use ether to quiet you. I don't, as I know you have a brat growing in your gut.

"Ether is a nasty, solvent-type chemical. Think starter fluid for engines. That's what ether is. Choice A is you stay quiet until we get the gag in. Choice B is you try to scream, and we use the ether. Close your left eye for choice A, or close your right eye for choice B. Now let me see what you say."

Rachel closed her left eye and held it closed for a few seconds.

"Good girl," the lead punk replied.

The group of captors gagged her. Then they shuffled her into the shadows near the garbage containers. There, they held her arms behind her back.

Mr Black hunkered down and glared at her. "We're going to exit through a side trail to get off this property. Any shit from you, I will tie you up and use the ether. I have no problem carrying you while you are unconscious. Understand? Close your left eye for yes or close your right eye for no."

Rachel closed her left eye.

"One more thing," the asshole hissed. "I'll be carrying you over my shoulder for the first leg of our journey. We have to go fast. The same ether offer still applies. Give me any shit about that, and I'll use it."

Rachel closed her left eye again and held it closed for a couple seconds.

Mr Black reached forward, grabbed her around the waist, and hoisted her over his shoulder. The ease with which he conducted such a maneuver was terrifying. He was beyond strong. Her earlier suspicion that he was a shifter, although he smelled like a canine, was surely accurate. Maybe he shifted into some kind of junkyard dog instead of a wolf.

Her heart sank deeper into a bottomless chasm as the house shrank in the distance. Her head hung toward the ground while her stomach bent over the scoundrel's shoulder.

Her mind spun in panicked chaos. She had failed Marcus and the den. Her captor's momentum added to the feeling of dread. The further away they moved, the faster they went.

Rachel rode slung over the male's shoulder through winding trails and backroads for what seemed the longest time. The smell of dust and sweat, coupled with the nasty gag in her mouth, meant vomiting would be inevitable.

They stopped abruptly. Not only did the sudden stop surprise Rachel, but the stiffness in her captor's body also startled her. He literally froze in his tracks.

If he drops you, you run, she told herself. *The baby is depending on you*. Just like in the old Thomas Hardy poem, she would not go gentle into the good night.

Draped over her captor's shoulder, Rachel twisted to peek around the side of the ass holding her to see what caused them to come to a screeching halt. They stood in the middle of a clearing bathed in moonlight.

With a jerk of her captor's shoulder, she dropped to the ground onto her ass. Her crash landing dazed her for a moment. Then she saw the men *running away*.

What the hell?

Why kidnap her and then leave her in the middle of the forest?

Movement in the sky caught her eye, and she quickly realized that she'd gone from the frying pan straight into the fire of an unknown dragon.

SIXTEEN



MARCUS

The valley was dark and silent in the night. Marcus and his two enforcers followed the path of the moonlight through the air like a blade through flesh. His prey ran through the forest below them.

There's a clearing ahead, an enforcer said. That may be their destination.

They landed in the field and then hid among the trees to wait for the kidnappers to emerge. Marcus blinked, barely able to hold still. He was focused despite the hammering rage that had been surging in his heart since he heard his mate's scream.

Wait for my word. No one move.

The enforcers froze, seemingly turning into stone, like protective gargoyles. Marcus watched closely as the wolf shifters, still in human form, stopped in the clearing.

Marcus's heart buzzed in his ears, the silence too deafening. An image of Rachel's body lying limp under the spotlight of the moon, her throat slashed and glittering ruby-red to soak the grass below, passed through him.

It made him whimper like someone had gutted him. His enforcers remained quiet, standing loyal by their alpha's side.

The wolf did not harm Rachel, thankfully. He merely dropped her in the center, a thud onto her butt as she tumbled.

Marcus scowled as the wolves immediately sprinted in the opposite direction, swallowed whole by the inky black forest. Had the wolves sensed him and his men? Why dump what they risked their lives to take and then run?

Marcus launched forward toward his mate when a shadow slinked along the field. It looked like an airplane was flying low and blocking the

moonlight, but there was no sound of jet engines. He glanced up and saw the source.

Swooping over the forest on the side where the wolves had disappeared came three large dragons. Their size and majesty were stunning, even to Marcus, who was considered on the larger side himself as an alpha. They cut through the pale shade of the moon, their scales as glossy as a crystal ball. They swarmed overhead like vultures, the sound of the flapping wings akin to that of a ship's sail.

Marcus and his enforcers watched, moving from their hiding spot to battle stance on the ready. Marcus could not believe how colossal the foes were. The sight of creatures that mirrored the power of his own was shocking.

And when it came to protecting his mate, it was downright terrifying.

He shot his glare from the dark sky back down the clearing. Rachel was in a panicked run, heading away from him. He needed her to leave the scene if he was going to focus on taking down these shifters.

Protect her! he ordered his enforcers. *Take them out. Take them all out! I want blood!*

His enforcers took heed of his demands, entering the clearing and shifting as their enemies zeroed in on Rachel, still exposed on the far side. Marcus shifted, then leaned his head back, parted his mouth, and let out a shattering sonic screech.

With the call came an emergence of glowing red and orange fire. It lit up the night like an explosion.

Run! Marcus screamed in his mind to his mate. *Run into the forest! Now!*

He watched as Rachel heard his cries in her mind as she fled from the enemy dragons coming for her. The unknown visitors saw them and dove at her as fast as rockets, their snouts wide with fangs shining like massive bones. Rachel moved into the trees while the enforcers blasted into the air, with Marcus catching up at the speed of light.

The enforcers smashed into the enemy dragons with ease, using their body weight to collide with them and push them off the path of the retreating Rachel. Marcus watched her move quickly. The sound of his own blood was like the raging sea echoing through his eardrums.

Two of the shifters were taken out briefly, spinning sideways as the enforcers gored them with their large lizard heads. The third, and arguably the biggest of the opponents, slicked his wings back, becoming like an arrow

launched by an archer. Rachel had barely made it into the thicket of trees, disappearing into the black, when Marcus intercepted the largest aggressor and grabbed hold of his tail with his fangs.

Relief sank into him as his fangs bit through the scales of the dragon, who shrieked out more with annoyance than pain. It was a cheap move when battling dragons, but Marcus thought it was cheap to kidnap an alpha's mate.

