



*Who's Her*  
**DRAGON**

NEW YORK TIMES & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**JULIA MILLS**

*Who's Her*  
**DRAGON**

DRAGON GUARD - BOOK 50  
MACALLEN CLAN - BOOK 5

*by*  
**JULIA MILLS**



*There are no coincidences  
The Universe does not make mistakes  
Fate will not be denied.*

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NOTICE: This is an adult erotic paranormal romance with love scenes and mature situations. It is only intended for adult readers over the age of 18."

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*For my girls*



## **The Dragon Guard**

*We soar the skies  
Free to a certain extent,  
As long as we stay hidden  
From prying human eyes.*

*Our scales differ in color  
Our defensive weapons,  
Tails, horns, talons and all,  
Are never the same.*

*We are one with nature  
We blend in with nature  
The wind helps us soar high in the heavens  
While the earth grants us healing strength in our hour of need.*

*We are one with the world  
We are the guardians of our kin  
When evil conspires to maim and hurt  
We are protectors of this human race.*

*As majestic animals of fairytales  
We share our beings with great men  
They walk in honor and the grace of Fate,  
Fate that we cannot deny.*

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- This Poem is based on the Series, The Dragon Guard by Author Julia Mills.

# WHO'S HER DRAGON



**All the planning in the world can't beat dumb luck.**

**Or a missing Mate....**

**Or an ancient curse....**

Being the youngest of the MacAllen Clan, Heath thought he had everything figured out. After all, wasn't he the one who had the Gift of Sight and could read everybody's mind without even thinking about it?

Then Fate and the Universe kicked him right in the butt, and everything changed. He walked into Sam's Diner, looked into the eyes of a woman he'd known his whole life – and *bam!* He knew she was his One True Fated Mate, the one the Universe made for him.

Never one to jump into anything, Heath did what he always did – he dragged his heels and waited for the perfect time to get down on one knee...

But as his momma always says, 'A Dragon often meets his destiny on the road he took to avoid it.'

Now, Maggie's gone. A Curse he didn't even know existed was activated when Arawn, the Celtic god of Death, and none other than the Omnipotent Being known as Fate – that god's Mate, stepped onto the steaming sands of the Chihuahuan Desert. And now, well, Heath is up Shi\*t Creek without a paddle.

Can he send a foe darn near as old as the Dragon King with whom he shares his soul back to Helheim? Can he save

Maggie before she's driven mad? Can he kick Dumb Luck's  
a\$\$ and make the idiot pay for ruining his plans for an  
unforgettable proposal to his Mate?

**Nobody's got the answers, not even the Guardsman with  
the Gift of Sight. But two things are true:**

**Fate will not be Denied, and Heath plans to show the forces  
of evil who's her Dragon and would give up his own life to  
save hers.**

# ORIGINAL LANGUAGE OF THE DRAGON KIN

WHO'S HER DRAGON

*Mo chroí.....My heart*

*Tha mo chridhe taobh a-staigh thu a-nis agus gu bràth.....*

My heart belongs to you forever and always

*Bho a-nis gu deireadh an ama bheir mi gràdh dhut le mo  
chridhe uile.....*

From now until the end of time, I will love you with all my  
heart

*Mo ghrá.....My Love*



“That took way longer than I planned,” Colton grumbled for at least the tenth time in the last three minutes.

“Yeah, you said that.”

“Ten days – ten long, freakin’ days, and we still didn’t get all of ‘em. How the hell did they get away? We were all there. Carrock, one of the oldest and best Guardsmen alive, even came down here to help. Hell, it makes no sense. Cheveyo’s got the Res warded like Fort Knox with all the gold still inside.”

“Rightfully so,” Heath sighed. At the mention of their maternal grandfather, the Principal Chief of the Thorntree Wolf Clan and Tribe of the Cherokee Nation, and the man he admired almost as much as their dad, the Guardsman tried not to snap at his twin but couldn’t keep the irritation out of his tone. “It is the birthplace of the Thorntree Timberwolves, not to mention....”

“And that’s another thing,” Colton cut him off. “How the hell did even one Demon, let alone half a horde, get past the Thorntree Timberwolves?”

“Because they....”

“And Dare, Liv’s Familiar, the biggest damned Wolf ever created with more Magic than you, me, and all our brothers combined, was there. It just makes no sense.”

“As I was saying,” Heath pushed out through gritted teeth. “The Thorntree Wolves, all of us, Dare, and every other person that was with us cannot be everywhere.” Snapping his mouth shut, he worked hard not to add a resounding ‘duh’ at the end.

“Not one damn thing about any of this makes sense. And where did Liv go? We damned sure could’ve used that Valkyrie. She’s stronger than ten men, older than most Dragon Shifters, and has the intuition of the Goddess Freya. Not to mention, she’s got Power and Mysticism as old as time.”

“You said all of that too – several times.”

“Did you talk to Gage and Tree?”

“No, I...”

“I did, and they couldn’t figure it out either. Then J.D. said he found scorch marks over by the entrance of the old mine. What the hell does that mean?”

“It means there was burnt sand at the entrance to Broken Arrow Mine.” The ‘duh’ was still on the tip of his tongue, so he bit it to be sure it didn’t slip out.

*“Let it fly, Lad,”* the Dragon King with whom he shared his soul snickered. *“Let it fly. Somebody’s gotta shut your brother down, or he might spontaneously combust. The boy is quickly spiraling out of control.”*

As usual, his brother kept rattling on without so much as acknowledging that Heath had uttered a word – or how hard he was trying to keep from smacking him in the back of the head. Some days, he wondered why he even opened his mouth.

“And why can’t we just fly home? It would be so much quicker. There’s nobody around. Not a damn soul would see us. Besides, almost all of the Valentine and the Chihuahuan population are Supernatural. They know we exist. We know they exist. Who gives a flying fig if we fly or...?”

Stopping without finishing his thought, something that rarely, if ever, happened, Colton’s head snapped from side to side. Rubbing his chin with the side of his gloved index finger, he frowned. “Hey! Wait! Don’t you think it’s kinda deserted

around here- even for the Desert? Where are all the animals? The wild horses? The....”

“The tumbleweeds?”

“Whatever,” he shook his head and grunted. “It must just be my imagination. I need to get back to work. Yep, that’s exactly what I need to do.”

*“Seriously, Lad,”* Finlo grumbled. *“Put your twin out of his misery.”*

*“What do you want me to do? Hit him in the back of the head? Knock him off his horse? You know as well as I do that there’s nothing and no one who can shut up the Mighty Mouth.”*

*“Well, you need to do something. He’s answering his own questions. And we both know it’s a slippery slope from there.”*

*“Yeah,”* Heath chuckled despite his frustration. *“But Colt’s already at the bottom of that hill.”*

Of course, his twin had yet to take a breath and was still rattling on like a broken spoke on a bicycle.

“I need to get my mind back on my cases and off Demons. I can’t believe Ranger wasn’t chomping at the bit to get back to work. And did you hear Donovan? The butthead said he and Lottie were headed off to Two Wolves II up in the redwoods. The frikkin’ Pacific Northwest, hundreds of miles from here. Can you believe they’re not even trying to stay close to home? Did he not hear that there are Demons on the loose?”

“We don’t know that they’re on the loose. Scorch marks at the entrance of the mine probably mean they hid in there until they could find or open a portal back to Hell. It’s what I would’ve done if a bunch of Dragons were looking to chop my head off, burn my body, and spread my ashes hither and yon. Besides, I don’t think all of them together were strong enough to do anything but curl up and die in the darkness, and....”

“I really need to get back to the office. I can’t even imagine the mess Chance has made.”

And just like that, Colton stopped talking. Heath let out a cleansing breath. Riding along in silence for almost a full minute, he smiled as the Dragon King with whom he shared his soul, Finlo, growled, *“Thank the Goddess, the boy is taking a break. He was winding up to take on the all-time record. He didn’t take a breath from Captain’s Reef to Blind Chief’s Bluff – even when you commented or answered his questions. That was excessive, even for him.”*

*“It sure is,”* Heath readily agreed. *“Makes me wonder if there’s a girl back at that office who’s caught his eye. I mean, when has Colton ever been worried about getting back to work? Gettin’ out of work? Now, that I would buy. He can’t really be worried about Chance. According to Ranger, he’s a damned good Agent. Hell, maybe Colt’s met his Mate and doesn’t want us to know.”*

There was a pause. The Guardsman knew his Dragon King was sniffing the air to see if his twin’s scent had changed, and it lifted his spirits like nothing else could. Somethings took the special Magic of an Ancient Dragon King being wielded by the soul of that Dragon King, to ferret out and getting the first whiff of a newly formed Mating Bond was one of those things.

Letting the left side of his mouth – the one facing away from his twin – lift all the way into a grin, Heath mentally chuckled, *“Thanks for that, Old Man. I really needed it.”*

*“I know you did,”* Finlo snickered, the sound like pebbles rolling around the bottom of a tin can.

*“Have I been that bad?”* Not waiting for an answer, he went on, *“Don’t answer that. Sorry, Old Man. I know I’ve been a real asshole, especially these last couple of days. Guess I’m just tired.”*

*“And missing our Mate.”*

*“Yeah, but she was pissed that I had to cancel our date. I’m pretty sure she didn’t put a candle in the window to guide me home.”*

*“Oh, stop, Lad. Maggie wasn’t mad. She was just disappointed,”* the Dragon King huffed, his original Scottish



brogue getting thicker with every syllable he uttered. *“Besides, she understands helping Family better than most. And we both know it wasn’t you leaving that made her mad. It was you telling her it was too dangerous for her to come along that pissed the lass right off. I swear, she was about to spit fire.”*

*“Yeah, that might’ve been some of it, but I’m pretty sure she knew I was gonna get down on one knee and propose. Hell, the furniture was even delivered to my cabin the day before. She couldn’t have missed the eighteen-wheeler rumbling through town with Englewood Furniture painted on the side. All I had to do was get the bedding out of the dryer and get it on the bed. I even talked to Bonnie.”*

*“And got a kiss on the cheek, a welcome to the Sampson Pack, and ‘Thank the Great Goddess It’s finally gonna happen’ because you were respectful enough to tell her what you had planned,”* Finlo chuckled.

*“I was finally gonna mark Maggie Mae Sampson as mine for all the world to see. We should be planning our Mating Ceremony this very minute.”*

*“Well, in case you’re wondering, Colton has not met his Mate yet.”*

*“Way to change the subject,”* Heath sarcastically chuckled. *“And thank you for it. I could feel myself heading down the road into my own little pity party.”*

*“Not a problem, but mostly, I checked on your twin’s scent because I’m nosey. After all the shit he’s given you about not making things official with Maggie, I had to see if he was doing the same thing.”*

Disguising his laughter as a cough, Heath lifted his gloved fist to his mouth. Then, to make sure Colton thought he was listening, he added an ‘unhuh’ and ‘yeah’.

*“Have you reached out to Maggie lately?”* Finlo asked.

*“You know I haven’t.”* Heath snapped, then immediately added, *“Sorry, Old Man.”* Clearing his throat, he went on,

*“The last time I tried, my own voice was thrown back at me so hard it took an hour for my ears to stop ringing.”*

*“The sooner we get back, the sooner you can get on your knees and beg and grovel until she’s smiling and giving you all the kisses.”*

And just like that, a vision of the lovely Maggie Mae Sampson flashed into the forefront of Heath’s mind. Five-foot-two with the bluest eyes he’d ever seen, her smile could light up the desert on a moonless night.

Her blond curls were nothing short of gorgeous and soft as the down on a baby duck’s back. He especially loved the chunky streak of pure ebony right in the front on the left side. Damn it all to the heavens, if that silky mane didn’t go all the way down to the waist of her jeans that fit perfectly over her beautifully curvy behind.

Maggie’s body was like a back road Heath could drive with his eyes closed. All her curves had curves, and he wouldn’t have had it any other way.

He’d dreamed about making her his since the day he walked into Sam’s Diner and got smacked over the head by a Mating Call that felt like a two-by-four being swung by The Dagda. It was like he was seeing her for the first time. Her aura was a rainbow of all the most vibrant and brilliant colors that only got more intense as her soul called to his.

*“Why have we not felt this before?”* He’d asked Finlo. *“We’ve known Maggie Mae, and all the Sampsons, for as long as I’ve been alive. Centuries, Finlo, literal centuries. Why now? Couldn’t have a little heads up? A little the next time you go into the diner wear a suit of armor ‘cause you’re gonna get knocked onto your ass?”*

*“The ways of Fate and the Universe are mysterious, Lad,”* had been the Dragon King’s reply. *“It matters not how many years we’ve lived, when the time is right, the time is right. It is not up to us to question Fate, Destiny, and the Powers That Be, only to live our lives to the fullest and follow the directives we’ve been given.”*

Drawn to her like a moth to a flame, Heath was across the room, leaning his elbows on the counter before he knew he'd moved. Of course, Colton yelled, "What the hell, Bro? Let's get a seat and order. I'm starvin'," at the worst possible moment.

Heath's head snapped to the side to mentally tell his twin to shut the fuck up, and when he turned back, Maggie had disappeared into the kitchen.

*"And some things never change,"* Finlo chuckled as Heath's trip down Memory Lane was cut short by his twin's bitching.

"Something feel weird to you?"

"Besides the fact that you've been quiet for over thirty seconds for the last ten days?"

"Not cool, Bro," his twin shot back. "What are you tryin' to say? It's not like I've been..."

"Yes, you have, and you know it," Heath shot back. "You have been chattering like a magpie about that job of yours at the DIA and how you love working with Ranger since the moment you walked into Mom and Dad's house. Which I get. He's the best. We all love him. He's one of us. He's a brother, no doubt about it. But damn, how many times can you say the same thing?"

He blew out a breath that did nothing to calm his frustration. "As if that's not bad enough, you switch from that to bitchin' about how long it took us to handle that mess at the Res. Like it was ever gonna be some quick and easy job. I mean, come the fuck on, did you think we could handle a horde of rogue Demons like they were kids in nursery school?"

"Well, I...."

"Well, you weren't thinkin'. And that's my point. Oh, and don't forget all the times you've told me how much you need to get back to the office and that you are just sure Chance has messed something up. Of course, he's been there longer than

you and trained you, but we all know that the great and wonderful Colton MacAllen is the best at everything.”

“Now, that’s not what I...”

“Yes, it is what you meant. You know it, and I know it. Hell, everybody who’s ever met you knows it, too.”

“Dude, if you would just....”

“If I would just shut the fuck up and let you run on and on like you always do then everything will be, okay?”

“That’s not what I...”

“Yes, it is. It *is* what you meant, and that’s cool. But damn, Bro. If you’ve said it once, you’ve said it twenty-five times – and that’s just today. Shit, all I’ve heard since we saddled up our horses and headed towards the Res ten days ago is what you need, what you don’t like, and what an inconvenience helpin’ out *our* family is.”

“And you haven’t been sayin’ a damned thing,” Colton snapped, doing what he always did, going on the defensive when he knew Heath was right. “You just ride along over there with your mind goin’ a hundred miles a minute. You should’ve opened your mouth and spoken up five miles back, but did you? Oh, hell no. Not the silent thinker - the twin with the brain. Nope, he’s got to mull somethin’ over and over till it’s thinner than the heels of granny’s socks. Like momma says, you beat the horse till it’s dead and buried, then dig it up just to beat it again.”

“That’s called beating a dead horse,” Heath ground out through gritted teeth. “And I do not do that. Also, I was answering you, but you weren’t listenin’. So, I shut up.”

“Yeah, okay, you live over there on Fantasy Island. I’m gonna stay here in reality and take my happy ass back to the ranch.”

Acting as if Heath hadn’t said a damn word, Colton kept right on going. “I was just tryin’ to fill the silence. Maybe say something that would take your mind off your worries. It’s not like I don’t know you’ve got a bee in your bonnet that you won’t let go. The buzz is about to drive me batty.” He beat the

side of his light brown Stetson, covering his head above his temple with the tip of his index finger.

“Battier than usual?”

“Ha. Ha. Ha,” Colton grumbled, adjusting his hat and sighing. “I can’t help that I got all the good looks, and you got a kicked-up ability to read minds and whatever else comes with the Gift of Sight. No, I can’t tell what you’re thinkin’, but I can hear the whir of that big brain of yours when you’re thinking really hard. And that’s what you’ve been doing this whole time.”

“We’re identical twins,” Heath deadpanned. “That means we look alike, Dipshit.”

“Not really. We have different colored eyes.”

“Wow! Let’s alert the media,” Heath huffed. “Your green eyes look better than my blue. I’m sure there’s an award they can send you. I can look it up when we get back to the ranch and fill out the application.”

“Okay, okay, maybe I have been....”

“A real asshole? Yeehaw! Hot damn! We finally agree on somethin’.”

“Come on,” Colton urged. “I’m even gonna let you have that one. Now, talk to your older brother. Let me give you the wisdom of my years.”

“Yeah, the whole three minutes longer you’ve been on this Earth makes all the difference in the world, right?”

“I’m glad you finally figured that out. So, whatcha thinkin’ ‘bout?” Holding up his gloved hand, the older twin didn’t wait for an answer. “I know. You’re thinkin’ about Maggie Mae and the way she stormed outta mom and dad’s house when you told her it was too dangerous for her to come along to the Res.”

“Although that didn’t take a genius to figure out, I have to say I’m shocked you even remember anything that doesn’t have something to do with you.” Shaking his head when his brother smiled triumphantly, Heath powered on because he

truly needed to get something off his chest. “And since you brought it up, why the hell is she mad at me? I didn’t make the rules. Isn’t it my job to protect her? Isn’t that what being her Mate means?”

“Are you serious? Have you not been paying attention? Were you sleepin’ for the last five years? Hasn’t every single one of our hardheaded older brothers tried the same bullshit? And hasn’t every single one of them ended up beggin’ and grovelin’ for forgiveness when their Mates handed them their asses for goin’ all Neanderthal and barkin’ orders?”

“Yeah, but this is....”

“This is different because you’re different? Or special?” Colton barked with laughter. “Now, why is it that you get to say shit like that, but when I say it, you give me a rash of shit as big as the Rio Grande and say I have an ego that just won’t quit?”

“I was not gonna say ‘because I’m different or special,’” Heath protested. “I was gonna say that my relationship with Maggie is different because we’ve known each other forever. It shouldn’t surprise her that I would try to protect her. Like you said, all the others did it. And Maggie got to see it firsthand. Why would she think I was any different?”

“Because you *are* different, Bro,” Colton immediately answered. Then, much to Heath’s chagrin, he held up his hand and added, “And I mean that in the best possible way. So, if you repeat what I am about to say, I will call you a liar and never speak to you again.” Once again, Colton scratched his chin with the side of his gloved index finger and didn’t miss a beat. “You got all the manners, the brains, the intuition, and the heart between the two of us. That’s just some of the things that make you different – dare I say – better than the rest of us. It’s why the Universe made you for Maggie and her for....”