It was no holds barred as far as he was concerned. *Fuck with her, then you fuck with me.*

Marcus locked his maw around the enemy's tail, encouraging its wrath as he thrashed back and forth to the point where he tasted rust. The animal roared out and slashed at him, bent backward mid-air, and moved robustly enough to tear his tail from the clutch of Marcus's jaws.

The second he released it, the dragon charged him. Marcus was thankful his attention was no longer on Rachel, but that didn't mean the fight wasn't going to be a challenge. The shifter before him was bursting with bloodlust, his eyes a sickly and dazzling shade of dead green. His mouth was parted, and his teeth protracted like a thousand tiny swords. He immediately went for Marcus's jugular, which was rather bold but also quite telling.

Marcus smacked him directly in the chops, which only subverted the beast for a moment. Marcus's blow only enraged him, which spurred a rather speedy recovery and a stream of fury in the form of a blazing firestorm.

Usually, dragon shifters need a few seconds to garner the strength and effort to emit such an inferno. During the build-up, the potential victims had the time to escape, but the dragon in front of Marcus needed little to no time, giving Marcus no time to move.

The enforcers punched the dragon from all sides, but it didn't stop the enemy from emitting a stream of fire at Marcus.

Marcus wrapped himself in his wings and plummeted toward the earth. He caught the tail-end of the blast singeing his left side, and he gritted his teeth to endure the hot agony. He remained wrapped until snapping his wings outward just before hitting the dirt and gliding to safety.

It was folklore that a dragon was immune to fire. Scales made them resistant, but the wings were as fragile as they were powerful. Marcus floated along the ground before taking a sharp turn toward the section of the woods where Rachel had disappeared.

His left wing throbbed, but his enemy was still following him. His big feet smashed onto the earth, sending a thunderous rattle through the ground.

Marcus saw his enforcers battling in the air, equally matched, tiny blooms of fire coloring the murky sky. He returned his attention to his own opponent just in time.

They head-butted, the pain moving through his dragon body with a visceral shudder. It sent him to the ground, rolling and skidding over the pebbles of dirt.

Fucking hell! he screamed in his mind.

And here I thought you were an alpha? the dragon replied.

Marcus's scales bristled as he recovered, landing on all fours and breathing deeply to summon his own dazzling flames. He hated that the son of a bitch was getting the better of him. That rarely, if ever, happened. Marcus knew from the very beginning whoever had been behind the missing shifters would not be easy to take down.

But the difference now was the key and rose in his mind ... now he had Rachel, his mate. That not only made him far more formidable, but it also made him vulnerable.

The thought of Rachel and the baby getting hurt made him angry and violent but also distracted and irrational. The shifter was trying to get a rise out of him, and it was working.

Bubbles of heat gathered in his throat like a cloud burst. It galloped through him with intense heat, erupting out of his mouth in a ball of vibrant licks of orange. The shifter before him managed to avoid the collision, skirting the flames and zipping sideways to catch Marcus's wounded wing between its teeth.

Marcus cried out in unexpected anguish, the shifter throwing him by the edges of the most sensitive portions of his body. That was when the anger took control, but only in the most succinct and beautiful way. A part of him clicked inside, a piece that had always been there, simply waiting to be moved.

It was the fated mate's strength and the threat of losing her. It made the pain surging through his wings and body shrink, virtually disappearing into the ether.

Marcus, the intimidating and calculating alpha, violently whipped his tail directly into the eyes of his enemy. It lashed him with a snap, landing in a bull's eye at the core of the shifter's green iris. It instantly became red and swollen, blood flowing down his scales like tears.

He stopped, grasping for the injured eye with his claws. Marcus took

advantage of the blunder and brought out his own talons, catapulting forward, the steel-like blades going for the exposed neck of his nemesis.

Marcus moved like lightning, giving the shifter no chance in hell to recover. He was surely blinded in one eye, but that agony would soon fade. Marcus flew toward him and lacerated through the leather-thick scales in a single swipe, causing blood the color of oil to squelch out into the moonlight.

Marcus wasn't going to leave it at that. If he gave the dragon any chance, he would surely take it. He was vicious, so Marcus had no problem being the same.

Seconds after cutting the shifter's throat, Marcus hovered above it and placed his hands on the dragon's head. He twisted with expert precision, the cracking sound almost deafening, echoing through the night air. Marcus imagined a champagne cork popping when the dead shifter clonked to the ground, the night going silent once more.

Marcus landed on all fours, taking note of his enforcers and their own opponents. They appeared to have slayed them in the fashion he had instructed, with rivers of blood spilled.

Marcus grinned to himself, the sight of the moon illuminating the bodies morphing into their human counterparts. The enforcers seemed relatively lively, so he wasn't so concerned about them.

But something in him, the thread connected to Rachel, was alarmed. It pulsed like his heart was being squeezed.

Before turning toward the woods and shifting, he instructed his enforcers on the next steps.

Make sure they are dead. One of you warn the den. This isn't over.

He felt the wind of his enforcer's extraordinary wings as Marcus shrank down into a man and ran naked in the dark with a hot, drumming sensation in his lower spine.

SEVENTEEN



RACHEL

Rachel ripped off the gag as she ran for the protection of the tree line just in time. The gust of wind caused by the dragon coming for her with the speed of a bullet pushed her forward with the force of a tornado, causing her to trip over a few fallen branches and tumble onto her side. The fall didn't stop her from moving, though. She didn't know if dragons could infiltrate such a dense forest, but they could breathe fucking fire.

Marcus's signal looked like an explosion, the kind she had only witnessed on TV shows or the news. It was a fair distance away, but it was still just as striking. The howl into the night was filled with sorrow and fear, riddling her with her own versions of the feelings as she crawled onto all fours and then climbed to her feet. Screeches and squawks erupted behind her with surreal and extraordinary sounds.

Rachel ran, her heart rattling in her chest as she tried to find her way through the dark. She held out her arms as she moved to feel the trees while the bursts of fire behind her glowed in the dim forest and briefly lit her way.

She didn't know what was going to happen to Marcus, but she had to trust him. It was his world she was in, and for the time being, she had to find somewhere to hide and wait out the battle.

She boldly kept going while her hands shook in front of her, the reverberation from the fight moving under her feet like the cracking of thunder.

Just when the disturbing sounds were finally growing muffled from the depths of her placement in the forest, Rachel felt someone or something reach out and touch her shoulder.

“Hey...”

She reacted by spinning around, slamming her body against a tree trunk. The blow as her head hit the tree disoriented her. The next thing she knew, the person came to her again, hands outstretched, palms open in a peaceful gesture.

“Rachel, it’s me, Vincent.”

She was still reeling from the thud into the tree, having bonked her head slightly against the hard surface, when she squinted into the dark. The blue eyes hung there in the black night like jewels, and relief washed over her.

“Fuck, Vincent,” she said, claspng her chest. “You scared the shit out of me. Thank God you’re here.”

Vincent wore what Rachel was accustomed to seeing him in ... military-styled pants with a tight-fitted gray shirt. It was still dark, but the radiance of his eyes and the adjustment of the ill-lit forest made up for it. He came to her with one hand behind his back, the other outstretched to touch her head. She relaxed, bending her neck and letting him take a look.

“Does it hurt?” he asked, gazing over the back of her skull.

Rachel shook her head.

“Just a little knock. I’ll survive, I think.”

Vincent smiled. Rachel realized at that moment that she had never been this physically close to Marcus’s beta. He was taller than Marcus but only slightly and far more lean than muscular. When she peered upward to look at him, there was a ghostliness to the pale blues that she hadn’t ever noticed before.

That, combined with his smug smile, made her uneasy.

Rachel lifted herself from the tree trunk, ducking out from under his arm that was pinned over her. She crossed her arms, feeling suddenly defensive.

Then she realized he wasn’t naked. Marcus had told her they were always naked after shifting.

“Why aren’t you out there with them?” she posed.

“Oh, it sounds like they’re handling it just fine,” Vincent said, moseying over from the tree to stand before her. “Don’t you think so?”

Rachel shrugged, feeling the pulse of her heart throbbing in her neck. She didn’t want to take her eyes off him.

“I don’t know anything about dragons. I think that would be your expertise.”

Vincent chuckled darkly. Rachel started to feel sick.

“You always have clever remarks, don’t you? You always have

something to say.”

“What can I say? I’m *charming*,” she drawled in response.

Vincent came toward her with his hands in his pockets. It was a saunter and not at all aggressive, but Rachel knew something was wrong. She had to get away from him. She kept her arms crossed, her mind flickering with considerations for escaping.

“It’s safe to say that he found you charming, isn’t it? Marcus was the one who was never supposed to find a mate. Of all places, he found you in a fucking surrogate agency.”

Vincent’s blue eyes scanned her over, and then he turned his gaze to where the battle was still raging. The sounds were faint but altogether violent and upsetting. Rachel waited as he mused, her fingernails leaving indents in the skin under her elbows.

Vincent spoke as if casting a spell, muttering into the starless night nearly to himself.

“Sure, he could have a woman and have a child with her. That in itself wouldn’t necessarily mean anything. But you don’t understand what having a mate does for a shifter ... the power, the focus, the strength.”

“Enlighten me then.”

Vincent looked back at her, the grin growing wider.

“It’s like being injected with a drug. A drug that makes a supernatural being even more terrifying and intimidating. Nearly impossible to destroy.”

At the speed of lightning, Vincent whipped a hand out of his pocket and slapped it around Rachel’s throat. She gasped but kept her arms folded. He didn’t squeeze just yet but rather held her firmly. He could crack her vocal cords like snapping an apple core. Or he could strangle her without breaking a sweat. Terror screamed at Rachel to run, but another part of her told her to keep still and look into the eyes of the man who had completely lost control.

“And that’s all your fault,” Vincent seethed, his teeth gritted and glistening in the black night, moving his eyes in closer. “You really had to show up and fuck everything up, didn’t you? With you alive, he will be undefeatable.”

He had started to squeeze, which ramped up Rachel’s heartbeat. She wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of seeing her struggle, so she swallowed, wheezed for a breath, and then croaked out one final quip.

“Still,” she said, trying to come up with something that would stall her death in any way possible, “after all your work, all that deception, you

couldn't stop me. No wonder you're a beta." Maybe poking the bear ... uh, dragon ... wasn't the best idea. It wasn't the first time her mouth reacted before her brain.

Vincent smiled, and before he got the chance to snap her throat like a stick of celery, she swung her knee, connecting with his balls. It was a relentless, shattering blow that knocked the wind out of the man and caused him to release his tightening grip around her neck. As he doubled over and clutched his privates, Rachel ran, scared but snickering to herself that even a fucking dragon had that single, most vulnerable spot.

"Fucking bitch!" Vincent screeched.

Rachel sprinted, dodging the trees and leaping over branches with a primal fear she had never experienced before. She heard him running, stomping through the dark, and gaining on her with the speed that could only come from a supernatural being. A stitch developed in her side when she felt another flash of air whoosh past her, accompanied by a booming clatter that made her stop in her tracks.

She skidded over the dirt, bent over and panting as she found a place behind a large evergreen to hide in. The pain in her side was hot and cramping, but that didn't stop her from frantically studying the darkness to find out where the clamor had come from. When her eyes finally honed in on the sight, she felt her heart speed up even faster.

Marcus stood a few feet away, naked and glorious, holding Vincent by the throat two feet in the air. Vincent's feet dangled as he clawed with desperation at Marcus's forearm but to no avail. Marcus's teeth were clenched, a deep scowl embedded in the grooves of his face, and lord, he looked exasperated. But he stood tall, his stone-hard chest rising and falling.

Rachel had never felt more protected or more loved in her entire life. It filled her with certainty that she wished she could bottle, but it was ineffable. She leaned against the tree, holding her side, watching her alpha as Vincent gurgled pathetically.

"Marcus..." she whispered.

"Go home now, Rachel, you don't want to see this," he said sternly.

"But the fight ... did you..."

He shot his gaze at her, blazing like a golden sun. It warmed her despite the anger he expressed.