Cut off as the heart-wrenching, utterly soul-shattering howl of a female Wolf slashed through the sweltering heat, Heath’s heart skipped a beat. He couldn’t think. He couldn’t breathe. All he knew for sure was that he had to get home.

Gripping his horse, Matilda, with his thighs and leaning forward in the saddle, the Guardsman wrapped the reins around his left fist, clicked his tongue, and roared, "Go on now, Tilly."

Off like a shot, he couldn't answer any of the questions that Colton fired like bullets out of a Tommy gun. He had to get there. He had to be sure she was okay. He had to....

Then the words he never wanted to hear shot through his mind, "*Maggie's gone!*"



“Hey,” a faraway voice whisper-yelled with such force she felt breath on her cheek. “Hey, lady.... Umm, girlie.... Wolf? She-Wolf? Wolfie?”

Maggie tried to open her eyes, whisper something back, move her head, or at the very least, wiggle her finger to let the person know she was alive – but nothing happened. Doing a quick check, she went down the list.

Heart beating... Check.

Still breathing... Check.

Head still on shoulders... Double check.

Her brain was definitely working, and her body was still intact, but that was all there was. All the vital organs, and fingers and toes were still in all the right places. As for the rest, well, they were like leaves on a tree – just hanging around.

Calling to her Wolf, she mentally whispered, “*Nina? Nina, what’s happening?*” Waiting precisely two heartbeats, she murmured more forcefully, “*Dammit, Nina, answer me. If I did something to piss you off, just tell me. You know how I feel about the silent treatment. Come on, please talk to me. I don’t know what’s happening, and I’m....*”

“Hey, Angel. You there?”

The voice was back, and this time, it had called her by the name of the female dog from *Lady and the Tramp*. Yeah, it was one of her favorite movies, but Maggie Mae Sampson was



not. A. Dog. *“Well, it’s confirmed. I’m in Hell,”* she mentally huffed, wishing for the ability to double up her fist and, at the very least, hit the ground beneath her.

*“No, we’re not in Hell, but somewhere close.”*

What the....? The voice was in her head. How had it gotten past her mental shields? She had learned to lock her mind up like Nanny’s house on a full moon at a very young age. And she had her Wolf to back them up if something unforeseen happened. Wait! Where was Nina? Where was...?

*“Okay, chill the heck out,”* the voice answered. *“My name is Bridgette Featherstone. But call me Ettie. It’s all I answer to. Well, unless you’re my mother. Then, I am forced to acknowledge that other name. For the most part, I hate that name. Don’t tell my mom. But, to my way of thinking, Bridgette brings up visions of all things girlie, and I am not girlie in any way, shape, or form.”*

The following silence was like the vast expanse of the Pecos River, where it met the Rio Grande downstream of Big Bend National Park, not far from the Chihuahuan Desert Maggie called home. Ready to ask what the name Bridgette Featherstone, or Ettie for that matter, was supposed to mean to her, Maggie was cut off at the pass when the assertive stranger answered her unasked question.

*“I’m Ettie Featherstone. Come on, you know - Claire’s cousin? The Claire Featherstone who is Mated to....”*

*“To Rory O’Reilly from the Blue Thunder Clan,”* Maggie chimed in with relief. *“Oh, thank the Great Goddess. I thought you were a Valkyrie, and I was being taken to Valhalla.”*

*“Do Alpha, Pack Leader, She-Wolfs go to Valhalla?”*

*“They do if they’re friends with pretty much every Valkyrie still roaming the face of the Earth.”*

*“Good to know,”* Ettie chuckled, the sound raspy and smoky. *“And sorry about indirectly calling you a dog. I just thought it might piss you off enough to answer me. I could tell you were awake and thought you were just playin’ possum because you thought I was one of the fuckin’ Demons who*

*grabbed us. You gotta know, I would never ever never do somethin' as low and dirty as that. It's just not the way I play the game. I'm a straight shooter from the word go. Even if I plan on kickin' your ass. It's really simple. I just tell you that I'm plannin' to kick your ass. It's like the time...."*

*"Hold on just a sec," Maggie blurted out. "I mean, excuse me. I usually have better manners, but I'm kinda at a huge disadvantage right now. So, tell me, how did you know I was awake? How were you able to speak to me telepathically without me knowing you were there? That's to say, how did you get past my mental shielding, as well as Nina's? What do you mean we were grabbed by Demons? And where in all that's holy are we?"*

*"Wow! When you decide to talk. You REALLY decide to talk," Ettie chuckled dryly. "Okay, here goes. I knew you were awake because I am an Empress Eagle Shifter, second in the hierarchy of the Clan of the Sun, and one of the daughters of Lugh."*

*"You... I mean, you're a... Well, that's to say that you are a...."*

*"Okay, let's get this over with before you have a stroke, and I have to figure out how to not only find a way out of here but also carry you all the way back to the Goddess-forsaken desert you call home all by my lonesome. Yes, I am a Demi-Goddess. But that doesn't make me any different than you, except for the unmistakable fact that when my alter ego comes forward, I sprout feathers, and you sprout fur, and that has nothing at all to do with my dad being a Celtic god. Yeah, I got some special crap from the big guy, but I would have preferred he stop by every now and then or send money on birthdays and Christmas. Goddess knows he's got enough dough for you, me, and everybody else I've ever met. Anyway, and more importantly in this scenario, your She-Wolf, Nina, is one the fiercest I've had the pleasure of being near in about a hundred years. Sure, she's knocked out at the moment, but I can feel her Power pulsing just under the surface of your consciousness."*

*"You can?"*

*“I sure can. And I can also feel the nasty Magic holding you captive. That brings me to your Demon question. Yes, at least in my case, a nasty, stinky – and very scratchy – bag was thrown over my head right before I was coldcocked with some of the most horrible Black Magic I have ever had the displeasure of feeling and smelling. Dude, seriously, I went down like a sack of potatoes. I mean, my Empress Eagle is still nursing a hangover unlike anything she’s ever had. And that’s coming from a chick who’s partied with the entire Pantheon of Celtic and Norse gods at the same time.”*

“Aye, tis true,” a rather croaky, scratchy voice with a thick brogue mumbled.

“That’s Eden,” Ettie clarified. Then she added, “Eden, this is...?”

“Maggie.”

“Maggie Mae Sampson.”

“How did you...?” Maggie gasped, then immediately corrected, “Oh, yeah, Demi-Goddess.”

*“Yeah, and Empress Eagle and a whole shitload of other things we can talk about after we get the hell outta Dodge. And before you ask, I didn’t just tell Eden your name because that is rude, and despite what some might say, I do have manners. I told her because you need to conserve your strength.”*

*Ettie took a quick breath and sarcastically snickered, “As for where we are? Well, we might actually be in Dodge or some other Goddess-forsaken place. But the smell of smoke, sulfur, and brimstone, and the ash filling the air, tells me we’re not far from Lucifer’s front door. Or, somewhere that leads to his adobe.”*

Again, there was a moment of silence. Then Maggie heard shuffling that reminded her of the time she and Bonnie climbed down the well on the old Baker farm and ended up having to crawl across the rocky bottom to get out.

Sure, momma and daddy had told them not to go over to the burnt-out birthplace of the entire Baker Family. Not only

was it as old as the hills, but every member of that Puma Pride had been born and buried on that land as far back as anyone could remember. As they walked that way, the twelve-year-old, newly Shifted for the first-time girls pinkie promised not to go near the family cemetery and to be respectful at all times. Still, they had to know if there really was a tunnel to the Underworld at the bottom of that old well. They were both sure they could find it, close it, and then they would be forgiven for breaking the rules.

Sadly, they never found anything, but some arrowheads they returned to Cheveyo Thorntree, a hand-carved wooden doll, and some cans covered in holes with bbs inside. Worst of all, when they got home, they were scolded for almost an hour and then had to wash dishes at the diner for the next month.

*“But it was still fun,”* she whispered. *“Wish Bonnie was here now.”*

*“I’m sure your twin is the best, but you got me, Maggie Mae. I never give up, and I always win.”*

Dust tickled the She-Wolf’s nose, and little pebbles bumped into the outside of her immobile arm. The heat of another body warmed her side right before Ettie’s breath was hot on her cheek. It was more than a little disconcerting that the Demi-Goddess was firmly planted in her mind, and the connection was only one way. No one but Bonnie – and Heath as of late – had been able to get in there and stay without her also seeing their thoughts.

Then things went to a whole other level of weird when Ettie whispered, “Don’t freak out, but I’m gonna try something,” into her ear.

*“What are you gonna... trrrrrrryyyyyyyyyy?!”* Mental whispering instantly became mental shouting as the palms of Ettie’s hands slammed down onto Maggie’s chest like a ton of bricks.

Warmth emanated from the Demi-Goddess’ very essence and out of her hands, making a beeline for Maggie’s soul. She could not only feel - but saw with her mind’s eye - every zigzagging tendril of pure white and very ancient Magic as it

wound over, through, and around every fiber of her being. Everywhere it touched, there was a puff of black smoke, a bright flash of light, and a low, lulling hum.

It took a second, but she finally realized what was happening and could only breathe, “*Wow. Just wow.*”

As time passed, she got hotter and hotter. Being heated from the inside out was cool, but it was making her perspire in places she hadn't known she could sweat.

Never one to bitch and moan, especially when someone was helping, Maggie let her mind wander. As usual, it landed on the only thing she'd been thinking about since that fateful day in the diner when Fate decided to make Her presence known – Heath Frikkin' MacAllen.

Long and tall, with blue eyes that looked right into her most secret places, there was no doubt he was the man made for her by the Universe. Sun-streaked brown hair that curled at the bottom when it touched his collar, and a butt that made her want to grab hold of it and never let go, he was her greatest joy and the bane of her existence, all wrapped up in the Dragon she wanted to spend the rest of forever beside. Ever since she'd realized – or been forced to realize, as the case may be – that he was her One True Fated Mate, Maggie – aka Magnolia – Mae Sampson had been waiting for him to pop the question.

Of course, one thing after another had gotten in the way. Right off the bat, before she'd even been able to speak to her Mate about what had happened, the Scorned Woman – a myth come to life - tried to kill Bryn and Zach, one of Heath's brothers, and steal their Magic. Then some crazy ass Sorceress tried to murder Donovan Cross, an adopted MacAllen Dragon Guardsman, and his Mate, Lottie, right in the middle of the desert they all called home.

Along the way, one of their own Sampson Wolves, Orla McCarthy, was damned near killed while on a case with the Dragon Intelligence Agency. Sure, the girl was the best damn Agent the Council Special Branch had. Still, it was one helluva a nail-bitin' couple of days and caused yet another

bump in the road between Maggie's happily ever after with the man of her dreams.

Of course, she'd been happy to help when Alex MacAskill, the Morigán's Executioner, the one and only Black Fairy, needed assistance after being ordered to assassinate her own Mate. It didn't matter that Creed Mathers was one of the oldest Dragon Guardsman and a Paladin to boot. When the Assassin Unkindness demanded Justice, there was no choice – or was there? All was well that ended well, and Maggie hoped for the same in her own life.

Happily, things had been nice and quiet recently, well, as quiet as they could be in a town full of Supernatural Beings that just happened to sit beside one of the most Magically charged deserts in the whole damned world. She and Heath had been spending loads of time together, and it was nothing short of fabulous with a capital F. They'd been making plans, learning about one another, and actually talking about making everything official in the very near future.

Then, the day she heard him talking to Bonnie, Maggie's heart had almost burst with joy. It took everything in her not to run into the kitchen, hug her sister, kiss her Mate, and dance a jig right there in the diner the twin Alpha She-Wolves had inherited when their parents passed.

She could remember it like it was yesterday....

*Walking into the diner, Maggie hung her purse on the hook, grabbed her apron, and was just about to holler out, "Hey, Sis. I'm here. One hour till the lunch rush starts," when she heard the low, rumbling voice of the one and only Heath MacAllen.*

*Tiptoeing so the heels of her well-worn red Roper boots didn't strike the black and white tile, she hurried towards the huge, gray, swinging double doors that led into the kitchen. Holding her breath, she stood perfectly still as Nina shoved a shitload of her sure and steadfast Wolfen Magic into their preternaturally enhanced hearing. Her heart soared, and she did a little shimmy with her shoulders when Heath told Bonnie, "I got my cabin all ready to go. J.D. helped me hang*

*the blinds, and Mom put up the curtains. She said we had to have curtains, too, because it was only right."*

*"I do love your momma," Bonnie chuckled. "She is a stickler for the oldies but goodies."*

*"Yeah, me too," Heath agreed with a snicker. "And she danged sure is. Anyway, the furniture is bein' delivered later today. I bought brand new bedding— light blue and dark blue flowers on a white background just like...."*

*"Just like Maggie picked out in the catalog last month?"*

*"The exact ones," Heath proudly proclaimed. "I went home that very night and ordered them. And I threw 'em in the washer the second they were delivered the day before yesterday. They're waiting in the dryer for me to make up the bed right before I come to pick her up tomorrow night."*

*"I'll have everything ready, Heath," Bonnie gushed.*

*Maggie heard what she knew was a kiss from her twin on Heath's cheek right before her Mate chuckled, "I got the ring in my pocket. Been carryin' it around since the day I bought it."*

*"Maggie Mae is gonna be so excited."*

*"I just want to make her the happiest woman in the whole wide world."*

*"And you will."*

*"I'm damned sure gonna try."*

*"She loves you more than anything."*

*"And I love her more than I ever knew it was possible to love someone. So much I can't even remember my life without her."*

*In the blink of an eye, Heath was moving toward the door, and Maggie used the speed of the Wolf with whom she shared her soul to race into the bathroom and hide out until he was gone. Waiting until Bonnie was back in the kitchen, she snuck out into the dining room and called out, "I'm here. I'll get started putting the silverware out."*

*The rest of the day was a blur. The diner was packed with a line going around the building from the time they unlocked the door until she called out, "You don't have to go home, but you gotta get the heck outta here. Hey, head on down to Rodeo. Jackie will take good care of you and tonight's happy hour is three for one drafts". To top it all off, they had a record number of to-go orders and were booked solid for dinner the next night. She only hoped Bonnie had called Charity to help out.*

*Yep, it was the best day they'd had since the poor humans caught that horrible virus and things went all to hell in a handcart. But no matter how rushed off her feet she was, Maggie Mae still had time to look out the window every few minutes. Then, just when she was serving Junior Thompson his apple pie, the biggest delivery truck Englewood Furniture owned drove past the window.*

*Time seemed to go even slower. She could not wait for the next night when Heath planned to 'surprise' her with a special dinner and an even better proposal.*

*The following day, Maggie popped out of bed before her alarm had the time to sound. In the shower, she and Nina mentally conversed about how their lives were about to change in all the right ways. Shutting off the water, she heard the phone ring, and her blood ran cold.*

*"Something's wrong at the Res," she and Nina gasped in unison. Sometimes having a kicked-up intuition just plain sucked.*

*Dressed in half a minute, and her hair up in a wet, messy bun with her boots on her feet in the next tick, Maggie was down the stairs of the house she shared with her twin and in the kitchen just as Bonnie said, "You sure there's nothing we can do?"*

*"No, darlin'," Barbara MacAllen's voice floated out of the receiver of the old wall phone both girls refused to get rid of because it was where they always used to find their momma almost every afternoon when they got home from school. The Great Goddess knew that woman could talk to a wall, but she*



*didn't have to. Everybody loved Sally Sue Sampson, and Sally Sue Sampson loved everybody right back. Talking to one of her many friends was not just a habit. It was her happy place and something the twin Alphas never wanted to forget.*

*"Well, call us if you need anything," Bonnie told Heath's mom, who also happened to be a Cherokee Princess and fierce Alpha Timber Wolf of the Thorntree Pack. Looking Maggie right in the eye, she emphasized, "And I'll let Maggie know she's to wait for Heath's call."*

*Not even lingering while Bonnie returned the receiver to the cradle, Maggie did a one-eighty and headed for the door. Making it all the way to the bottom step of the front porch, she stopped short when her twin hollered, "Barbara said you didn't need to come out there. She promised to have Heath call you when he can."*

*"Screw that," Maggie yelled over her shoulder. "She's only sayin' that because she doesn't want me sittin' around the ranch, waitin' and worryin'. Well, I'm not going to make food and coffee. I'm going to help with whatever fresh hell has come our way."*

*From one pounding footstep to the next, Maggie happily accepted the Magic of the Wolf and relaxed into the Shift. Four paws hit the cobblestone walkway in a single beat of her heart, and she was off and running.*

*Across the desert faster than she'd ever traveled, Maggie changed back to her human form right before her toes touched the first brick in the flower-lined path leading to the MacAllen's porch. Straightening her Wolf's Howl At More Than The Moon T-shirt, she made it exactly one step before Heath burst out the door and demanded, "Maggie, what are you doin' here?"*

*Knowing his curt demeanor and stern tone were because of what was happening at the Res, she ignored his furrowed brow and matching frown and continued to him. Happy when he opened his arms and held her tight, Maggie knew everything would be alright. But she couldn't have been more wrong.*

*Stepping back long before she was ready, the She-Wolf let her fingers slide down his arm and wound them through his. "What's goin' on? When are we headin' out to the Res?"*

*"You're not going," he deadpanned, taking another step back that forced her to let go of his hand.*

*"And why is that?" Maggie knew she was growling but didn't care. Heath was her Mate. There was no doubt about it, but that didn't mean he could tell her what she could or couldn't do. After all, she was an Alpha Wolf and the one of the Leader of the Sampson Wolves.*

*Then things went from bad to worse.*

*"Because it's gonna be dangerous. Cheveyo says there are Demons literally coming out of the ground. I won't knowingly put my Mate – you - in danger. Go on back home, and I'll...."*

*"You'll kiss my ass in the Town Square on Founder's Day, Heath MacAllen. That's what you'll do."*

*Without another word or waiting for a response, Maggie spun back toward the way she'd just come. She knew there was no use fighting with him. She'd seen the firm set of his jaw and the furrow of his brow once too often. Her Mate had made up his mind and thought she should agree. Well, screw that.*

*Shifting back into her Wolf, Maggie ran into the desert. Ignoring Heath's mental calls, she ultimately slammed the doors of her mind closed and just ran until she couldn't run anymore.*

*Getting to the base of Captain's Reef, a mesa in the Chihuahuan Desert that looked like a wave hitting a reef, her furry behind hit the sand at the same time that Nina snickered, "Feel better?"*

*"Nope," Maggie shot back. "I feel like an asshole. I didn't even let him explain. I just ran off like a little girl who didn't get her way. I bet he thinks I'm off somewhere cryin' like a baby and just didn't want him to see."*

*"Oh, I doubt that," Nina reassured. "Heath knows you better than that. And I'm pretty sure from the way he's been calling after you that he feels bad and wants to apologize."*

*“So, you agree, he was wrong.”*

*“I agree that his approach was wrong, but you know very well that I do not think turnin’ tail and runnin’ is the right way to....”*

*“Oooooooooohhhhhh shiiiiiiiiittttt! What the...?”*

Yanked from her daydream and dropped firmly back into a reality she would rather forget, Maggie silently screamed inside her mind as her body felt like it was being torn apart from the inside out. Her back bowed off the ashy ground. Her mouth opened so wide that her jaw cracked, and the back of her head was pushed into the dirt as far as it could possibly go.

Pain shot in every direction, and then it doubled back with a vengeance, trying to hack her insides into bits. The heat Ettie had been pouring into her caught fire. The runaway flames attacked what remained of the evil Sorcery holding her hostage as the resulting acrid, black smoke clouded the vision of her mind’s eye and slid into her throat.

Needing to cough or, at the very least, clear her throat, Maggie could do nothing. It was so much worse than her previous feeling of helplessness that she thought about giving up. It was torture - pure and simple torture - but she knew she had to fight. Her thoughts of surrender had been stupid. Sampson Wolves did not submit, no matter what.

On and on it went, the level of pain going from agony to excruciating to insufferable with no end in sight. Sure she was about to lose consciousness, Maggie tried to yell when everything stopped as if a switch had been flipped.

Returning to the ground, her jaw snapped shut, and her chin fell to her chest. Her fists relaxed as her head fell to the side, and blood pooled in her palms from where her nails had dug into the flesh.

Eyes meeting Ettie’s, she tried to speak to ask the Eagle Shifter if she was trying to kill her, but all that came out was a scratchy groan followed by a cough. Rolling forward, she gladly accepted the cool water from the canteen Ettie pushed to her lips.

Swallowing deeply, she rolled back, opened her eyes wide, and stared at the ceiling. “Did that go as planned?” She snidely asked. Then before Ettie could answer, Maggie sat straight up, spun on her butt, and grabbed the Demi-Goddess by the arms. “I can talk! I can move! You did it! You fixed me!”

“Well, shit,” Ettie happily snorted. “It did. Look at that. It worked.”

Letting her hands drop to her lap, Maggie furrowed her brow and challenged, “What do you mean ‘it worked’? Haven’t you ever done that before?”

“Nope, not even once,” Ettie chuckled. Then, holding up her hands in surrender as Maggie felt her cheeks get hot, she rushed to add, “But I’ve seen it done by the daughter of the Grand Priestess of all Earthen Witches, Kyra O’Reilly, Claire’s sister-in-law. So, I was sure I knew what I was doing.”

“Did the other person almost choke on their own tongue?” She growled, narrowing her eyes at the Demi-Goddess.

“Well, no, but he didn’t wake up either, at least not for about a week. So, see? I had better results than one of the most Magical Witches in all the world.”

Opening her mouth to throw another shot, Maggie could hear her mom’s voice saying, *‘Girl, you need to be grateful for even the smallest blessings.’* Blowing out a sharp breath, she sat up straight, looked Ettie right in the eyes, and held out her hand. As the Demi-Goddess accepted and they shook, Maggie smiled and said, “Thank you very much. Sorry for being a butthead. Without you, I would’ve been stuck here until the Demons decided what to do with me.”

Getting to her feet and pulling Maggie along, Ettie shrugged, smiled, and winked. “Don’t worry about it. I would’ve been pissed too. Hell, I shoved enough Magic into you to light all the runways of DFW Airport during a thunderstorm. To be honest, I was just prayin’ I didn’t short out your brain.”

“Well, thank you,” Maggie reiterated. “Not to be pushy, but do you have any idea when Nina, my Wolf, will come out

of it?”

“Sorry, I don’t,” Ettie sighed with a shake of her head. “I can’t get Eden, my Eagle, awake either. Well, except for that little bout of ‘drunk talking’ you witnessed. I’m thinkin’ it’s because the girls are one-hundred percent Supernatural, Paranormal, Magical, and Mythical, and that means it takes longer for them to shed Demonic Mojo.” She shrugged again while still holding onto Maggie’s hand. “But I won’t know until...” She tapped her temple with the tip of the index finger on her other hand. “...we’re out of this hole, and I can contact someone way smarter than me.”

“Yeah, I want to talk to my sister too. I bet she’s about to lose her mind. We’ve never been out of communication, and she might know how to help us.”

“Either her or Barbara MacAllen,” Ettie chuckled. “You feel good enough for me to let go of your hand?”

“Yeah,” Maggie nodded. Stepping back, she added, “Thanks again.”

“No worries.” Looking one way then the other, she changed the subject. “So, don’t know if you’ve noticed, but we’re seeing with our built-in night vision goggles ‘cause it’s darker than...”

“...Than the bottom of Granny’s change purse?” Maggie chuckled, trying to lift the mood. “Yep, got that in one.”

“Okay, good,” the Demi-Goddess nodded. Turning to the left, she motioned with a sideways nod of her head. “Let’s try this way first.”

“Sounds good.”

“And while we walk, you can tell me all about that sexy Dragon of yours.”

“Only if you tell me what it’s like to have the King of the Big Cats as a Mate.”

“Well, shit, bad news *does* travel fast, doesn’t it?”



With all his focus on the robust and glowing bond he shared with Maggie, Heath let the thundering beats of Tilly's hooves as they tore up the sand lull him into a meditative state. Faster and faster, they traversed the smoldering desert as he called out, "*Maggie, honey, you there?*" Waiting less than a second, he tried again, "*Hey, mo chroí, I love you and I'm sorry I was a dick.*"

Sighing, he let his heart do the talking as he and Finlo poured Magic, Mysticism, and Hope into the unique link they shared with their Mate. "*Just tell me where you are. Or give me some hints. You know I know this desert like the back of my hand, and I know you are still here. I can feel it with every fiber of my being. I'm even using my worthless Gift of Sight and can't see a damned thing. I just know you are alive. Now, as sure as God made little green apples, I know you're not far. So, just give me a shout. I'll come and get you, then you can kick my ass for the rest of forever for being such a high-handed, Neanderthal butthead.*"

"*I don't think she can answer,*" Finlo grumbled, the thread holding his usually well-controlled dominance and supremacy quickly unraveling. "*Something is in the way. It's clouding her mind. You are right. Maggie lives, but she is in great danger.*"

"*Thank you for the no shit statement of the day, Great and Powerful Dragon King,*" Heath seethed. Then, instantly regretting what he'd said and how he'd said it, he went on, "*I'm sorry, Old Man. I just....*"

*“Aye, no need, Lad. I understand,”* Finlo commiserated. *“Now, get back to calling our Mate while I maneuver the desert.”*

Again and again, he called out to his Mate to no avail. The more he focused and the louder he yelled, the harder his own voice reverberated around his skull until Heath thought his ears might bleed.

*“This is not working,”* he snarled. *“Get ready for Plan B, Old Man.”*

*“Already there, Lad,”* the Dragon King ground out through gritted teeth.

Gripping Tilly’s sides with the inside of his calves, Heath laid down until his chest rubbed against her neck. *“We’re gonna do our trick, Girl. I just need you to go a little faster.”* Giving the outside of her ear a kiss, he promised, *“As soon as you get to the barn, Dustin will give you the best rubdown you’ve ever had and get you anything you want. Deal?”*

Giving him a loud blowing noise, Heath smiled at his Mare’s agreement despite the situation. He could always count on Tilly. Together with Finlo and Hugo, they were all an unbeatable combination.

*“And about to be more,”* the Dragon King huffed.

*“Good Goddess willin’ and the creek don’t rise, we’re damn sure gonna be more,”* was the last thing Heath said as he sat up tall in his saddle and wrapped the reins around his fists. Counting down from three, he let both Finlo and Tilly prepare for what was coming.

*“Three... Two... One!”*

No sooner did he push the last word from his mind to theirs than did the Guardsman pull the reins to his waist and shout, *“Now, Tilly!”*

With Tilly skidding to a sudden stop, Heath let go of the reins and slapped the heel of his left hand on the horn of his saddle with the right on top. As gently as possible, always careful not to hurt his favorite Mare, he pushed his hands

down, threw his head up, and launched himself over Tilly's bowed head.

*"Thanks, Girl,"* he called back to his Mare. *"You are the best."*

Letting his consciousness fall to the background as he flew through the air, he welcomed the Ancient, Pure, White Dragon Magic of his Ancestors as Finlo took over. Embracing the Power, Heath reveled in the supremacy of being one of the Universe's Chosen Winged Warriors. The air flew from his lungs, and his vision blurred as the warm, burnished copper scales of his Dragon King burst through his flesh.

In the blink of an eye, Heath's blood ran cold. He couldn't breathe, but he didn't need to. Finlo had it all under control. In a single beat of his heart, his body temperature flipped to boiling, then right back to freezing as if it was on a spindle being turned by a frantic Fairy. Only his Dragon King's legendary control and the strength of his Ancient Dragon Magic kept the Guardsman focused on what had to be done.

Every muscle and every tendon contracted in unbelievable ways that defied all logic. Still, it all made sense to Heath and his Dragon King. The belief in the Power of the Universe and the mission he'd been given, as well as his unwavering trust in Finlo, kept the Guardsman from screaming bloody murder. Transforming man and Dragon King into the majestic form of one of the Universe's Chosen Warriors was utter agony and incredible ecstasy all in one and something Heath wouldn't give up for the world.

The Enchantment of the Ancients beat against his body to its very core. It sprang from the part of his soul he shared with his Dragon King. It fueled his life's essence and opened his mind to the secrets of the Universe. Every fiber of his being vibrated with the glorious supremacy and unsurpassed authority given to him and all the Dragon Guardsman by the Omnipotent Powers That Be.

The large, elongated muscles used for flying grew from his biceps, chest, and obliques as adrenalin surged like waves hitting the shore and forced his body to expand. Bolts of



lightning filled the air. Mysticism from the very depths of the Earth rose up to meet him, pushing him faster still towards the incredible transformation into Dragon.

Bones shattered, and muscles ripped as his wings stretched toward the Heavens. Sharp, venomous talons – extensions of the long, hollow phalanges – emerged from the tough, webbed flesh tingling with the need to rip the one who had dared to touch his Mate limb from limb.

An evil grin curled the corner of his lengthening snout. Whatever evil had dared to set foot in his desert didn't know who they were messing with and how far he would go to save the woman made for him by the Universe. Blood would stain the sand, and it would *not* be Maggie's.

Lending all the Magic he'd inherited from his mother, Heath felt the fur of the Thorntree Timber Wolves rub against the underside of his skin. *"Sorry, Hugo. I got so caught up that I forgot to wake you."*

More in touch with the soul of the Lupine who also shared his soul, than his brothers, even Heath sometimes forgot to include Hugo when the going got tough. Thankfully, the Timber Wolf was old as time and very patient.

*"Not to worry, Sonur,"* the Legendary Norse Timber Wolf acknowledged, using the Olde Language of his Ancestors, and calling Heath 'Son.' *"I have lent all that I am to our fight and will remain at the ready for the battle to come."*

*"So, we do have a fight on our hands?"*

*"Yes, we do, and it is an Ancient Lupine I have had to subdue before."*

*"It's what?"* Heath and Finlo growled in unison.

The three seconds of silence that followed was damned near unbearable. Still, the Guardsman knew the Timber Wolf was translating the Ancient Norse language into English before he continued to explain. Focused on the gale force created by the downward thrust of Finlo's mighty wings that fueled the fire racing through his veins, he felt the Dragon King scooping the hot, dry air as he propelled them upward.

The ripple of the thin, coarse sails was music to Heath's ears, the whistle a call to battle, and every undulation a blast of Power unlike any other. The feeling of absolute freedom and supreme dominion over all he surveyed was nothing short of intoxicating. Man, Dragon King, and Timber Wolf were one with the elements, one with the Universe, and one with the only woman they'd ever loved.

*"I am ready,"* Hugo's voice whispered through their minds. *"The last time I faced this foe was when he and his cohorts attempted to bring about Ragnarok. As a child of Loki, the Norse Trickster god and the Giantess Angrboða, Fenrir – or the King of Chaos – believed he and his armies could bring about the destruction of the Norse gods and the humans they protected and claim the cosmos for themselves."*

*"Although the battle was bloody and many honorable and loyal warriors were ushered to Valhalla by the mighty Valkyrie, the side of the Good and Just prevailed. Fenrir's supporters were slain, and the King of Chaos was also to be executed by Gungnir, Odin's Spear of Heaven. However, just as the All Father was about to deliver the fatal blow, the Norse god of Justice, Tyr, stepped in and asked that the Wolf's life be spared. Because the god had fed the Lupine and in exchange, Fenrir had been a friend to the god by providing valuable information, Tyr asked that Fenrir be banished to the Island of Lyngvi in the Kattegat Strait between Denmark and Sweden."*

*"Knowing Fenrir's extreme intelligence and truly remarkable gift of deception, he added that the Wolf, who could Magically grow to over thirty feet tall, be bound to Mount Higravstinden, the highest peak on the island. As a last measure of safety, he requested that the Lupine only be released when and if Ragnarok ever occurred and he survived."*

*"As we have seen, nothing is ever as it seems. Fenrir had tricked Tyr with information he could have gotten anywhere and used the god's loyalty to help with his devious plans. Knowing Tyr would speak on his behalf if he was ever caught, Fenrir had taken many precautions, one of which just happened to be with the powerful Norse Sorceress, Grímhildr."*

*Even though he despised all the Norse gods and goddesses, the King of Chaos hated his sister, Hel, above all others.”*

*“Therefore, when he asked the Sorceress for assistance, he requested it be in the form of a Curse that would be enacted by his very own sibling. You see, he knew the guilt Hel felt from the resulting loss of life by so many would be unbearable.”*

*“Do you have any idea what the Curse is and how it involves Maggie?”* Heath asked, working hard to control his temper.

*“One moment, I am conferring with my Brothers.”*

Watching as the tops of the roofs of the MacAllen Ranch came into view, the Guardsman slowly counted to ten. Metaphysically opening and closing his fists, he mentally called out to his dad, *“Hey, y’all home yet?”*

*“No, son,”* Owen immediately answered. *“We’ll be here at the Res for at least another week. Whatcha need?”*

*“Nuthin’,”* Heath lied, not wanting to upset his parents, grandfather, and brothers or call any of them away from Res. The Tribe needed all the help they could get. Sending their dead to the Heavens and rebuilding was already too much. Heath would not pile his burdens on, too. *“Just checkin’ in.”*

*“Okay, Son.”* He could hear the smile in his dad’s voice. *“Thank you for that. Now, you go get that little Wolf of yours and make it all official. We’ll be home in time to help with the Mating Ceremony.”*

*“Thanks, Dad.”*

Heath cut their connection right before huffing, *“Yeah, that’s if I find Maggie – and she’s okay.”*

*“Stop that,”* Finlo and Hugo snapped in unison. *Then the Dragon King added, “We do not give up, and we do not lose. Keep your wits, Lad. All is never lost as long as we remain focused and work together.”*

Shaking it off, the Guardsman quickly agreed, *“You’re right. Sorry.”*

*“No need for that either,”* Hugo added. *“We tackle all as one. Even if I was left out of the rallying cry before.”*

*“Oh, crap,”* Heath sighed. *“You’re just not gonna let me forget that, are you?”*

*“I am teasing,”* the Timber Wolf chuckled, the sound more like a ragged growl. *“I thought it might ease some of your tension. But alas, I have something better - news of Fenrir’s plot.”* Without so much as a pause, he explained, *“The Curse is thus: When Hel’s, the goddess of Helheim, feet touch the sands of the Mystical Desert, the King of Chaos shall be released from his bondage and seek his revenge against the one of his own blood who betrayed him. With the pelt of the second daughter of the True White Wolf Couple of Power and the sword of the twin Dragon with the Gift of Sight that has been ripped from the Guardsman’s cold, dead hand, Fenrir, son of Loki, shall behead his sister, paint the sands of the Mythical Desert with her blood, and gain the favor of his father.”*

*“What the fuck?!”* Heath roared as Finlo’s snout dropped towards the ranch. *“How did you not know this was a possibility?”*

*“No one knew until Hel stepped foot on the Chihuahuan Desert just ten days ago.”*

*“What are you talking about?”* Heath ground out through teeth gritted so hard he was sure he’d chipped one or two.

*“I am saying that while we were assisting Chief Cheveyo and the Thorntree Timber Wolves, the Norse goddess Hel, the Celtic god Arawn, the Omnipotent Being known as Fate, and their compatriots, including the Valkyrie Liv, were forced into a conflict against Demons right here in the Desert we call home. I did not know because the Curse was hidden from all until the moment it was enacted. Even now, only my brothers, who are still aligned with the Norse Pantheon and do not share their souls with the Chosen, have received the knowledge. Although, I do not expect it to stay a secret for long. As they say, good news travels fast, but bad news travels faster than the wind.”*

Shifting back to his human form a split second before the soles of his boots hit the gravel of the long lane to the MacAllen Ranch, Heath was running as fast as his feet would carry him. One foot on the bottom step that led to the wraparound porch where his family usually congregated, he stopped midstride when the Valkyrie Liv, her Familiar – the Lupine of Legend, Dade, and none other than the King of the Big Cats, Maximillian Prentice appeared out of thin air.

“No time for pleasantries,” he growled. “Why are you here?”

“Hold on, young’un,” the Valkyrie countered, taking a commanding step forward. “There’s something you need to know.”

“No, there’s something *you* need to know,” he shot back, taking the last three steps in one stride and standing nose-to-nose with the six-foot, raven-haired Shield Maiden.

Ignoring the way her light blue eyes swirled counterclockwise and her Magic popped and crackled in the air around them, Heath refused to back down. He would stand his ground or get knocked on his ass. It didn’t matter that she had the strength of ten men. There was no way Liv was going to stop the Guardsman from getting to his Mate. He just needed to get one thing from the house.

The perfectly blended Nordic Runes covering her arms flashed red with the supremacy – and fury - of her Mysticism. Then Dade, the Ebony Wolf – the Valkyrie’s Fylgja, or Familiar – stepped up to her side. Eyes sparkling silver with fur as black as night, the Wolf’s voice resonated deeply as he commanded, “Back down, young Dragon. We come in peace.”

“I don’t care why you’ve come.”

“I think you will when you hear what we have to say, *mi amigo*,” the King of the Big Cats said from his place beside the door.

Then Heath noticed the usually well-dressed, never mussed, always suave, undisputed King of the Big Cats had bags under his eyes, his hair was standing on end, and his shirt

was untucked. Something was wrong in every possible way. Maxmillian Prentice was never disheveled. So, out of respect - and healthy curiosity - he would give them one minute to explain.

Spreading his legs shoulder-width apart, the Guardsman leaned back on the heels of his boots, crossed his arms over his chest, and gave a curt nod. "The clock is ticking."

Running his hands through his hair, something Heath had never seen the majestic Black Panther do, Max inhaled deeply, shook his head, and exhaled. "My Mate, Bridgette...ahem, I mean, Ettie Featherstone is also missing. She was called to assist the Celtic god of Annwn, Arawn, and his Beloved, the Omnipotent Being known as Fate." Once again, he dragged his fingers through his thick, dark hair, but this time, his hand ended up on his jaw, scratching at the stubble Heath hadn't realized was there until that very moment.