"Rachel, please. You don't want to see what I'm going to do to this traitor. Go, my men are waiting."

With that, Rachel nodded, listening to her alpha, and hurried past them and through the forest. She wasn't worried about Marcus. However, she didn't want to leave him. He would do what he needed to do as an alpha protector, but she wanted to be with him. To feel his arms engulfing her, his mouth lapping against the spot where Vincent had nearly crushed the life out of her.

Her body was suddenly depleted of energy as she emerged from the forest. She toppled to her knees. After a fluttery moment, she realized that it was shock, the body's way of protecting itself from trauma. The moon was still out, bright and bold, when one of Marcus's enforcers arrived at her side in his dragon form, encouraging her to climb on and fly back to the den.

Rachel did as he asked and was soon soaring through the dark sky as she looked back at the forest. From a distance, it was like an ink blot spill, malevolent and eerie. Her heart felt like it was being punched repeatedly, imagining a tragic end that would have Vincent getting what he truly deserved.

She tried not to let her thoughts roam as she was taken to the den and tended to by the women as well as the enforcers. There was only a tiny bump on her head from colliding with the tree, while the rest of her scars were invisible and emotional. She thanked all of the shifters but implored them to leave her be. Rest was what she truly required.

They finally did, all gathering to wait for their alpha to return with lights cast upon the trail like a plane's landing path. Rachel couldn't stomach waiting out there with everyone. Her mind was flooding with terrible thoughts and considerations. So she lingered inside the home she now shared with Marcus, lying on the couch as the world spun around her.

Rachel made herself tea, feeling antsy, even making herself a small meal to distract herself. It was like waiting for your husband to come home from war. You never really knew if it was going to happen or would remain a fable in your mind. She paced the room a few times before returning to the couch, attempting to read a book, but ended up tossing it onto the floor with impatience and frustration.

She stared up at the ceiling, listening to the chatter of the shifters outside. Her fingers rolled down and settled upon her stomach where their child was growing. She closed her eyes and laid her hand flat against her belly, sending love and hope to the unborn fetus. Really, Rachel was sending them to herself. She couldn't be a single mother. That wasn't how the story was

supposed to go. She breathed in and out slowly, calming her racing heart and lulling herself into a serene sleep.

She dreamed of her child. She dreamed of Marcus, unharmed, laughing and playing with their child. She dreamed of her soaring on his back, of making love in a field of roses. It was everything she had ever wanted.

EIGHTEEN



RACHEL

Rachel woke with a start at the feeling of floating.

She had not even realized that she had drifted to sleep until she had been disturbed.

At first, she thought it was still a part of her dream, flying around on Marcus toward the setting sun.

But, after feeling a slight jolt, Rachel became more conscious of her surroundings and saw that it wasn't clouds below her but steps.

She was being carried.

Her body stiffened as she looked up, slightly jittery after being dragged from a deep sleep.

She relaxed when she was enveloped by the familiar scent, followed by seeing the vision of his face.

Marcus was carrying her to his room, which meant nothing had gone wrong.

Relief washed over Rachel as she nestled back into her lover's strong, capable arms that were made to protect her.

"I'm glad you're back," she whispered as he laid her on the bed.

Marcus smiled at her. Once he had set her down, he stroked her cheek, brushing hair from her face. "Me too."

Rachel leaned her head onto his palm before turning to kiss it. "Are you hurt?"

He let out a snorted chuckle. "I carry you in here to lay you out and check you for any injuries, and you have the audacity to beat me at asking if *you* are all right?"

She grinned sleepily at him while she forced herself to wake fully and sit

up.

“Well, are you?”

Marcus rolled his eyes. “Yes, I’m fine. But what about you? I know you have that knot on your head.” He pushed her hair back to look at the tender egg forming.

“It’s nothing,” she insisted, trying to push his hand away.

Marcus was resilient and continued to check her over for any other marks. Rachel gave up, realizing her compliance would get this over faster.

Once he was satisfied with his findings, Marcus sat back and looked at Rachel intensely.

She had never seen such fear and happiness at once.

Everything about Marcus’s eyes screamed with such strong emotion from all directions. She felt for him. He had just seen her kidnapped with their unborn child, fought other dragons, and killed his best friend.

“Oh, Marcus. I’m sorry about tonight...”

Before she could say any more, Marcus shook his head, casting his eyes downward.

“Don’t be. It had to be done, and we found out everything we needed to bring down Orion. It will be handled.”

“But still...”

“But still nothing. I have you and our child back.” He rubbed her stomach protectively.

She smiled and covered his hands in her own, cradling their future.

“That’s all I need in this life. I promise. Also, my dark humor laughs at the fact that Vincent thought he could take me on in a challenge for alpha,” Marcus continued.

Rachel smiled at the fact he was putting on such a strong façade.

He had to be hurting after the betrayal of his beta, on top of so many other things. She also figured that he didn’t want to admit how scared he had been about almost losing her.

It might have sounded conceited, but it was true. She could see it as strong as any other emotion in his luminous green eyes.

“All I need is to know that you are all right, and it makes everything disappear.”

She kissed him on the cheek. “I promise, Marcus. The baby and I are fine.”

“Are you sure?” The first sign of worry seeped through his mask.

“Yes. Like I said, I promise.”

He looked satisfied with her answer. “Okay. If anything changes, you need to tell me immediately.”

“I will.”

He kissed her forehead and turned to leave.

“Where are you going?”

He turned with a smirk. “To take a shower. I’m covered in blood and dirt. Care to join me?”

“Tempting, but I like the feel of the bed right now.”

He didn’t seem put off, just kept grinning and walked to the bathroom.

Rachel lay there smiling, thinking about Marcus’s naked body covered in soapy goodness in the murmur of the shower water.

She had wanted to go in with him, but she also wanted to give him time to reflect. A part of her felt ashamed that she still wanted him inside her desperately in the midst of everything and his worry.

While she heard the shower running, she couldn’t resist letting her hand venture down and play with her tingling pussy.

His need to protect her and willingness to do anything to get her returned safely turned her on more than she could have explained.

Her hormones were also sky high since she had become pregnant, but that was neither here nor there. She wanted her partner’s body against her hot skin.