Watching as the King opened and shut his mouth, Heath's head snapped to the side when Liv took over, the command in her voice impossible to ignore. "But that was bullshit. I was out here with Ari, Fate, Hel, and all the rest. We didn't call for anyone. The telepathic message to Ettie was a ruse. They lured her out here, then took her. Have you heard anything?"

"Nope," Heath snapped. Turning to Max, he lowered his tone, and empathy filled his voice. "But I'll see your missing Mate and raise you an Ancient Curse that wants to kill Maggie and me."



“**Y**ou have *got* to be kidding me,” Ettie laughed out loud. “Do you mean to tell me there *really* is a place called Shit’s Creek?”

“Way to keep steering me away from discussing your Mate.”

“I could say the same.”

“Busted,” Maggie chuckled. Then right back to the question posed by the Demi-Goddess, she snickered, “Yes, ma’am, I am tellin’ you that there really is a place called Shit’s Creek.” Winking in the darkness, knowing Ettie could see her expression, she continued, “And it runs along the south side of a mesa called Captain’s Reef, the east side of Blind Chief’s Bluff, and right past the entrance to Broken Arrow Mine – where Bonnie and I used to play even though we weren’t supposed to. I tell ya’, we were always looking for the entrance to the Underworld or buried treasure. Never found either one and never gave up until we got too old and too busy to keep at it.”

“Wait. How is there a bluff in the middle of the desert? Aren’t they usually on the shoreline or in coastal areas where the tide eroded the landscape?”

“And what do you think the desert is? Or rather, it was about a million or so years ago? There’s stuff out there that is ancient and yet to be discovered. I actually thought about being an archeologist when I was younger but decided I liked

live people a little more than those of the past. However, I do still read all the time.”

“Well, shit, I guess you’ve got a point about the past. Things are always changing.” Playfully swatting her on the arm, the Eagle Shifter went on, “You are one smart cookie, Maggie Mae Sampson. So, since you’re so intelligent, and most Wolves want nothing more than to find the one made for them by the Universe and spend forever and ever living happily ever after, tell me why you’re so pissed at your Mate?”

“You first.”

“I’m ignoring you and moving on with my questions,” Ettie snorted playfully. Now, aren’t Dragons supposed to be the best? I mean, according to my cousins, they were doubly blessed when the Universe made their Mates, and the guys were Dragons.”

“Cousins? There’s more than one Mated to a Guardsman?”

“Way to change the subject - again,” Ettie chuckled. “But I’ll letcha off the hook ‘cause I’m not talkin’ about mine either. Now, what was your question?”

“You have more than one cousin who is Mated to a Dragon?”

“Oh, yeah, I thought you knew.”

“No, I didn’t. But I’ve never met Claire. I just heard about her and Rory from Carrock, and he never mentioned anyone else. Then again, he’s not much of a talker.”

“No, he is not. I’m kinda surprised he said anything at all.”

“Well, he was talkin’ to Owen MacAllen, and I walked up on ‘em.”

“Oh, that makes sense,” Ettie nodded. “Well, there are seven of us. Two are Mated to Dragons, Claire – which you knew – and Olive, whose Mate is Kellan Aherne. Our moms are all the Leaders of our Clans, but we each decided to follow Claire and help her form the Clan of the Sun.” Tipping her head to the side, she slid her eyes toward Maggie and grinned, “I’m sure you know she’s a Phoenix. So, in theory, she’s the



only one and thought it would be nice to have something to call her own.”

“In theory?”

“Yeah, well, that’s a story to be told over a bottle of tequila, a bag of limes, and a jukebox full of old-time country and western music after we’re outta this shithole. The tale is long and filled with a lot of mythology and lore. It always makes my head hurt unless I’m drinkin’ or in the mood for a philosophical conversation – which has only ever happened twice in my lifetime.”

“Well, I can help with drinks and music,” Maggie smiled. “My sister and I opened a bar called Rodeo just a little over a year ago. It’s right here – or there, depending on where we are - in beautiful downtown Valentine, Texas. The beer’s cold, and the limes are free. We’ve got a kickin’ jukebox filled with pretty much everything country and western *and* live music every night after nine.”

“No shit?”

“No shit.”

“Alright then,” Ettie nodded. “I get us out of here, and the beer’s on you.”

“For the rest of forever, my new friend.”

“My mom always tells me that a stranger is just a friend I’ve never met. I admit, I didn’t believe a word of it until I met you,” Ettie snorted with some sass. “You might have noticed I’m kind of an acquired taste.”

“No way. Not at all,” Maggie quickly countered, and she meant every word.

“Oh, yes, way,” the Eagle chuckled. “I’ve lived too long to start lying now – especially to myself. I speak my mind and make no apologies, even when it would be politically correct and infinitely safer for all involved for me to keep my mouth shut. It’s just one of the things my dad doesn’t like. I dare to call him out on his shit no matter where we are and who is around. Then there’s the fact that I don’t mind being on my own. My cousins accuse me of being a hermit pretty much all

the time. But hey, it doesn't bother me. I like me and find I give good advice."

"Well, I think you're great. Besides, my mom used to tell Bonnie and me the same thing about meeting people. No matter how many friends we had, she always said we had to take the time to be kind to everyone, and she was right. 'Spread the sunshine' was one of her favorite sayings."

"She sounds great. Do your mom and dad still live in Valentine?"

"No," Maggie whispered into the darkness, trying not to sniffle. It didn't matter how long they'd been gone. It still hurt. "They passed a couple days before Bonnie and I turned eighteen - a long time ago."

"Oh, shit, Maggie," Ettie quickly comforted. "Me and my big fuckin' mouth. I am so damned sorry."

The She-Wolf instinctually leaned into the Demi-Goddess' hand on her arm. She didn't know much about Avian Shifters and even less about Eagles, but Wolves were Pack animals. They craved the community, support, and love of those they held dear, and in that moment, Maggie needed the closeness of another more than just about anything.

"Don't you dare beat yourself up," the She-Wolf countered. "You had no idea. I mean, wait. You didn't see that in my mind, too, did you?"

"No, hun," Ettie quickly replied. "The minute I knew you were okay, I got the heck outta your brain. Like I said, I only go pokin' around the little gray cells of others without permission when it is absolutely necessary."

"No, I didn't mean that," Maggie explained. "I just thought maybe you.... Oh, never mind."

"You thought I knew and forgot or wanted all the gory details, so I was pretending not to know your parents had been called to the Heavens." Ettie's tone wasn't accusing. It was rather matter of fact, and that made Maggie feel worse.

"No. Yeah. I mean, no, I just... Hell, I have no clue what I meant. For some reason, it hurts more today than it has in

years. Anytime something goes wrong, I still reach for the phone to call Dad and get his advice or his opinion.” Shaking her head, she sighed, “I know he would tell me to keep my wits about me and put one foot in front of the other in this situation. He always had so much faith in mine and Bonnie’s abilities. Told us we could do anything. I probably just need a good night’s sleep in my own bed.” Turning to the side, she looked at Ettie’s profile. “Sorry, I sounded like I was accusing you of something.”

“Girl, don’t worry about it. You’ve been through a lot in the last couple of days.”

“But you have, too.”

“Yeah, but I’m close to five hundred years old. There’s not much I haven’t seen, or done, or been thrown into,” Ettie snorted. “And for better or worse, I still have my crazy ass parents. I mean, some of my cousins have suffered the loss, and I loved my aunts and uncles loads, so it was my loss, too. But it’s not the same. However, I do know it never really leaves your heart.”

“Yeah, you’re so right. Do you mind if we talk about my mom and dad? Is that weird?”

“Not at all,” the Demi-Goddess,” reassured. “If you need to talk, I’ve got the time. I’m not a great communicator, even at my best, but I am an excellent listener.”

With her night vision, Maggie saw how hard Ettie was working to help, and she appreciated the effort and support more than she would ever be able to tell her. Then the Eagle Shifter chuckled, “Besides, I hear it’s easier to talk about these kinds of things in the dark or when you’re not being stared at. So, talk as much as you want, whenever you want, because we’ve got the darkness thing covered in spades, and I will avert my eyes and keep them on the path we’re taking to make sure we don’t fall ass over tea kettle and break something we might need to get out of here.”

“I sure do appreciate it.” Stopping, then waiting until Ettie did the same thing, Maggie turned towards her new friend and looked her right in the eye. “You sure you don’t care? You’ve

known me for all of ten minutes, and I decide it's time to lay one of my biggest burdens on ya'. You don't have to be my therapist. I know a real good one I can call when we get home."

"No way, Mags. Do you mind if I call you Mags?"

"Nope, it's one of the best nicknames I've been given over the years."

"Cool. Well, Mags, I like you better than some people I've known my whole life. So, talk away. Just don't count on any advice. Like I said, that's not my thing. I can't even give good directions unless I'm flying, and then I tend to forget not everybody sprouts wings. On the other hand, I won't send you a bill."

"Ha! Well, that's a good thing. And ya' know what else?"

"What's that?"

"You look damned good for five hundred years, and if anyone ever tells you any different, I will open a Texas-sized can of whoop ass all over them."

Brushing the dark brown hair off her shoulder with an exaggerated flourish, Maggie saw the twinkle in the glow of Ettie's light green eyes when she winked and couldn't help but step forward and hug her new friend. Patting the Demi-Goddess on the back, she snickered when her spine stiffened just the slightest bit, "Girl, you gotta loosen up. You're part of the Sampson Family and Pack now, and that means loads of hugs – and probably more unsolicited advice than you've ever wanted or had."

Loving that Ettie instantly relaxed, Maggie laughed out loud when she teased, "Okay, but if you dare tell anybody I'm actually a nice person, I'll kick you in the shin and call you a liar to your face."

"It's a deal," the She-Wolf chuckled, then stepped back, took a deep breath, and started.

"I remember the jingle of the bell over the door to the diner like it was yesterday. It's one of the reasons we don't have one up there to this day. I tore the thing down the day of

my parents' wake and made Bonnie pinky promise there would never be another. So, when you walk into Sam's Diner and hear the digital version of *Hungry Like The Wolf*, you can laugh. Everybody does. But you know what was worse than that damn jingle?"

"What?"

"The look on the faces of Junior Thompson and Smitty Brown. They just about broke my heart, and I didn't know what was going on yet. Ya' see, they're both Sampson Pack Enforcers and also Jeff Davis County Sherriff's Deputies. So, Bonnie and I have known them our whole lives, and they are rough and tough and subscribe to the theory that men are stoic and unemotional."

"Well, that's bullshit. And I bet knowing them didn't make what you were about to hear any easier."

"No, it did not. I mean, it was better hearing the news from people we knew, but it sucked just the same. Then the cherry on the top of the whole shitty sundae was the tidal wave of grief and dread flying off those boys like stink off Coyote shit. It damn near knocked both of us on our asses."

"I can't even imagine."

"Yeah, and I hope you don't ever find out. Anyway, it wasn't weird for Bonnie and me to be at the diner by ourselves. We didn't think anything about our parents not being there. From the time we were thirteen, we ran the diner by ourselves any time they needed to be somewhere else. And Mom had left a note on the counter saying they were going to Pecos to pick up a new vent for the grill. That's two hours from Valentine, and one of Daddy's favorite steak houses was there, but it didn't open until five in the evening. We knew there was no way he would miss the chance to have a big ol' ribeye with all the trimmings cooked by somebody else." She shrugged and shoved her hands into the front pockets of her jeans. "We figured we might not even see 'em until the next morning, and that was just fine."

Taking a deep breath, she started walking, hoping Ettie would follow. When she felt the Demi-Goddess at her side,

Maggie kept going. “The minute those boys walked through the door, it was like a big black cloud the size of the stadium where the Cowboys play settled over all we’d ever known. The warmth from the midday sun shining through the big plate glass window just disappeared. Like, *poof*, it was gone. I even shivered, and it was the middle of September. Now, if you know anything about South Texas, you know it is anything but shiverin’ weather that time of year. I remember thinking, ‘Did those boys just turn on a big ol’ shop vac and suck all the happiness right outta the air’?”

“I opened my mouth to ask just that, but the sight of Junior fiddling with the brim of his tan Stetson and looking everywhere but at us had me swallowin’ my words. I just stood there – waitin’. When he finally raised his eyes and stepped forward, his deep, rumbling voice was so full of sorrow, I swear, I could see it in the air. ‘Dammit, Girls, this is the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do.’”

“I think he cleared his throat half a dozen times before he choked out, ‘But I wanted it to be Smitty and me who told y’all.’ He took another step towards us and leaned his hip against the back of a stool. By that time, Bonnie had come out from behind the counter and was standing beside me. For a second, I thought he might go down on his knees. And let me tell you, I was scared. I’d never seen the six-foot-seven-inch giant with wide shoulders and muscles for days be anything but strong and powerful. Actually, just the opposite. I’d witnessed him taking on seven rogue Wolves all by himself and comin’ out without so much as a scratch while all of them were tied, gagged, and ready to be taken before the Council. But this was truly a day of firsts. Then he said, ‘Girls, I am as sorry as I’ll ever be to tell you that your momma and daddy’s bodies were found out on Old Hickory Rd on the far side of Wild Horse Basin just outside Valentine about an hour ago.’”

“I shook my head, refusing to believe what he said. ‘No way, Junior,’ I growled. ‘You got your wires crossed, Son. Mom and Dad are in Pecos at the restaurant supply store. Wild Horse Basin is in the complete and opposite direction. They wouldn’t have even been drivin’ through there to get where they were goin’. You have lost your damn mind’.”

“But he didn’t answer me. Instead, tears filled his dark brown eyes, and his voice cracked when he tried to talk. Swallowing like a boulder had just appeared in his throat, he tried two more times before he finally said, ‘Maggie Mae, I’m not wrong. It’s your momma and daddy. I would know them anywhere. You know they are like my own parents.’”

“Of course, I started yelling and even threw the silverware I had in my hand at him before I spun to the side and hollered at Bonnie to do something. But she couldn’t. She was just frozen. Then she started to cry. No, make that wail. It was the scariest and most sorrowful sound I’d ever heard. My heart and soul hurt like nothin’ I’d ever felt, but....”

She huffed out a breath, pulled her left hand out of her pocket, and shoved the blond curls off her shoulder. “Well, as you might have figured out, I can be hardheaded.”

“Ya’ don’t say?” Ettie snorted, and Maggie had to admit it felt good to have somebody to talk to who was as sarcastic as she was. Then the Demi-Goddess added, “Ya’ know that old saying, the Universe does not make mistakes?”

“I do.”

“Well, I’m thinkin’ me meeting you is just further proof of that. ‘Cause if I was stuck in this situation with some whiny woman or mouthy man, I would’ve already pulled all the hair out of my head and run screaming into the darkness.”

“You would not have.”

“Oh, yeah, I would have. I’m not exaggerating at all. And I say that to tell you that you, Maggie Mae Sampson, are not hardheaded. You are a strong, intelligent woman who knows her mind. So, don’t ever change.”

“Aww, thank you. And right back atcha.”

Walking along in silence, Maggie suddenly had the feeling they were being watched. Opening her mind to Ettie, she telepathically whispered, “*Anything feel weird to you?*”

“*Yep. I’m pretty sure about a hundred eyes are glaring at us. Do you mind continuing your story?*”

*“Not at all. You want me to act like nothing’s changed, right? Like we’re none the wiser.”*

*“You are one smart cookie, my friend.”*

Picking up where she left off, Maggie explained, “Well, I was pretty much running on autopilot. I went to the kitchen and turned off the grill, the oven, and the fryers. I locked the back door, made sure the cooler and freezer doors were shut tight, and hit the big gray double doors leading back to the dining room so hard they bounced off the walls on either side.”

“Marching past all of ‘em, I grabbed the closed sign off the hook, hung it in the window, and hit the lights. Then I shoved all my emotions and pain in a little box, locked it up tight, and threw it in the back of my mind. I had to get to the bottom of what was happenin’ – sooner rather than later.”

“Spinning on the heels of my boots, I stood tall, looked Junior right in the eye - which had to have looked weird since I am five-foot-two and he’s six-foot-seven, but I did it all the same- and demanded, ‘I want to see them.’”

“Now, when I tell you that those boys looked flummoxed, I mean it. And I don’t use words like that unless I mean ‘em. I swear both big guys were lookin’ at me like I had grown three heads, a forked tail, and scaly wings all at the same time.”

“I think I might have liked to see that,” Ettie murmured, but Maggie knew she was surveilling the area all around them. The Demi-Goddess’ Magic was strong and powerful, making the little hairs on the back of the She-Wolf’s neck stand on end with such force that it felt like they were being pulled out at the root, but she kept telling her story.

“You want to what?” Smitty growled, the eyes of his Wolf glowing a deep golden within his own.”

“I want to see them – and where it happened.”

“B-But...” Junior stammered. “M-Maggie, honey... Y-You j-just...’.”

“Stepping even closer, I tipped my head back and glared. I squared my shoulders and let the Alpha Power I was slowly



inheriting now that my soul somehow was processing what I refused to believe show in my eyes and expression. Then I deadpanned, ‘Take me, or I’ll go myself. You know I can get there faster than you can grow fur.’”

“Walking past me, Junior pushed the door open and, with a sweeping motion of his hand, pointed towards the parking lot as he grumbled, ‘Come on, Smitty. Let’s take ‘em. It’ll be hours before Kristie Sue needs ‘em at the morgue.’”

“The stale stench of doubt and worry coming off those boys was worse than their sadness and sorrow. I could tell they were thinking through every possible scenario and thought I would back out before we so much as got in the truck. But they were wrong.”

“I climbed up in the tan and green four-door pickup with the Jeff Davis County Sherriff’s Badges on the doors and pulled Bonnie in after me. I buckled up, put my hands in my lap, and refused to look anywhere but out the window for the rest of the trip.”

“Ten miles seemed like a thousand. I thought of all the people who looked like my mom and dad. I was just so sure Junior was wrong. He had to have made a mistake. There was no way they could be gone. They were supposed to live to at least a thousand years old.”

“Pulling the pickup onto the shoulder of the two-lane road named Old Hickory, he turned off the engine and sighed so loudly my eyes snapped to the back of his head to be sure he wasn’t crying. When I realized he was just stalling, I threw the door open, jumped out into the tall grass, and looked around.”

“When I didn’t see any signs of a wreck, I was just about to ask him what the hell was going on when the coppery scent of blood mixed with gasoline and motor oil hit my senses like a ton of bricks. At least he wasn’t fuckin’ with me because that would not have ended well for him – no matter how big he was.”

“Shutting the door, I didn’t wait for Bonnie. Something was brewing in the pit of my very soul, and I needed to walk. Of course, that was when my Wolf, Nina, whispered, *‘I got*

*you, Maggie. Get your proof. You won't accept the loss if you don't. I won't let anything bad happen to you."*

"Of course, I didn't answer. I was pissed. Nina had already accepted that my parents were dead and wanted me to do the same thing. It was the first time we weren't on the same page, and it only added to my fury. So, I crossed the narrow, pothole-laden road where dad had taught me to drive a truck when I was ten years old and headed straight for where the long, tall grass had been disturbed."

"I had gone nearly five hundred yards before I heard another truck door open. I yelled over my shoulder, 'Don't follow me. I gotta do this by myself.' And just kept goin'."

"Damn, Mags. You are stronger than I ever imagined." Ettie responded out loud before mentally adding, *"Whatever is watching us is staying back but still creeping along on all sides. It's like they know something we don't, and that just pisses me right off."*

*"I hear ya'."*

*"You're doing great. Just keep going. I promise I'm listening. I got this multi-tasking thing down."*

*"You are good, Ettie."*

She continued while also using her senses to assist in watching whatever was following them. "For one of the only times in my life, I went into something slowly. I had to see and feel everything. Although I still hadn't laid eyes on my parents, I knew it was the scent of their blood on the hot, dry Texas air, but something was stopping me from getting all the information I needed. Either their blood had been there longer than Junior thought, or someone with wicked Mystical Powers had been nearby. Whatever was happening, it was blocking me, and that crap would not stand."

"So, I toed off my boots and took off my socks, left them lying in the grass, and inched closer to the bottom of a little hill where all the grass was just gone. Like it had been dug up by the world's biggest Raccoon on a tirade. Climbing to the

top, I looked out over Wild Horse Basin and saw the twisted metal of my dad's silver pickup."

"Shoulders back and spine straight, I didn't take my eyes off the warped tailgate. When I got to the edge of the wreckage, I put one foot in front of the other and slowly walked the perimeter of the scene."

"But I was still being blocked. None of the special abilities I'd been given by the Universe and the Great Goddess were working. Somebody had flipped my switch to the off position and wasn't lettin' go. So, I closed my eyes and let my other senses, along with Nina's, take over."

"A vision of the past came into view. I saw Dad driving and Mom raising her voice to talk over the radio. She was telling him some story about one of our Packmates. They were smiling and laughing, and Momma was teasing Daddy about having already made a reservation at the steakhouse."

"Closer and closer, I wound my way to the truck, and there she was – my mom. Her body was broken in ways no one, especially me, could have ever imagined. Her arms were at weird angles, her legs were still trapped under the truck, and dark crimson and clotted blood was everywhere, especially in her long, blond curls."

"I was pissed. Even though the crime scene people and the boys from the morgue weren't there yet because they were at a house fire involving a family with six small children, no one – not Junior or Smitty, to be exact – had covered up my momma and kept her safe from the elements and critters. They'd just let her lay there. And I couldn't imagine where my dad was or what condition he was in, but I was gonna find out just as quickly as I could."

"Hotfootin' it over to the truck, I jumped up in the bed, opened dad's big, silver toolbox, and got out all the blankets he kept in there for emergencies. Back on the ground, I raced over to Mom, knelt down, and started to cover her."

"The ground beneath my knees shook. The acrid stench of silver shot up my nose. Pain raced down my spine. My eyes

slammed shut, and Nina howled so loud my brain rattled in my skull.”

“I tried to get my eyes open. I had to know what was happening. Then a hand wrapped around my wrist, and I was sure I was about to die right then and there where my parents had lost their lives.”

She huffed out a long breath as goosebumps jumped to attention and did the Macarena all over her body. Something was giving life to her memories, and Maggie was getting angrier with every beat of her heart. This was the part where she always blacked out, or her mind went blank - but it wasn't happening this time.

It was only on pause. But how did she get it to keep playing?

Turning to tell Ettie, she got as far as opening her mouth - when she saw it. Something big, dark, and imposing. But the Demi-Goddess started to speak before Maggie could make her mouth move.

“Holy shit, Mags,” Ettie gasped. “What the hell happened? You can't just stop there. I mean....”

“You mean, there's a shadow up ahead that looks like an overgrown Warrior Wolf on steroids with horns coming out of his head and claws as long as I am tall. Or that he's got a whole shit ton of green glowing eyes at his back that are all at least seven feet above the ground, and you're about to go all Eagle on his ass? Either way, I'm good. You make the call, and I'll back you up or die tryin'.”

“Oh, don't worry about them, Maggie Mae Sampson,” a deep, growly version of a voice that pricked at the edges of her memory but refused to be identified mocked. “Go on and finish your story. I've been waiting years and years to know what you heard before that big, dumb oaf, Junior Thompson, raced in there and scooped you up. I thought about putting a bullet between his eyes that day, but that wasn't the plan, and I would have been severely punished. However, we are now at the epic conclusion - right where it was always supposed to end. Now, tell us what your dead momma told you. Go on, I

know you know. You have to have remembered by now. If you tell me, I'll kill you and your friend quickly. I promise it'll be painless. I might even let your Mate live. But if you make me wait, I'll kill your friend here and that worthless Dragon – Heath MacAllen, while you watch. Then I'll keep you alive for decades. I'll torture you, torment you, and drive you crazy as a bed bug. All the while you feed the Master with your blood, he will extract all the secrets of the Sampson Wolves, the MacAllen Dragons, and the Thorntree Timber Wolves, then when you are nothing but a worn-out husk, I'll take you apart piece by piece and feed you to my minions and not let you die until only your head remains.”



“**W**hat the hell did you just say, Heath MacAllen?” Bonnie Sampson roared as she burst out the front door of his mom and dad’s house. “Who wants to kill my sister? What the fuck are you talkin’ about? Why weren’t you there to protect her? Why aren’t you lookin’ for her? What are you...?”

Grabbing her fist right before it connected with his jaw, Heath looked his soon-to-be sister-in-law in the eye and growled through gritted teeth, “Here are your answers in the order you asked for them, so keep up. I don’t plan on wastin’ any precious time repeatin’ myself. The King of Chaos wants to kill Maggie and me to get revenge on his sister. I am talking about a Curse that Hugo, my Timber Wolf, just unearthed, and that goes along with the first answer, too. I was at the Res helping send a horde of Demons back to Hell. I had Mags stay here because I *thought* she would be safer out of the line of fire. I didn’t know she was missin’ until you wailed like a stuck pig while I was headed back this way. And as for whatever other accusations you’re about to hurl my way, I would prefer you do it in a normal tone of voice and without trying to rearrange my face. I already have a headache and have to come up with a plan to save my Mate.”

Watching the Alpha She-Wolf, his Mate’s twin sister, literally deflate before his eyes, only his preternatural reflexes kept Bonnie’s butt from hitting the boards of the porch. Holding her up, he pretty much carried her to one of his mom’s rocking chairs and gently sat her down.

Kneeling, he took her shaking hands in his own and explained. “Maggie wanted to go with me. I thought it was too dangerous, and I said so. Then she got pissed and left. I called and called, but she locked me out. I had grand plans to grovel and apologize until she forgave me, then propose on the spot and live happily ever after.”

“Yeah, I know she wanted to go,” Bonnie hiccupped, just barely holding back the tears. “She shot outta the house like her butt was on fire even though I told her not to. I figured she was with you. That girl never takes no for an answer, and you always give her whatever she wants. That’s why I didn’t think twice when Melissa from Two Wolves II called with a problem that had to be handled in person ASAP. I got Charity to run the diner, walked out the back door and Shifted, and took off for the Pacific Northwest as fast as my paws would carry me. When I couldn’t get through to Maggie, I figured she was behind the wards at the Res. Sometimes, they dampen even our twin telepathy. It wasn’t until I got home, and Charity was still at the diner, that I knew something was wrong.”

“Well, that confirms what I thought,” Heath nodded.

“And what’s that?” Liv asked from over his shoulder.

“That Maggie is still alive,” he stated, glad when Bonnie nodded without tears. “I was certain I would know, but I am damn sure her twin would feel the second Maggie breathed her last breath.”

“And I checked with all my sisters,” Liv reassured. “No one has taken her soul to Valhalla.”

“Or anywhere, for that matter,” Dare rumbled from his place at the Valkyrie’s side. “Miss Maggie remains on the Mortal Plane.”

“Thank you,” Bonnie murmured. Then her eyes returned to Heath’s. “I’m sorry. I needed someone to blame. In truth, I should have stopped her from runnin’ over here when your momma called. It’s my fault.”

“It is not, and exactly how would you have stopped her?” The Guardsman snickered even though it would have been

easier to roar. “I don’t think there’s anyone who can stop Maggie Mae Sampson when she’s set her mind to something. It’s one of the many things I love about her.”

His heart clenched, and his throat damn near closed. He would not cry. He would not show weakness when he needed to be strong. He would find his Mate, lock her in their home, and never let her out of his sight for the rest of forever. Then he would shed tears of happiness and thank all the Powers That Be to have her back.

*“Aye, Lad, we will,”* Finlo forcefully agreed. *“Well, I will not shed tears, but I will be as grateful as I have ever been. Now, find out what the King knows.”*

“It is good to once again hear your voice, *mi amigo*, King Finlo,” Max answered aloud. “And with pleasantries dispensed, I will get right to the point.”

Turning on the toes of his boots, not wanting to stop lending his strength and resolve to Bonnie, Heath was surprised to see that the King of the Big Cats was regaining his composure and impeccable grooming without leaving the porch. Nobody could ever say Big Cat Magic didn’t pack a powerful punch. Max was damn near back to his usual debonair self.

Giving Max a nod, Heath bluntly prompted, “Okay.”

With a nod of his own, the King began. “I know that Ettie received a rather garbled message from who she thought was Arawn, the Celtic god of Annwn and many other things I can’t remember. She told her cousins that she had to go because of a promise she made her father to help any and all of the Celtic Pantheon should they ever need it. Approximately two hours later, when they hadn’t heard from her, Karleigh, her youngest cousin and a very intuitive Falcon Shifter, reached out to Brigitte. There was no answer. In fact, she reported, and I quote, ‘My thoughts hit a stone wall and shot back at me like a handball hit by The Dadga himself.’”

“That’s when Max called me,” Liv stepped in. Looking at the King of the Big Cats, she gave him a tip of her chin and half a smile. “You were taking too long.” Turning her attention



back to Heath, she added, “I opened a portal where I was. He opened one where he was. And here we are - the last known location of both Ettie and Maggie according to Dare and his Magical GPS.”

“So, what do you know?” Heath asked, trying not to demand answers from Beings who could wipe the porch with his butt.

“You first,” Liv challenged. “From what you just said, you’re at least ten steps ahead of us.”

“Well, more like five-and-a-half, and only because Hugo reached out to his Brethren.” Getting to his feet, Heath continued to let Bonnie grip his fingers. “Apparently, after Fenrir’s last attempt...”

“Hold up,” Liv seethed. “Are you telling me that that worthless lump of fur is causing problems all the way over here?”

“Well, I’m trying to tell you, but...”

“Sorry, young’un,” the Valkyrie snapped. “You know I have a hard time holding my tongue at the best of times. Which this is not.”

“I do, and I understand.” Heath mustered half a smile. “Now, where was I? Oh, yeah, after Fenrir’s last attempt to enact Ragnarok, Odin sent him to some island instead of beheading the son of a bitch, cutting him into a million little pieces, then burning the pieces, and putting us all out of our misery.”

“In the All Father’s defense,” Liv corrected. “He only imprisoned the King of Chaos at the behest of the Norse god Tyr. It was a request Odin didn’t have sufficient grounds to refuse. Fenrir had been helpful to Tyr and thus was owed a favor by the gods.”

“No sufficient grounds? Giving a few answers makes up for all the lives his actions cost?” Heath seethed.

“How did you know that?” Liv probed. “No one who wasn’t present that day has that information.”

“Well, I...” Heath paused, thought, and then answered. “In all honesty, I have no clue how I knew that, but I do, and you just confirmed that I am right. So, can we move on?” Without so much as a breath, he jumped right back into his tirade. “Was the fact that Fenrir is a maniacal asshole who thrives on madness, mayhem, death, and destruction not enough for Odin to sentence him to death? How about the fact that he never gives up? How about...?”

*“The fact that you can’t kill an Immortal Being might be a factor,”* Finlo counseled.

*“But is the King of Chaos truly Immortal, or does his immortality extend from the immense durability and decelerated aging he genetically acquired from his parents?”* Hugo posed.

*“How about we have this debate over his dead body?”* Heath growled.

“How about none of this is helping us find my sister or Max’s Mate?” Bonnie solemnly answered as Heath tried to corral his alter egos and realized everything going on in his mind was out in the open. Getting to her feet, she let go of his fingers, took a deep breath, and continued as she exhaled, “What’s done is done. We can’t change it. We have to get my sister back. We have to get the Demi-Goddess back. That’s all that matters.”

“You are so right, Bonnie,” Heath agreed, feeling like an asshole for not staying focused. “I’m sorry. I’m just so....”

“Mad? Pissed off? Ready to kick ass and skin a Mythical Wolf with mad Magical skills who is holding your Mate and Max’s for some unknown reason?” Colton announced as he jumped off the back of his horse and stalked to the porch. “I’m right there with ya’, Brother.” Tipping his hat to everyone else, he mentally added, *“I agree with Finlo and Hugo. We have no clue what Fenrir really is. So, how about we do not tempt fate and piss Odin off all in one flew swoop. You never know. The All Father might be listening.”*

Glad his twin was there but wondering how he knew so much, Heath opened his mouth to ask when Colton answered,

“I know everything because your anger and rage burnt right through your mental shields. That’s how everybody here is hearing you right now. I’ve been listening since you took off like a bat out of Hell – and it’s a good thing. ‘Cause while I was eavesdroppin’, I called Em and her boyfriend, Nostradamus. You know, the kids who created Ghoogle, the super-secret worldwide web for all things Supernatural, Paranormal, Weird, Strange, and otherwise right up our alley search engine. At first, Em said I was nuts. Actually, she said I was fucking nuts, but that’s just because she likes me. Then I convinced her to humor me and take a look. She was shocked. She found all the information about Fenrir, Grímhildr, the Curse, and even Hel’s part in it had been Magically added to all the records in Ghoogle in the fifteen minutes she hadn’t been at her computer.”

“I told all of them that Grímhildr wasn’t dead,” Liv spat. “I even volunteered to go and find her and put an end to her worthless life. Bet they listen to me next time.”

“Probably not,” a hauntingly beautiful voice floated on the airwaves. “I warned them, too, but no one listened. Not even my dad.”

Appearing before them was the Magical visage of the Norse goddess of Helheim, Hel, and she had to be the most unique Being Heath had ever seen. Half alive and half dead, she was indeed the depiction of every story he’d ever been told. Her live side, the one she inherited from her dad, the Norse god of Mischief, was beauty personified. The only person he’d ever seen that was more beautiful was Maggie, and to his Mate, that half of the goddess didn’t hold a candle, but it was pretty, nonetheless.

However, her left side, the one that looked like her mother, the giantess Angrboda, was absolutely, in every sense of the word – dead. From the top of her head flowed long, black, tangled hair. Her eye was milky white and sunken so far into her skull it was almost nonexistent, and as for everything else, well, it was skeletal with remnants of muscle and gore hanging here and there. It was the opposite of her live side down to the smallest detail.

It took a second and a goose of Dragon Magic from Finlo for Heath to stop inspecting the goddess and listen to Liv. “You went to Loki, Hellie?”

“I did.” Her voice was low and sad but nonetheless melodic. It was like a funeral dirge being played in a major chord instead of a minor, at a higher octave, and with a bit of liveliness. Weird, to say the least.

“And he told me that I was overreacting.” Hel shrugged. “But then again, he would never condone the death of any of my brothers and sisters, or me for that matter. As time passed, I continued to be uneasy. Dad thought I should go see Fenrir, but I did not. Why would I? He hates me with every fiber of his being and always has. However, after we returned from Texas, I simply could not shake the feeling that something was amiss. My brother even haunted my dreams. It was horrible. All the cackling and boasting about laying flowers on my grave was creepy. So, I went to my father again. Sadly, he told me I was wrong, but regardless, he swung Lævateinn, his divine weapon, before I could escape. That’s why I’ve been forced to come to you like this. Loki has locked me down tight. Even got Freya to help with the binding Spell. Thankfully, I had this.”

Holding up an onyx stone with a rune carved in the center, she smiled at the Valkyrie. “Liv, if you hadn’t given me this and told me to place a little bit of Enchantment in it daily, I wouldn’t have been able to contact you and warn you.”

“Warn me of what?”

“Not only does Fenrir have the ability to inhabit bodies, but the only thing that will kill him is my ragged-bladed sword of Helheim. It’s the safeguard Freya placed on the blade when Fenrir was born.”

“So, let me guess,” Liv sarcastically scoffed. “It’s locked down with you at the super-secret location Loki whipped out of the ether?”

“Yep,” Hel solemnly nodded.

“Well, then we are scr....”

“Hush up, Liv, and hold out your hands.”

Doing as she was told with a deeply furrowed brow and matching frown, the runes tattooed into the Valkyrie’s flesh flashed a deep color of merlot as her eyes swirled with power, and she grumbled, “Only you, my dear friend Hel, can speak to me that way.”

Without a word, the Norse goddess of Death and Helheim waved the onyx stone in an intricate pattern that left a flaming rune floating in the air as she whispered, “*Borte*,” in a language Heath instantly recognized as belonging to the Norse Pantheon.

“*She said Away*,” Hugo rumbled.

No sooner had the Timber Wolf’s words echoed in the Guardsman’s mind than the beautifully unique and incredibly ancient sword floated from Hel’s grasp, through the shimmering surface of the Magical portal, and into the Valkyrie’s outstretched hands. “Only you and the Dragon with the Gift of Sight have the Power, Magic, and Protection to wield the blade,” the Norse goddess clarified. “Should any other grip the handle, they will be engulfed in the Flames of Helheim for all eternity.”

“Damn, Hellie,” Liv exclaimed. “You do not fuck around.”

“It was the best I could do with the time and access to Magic I have.” She shook her head and sighed. “I am so very sorry. I should be there. This is my mess. Had I known...”

“Had you known, you never would have come here in the first place,” Heath said, stepping up to the portal. “I do not blame you. I would do anything for those I love, and to you, the Celtic god Arawn and the Omnipotent Being known as Fate are Family. In this case, intention matters most - and yours were pure. The Powers That Be know your heart is true and will grant us favor.” Dropping to one knee, he placed his right fist over his heart and bowed his head. “I pledge my loyalty, and that of my Dragon King and Timber Wolf, to you and yours. We will vanquish your enemies as if they were our own and protect your interests along with those of Dragonkin, Wolfen Kind, and humankind.”

“Thank you, Winged Warrior,” she regally responded. “Arise and go forth with my blessing and that of all I hold dear.”

“Damn!” Liv snorted. “Y’all sure are stuck on ceremony.”

Without so much as a glance at the Valkyrie, the goddess replied to Heath, “I must ask, Dragon Guardsman, why has your Gift of Sight not shown you what is to come?”