Rachel’s eyes closed as she imagined Marcus deep inside her. Her fingers danced around her lower lips and moved fast against her clit.

She didn’t want to climax without him, but part of her didn’t want to wait either. The sensation of being so close drove her to the edge, but she forced herself to stop. Mainly because she heard the shower kick off and wanted the real thing more than her imagination.

She stripped her clothes off and lay on the bed with her legs spread and wanting. Her nipples were erect, and her body craved Marcus.

He apparently had the same thought.

Marcus came out of the bathroom completely naked, steam rolling off of his body.

Rachel ached for him all over again.

Her hand was still lingering inside herself as he walked over, towel-drying his hair while nothing else touched his beautiful physique.

“Are you starting without me?” he teased, approaching the bed.

“Just making sure that you like what you see.”

She watched his cock harden slowly as his gaze slid over her body, resting on her playful hand.

“Oh, I have no doubt about that.” He stroked his member slowly as he watched Rachel.

Their actions mimicked each other as they turned each other on by playing with themselves.

“I think you’re more than ready,” Marcus commented as he stopped himself and headed over to the bed.

Rachel let her hand rise above her head as he walked over and climbed on top of her.

“You know, I can take the lead,” she said in a low voice as he straddled her.

“I know that you could, but right now, I feel like I need to run this show. I want you bad, and right now, I need to fuck you in such a way that nothing else could compare.”

Goosebumps covered her body as he talked about what he was going to do to her. Just his words turned her on and caused her to leak with anticipation.

“Then have your way with me. Don’t hold back.”

“Mmm, I won’t. Not this time.”

He laid over her and kissed her lips, pushing his tongue into her mouth. His chest pressed against her breasts, stroking her sensitive nipples and sending shivers throughout her body. She rocked against him, already knowing the rhythm that would fall into place once he entered her.

She stopped herself from guiding his cock inside and instead placed her arms around his back.

“Fuck me,” she purred, biting his earlobe. His pre-cum dripped onto her skin, and she smiled.

He growled low in response and adjusted his position, making himself ready to enter.

Marcus lowered and placed his face in between her breasts, nuzzling his face against the mounds.

His kisses sent electric shocks through Rachel, making her dig her nails into his back with her anxious need.

His cock teasingly rubbed against her pussy, caressing the inside folds but not yet entering.

“Are you going to make me beg more than I already am?” she asked in a raspy voice. Her body twisted and arched against his, just waiting to be taken.

“I can’t deny that I like it when you beg me.” He flicked his tongue against her nipples and lightly nipped at one, causing a gasp to escape Rachel.

“Please.”

Marcus finally submitted and sank his large, hard dick deep inside her awaiting pussy.

“Oh, my God, yes,” she moaned as he pushed his way in deeper and deeper.

She was so wet that he slid in and out with ease, even with his thick girth. The only friction she had was him gliding against her walls. She clenched tightly around him to give him the slick abrasion they both wanted.

“Fuck, you feel so good,” he groaned through clenched teeth as his pace picked up.

“I need you to come for me. I want to finish with you,” Rachel murmured. She was so close already, but feeling him finish inside her always drove the sensation that much higher. She wanted them to release in unison to experience the maximum pleasure.

Marcus’s groans became more frequent and louder as he pumped deeper. His fingers gripped deeper into the bed as he drew closer to the finishing line.

Rachel’s nails scratched down his back as she tried to hold off on coming before him. She was on the edge and forced herself not to fall over it too soon.

Their eyes locked on each other, holding an intimate stare as they enjoyed each other’s bodies surging against one another. It intensified everything to look into his green irises as they held her captive.

She couldn’t stand it anymore.

“Holy shit! Holy shit! Don’t stop,” she pleaded as she fought to stay focused. It didn’t do any good. “I’m going to come!”

Marcus must have been right on the verge as well. He gave a grunt as his breath quickened, and then she felt his cock pulse with victory.

Rachel let herself go along with him, wanting to revel in the surrender.

Her body felt as if it were being rolled over by waves of ecstasy as she let nature take control and released her mind.

Endless pleasure washed over her as Marcus continued to pour himself into her.

They both let out a loud moan as Marcus gave one more thrust and bit down on her shoulder as her fingers dragged down his back. He had bitten hard enough that she should have felt pain. But only bliss coursed through her as he made sure every drop of himself was released inside her.

She quivered against him as her body attempted to relax. His movements slowed as well, his mouth still on her.

He lifted his head and kissed her mouth, cheek, and forehead before pushing himself off of her to lay beside her.

Her hand lifted to where his mouth had been. There was a mark she could feel but no real pain.

“I forgot to mention something about fated mates,” Marcus said, leaning on his arm to look down at her.

She looked up at him, waiting for the forgotten tidbit.

“Shifters leave marks on their mates to claim them as their own. It allows for others to know who you belong to, but more importantly, it allows for deeper telepathic communication between us.”

“Wait, you mean I can speak to you telepathically now?” Instead of waiting for a reply, she focused her mind and asked him, *What else about the mark?*

He grinned. *It will never fade. I’m sorry that I didn’t say anything sooner about it, but my inner dragon reacted now that we both have openly acknowledged being each other’s mates.*

Does only the male leave the mark? she asked.

If you were a shifter, your instinct would have been to leave one on me as well. But don’t worry, you already have. It’s just not visible.

Rachel giggled. “How so?” she said out loud.

He kissed her lips, then lowered himself to kiss her belly.

“Your mark is on my heart, and that, my love, will never fade.”

NINETEEN



MARCUS

Marcus felt more powerful than ever after a night of lovemaking with his fated mate. He truly felt at ease with the world around him, moving fluidly as he and a collection of enforcers from the affected clans zeroed in on Orion's base of operations.

Just before his death, Vincent had named Orion as being behind the shifter kidnappings, and Marcus finally had what he needed to begin his assault. They approached under the cape of night, blending in with masks donned, waiting for Marcus's signal.

Marcus received the information that was required the night before, his hand clutched around the throat of the man who was supposed to have been the most loyal of them all. He watched as the hope for life drained out of his face, with Marcus narrowing his airway like a boa constrictor.