“Well, it has never worked that way for me. I have an enhanced ability to read minds, hear thoughts, and predict the actions of those within close proximity, but nothing more. As far as seeing the future or anything like that, it has never been more than a feeling in the pit of my stomach.”

“Ah, I see.”

“What does that mean, Hellie?” Liv asked, but another jumped into the conversation with both feet before the goddess could answer.

“While I appreciate all that just occurred,” Bonnie interjected. “And your help, Goddess Hel. My sister is Great Goddess knows where having Great Goddess knows what done to her right now. And Ettie, too. We have got to do something besides stand around with our thumbs up our butts.”

“I concur,” Max agreed. “While I insist we proceed cautiously, I cannot hold back the Panther King with whom I share my soul much longer. He is more than ready to force me backward and take matters into his own hands. That is something incredibly unpleasant, and that has not happened for centuries. Therefore, I request we get our shit together.”

Heath was shocked. He’d never heard the King of the Big Cats curse. Any other time, he would have laughed out loud, but this time, he agreed with a sharp nod of his head. “You’re both right.”

“Yep, everybody’s right,” Colton added, clapping his brother on the back and winking at the Goddess Hel. “Thank you for your help, Goddess. My brother and I will make sure your brother gets the ass kickin’ he deserves. Then your dad

can lift the house arrest, and maybe you can come on back to Texas.”

“Oh, brother,” Heath scoffed. “Knock it off, Casanova. She’s a goddess, and you’re a pain in the ass.”

Amidst the laughter, which Heath knew was a way for everyone to blow off some nervous energy before they headed out to find Maggie and Ettie, Hel’s Magical window disappeared with a loud pop. Stepping toward them, Liv chuckled, “You better back off, Loverboy. Hel’s already found her Mate, and he happens to be one of the Powers That Be.”

Shaking his head while trying to act cool, Colton scoffed, “I was just trying to be nice.”

“Sure, you were.” Tapping his temple, Heath snickered, “I know what you were thinkin’, and it wasn’t....”

Driven to the ground by an unknown force, spidery tendrils of fire and ice shot through his body and stole the words from his lips. Falling forward onto his hands by the sheer intensity of the attack, lightning flashed behind his eyelids as visions of Finlo and Hugo came into view.

One then the other, the Supreme Beings with whom he shared his soul blinked in and out of view. Their mouths moved. Their eyes glowed. And the Magic of the Ancient Dragons and Mighty Timber Wolves pulsed heavily within Heath’s soul.

Stopping dead center of his mind’s eye, the two came together. Ten feet tall, covered in scales and fur, his Warrior Dragon and Warrior Wolf forms had come together in one miraculous, unstoppable Being. One brilliant blue eye had an elliptical pupil. The other was golden and exuding the Mystical strength of the Lupine. There was no doubt they were both present.

*“Today, you become what you were always meant to be, Heath MacAllen. As destined by the Universe, the Great Goddess, the Great Creator, and the God of human creation, you will now and forever be known as The Furred Dragon of Legend.”*

*“Finlo?”*

*“Aye, it is me, Lad.”*

*“I am here also,”* Hugo responded. *“You are the first in a thousand years to be given this Mantle and all that comes with it. Your great-great-great-grandfather, Orlo MacAllen, was the last. It was a secret honor he never shared with another but held sacred in his heart and soul.”*

*“You are the one prophesied to Mate the second daughter of the White Wolf Couple of Power. The second twin to Mate the second twin and bring forth the Mysticism of the Furred Dragon – the perfect embodiment of Dragon and Timber Wolf – will know the secret of preserving all Multi-Natured Beings. You and your Mate are the only living Creatures who can wield the Blade of Dà Lasair, the sword carried into battle by the god Dewi as he reclaimed the monasteries in Wales,”* Finlo continued where the Timber Wolf had stopped.

Then, together, they commanded, *“You will go to the place where the lives of the White Wolf Couple of Power were brutally taken. You will find the amulet made of Connemara Marble and inscribed with the Celtic Heart and place it into the handle of the Dragon Blade that is yours to call from the ether.”*

*“Wait! What is happening? What are you saying? This can’t be....”*

*“But it is, Lad,”* Finlo reassured.

*“It is your destiny,”* Hugo encouraged. *“This is when all you have been told comes into being.”*

*“But I was never told any of this.”*

*“You were,”* both Dragon King and Timber Wolf countered. *“The memories have laid dormant until now. Soon, you will know all. Today, you become who you are meant to be. Arise and become. Find the woman made for you by the Universe. Save her before her mind is enveloped in the madness of the King of Chaos and the Lightning White Wolf is stopped from becoming all she was meant to be. Find Magnolia Mae Sampson, Lad. Join with the one who brings*



*the Flame to not only your heart and soul but also to the Magic that is and will always be those of us who share your soul. Together, you will become the Mated Pair of Justice that will stop the evil that lurks."*

Spikes of pain like the burn of silver being shoved into his body assaulted his flesh. His muscles shook. His heart stopped. Every breath was forced from his lungs. Time stood absolutely still. With a clap of thunder and a bolt of lightning, his heart once again beat.

Inhaling deeply, he caught Maggie's scent in the wind. Everything was suddenly clear. Somehow, everything had been locked deep within and was now set free.

Colton's bellows broke through the fog at the precise moment Finlo and Hugo assured, "*All is as it should be,*" and all pain was stripped from his body.

"I'm good."

"The fuck you are," his twin roared. "You weren't breathing."

"Everything is how it should be," Heath reiterated the words of the Compatriots with whom he shared his soul.

"What the hell does that mean? Did you suddenly become Confucius?" Liv growled, stepping in front of him and staring into his eyes. "Something just happened," she snapped, more to the others than to him. Then, to Heath, she observed, "Your eyes have silver and gold in them, and there is a swirling that wasn't there before."

Spun around by his brother, Heath barely stayed upright before Colton grabbed his shoulder and shook. "What the fuck is wrong with you? Did that fucking crazy Norse Wolf King do something to you? Did he scramble your brains? Speak, dammit. Talk to...."

"Well, shut up, and I will talk to you," Heath cut in. Taking a commanding step backward, he pulled out of his twin's grip and directed, "Colton and Liv, go to the entrance of Broken Arrow Mine. Do not go in. Just wait there."

Turning to the left, he added, “Max and Bonnie, come with me. We need....”

“Now, wait just one minute.”

Spinning back around, he glared at his twin and opened his mouth to tell him to shut up, but it was Finlo and Hugo’s combined voices that came out of his mouth, cut through the hot desert air, and demanded respect. “Today is the dawning of The Furred Dragon of Legend. This is your twin’s destiny. You will fight by his side for your future waits and will be sealed by the action you take on this day. You and Heath came into this world together, and together – with your Mates - you will preserve it.”

“What the fuck?” Colton breathed. “Was that Finlo *and* Hugo?”

“Yeah,” Heath answered. “So, do as they say, and we might just make it out of this shitstorm alive.”



“**M**ags. Hey, Mags. I know it seems like I’m singing the second verse of the same song, but I really need you to wake up.”

She knew that voice. Had heard it before. Truly liked the person it belonged to. But who was it? Why were they inside her mind? How did they get inside of her mind? What did they mean she had to wake up? Wasn’t she awake? It sure felt like she was.

“Maggie.” The voice was more insistent. “*You really gotta wake up now. This misshapen Wolf-lookin’ dude is rantin’ and ravin’ about your mom and dad and how you talked to your dead mom on the day they were killed, and....*”

Focusing on the flashes of memories racing to the forefront of her mind, Maggie let the disembodied voice float to the back. Something important was about to happen. She could feel it all the way to the very bottom of her soul.

Her senses were heightened. The earthy, musky scent of creosote danced in her nose. Every other aroma was like her favorite symphony. They were clean and arid. There were notes of clay, cedar, and blooming fall flowers. It was beautiful. It was welcoming.

It was home. Maggie would know it anywhere.

*Then it hit her. The coppery stench of old blood and death. There was gasoline and oil, too, right along with freshly overturned earth and, if she wasn’t mistaken – hate. At the*

*very least, someone or something close by was evil to their very core, with a black soul and malice in their heart.*

*Walking forward, she toed off her boots and slipped out of her socks. Everything felt so familiar. She had been there before – absolutely no doubt about it. But when? Why? Where was she? It was right on the tip of her tongue, the edge of her memory, buried deep in her soul like a secret for her and her alone.*

*Sliding her eyes to the left and right, she recognized every rock, molehill, and even a squirrel in the tree. But there was also a sadness – a bone deep sorrow and a sense of loss that made her heart hurt. There was something just ahead she didn't want to see. But she had to keep going. Had to look to confirm or deny what she'd been told by someone she knew would never lie.*

*But what had she been told? And....*

*At the top of a hill, she saw it. It was her dad's truck, and it was wrecked. No, not just wrecked. It was demolished. It had rolled end to end and then hit a tree, but it hadn't stopped there.*

*The tree gave way, and the pickup went over it like a ramp. Flying through the air, the front end dove into the ground below. The bottom of the chassis skidded along the dirt, digging it up like a tractor plowing a field.*

*Careening down the hill, the truck bounced off huge rocks and petrified cacti until it landed with a thundering boom, and its inhabitants were thrown from the cab. The final insult, the crushing blow, landed when the truck fell to the side and trapped the woman's legs under the bent and twisted metal.*

*But Maggie hadn't been there. She wasn't in the truck. She was seeing it after the fact and through the eyes of the woman. A woman she should know as well as she knew herself.*

*The memories came roaring back. They took no prisoners. They gave her no warning. Every picture and every emotion hit the center of her chest. They danced on her heart with*

*spiked heels. They demanded that she acknowledge what had happened and remember every detail.*

*On fast forward, Maggie was shoved through the worst day of her life in record time. Then, she came to a screeching halt just as she watched an image of herself placing a blanket over her mother's dead body.*

*Flashed from where she was, back in time, Maggie became one with her younger self. Wrist caught in the vice of a grip so strong the She-Wolf heard the crack of her own bones, she was sure she was about to join her parents. Whatever had been filled with such rage and hate had them in her clutches, and they would do to her what they had done to her parents.*

*But that was not the case. Oh no, that would have been too easy.*

*Reaching for her broken wrist, Maggie's opposite hand landed on another's as her eyes took in the unbelievable sight that defied all she knew. Not only was her mother's spirit sitting at her side, but Sally Sue Sampson's hand – HER DEAD HAND – was wrapped around Maggie's wrist.*

*Gaze flying to the hauntingly transparent image of her mom, the She-Wolf whispered, "Momma? Is that really you? Please tell me it's not a Demon wearing your face."*

*"No, not at all. It's my spirit, Little Girl." Pointing at her body, the older woman chuckled, "That's my physical body, and it's seen better days. No Demon wants that old thing."*

*"Yeah, well, if you don't make your hand let go of me, I'm not gonna look too good either."*

*"I'm so sorry, Baby Girl," Sally cooed at the same time that her hand released its death grip. "I really have no clue how these kinda things work. I only know what the spirit of my Wolf told me. I am following the directive I was given."*

*Feeling Nina's Magic working hard to heal her broken bones, Maggie turned to her mom and asked, "How did this happen? Why are you here? Are you and Daddy not really dead? Do you need me to help you come all the way back? I can get Cheveyo, Owen, and Barbara. I bet they know what to*

*do. Just tell me what to do. You can't leave us... me... You just c-can't leave."*

*Tears streamed down her face as Sally comforted, "I know it's hard, Baby. I didn't think your dad and I would be leaving you and Bonnie for a long time. But just like I always told you, The Powers That Be have a plan. It's our job to follow it."*

*"I don't want to follow it if it means you and dad aren't gonna be here. I won't do it. I'm gonna...."*

*"I don't know what you're about to say, but just stop. Just don't say another word. You know better than all that crap. You are a strong Wolf destined to be Pack Alpha along with Bonnie, and you will do nothing to stop that from happenin'. The life of the Sampson Wolves depends on you and your sister being at the helm. I've seen it all, and together, you and Bonnie will lead the Sampson Wolves to bigger and better things. Things the world – Paranormal, Supernatural, and human alike – need."*

*"But momma...."*

*"But momma nothin'," Sally Sue countered, her tone once again softening. "Your sister's gonna need you. She puts on a good front, but she can't do it all alone. She is the vanilla to your chocolate, and you are the sweet apple filling to her crust. Together, you both achieve greatness. You have the inner strength and resolve to stand up to damn near anyone. You believe what you believe with your whole heart and soul. That's why you and Bonnie make such a great team."*

*Averting her eyes, Maggie looked at the long blades of grass and weeds blowing in the wind and sighed, "Nobody else can see or hear you, can they?"*

*"Now, why would you say that, Baby Girl?"*

*"Because no one is yelling and screaming, and Bonnie isn't cryin'."*

*"See? You're smarter than you think you are, and you follow your instincts. That's gonna be what you need to do when the Betrayer shows his face and his Master makes*

*himself known. I do not want you to avenge your dad and me. I want you to stop them before they hurt anyone else.”*

*“What are you talkin’ about, Momma? Is your mind already gone, and the rest of ya’ hasn’t caught up yet? You sound like one of those crazy mystery novels you read.”*

*“Well, it’s more fun than always havin’ my nose in a journal about diggin’ stuff up and findin’ out how old it is. Tell me again why you wouldn’t take that scholarship and go to college. You know your daddy and I were happy for you and wanted you to follow your dreams. Hell, Bonnie planned a party and had already drawn pictures of how she wanted y’all’s room to be when it was a single.”*

*“Yeah, I just bet she did,” Bonnie snickered slyly. “She always said it was gonna be her room and her room alone one day.” Pulling a long blade of grass from the ground, she wound it around her finger. “It wasn’t my dreams that kept me here. It was my heart. I couldn’t imagine not being at home, being without you, Dad, and Bonnie. My family and my Pack are more important than anything else. I knew where I needed to be, and that is where I stayed, and I don’t regret a single minute of it.”*

*“And that is why I am here to tell you to always be prepared for your destiny, my girl. It’s gonna hit you over the head like a two-by-four, punch you in the gut, and make you doubt things you know are true.”*

*“Okay....”*

*“Now, you know I don’t like that tone, Miss Maggie. Just say what you think and mean what you say. Your dad and I taught you better than to be petulant and sass your elders.”*

*“Sorry, momma, but you’re talkin’ crazy. We both know my only destiny is at the diner with Bonnie and learning how to run the Pack as well as you and Dad did. Nothing great and wonderful is in the stars for me, and I’m just fine with that.”*

*“Well, I don’t know if you’re fine with any of that hogwash, but I damn sure know you’re wrong. Now, listen here. There is gonna come a time when you are gonna have to trust a*

*stranger that feels like you've known her your whole life and take the life of someone you thought was a friend to save not only our home but the man the Universe made for you."*

*"I do not believe in Fated...."*

*"You better start believin' in Fated Mates and payin' attention to everything around you. Never take anything for granted. God gave you two eyes, and the Universe and the Great Goddess gave you your Wolf. So use them."*

*"You've always told us that."*

*"And I've always meant it," Sally confirmed with gusto. "Now, you listen to me, Magnolia Mae Sampson. You're not gonna remember any of this until the time is right. To Junior, Smitty, and Bonnie, it looks like you're just sittin' next to my body, sayin' your goodbyes. But I believe something deep inside your soul – probably that sassy little Wolf with whom you share your soul – is just gonna know and make sure you are always ready."*

*"But mom, this is...."*

*"It is not crazy. It is Magic, and Fate, and Destiny, and all part of being the Special Beings that we are. So, just get ready to fall asleep and dream of how much your daddy and I love you. Always stay safe, my girl. And look out for your sister. You two are the future."*

*"Momma! Momma don't go! Momma don't...."*

*Slap!*

"What the fuck?" She roared, suddenly all the way awake and definitely more pissed than she'd been in a really long time.

Eyes flying open, Maggie instantly recognized that she was not only hanging upside down, but her head was about eighteen inches from an above ground pool about three feet deep full of liquid silver, and Ettie was hanging to her right. Eyes sliding that way, she mentally asked, *"Was that you tryin' to wake me up?"*



*“Yep. And it was me tryin’ to get you to hush up before big, furry, and grotesque to look at got back.”* The Demi-Goddess sighed. *“But none of that happened. You threw me to the deepest, darkest corner of your mind, then started talking to your mom like you were a teenager again.”*

*“I did?”*

“You did,” a deep, rumbling voice answered in place of Ettie. “And y’all can stop all the telepathy bullshit. Not even the Magic of the great and powerful Demi-Goddess, Daughter of Lugh, Empress Eagle Shifter, and Mate to the King of the Big Cats, Bridgette Featherstone, can break through the wards the Master has set to keep our location hidden and your Enchantment dampened.”

“The name’s Ettie, asshole.”

“Excuse me, Bridgette,” the voice mocked. “But you will be called whatever I want to call you. After all, this isn’t about you. This is about Maggie and what she will do to save those she loves.”

“I’m not doing anything until you show me your face.”

A tidal wave of Sorcery whipped through the room, swinging Maggie so hard that the side of her face almost touched the ceiling before she was whipped back the other way like a runaway pendulum on a broken clock. Reaching the end of the chain from the rocky ceiling that wrapped around her ankles with an unspoken *boing*, she snapped back the other way. Colliding with Ettie at a high rate of speed, pain shot down the left side of her body and pooled in the top of her head right along with damn near every ounce of blood in her body.

Refusing to cry out, she knew the Demi-Goddess was doing the same, but then another loud slap, an ear-splitting *oomph*, and what could only be the *pop* of wood against flesh, and Ettie was snarling, “Come a little closer, Dickhead. Just a step to the left or the right, and I will headbutt you into next year. Just wait until...*ooooooooommmppph!*”

“STOP IT!” Maggie screamed. “Stop your shit right now!”

Huge fingers dug into her cheeks as the tips of ragged claws cut into her flesh, and blood streamed toward her forehead and into her hair. “You can’t tell me what to do anymore, Maggie Mae Sampson. I am no longer one of the stupid Sampson Wolves. I no longer have to do what you say. Hell, I haven’t been a Sampson Wolf since a week before I killed your parents. I belong to King Fenrir. I am a Warrior of Chaos. I am....”

“You are a second-rate Enforcer and an even worse Deputy Sherriff. You never did anything, including take a shit, unless someone told you to. You followed Junior Thompson around like a little pup, picking up his droppings and wishin’ you were something you could never be. Worst of all, you kissed my daddy’s ass, lookin’ for handouts, but he saw you for what you really are. A worthless piece of....”

*Slap! Slap! Punch! Punch! Punch!*

Holding her breath and biting her tongue, Maggie would not cry out. She would not show fear. She would not react at all. There was no way in all that was holy she would not give the fucking Betrayer, the asshole her momma had warned her about, the satisfaction of her pain. He would have to kill her, and still she wouldn’t say a fucking word.

Of course, he wouldn’t do that because then he would never find out what Sally Sue had told her.

Punch after punch hit her torso. Her ribs shattered into pieces, only to be healed by the stinging, nasty bite of Black Magic. Sadly, she knew her body could take the assault for months, maybe years, even if Nina never woke up because whoever the Betrayer’s Master was had some serious mojo.

But why wasn’t he showing his face? Hadn’t Maggie already proven that she knew who he was? What was with all the mystery?

No sooner had the thought entered her mind than a tsunami of Black Magic, a deluge of thick, noxious smoke, and the sound of claws skittering across rock filled the cavern. The beatings stopped. Everything went silent as the grave – even the scurrying paws ceased.

Unable to take a breath, her body on fire from the copious amounts of Evil Sorcery being forced into it, Maggie did the only thing she could: she called out to the two people she knew would never let her down. *“Heath! Bonnie! Ettie and I are in the burnt out shaft in Broken Arrow Mine! Smitty Brown has lost his damn mind and he’s....”*



“So, not only can you Shift into a Dragon and a Timber Wolf, but now you can do both at the same time, and you’re The Furred Dragon of Legend?”

“Yes, that’s what Finlo and Hugo said when I hit the dirt and stopped breathing.”

“And you’re sure that Maggie is still alive?”

Stopping with the blade of his sword on a backswing, Heath snapped his head to the side and waited. It took several long seconds, but when Bonnie finally looked his way, he answered her question with a question. “Have you felt her take her last breath? Has the piece of your soul that connects you to her floated away on the breath of Angels? Does your heart feel broken into a million pieces and can never be put back together?”

“No, no, and no.”

“Then there’s your answer. That’s how I know. Because I haven’t felt any of those things either.”

“As long as Bridgette is with her, your Maggie will be well,” Max added from the top of the hill on the closest edge of Wild Horse Basin. “She is nothing if not a Warrior. She will protect your Mate...” Eyes going to Bonnie, he continued, “... and your sister with her life. Of that I am...”

“What is it, Max?” Heath barked as he raced to the King’s location.

Skidding to a stop, his eyes followed Max's line of sight, and his heart skipped a beat. There it was, in the wet, worm-ridden dirt that had been under a massive rock before the King of the Big Cats moved it, shining like a green, mottled sphere in the land that had been soaked with the blood of Maggie and Bonnie's Parents – it was the Connemara Marble.

Carefully and slowly kneeling in the brush, he reached for the gem. No sooner had his fingers closed around its smooth surface than a shock of pure, white Earthen Magic shot through his body. Momentarily stunned, black spots danced before his eye just as the vision of Sally Sue Sampson floated above the colossal hole in the ground.

*"Well, lookie there, you found it,"* her voice resonated in his mind. *"You, Heath MacAllen, always were my favorite MacAllen twin and could find a needle in a haystack."*

*"Yeah, well, was there really a choice?"* He answered the same way he always had when she teased.

*"Not a one,"* she laughed, the triumphant sound lifting his spirits almost as much as he *knew* holding Maggie in his arms would be. *"Sorry we don't have time to catch up, but you need to get your ass out to Broken Arrow Mine and save my girl."*

*"That's where she is?"*

*"Yeah, but you knew that."*

*"Okay, I might have."*

*"You can't fool me. I'm dead, not dumb. And I have a front row seat to everything happening in my Desert."*

*"Oh, it's your Desert, is it?"* Heath chuckled, remembering when she told him that for the first time and his ten-year-old self had argued until his dad dragged him out of Sam's Diner.

*"You know it is. If you don't believe me, just ask your daddy."*

*"Oh, I know it is, Sally Sue,"* Heath nodded. *"And like you said, I gotta get goin'. That girl of ours is bound to be as mad*

*as a wet hen that it took me this long to come along and get her.”*

*“She’s good. I checked, but you’re right. Go on, now. Fetch Maggie and take care of her like I know you will.”*

*“I promise and then some, Sally.”*

Standing to his full height, Heath’s eyes met the King’s knowing look. “Guess you heard all of that?”

“I did, and I agree.” Turning towards the road where his black SUV was parked, he added, “Should I drive, or are you?”

Holding up his hand, he grabbed the keys Max had just thrown out of the air and called to Bonnie, “Come on. We found it.” Holding up the gem, he added, “And I know where your sister is.”

“You do? How did you do that?”

“A little Angel appeared to me in a dream.”

Without another word, because he didn’t want to hurt his soon-to-be sister-in-law’s feelings by saying that her dead mother had appeared to him and not her, Heath hit the button on the key fob and held the door open for her. As soon as everyone was buckled in, he turned the car on and hit the gas.

Taking every back road and creating a few new ones across the land belonging to his family, the Guardsman hit the sands of the Chihuahuan Desert going seventy-five. Holding the SUV steady, he made a beeline for the entrance of the mine as he mentally called to his twin. *“Coming in hot, Colt. Did you get the thing out of my old closet?”*

*“I got it, but I’m not sure what you want with an old saddlebag.”*

*“You didn’t look in it?”*

*“You said you’d shave my head, super glue feathers to my eyebrows, and shove bright pink food coloring under my fingernails. Fuck no! I did not look in it.”*

*“Good.”*

Locking eyes with his twin, Heath hit the brakes and stopped ten yards from Liv, Colton, and Dare. Out of the driver's seat, he sped to Bonnie's door, opened it, and let her out.

Talking as he closed the distance with Max on one side and his soon-to-be sister-in-law on the other, he directed, "I'm not gonna put this stone in the handle of my sword until right before I go chargin' in there to get Maggie. According to a reliable source, Fenrir will know the minute the two are united."

Looking at Liv, he continued, "I know Hel said that only her blade would kill the King of Chaos, but Finlo and Hugo have new information. Now that they are joined, and we are all The Furred Dragon of Legend, they have access to all kinds of interesting stuff."

"Wait! Are you tellin' me that you are now as smart and knowledgeable as The Mad Dragon, Maddox?" Colton blurted out.

"No, I am telling you that I have no clue what I know, but I trust Finlo and Hugo. So, we're going to do exactly what they say, and everyone but that fucking piece of shit Wolf are walking out that mine right there...." He pointed at the entrance of Broken Arrow Mine as his eyes landed on the scorch marks his brother, J.D., had told Colton about, and at that moment, he knew the whole truth. "...alive."

"And while I'm at it, the Demon attack on the Res was planned by Fenrir. It was a distraction to keep us Dragons out of the way. He knew he couldn't take us all at once, but he needed Arawn in danger so Hel would come. I'm also sure that that fucking mangy Wolf is also the one who got Magoth to the Desert in an attempt to confuse Arawn just in case the Celtic god called us."

"You know about that too?"

Liv was amazed. He could hear it in her voice. Turning to speak to her face-to-face, Heath blurted out, "Damn! How did you do that so quickly?"

With her ebony hair tied up with a leather cord, she wore the armor of a Shieldmaiden, a drastic change from the jeans and T-shirt she'd had on when he walked up. Her top was a rich design of deep brown leather with black accents portraying the Nordic runes and Celtic Dragons of her heritage. The breastplate, made of Black Iron to deflect anything anybody could throw at her, covered everything to her waist and was etched with more of the same adornment.

The pauldrons covering her shoulders and upper arms and the gauntlets wrapped around her wrists had swirls of silver and gold and Celtic runes his mother had taught Heath and his twin when they were little. The ones Liv wore were a warning to her foes and a Blessing to the Valkyrie herself.

Heath's gaze fell to her sword. It had a long, thin blade crafted of Black Iron, and the handle fit perfectly in her grip. It was an actual work of craftsmanship, and Heath said so. "That is one fine sword."

"Why is that the first thing men say when they see me dressed for battle?"

"Because they are men," Bonnie chuckled.

"That's the best answer I've heard so far."

"Okay, y'all can list what is wrong with the male species when we have Maggie and Ettie back, deal?"

"Deal," they all chorused in unison.

"Since Liv is ready to go. The rest of us can Shift when we're close. I don't want to give Fenrir any indication that we're here until we're ready. That bastard will...."

*"Heath! Bonnie! Ettie and I are in the burnt out shaft in Broken Arrow Mine! Smitty Brown has lost his damn mind and he's...."*

"That was Maggie," Bonnie screamed as she turned and raced toward the mine's entrance.

Stopped by the sudden appearance of Dare in her path, the She-Wolf started to Shift as she howled, "Get the fuck outta my...."



Grabbing her around the waist, Heath put his hand over her mouth and, with a steely tone, demanded, “Cut the shit right now. Maggie and Ettie’s lives depend on you keepin’ your cool. If you can’t, I’ll lock you in Max’s SUV without air conditioning.”

Feeling her relax, he slowly loosened his grip and let his hand fall from her mouth. She sighed as her chin dropped to her chest, “I’m sorry. I know what you said, but I lost my mind when I heard Maggie’s voice.”

“I know you did,” Heath commiserated. “I almost did, too. But I have Finlo and Hugo to hold me back. Your Wolf is as upset as you are and wants to race in there, too.”

Stepping back, he looked every person and Wolf in the eye and said, “We leave no one behind. We bring Maggie and Ettie home. And we behead Fenrir and burn the remains.”

“Damn straight,” Liv cheered.

“I am yours to command,” Max concurred. “As you have seen, I am not at my best.”

Putting his hand on the King of the Big Cats’ shoulder, Heath nodded. “Not to worry, Max. I would be a maniac without Finlo and Hugo. Once you see Ettie, all will be well, and you will be ready the next time danger knocks at the door.”

“Yeah,” Liv scoffed. “I can see you’ve never met Ettie Featherstone, young’un. Just wait till you see them together. All will become clear.”

“Don’t listen to her, Max,” Heath reassured. “Like my mom and dad always say, the Universe does not make mistakes.”

Not letting anything else get in his way, he walked to the mine entrance, bent down so as not to bump his head, and crossed the threshold. Only when he felt the heaviness of Black Magic did Heath mentally whisper, “*Maggie, honey, we’re here and comin’ to get you and Ettie. Just hang tight. We’re on the way.*”

Without looking over his shoulder, the Guardsman directed, “We’re gonna go down to the left, then split off. Half of us will go right at the fork in the tunnel, and the other left. That way, if one set of us is detained, the other can still get to the girls.”

“And if we all get there at the same time?” Colton asked.

“Then we hit the bastard from two sides, get the girls, and get the hell outta there.”

“Good plan.”

Traversing the passage as fast as he could without using Magic, Heath trusted the others to follow. When they got to the split, he went right and told his twin to go left. “I know that no matter what happens, we will be able to communicate. Keep Bonnie safe and get Max to his Mate.” Turning his head the other way, he looked at Liv. “You and Dare good with goin’ with me?”

“We are,” the two extraordinary Beings answered in unison.

Putting his hand in the middle of the group, he gave them all a thumbs up and rallied, “See y’all on the flipside. Don’t forget, Maggie and I’s Mating Ceremony will be seven days after I carry her out of this mine.”

“Wait,” Colt spoke up, holding the worn-out saddle bag in his hand. “Why do I need this?”

“You don’t,” Heath corrected. “I do. You’ll see why as soon as I have my Mate in my arms.”

“Whatever you say.”

Spinning on his heels, the Guardsman sped through the tunnel, making a beeline to his Mate with their glowing Mating Bond leading the way. Winding one way and then the other, every step brought him closer. From one pounding footfall to the next, he reached up and grabbed his sword from the ether where he’d stowed it before leaving the Basin.

Whipping around the last turn, he snapped the Connemara Marble into the very bottom of the grip. Lightning arched

between the Guardsman and his blade, and he felt his eyes swirl. Bursting into the cavern he knew held his Mate, Heath's eyes met his brother's across the room.

Head snapping to the left, he saw Maggie hanging upside down, bound in silver and hanging over a pool of the same caustic substance. Raising the broad blade of his sword as a massive misshapen Warrior Wolf stepped out of the shadow, he immediately knew that Hugo had been right.

*"Did I not say the Betrayer was someone close to your Mate and a man you thought to be good and just?"*

*"You did,"* Heath responded. *"And I never doubted you. But Smitty doesn't look like I remembered."*

*"This is his true face, not the one he has shown you since before he killed our Mate's parents."*

*"Good to know,"* Heath seethed, the fury at how his Mate was being treated burning through the hold he, Finlo, and Hugo had on his temper. *"Now, where is his Master?"*

*"Right here, Boy,"* Smitty spat, stepping completely out of the shadows.

Growing taller and wider with every step he took, there was a sudden blast of Sorcery that damn near knocked Heath on his ass. Unable to believe his eyes, the Guardsman couldn't look away as whatever little bit of the man he knew as Smitty Brown quite literally melted away, revealing the humongous King of Chaos, Fenrir.

At least fifteen feet tall at the shoulders, the black and gray Wolf with glowing red eyes and venom dripping from his canines was finding it hard to maneuver in such tight quarters, and Heath planned to take full advantage. Keeping his sword at the ready, he trusted both Finlo and Hugo to do what they did best and let his consciousness fall backward.

Awash in Ancient Dragon Magic and Wolfen Mysticism as old as time itself, he no longer simply endured the Shift but reveled in every miraculous manipulation his body underwent. From one heartbeat to the next, Heath was no longer a man but the Furred Dragon of Legend.

Eleven feet tall from the tips of the battle horns atop their head to the soles of their padded, furred, and scaled feet, Guardsman, Dragon King, and Timber Wolf were one, and they were ready to take on all comers – especially the King of Chaos. Seeing their form through the eyes of his Mate, Heath was amazed. They truly were the perfect combination of Warrior Dragon and Warrior Wolf with a load of added Enchantment and attitude.

Taking a threatening step forward, Finlo and Hugo demanded, “Surrender now, and you might live.”

Laughing sarcastically, Fenrir matched their forward motion with his own and mocked, “I will gut you with my claws, rip that sword from your cold dead hands, and then I will force your Mate to Shift and skin her alive.”

“*Get him!*” Heath roared, no longer able to hold back. “*Tear him apart!*”

“The fight must be fair,” Finlo growled.

“We cannot draw first blood,” Hugo snarled.

“Bullshit!” Liv roared from across the room. Launching herself into the air, she flew without wings. With Hel’s sword pulled back over her shoulder, the Valkyrie’s flight was a thing of beauty.

It was as if time stood still. Still looking through Maggie’s eyes, he saw every swirl of Liv’s eyes, the tiny stray hairs that had escaped her ponytail, and how she perfectly aimed the blade in her hand. Sure, Heath wanted it to be he and his alter egos who killed the Mythical Beast who’d dared to touch their Mate, but the Valkyrie was a good second.

Holding his breath, Heath damn near lost consciousness when Fenrir spun to the side, lifted his gargantuan paw and swatted Liv out of the air. Hitting the floor, she rolled to the side, jumped to her feet, and angled closer to the Wolf.

Blood ran down her face. Her arm from the elbow down looked like raw meat from how the rocks had abraded her skin. She was a mess but refused to give up.

Eyes going to Maggie, he saw the dried blood on her face and in her hair, and suddenly everything made sense. *“He drew first blood!”* Heath roared. *“Fenrir drew first blood! Maggie and Ettie and now Liv. He did it! He struck the first blow and dared to send his fucking minion after our Mate!”*

*“Right, you are!”* Finlo and Hugo bellowed in unison.

Moving forward so fast that the rest of the cavern was a blur, the Furred Dragon of Legend swung Heath’s sword and let his bottom jaw drop open. But the King of Chaos was ready.

Dropping his drooling gaping maw to his chin, he bent at the waist and spun in a complete circle. Reaching out with all five of the thick, hooked, and jagged claws on the end of his right hand, the Norse Wolf had a victor’s gleam in his eye, but Finlo and Hugo were ready for the bastard.

Playing right into Fenrir’s delusions of grandeur, the Furred Dragon of Legend faked right, launched himself straight into the air and spun with all the Magic in every fiber of his being. Holding out their sword at the perfect point of their descent, he swung true. No sooner had the blade’s sharp edge separated Fenrir’s head from his shoulders than did Finlo finally release a plume of Dragon Fire larger than anything Heath had ever seen. The hotter and more robust the flames became, the more it was evident that the King of Chaos’ body could not be incinerated.

*“Well, shit,”* Heath breathed. *“That was almost over before it started.”*

*“Speak for yourself, Lad,”* Finlo grumbled.

*“Aye, Heath, we are not as young as we used to be. Were you not watching us jumping and twirling?”* Hugo finished. Then laughingly added, *“We looked like some young ballerina, but we damned took out that rat bastard, didn’t we?”*

*“Indeed, y’all did!”*

“Let it go, boys,” Liv ordered. Waiting until the fire had stopped, she walked over to Fenrir’s head and picked it up. “I’ll take this to Odin and see what he wants to do with it.”

Over her shoulder, she added, “Dare, grab the carcass. I’ll open the portal.”

Pushing his consciousness to the forefront, Heath hollered through the mouth of the Furred Dragon of Legend. “Don’t forget to be back in seven days. I expect you at the Mating Ceremony.”

“Alright, young’un,” she chuckled. Then, stepping into the portal after her Familiar added, “We’ll be there.”

Appreciating that Finlo and Hugo allowed him to control their massive body, Heath crossed the cavern just as Max and Ettie lowered Maggie from her chains. Taking her in his arms, he laughed out loud when she looked at him through heavily lidded eyes and slurred, “Look at that, you’re a Wolfie Dragon.”

Accepting the Shift back to human that his alter egos started, he was astounded at the fluidity and that his Mate was still safe and sound in his arms.

*“Told you all would be well, Lad,”* Finlo rumbled.

*“Things have changed, and more is to come,”* Hugo mysteriously added.

But answers to the questions he still had would have to wait. He had Maggie in his arms, and there was only one thing left to do.

Laying a tender kiss on her lips, he whispered directly into her mind, *“Magnolia Mae Sampson, will you make me the happiest man, Dragon, and Wolf in the whole universe and be my wife, my Mate, and the woman I spend forever loving?”*

*“Oh, yes, Heath, I will. Love you so much. But can I have a nap first?”*

*“Can it wait just a second?”*

*“I’ll try my best?”*

Eyes flying up, he yelled to Colton, “Hey, Bro! Hurry! Bring me the saddlebag.”

Reaching in the top as his twin held it up, Heath pulled out a small velvet ring box. Handing it to Colton, he asked, “Can you open this so I can put it on her finger before she passes out?”

“Gotcha covered,” his twin breathed, doing as he’d asked with the speed of his Dragon.

Taking the ring from the box, Heath softly requested, “Maggie, honey, can you open your eyes and put your left hand up for a minute?”

Smiling so wide that his cheeks hurt when she did exactly as he’d asked, he repeated, “One more time for the witnesses, *Mo chroí*. Magnolia Mae Sampson, will you make me the happiest man, Dragon, and Wolf in the whole universe and be my wife, my Mate, and the woman I spend forever loving?”

“Absolutely.”

Sliding the ring on her finger, Heath couldn’t help but laugh when she added in a whisper, “Now, let me have a nap, then I’ll make you a very happy man.”



“**W**hat am I gonna do without you?” Bonnie said for at least the tenth time that morning.