"Really, Vincent?" Marcus snarled, holding Vincent in the air. "When did you become so pathetic without me knowing about it?"

Vincent raked at Marcus's arms, but the alpha felt nothing. The betrayal was painful and would be something he would have to unpack later. It didn't matter right there in the darkness. He only needed information.

Vincent's words bubbled up through his mouth, specs of blood beginning to dot his lips.

"Marcus ... I ... I..."

Marcus threw him against a nearby tree, smashing his skull against the wood with a violent wallop. His head made a hollow sound as it hit the ground, and Vincent winced as he struggled to find his breath.

Marcus stomped over to his former beta and kicked him directly in the gut. He felt the beta's ribs split beneath him before falling flat on his back,

rolling in whimpering agony. It was a hard blow, but it could have been harder. He didn't want to injure him too much until he got what he needed.

"I don't want your pleas, you piece of garbage," Marcus said, pressing his bare foot against Vincent's collarbone. "You're going to tell me where this son of a bitch operates, where the prisoners are, and how many men he has on-site. Then, I'm going to kill you. Got it?"

A look of utter despair painted Vincent's stare, but Marcus didn't care. He crawled his foot up his collarbone and rested it against his throat.

He slowly pressed down harder when Vincent struggled, once again ripping at his flesh with his nails. There was a tiny chance that he could shift while he was being interrogated, but Marcus would see that it never came to that.

"Okay, okay!" Vincent implored, gasping for air.

Marcus let up, but only slightly.

"Spill it, fast," he growled.

"Orion ... has a headquarters by the river..." Vincent mumbled with a strangled grunt. "Prisoners ... on the property ... about ten ... shifter guards."

Marcus leaned forward, knowing that he didn't have much time left. He glowered at the man whom he once considered his good friend. Hell, even the best friend of all. He felt his heart sink when he recalled all of their laughs, connection, and encouragement with Rachel. All had been false.

"What river, Vincent?" Marcus murmured in a low, intimidating voice.

"By ... Aspen Road ... near the bridge..."

Marcus watched him struggle to breathe, then planted his foot directly under his chin. Before placing his entire weight upon his former beta and friend, his viciousness softened.

"Why?" he breathed. "Why this?"

Vincent's lips curled into a mischievous grin. The blues of his eyes sparked for the last time, and it was when he spoke that Marcus realized he had never really known the man at all.

"Marcus," he croaked. "I hope your baby is born dead."

Vincent laughed a smokey, smothered chuckle when Marcus thrust his body's weight onto Vincent's throat like he was made of mud, bones shattering and crackling like firewood. He flattened him with several more stomps, turning his head into red and black mush. All that remained were his eyes, staring blankly upward into the canopy, dreams of living long gone.

Now, approximately twenty-four hours later, Marcus stood by the

entryway of the base, crouching as he narrowed his vision to count the guards present. Vincent had said ten, but he had planned for double that. He was thankful to see there were only three near the door of the ancient castle-like structure, casually chatting without a concern in the world.

They had to take advantage of their false sense of comfort before word of Vincent's death spread through the grapevine. Marcus motioned to his enforcers lingering along the wall opposite the gate to go in for the kill.

They all started moving in their human forms as that would garner far less attention. They would need to shift once they were under fire, and even more likely when Orion realized his best-kept secret was systematically dismantled. They had made a meticulous plan that morning that involved removing the guards, freeing the prisoners, and removing Orion from that equation once and for all. Through it all, Rachel snoozed away, naked and at peace in her slumber.

He was invigorated by the idea of needing to protect not only his den and the other affected species but also his mate and their unborn child. He couldn't risk any potential retaliation when it came to their safety. No, it would end right then and there by his own hands.

The enforcers moved in swiftly and stealthily, taking out the three guards in utter silence. Marcus moved in and disrupted the security cameras, spraying their lenses with paint and regrouping with his men around the side of the building.

"I think we found the prisoners," one enforcer, a wolf shifter from another clan, said.

Marcus gazed over his shoulder and spotted the prison cells lined up on the hill that overlooked the river. The silence covering them felt like that of a horror movie. Marcus sensed something dreadful stirring inside with sinister intentions.

Marcus grunted, his empathy for the shifters driving his rage.

"Andy, Samuel, Roger, Frank, release the prisoners. Randal and I will head inside. Once they are released, follow us inside. Then we'll burn this place to the fucking ground."

Andy, the mate of Christina, gave him a captain's salute, then headed up the hill on all fours to take out the two guards who stood idly by the cells. Marcus nodded at Randal, and they snuck around to the entrance at the front of the home.

Randal was an expert in lock picking, breaking in with effortless dexterity

and skill. They slunk into what looked like a dungeon that hadn't been modernized in the slightest. It was dimly lit, making it easy for them to hide in the shadows.

Marcus and Randal took out two more guards with blows to the head, after which they dragged their bodies into the dark. They moved quietly, stones scraping under their feet.

They approached what looked like a lounge area, and Marcus raised his hand to halt. When Randal stopped, Marcus lifted his ski mask off his face.

"Orion is mine," he whispered. "Things will likely get messy here. Call for backup if you're stuck in a hard place."

Randal nodded, then removed his own ski mask.

"I got you, boss," Randal replied. "Always."

They heard loud voices booming in the lounge area. They would have to go in guns blazing. No sneaking around anymore. He took one last look at Randal.

Randal grinned. "Let's fuck them up."

Marcus kicked the door in, and then everything started to move in slow motion. There were two men to the right and two men to the left. Both Randal and Marcus were able to take them out with prompt slashes of their claws to the throat and kicks to vital organs. Once they were slain, Marcus came upon the man who had been in charge of the ring all along, seated upon what looked like a makeshift throne, wearing a robe like a king.

Orion was startled but soon grew a gnarly grin when he realized what was happening. He shot to his feet, fangs exposed as he stripped out of his clothing.

His voice was hoarse and would have been threatening to the inexperienced. But Marcus was pumped with adrenaline and the need for justice. Nothing would destroy his will.

"Marcus!" Orion crooned. "You have come to me. How bittersweet."

Randal snapped the neck of the final guard, his body smashing to the ground. For a moment, the only sound Marcus could hear was his own heartbeat and the crackling of the fireplace behind Orion.

He was an old, vindictive man. Marcus would never let him see the light of day again.

"Take your final breath, Orion," Marcus said, removing his own clothing. "And pick your words wisely. They will soon be buried with the shitty legacy you're leaving behind."

Orion threw his head back and cackled while the pounding of feet shook the floor below Marcus's feet. He wasted no time in checking to see if the reinforcements were his or Orion's. He shifted into his powerful dragon, sending his head through the ceiling and opening the room to the stars above.

Randal shifted just as fast as Orion did. Randal went for the doorway in case he had to attack the newcomers, leaving Marcus able to focus his attention on Orion.

Marcus threw himself into battle despite having just battled another dragon the night before. He went into it with all his heart and soul, no matter how much it may have hurt his healing wing. Rachel, his thunder, and his unborn child were all relying on him.

He soared into the sky, opening his jaws to sink into Orion's thick but ragged scales. Orion let out a sharp cry and slashed at Marcus, which was a fruitless endeavor. He was slow and out of practice but with a ruthless aggression that made up for it. They spun around in the sky, reaching and clawing at one another until Marcus released a spark that sent Orion backward into the stars.

It burned him right between the eyes, smoke rising off his scales in ringlets. Marcus took advantage and fired his body into his sworn enemy, enveloping the dragon in a headlock a hundred feet in the air. He squeezed Orion's thin windpipe until it squelched into mush between his biceps.

Orion's lifeless body went limp, and Marcus dropped him into the river. The splash he made was startling and cinematic.

The battle below commenced, with his crew quickly gaining the upper hand. He glided down, shifted back into human form, and aided in guiding the prisoners to safety outside the base. Once they were all accounted for, Marcus and Randal returned to their dragon forms and emitted a glorious blast of fire from their gullets that would give the Big Bang a run for its money.

They engulfed the entire property until it was nothing but smoky ash. It swirled in the sky like black snow, and the bodies of the dead softened into embers of skeletal forms. When they were finished, Marcus went to the river to make sure Orion was actually dead.

"Take the prisoners back to their clans and packs after you tend to their injuries. Make sure they know that they are safe."

He trailed in the blackness, using his nose as his guide. He came upon the remains of Orion, who had shriveled back into his human form. He was white

as a ghost, the water running over his broken body.

Marcus took the blob of flesh and left it to burn in the main house. No such horrors would ever be seen there again.

TWENTY



RACHEL

Marcus recovered with magnificent speed from his injuries. Despite knowing that a shifter's recovery time was far faster than that of a human's, Rachel was surprised. The tear in his wing as a dragon appeared as a bruised, ugly gash on his back when he shifted into his human form. The wing had been broken, and the shifter doctor saw to it at once, injecting a serum that Rachel didn't recognize. He only needed to rest for one day. Then he was up, lifting her into his arms as if nothing at all had happened.

"Your rib!" Rachel called out in concern.

Marcus chuckled, burying his face into her neck as he placed her down. The sensation of his teeth and hot breath on her skin reminded her of the night he marked her, the indents still present.

"Oh, I'm fresh as a daisy, darling," Marcus muttered, peppering kisses up from her neckline to her earlobe. "Shifters recover really fast. It's like scraping your knee for us."

Rachel wrinkled her nose, ready to scold him, but her body had other plans. Being so close to him made her tingle, no matter how emotional she was.

"Except when humans scrape their knees, there's still a mark the next day," she teased him.

Marcus nibbled on her ear, which made Rachel giggle and playfully elbow him away. After a loving pat on her bottom, he sat on the stool at the kitchen island. Being away from him for even a few seconds made Rachel sullen and yearning.

She continued making their eggs and bacon for breakfast while Marcus plucked a grape from the fruit bowl. She was amazed by how the color had

returned to his face. The fights had taken a lot out of him. He was as white as a sheet when he returned from freeing the prisoners, and it had scared her a bit.

“So, there’s a celebration going on today,” Marcus said, munching on another grape. “At the town square. Everyone is going to be there. I hear whispers of some kind of a ceremony to honor what we did.”

Rachel stirred the eggs in the sizzling pan, sprinkling in chives she had found growing in the garden out back. She cocked an eyebrow at Marcus as he looked at her with an innocence that made her swoon.

“You mean to honor what *you* did?”

Marcus shrugged. Not even a little blush. The man was impossible.

“I didn’t really have a choice. It was the right thing to do. But you did. You could have fled from all of this shifter madness, but you didn’t. You stayed, and you supported me. You also smashed Vincent’s balls into sand.”

Rachel burst out laughing, a high-pitched squeal that made Marcus chuckle in response. It was the first time he had mentioned anything about Vincent. She knew there would be some after-effects of having to kill the man whom he had once considered his best friend. He maintained a stony exterior about it, but she knew there must be pain beneath it.

She scooped the eggs from the pan onto their separate plates, then lowered the heat on the bacon. After placing those down, she held out the meals in her hands, a display of domestic bliss.

Rachel batted her eyes at her mate.

“Always a ball kicker, but she can sure cook a mean egg,” Rachel jested.

“God, you’re delicious,” Marcus said, licking his lips.

They finished their meals and proceeded to prepare for the celebration. Rachel didn’t know exactly what to expect, but Marcus reassured her, saying that it wouldn’t be anything she couldn’t handle.

She dressed in a blue floral gown that Marcus had once said made her look like an angel descending from the heavens. It helped that the dress was form-fitting enough to highlight her curves in all the right places. She wore her wavy and bright hair down around her shoulders.

She had to revel in the sight of Marcus as she began to walk down the stairs. His shoulders cut through the polo pulled over his mountainous form, and his sleek black hair shone like the night sky. He smiled up at her, and she swore her heart was going to burst out of her chest.

“Ready, my darling?”

He held out his hand to her, and she took it. He pulled her in quickly, holding her by the waist as she gasped. He briefly hitched her thigh against him, cupping her ass with his strong hands. He growled at the same time, the fluid movement and mixture of sensual touches causing warmth to burst just above her pubic bone.

“God, Marcus,” she panted.

“You didn’t answer my question,” he snarled in a teasing way, tracing his thumb along her lip.

“I’m always ready for you, my love,” she retorted, parting her mouth for him.

It was a moment that could have easily turned into a quick romp against the wall, with Marcus hitching up her dress and pushing her panties aside, but they had places to be. So they settled for a passionate kiss, slow, steady, building up fireworks that would go off later that night.

They met the entire community at midday, the weather warm but comfortable. The different packs had set up picnic benches in a vast field, with shifters of every kind, many of whom Rachel had never seen before nor met.

They received a hero's welcome, with Marcus greeting each of the alphas of every pack and clan, who thanked him for freeing the prisoners and destroying Orion. They all greeted her with the same level of fanfare, which she felt deeply honored by but also undeserving of.

Marcus, however, held onto her hand the entire time as they swerved through the crowd. She had never felt so supported, so adored, or so considered in her entire life.

The man had literally killed for her and put her wants and needs ahead of his own. What else could a woman ever ask for?

Marcus was honored in a ceremony with an unveiling of an orchard that would be marked with his family name. A beautiful apple tree stood at the center of the park that would soon be cultivated into a flourishing garden. Everyone applauded, and Rachel watched as her alpha’s beautiful eyes glistened under the blue dome of the sky.

They sat on benches that were similar to the ones they had sat on the first time Rachel had been introduced to the community. It hadn’t been so long ago, but it felt like a lifetime had passed since she fell into the wonderful whirlwind of his world.

He laid his hand upon her leg as they ate delicious lean sirloin. Many

shifters and their mates came by, thanking Marcus and Rachel for finding and returning the missing. A wolf shifter, whose eye was as red as cherries from popping a blood vessel, was one of the men Marcus had saved from the prison.

“My wife and children, thank you,” he said, holding his hand out to Marcus.

Marcus took it the way he took everyone’s hand, standing from the bench, gripping firmly, cupping it over with the other.

“It is my honor as an alpha,” he said solemnly.

A glossy tear rolled down the man’s cheek, and he wiped it with his free hand. He then turned to Rachel and gave her a weary but proud grin.

“And we are so thankful to have you here too,” he said. “It’s your support for your alpha that gave him the strength and fortitude to save us all.”

Her cheeks bloomed with warmth. The man was so earnest, with a limp leg and a hand grazing over his heart. She gazed up at Marcus, who was looking back with the most stunning admiration.

She saw everything there that she would ever need. A paradise thriving in his eyes.

She stood from the bench, too, and embraced the man in a tight hug. Despite the abuse he’d had to endure, he was still strong and sturdy.

“What was done to you was heinous. You all deserve to live beautiful, happy lives.”

After a long hug, the man pulled away, wiping his damp cheeks once more. It was an endearing sight to behold. A man with sharp features, easily identifiable as half man and half wolf, choking up on the prospect that his life could have been lost.

“And now, I get to do that,” he replied.

When the man left, Rachel felt Marcus’s hand on her lower back. He rubbed circles, filling her with solace.

“You don’t accept praise very well, do you?” Marcus asked.

Her cheeks flushed again as she sat next to her mate. She tilted her head, observing the specimen of a man that would be hers, and hers alone, until the end of time.

When she didn’t respond to his question, his eyebrows furrowed. “What?” he said.

“Oh, nothing, just changing the subject,” she murmured, shuffling in closer till her knees pressed against his. “This is all just so unbelievable. How

is this my life? How are you all mine?”

Marcus smirked on one side of his face, then lifted a hand to run his fingers through her hair. It was something he did when they were having intimate conversations, lulling her into a deep sense of security and understanding.

He lowered his voice, though the celebration had migrated away from them toward a performance of live music. Rachel could hear the hum of guitar strings and chatter with its pleasant din.

“It’s all real, Rachel. I promise you. Once the mating mark is made, that is it. For me, at least.”

His voice trailed off, and his eyes shifted downward. A rush of fear grabbed her. She seized his face in her hands and forced his eyes to fix upon her own.

“Marcus, look at me.”

He did.

Rachel took his hands resting on her legs and placed them on her belly. She had only just started to show, with the smallest of bumps, the fetus the size of an apple core. But she already felt love for it pulsing through her veins with the strength of a dragon’s fire.

“This is also final for me. This child is our future. A future that we both need to protect and care for so it flourishes. And we can only do that together.”

Slowly, a smile so proudly radiant grew on Marcus’s lips. Rachel’s sense of anxiety vanished completely.

He kissed each palm with intention, then moved to kiss her forehead. His voice made her spine tingle, a sensation that she knew would never be put to rest.

“I know, Rachel. I have known that for a long time now. Our love is something special. The path may not be smooth, but we will forge it together.”

Rachel bit her lip, then kissed him sweetly on each cheek.

He laughed. His tongue slid between his teeth, and his eyes sparkled. God, he was something else.

“I promise to make it up to you later,” he said, rubbing her belly. “I will make it up to you forever.”

Guiding her gently, he held her hand as they strolled toward the band. The music played on, a slow dance, its steps destined for Rachel to master, a

graceful rhythm leading her into a wondrous future with a dragon by her side.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

New York Times and USA Today Bestselling Author

Hi! I'm Milly Taiden. I love to write sexy stories featuring fun, sassy heroines with curves and growly alpha males with fur. My books are a great way to satisfy your craving for paranormal romance with action, humor, suspense and happily ever afters.

I live in Florida with my hubby, our son, and our fur babies: Speedy, Stormy and Teddy. I have a serious addiction to chocolate and cake.

I love to meet new readers, so come sign up for my newsletter and check out my Facebook page. We always have lots of fun stuff going on there.

SIGN UP FOR MILLY'S NEWSLETTER FOR LATEST NEWS!

<http://eepurl.com/pt9q1>

Find out more about Milly here:

www.millytaiden.com

milly@millytaiden.com



ALSO BY MILLY TAIDEN

Find out more about Milly Taiden here:

Email: millytaiden@gmail.com

Website: <http://www.millytaiden.com>

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/millytaidenpage>

Twitter: <https://www.twitter.com/millytaiden>

You can find a complete list of all my books by series and reading order at my website:
[millytaiden.com](http://www.millytaiden.com)