“Nothing, ‘cause I’m not going anywhere,” Maggie answered, just like every time before. “I’ll still be at the diner every day, and you darn sure know where the Ranch is. So, the only thing that will change is where I sleep.”

“Yeah, so I’ll be all alone every night.”

“Now, you know that’s not true. Mo...ahem, my intuition tells me that you won’t be sleeping alone for long.”

She still hadn’t told her twin about her encounter with their mom’s spirit, or Heath’s chat with their momma, for that matter. Maggie still wasn’t sure how Bonnie would react at being left out of the reunion and decided to wait until things settled down.

“Please stop sayin’ that,” her sister grumbled. “What the hell would I do with a man underfoot?”

Wagging her eyebrows, Maggie teased, “I can give you a list if needed.”

Laughing out loud, Bonnie shot right back, “Hey, I’m still the older twin.”

Throwing up her hands in mock surrender, Maggie chuckled, “And I bow to your supremacy.”

“Yeah, well, you better.”

“You know how much I love you?” Bonnie sing-songed.



“A bushel and a peck and a hug around the neck,” Maggie answered in the same tone she had used since they were little girls. “And do you know how much I love you?”

“A barrel and a heap, and I’m talkin’ in my sleep about you. And I always will.”

“Right back atcha, Sis, forever always.”

It had been exactly seven days since Bonnie, Heath, Colton, Liv, Dare, and the King of the Big Cats, Max, had raced into Broken Arrow mine and saved her and Ettie from certain death. She’d talked to the Demi-Goddess almost every day, and neither one had a clue why Ettie had been kidnapped too.

It made no sense. The Demi-Goddess wasn’t part of the Curse, and as far as anyone knew, Fenrir had nothing against her father, Lugh. However, Ettie’s dad, the Celtic god of the Sun, was more than a little pissed off. According to the Demi-Goddess, he had Magicked himself over to Asgar to speak to Odin and had yet to return. But Liv told them to wait until the skin of Fenrir’s neck regenerated and his head was reattached. Then, she would go to the Island of Lyngvi in the Kattegat Strait between Denmark and Sweden and get the answers they needed. She also said that Loki let Hel out of lockdown, and the goddess immediately took off to the deepest depths of Helheim and is only communicating by Mythical Messaging, yet another creation of the wiz kid, Em, and her super-techy boyfriend, Nostradamus.

Maggie was happy to hear that Ettie and Max were vacationing in South America – *together* – and told the Demi-Goddess that she still owed her some answers. Of course, Ettie laughed and said, “Yeah, well, ditto, my friend. Ditto.”

The She-Wolf was sad Ettie and Max wouldn’t be able to make the Mating Ceremony but told them it was okay. She knew they would be back in Valentine soon enough, and they would all catch up then. After all, she and the Demi-Goddess had a date for beer, limes, and tunes at Rodeo. Maggie really wanted to know what the deal was with Claire and if there might actually be more than one Phoenix walking the earth.

Looking at Bonnie in the mirror, she happily commented to keep her sister talking and out of her own head, “You know, I think Heath was glad I wanted to wear mom’s gown. Colton said he was scared to have one made. That he thought I wouldn’t like it. As if that man could do anything I wouldn’t like. He also said Heath didn’t want me to wear Barbara’s because Bryn already had.”

“That boy just wants to make you happy,” her twin teased. Then looking up, she added with a growl, “And he damned sure better.”

“He will, Goofball. And you know it.”

“Yeah, I do,” Bonnie agreed with a giggle. “I just like to give both of y’all a hard time.”

“I know you do.”

Swiping the end of her nose with the huge powder brush one last time, she tucked an errant hair in the fancy updo Bonnie had given her and got up from the dressing table. Turning in a complete circle, she made another half-turn and threw her arms open.

“Wanna hug me one more time before I’m a Mated woman?”

“You know I do.” Closing the distance between them in the blink of an eye, her twin wrapped her up in the biggest, tightest hug and whispered, “I love you, Sis. Just be happy. That’s what I want and what momma and daddy would want.”

“Oh, girl, we’re both gonna be happy as ants in a sugar factory. I just know it.”

“We damned sure will,” Bonnie breathed. “I just wish Mom and Dad were here to see how pretty you look.”

“Me too,” Maggie sighed sadly. “Me too. I swear, if Fenrir does actually regenerate, I might just find that secret island and behead him again. I will never get over the fact that he possessed Smitty and had that poor boy murder our parents. To make matters worse, Fenrir just stayed inside Smitty’s soul like some evil, squatting toad and nobody – not even gods – knew he was there. I wonder how many people that mangy

fuckin' Wolf made that boy kill or whatever else he made him do.”

“Yeah, I’m sure it’s too things to count and I’ll get three gray hairs for everyone we uncover. Thank God our Pack is strong, and Junior is made of steel. I was sure he would buckle under the weight of the guilt. When he started to say he should’ve known and done something about it, I shut that shit right down.”

“Yes, you did, and I was so proud. Thank the Goddess, Smitty’s momma wasn’t here to see what happened to her boy. She might have forgiven him because it was the King of Chaos pullin’ the strings, but she would have come unglued when he was a party to trying to kill me and Ettie and was gonna do the same to Heath,” Maggie shook her head. “But I still don’t think he deserved to be turned into a puddle of goo and spread all over the floor of Shaft Number Nine in Broken Arrow Mine.”

“No, he did not,” her twin agreed. “But what’s done is done, and I will never be able to thank everybody enough for saving you.” Swatting her on the butt, she added with a sassy smile, “Now get ready. There’s a Dragon and his Family waiting to welcome you to the Clan with open arms.”

Dressed in her mom’s elegant, floor-length gown made of white silk and decorated with tiny black and glittering bronze crystals to honor not only the Sampson Pack but also the MacAllen Dragons and the Timber Wolves of the Thorntree Pack, Maggie truly felt like a queen. Walking out of the main house, she stood at the edge of her soon-to-be mother-in-law’s garden and took a deep breath. All her dreams were coming true. If someone had told her that she would find true happiness and it would last forever after her parents were killed, she would have asked them if they’d lost their ever-loving mind.

But it was happening. It was really happening.

Standing under a white picket archway decorated with cornflowers, fall asters, and mums with ribbons to match, she prayed the wind didn’t blow her blond hair with its black

accent into her face as she waited for her Mate and his brothers to arrive. Eyes trained on the fountain in the middle of the garden, she smiled as Cheveyo entered from the side wearing the traditional dress of the Thorntree Tribe.

Gripping the bouquet of red roses that had been delivered to the house at the very crack of dawn, she smiled brightly, remembering the note written in Heath's perfect hand: *Together as one – Furred Dragon and Lightning White Wolf as Fate, Destiny, and all The Powers That Be intended. Loving you for the rest of forever will be my greatest honor. You are my heart, my soul, and my love. Always and forever.*

Loosening the death grip she had on the stems before she popped the blooms right off the top, Maggie breathed a sigh of relief when Gage, J.D., Zach, Tree, and Colton filed into the garden with Owen leading the way.

Nothing had changed from the first day her momma and daddy brought her and Bonnie to the MacAllen Ranch to meet the *Dragons*. Every single one of the MacAllen Dragons was wearing the same shit-eating grin. There wasn't ever a time one of them walked into the diner, stopped by the house to talk to her dad, or just passed her in the street that they weren't sporting that smirk. It was legendary in their part of the world, just like those dashing Dragons. Then, just to make her snicker because they knew she couldn't control her laughter, every single one of them winked in her direction and tipped their heads as if they were all still wearing their hats. Her snickers turned to chuckles, and then she stopped breathing altogether when Heath walked into view.

Dressed just like his dad and brothers in a surcoat King Arthur's Knights had worn, her Dragon looked *so good*. He was tall and handsome and made her weak in the knees.

Everything was perfect. Even the fabric of the surcoat was an ideal match for Heath's Furred Dragon, and it was so cool that she could wear the scales along with Nina's fur whenever she wanted.

*"Yeah, it's cool, alright,"* the Wolf with whom she shared her soul grumbled. *"Just make sure you don't damage my pelt."*

*I might never forgive you.”*

*“Oh, hush, grumpy pants. You know you love it.”*

*“Yeah, I do,”* Nina giggled like a pup. *“And that Hugo’s not bad either.”*

*“What about King Finlo?”*

*“Well, let’s just say I’m warming up to the idea of three being the perfect number. After all, they did find the Spell that woke me up and cleansed our soul of the residual Black Magic.”* She snickered, then added playfully, *“Warming up. Get it? ‘Cause he’s a Dragon and can breathe fire.”*

*“Yeah, I got it, Goofball.”*

Ready to give her Wolf another razzing, Maggie could barely breathe when Heath mouthed, *“I love you, Maggie Mae.”*

*“Damn, you look fantastic,”* she breathed into his mind, loving the sexy wink she got in reply.

Shifting from one foot to the other and back again, ready to get to her Dragon and say the words that would bind them together for all eternity, Maggie’s eyes landed on the fantastic needlework on the front of Heath’s surcoat. It was unbelievable, a perfect replication of the Furred Dragon of Legend amid a fierce battle.

Looking back, when Cheveyo cleared his throat, Maggie took one step and then the other. The sparkling white runner leading to the fountain tickled the bottom of her bare feet as she drew closer and closer to the man the Universe created just for her.

Stopping next to Bonnie, she reached for her twin’s outstretched hand. Looking into her sister’s eyes, Maggie smiled brightly as Cheveyo asked, *“Do you, Bonnie Sue Sampson, Alpha of the Sampson Pack and twin to Magnolia Mae Sampson, willingly and with all the love in your heart, give your Blessing to the union of your sister to this man?”*

*“My Pack and I do. May they know joy, love, and happiness for all their days on this Earth and beyond.”*

Pausing, Bonnie leaned down and gave Maggie a kiss on the cheek, whispering, “I love you, Sis. Be happy. You know I think you deserve everything with whipped cream and a cherry on top, and I’m pretty sure you’ve found it,” before standing tall and placing her hand in Heath’s.

Smiling at her soon-to-be brother-in-law, Bonnie added with a wink and a chuckle, “If you ever make her cry, I will find you. Ya’ know I can do it.”

After the lovely laughter died down and Maggie could almost breathe, Cheveyo nodded, “The Great Creator, the Universe, the Goddess of All, and all the Powers That Be have heard your Blessing and wish nothing but the best for you and yours. In this place, under this sky, in this world we’ve been given, we are all family, all loved, and all welcome.”

Waiting until Bonnie was seated beside Barbara MacAllen, the Chief again began. “Heath and Magnolia are here with family and friends, gathered under the beautiful sky with the wind kissing their cheeks and the sun shining brightly upon them, this couple wishes to profess not only their love for one another but their commitment to walk side-by-side and hand-in-hand for all eternity. The greatest wish of The Great Creator, the Universe, the Goddess of All, and all the Powers That Be is for these two blessed souls to be happy, whole, and one in heart and soul.”

“They’ve chosen to combine all they are for an extraordinary Mating Ceremony. Their sincerest wish is to honor every step, from the beginning and into the future, of their journey as mates. I stand before you, Chief of the Thorntree Tribe of the Cherokee Nation, Alpha of the Thorntree Timber Wolf Clan, and grandfather to Heath, to give you the Blessing of our Nation, our Tribe, and our Clan.”

“Magnolia Mae and Heath Owen, may you feel no rain, for each of you is the shelter for the other. May you feel no cold, for you have one another for warmth.”

“Now you are two people, but there is only one life before you. May your days be good and long upon this great Earth. Give the highest priority to the tenderness, gentleness, and

kindness that your love deserves. Focus on what is right between you, not what is wrong.”

“Ride out the storms when the clouds hide the face of the sun, remembering that even if you lose sight of what is good for even a moment, the sun is still there to light your path. As each of you take responsibility for the quality and blessings in your life together, it is the promise of the Great Creator and the Universe that you will have nothing but abundance and delight.”

“With the love only a grandfather can have for his grandchildren, I wish you nothing but love and happiness. Cherish one another. Remember that Faith, Hope, and Love are all that remains, and the greatest of these is Love.”

Stepping forward, Cheveyo laid his hands upon the couples’ and, while looking at Heath, whispered, “You have been given the greatest gift a man can receive. Cherish her with all that you are, Son.”

Smiling at Maggie, Heath winked. “I most assuredly will, Granddad. This woman, my Mate, the love of my heart and soul, is my world. I love her so bad it hurts.”

The next to stand before them was Owen, dressed just like Heath and sporting a smile brighter than she’d ever seen on the patriarch of the MacAllen Clan. Nodding to them, he looked at everyone in attendance and began, “For we Dragons, these ceremonies are usually only open to the Elders of the Clan and the Guardsmen of the Drake’s Force. In this case, I’m most certainly overjoyed to have family and friends witnessing this blessed event. It is something I have been able to do for all my sons, and I will continue this new tradition for all my days.”

“Long ago, when Knights and Dragons fought side by side for King and Country, it became apparent that Dragonkin were no longer safe from those who would expose, exploit, and destroy them. Seeking to remain hidden but also continue the mission of the Universe to preserve not only their species but humankind, they sought to join with the Knights who had so valiantly fought by their sides for so very many years. Thus,

the Dragon Shifters were born through Magic and the will of both Dragon and Knight.”

“In the infinite wisdom of the Powers That Be and our Founding Elders, Clans were set up, one for each color of the Dragon Kings whose souls we carry within our own. Each was assigned a region in which to make their home and to protect their families. Over time, some have flourished, some have ceased to exist, and others have been born from the joining of many. As the Leader of the MacAllen Clan of the Bronze Dragons, it is an incredible honor to stand here today among family and friends on the land my ancestors settled and have maintained for centuries. We have always lived our lives on a simple principle – Keep Creator and Universe, Family, and Love at the center of our world, and we can never fail.”

“Gathered in the place so sacred to my family, I can feel the Universe’s unconditional acceptance of one of the truest, most loyal, and infinitely remarkable Alpha She-Wolves to ever embrace all she is. She is always the first to defend those she loves and never backs down in the face of controversy. I have personally seen her in battle, and not only is she fierce, but she fights for the Light with all her heart and soul. Not only has she been blessed by the Goddess and received the gifts of the Lightning White Wolf – which was thought lost to the ages - but Magnolia has also been given the scales of her Dragon, of my son, of the MacAllen Clan, and of the Furred Dragon of Legend. As time passes, we will all grow to understand what each of these amazing gifts means for this worthy couple. From this day forward, Magnolia Mae Sampson-MacAllen shall be known as not only the Mate of a MacAllen Dragon but a Winged Warrior in her own right.”

Laying his hand on her shoulder, Maggie felt ten feet tall as the Magic of Owen’s Dragon reached for Nina and the budding Dragon Enchantment in her soul, and King Olatar rumbled, *“Never has one so deservingly been welcomed into our Clan. On the dawn of the second morning of the second month, you will receive the gift of the soul of your Dragoness. I can feel your soul preparing for her. Welcome her with all the love you welcome everyone into your heart and soul, and all will be well. Live long, fight well, and love with all you are,*



*Magnolia, for today, you are not only Alpha She-Wolf, but you are Dragon.”*

Applause filled the garden as tears ran down her cheeks. She'd known it would happen, so she had paid close attention to everything the MacAllens and Cheveyo told her, but nothing would ever compare to actually feeling it.

Well, nothing but being Heath's Mate...

Clearing his throat, Owen waited until everyone was once again quiet and went on, "The Great Creator, the Universe, and the Powers That Be continue to astound one and all as they bless the Dragons with extraordinary Mates for the best among us. Every Dragon who finds the Light of his Soul knows how very sacred she is. It is an honor to witness the Power of what the Universe and our Elders put into place at our inception. We acknowledge and bless the mating of Heath Owen MacAllen to the One the Universe made for him, Magnolia Mae Sampson. Will those seeking to witness this union please step forward?"

Taking a step forward, Gage smiled from ear to ear as he began, "We, the Dragons of the MacAllen Clan, brothers to Heath Owen one and all, wish to witness and offer our blessing to one born of our blood and the Mate of his heart. May their lives now and forever be a testament to all we hold dear...Love, Honor, and Loyalty." Turning to face Heath, the oldest MacAllen continued, "As you are one, let your combined strength see you through many years, and the children of your children's children smile upon you." Chuckling, a twinkle of mischief in his eyes, he added, "Since you're both twins, we're all expecting to be uncles twice over in about ten months. So, get on it."

Laughing right along with all their family and guests, Maggie was surprised when Bonnie Sue walked from the side of the garden and stopped beside Owen. Her twin had said she wouldn't do a Blessing because she was afraid she would cry. It was yet another wonderful surprise on her perfect day.

"Maggie Mae, you are one of the best people I know, and I'm not just saying that because we're twins. You truly are the

best of the best, and it is an honor to be your sister.”

“Because we are the Twin Alphas of the Sampson Pack, it is my honor to deliver the Blessing of the Wolf to you and your Mate,” Bonnie sing-songed. “Wolves have the loyalty and strength of Pack and Family. We communicate with our hearts, minds, and souls and Love the same way. Because Love is the Light to guide you. Love is the Blanket to warm you. And Love is the Wonder given to you to Cherish and hold forever, my dear, dear loved ones. May you only know happiness, only feel the sun on your face, and only ever know the love that comes for the True Fated Mate of your Heart. With the love, loyalty, and dedication of every Wolf in the Sampson Pack, know that we will always be at your back and will protect you with all that we are. Be blessed, sister mine. Be blessed and happy.”

“Thank you,” Maggie whispered as her twin leaned down, hugged her, and kissed her cheeks. “I love you, Sis – a bushel and a peck and a hug around the neck.”

“Damn straight,” Heath added, accepting hugs and kisses as well.

Appearing out of thin air, Liv stood beside Owen with Dare at her back. Smiling with a twinkle in her eye and dressed in the finery of a Shieldmaiden, she and her Familiar spoke as one. “May you always be as happy as you are today. May Odin give you knowledge on the way before you. May Thor bless your union with strength and courage. May Freya grant you family and prosperity. Know that we are always yours to call. We are one in spirit, one in family, and one in the universe. Be well, my dear friends, for the world is yours.”

“Thank you, Liv. Thank you, Dare,” Maggie and Heath whispered in unison as the two fantastic Beings stoically nodded and exited the stage.

*“Those two need to lighten up,”* Nina snickered.

*“And you need to hush,”* Maggie playfully corrected. *“You know no one takes their rituals as seriously as the Valkyrie.”*

Waiting just a moment, letting all the beautiful sentiments settle over and around the entire garden, Owen began again. “The witness and blessing of each and every one of you gathered here today has been acknowledged, not only by me but by the Great Creator, the Universe, the Powers That Be, and the Ancients for whom we owe our very existence. It is truly a blessed event to have witnessed and officiated the Mating Ceremony of my son and now, daughter.”

Looking at Heath and then at her before raising his eyes to the others for just a moment, Owen continued, “The Bronze Dragons were born of the flawless combination of Earth and Sea. They possess a charitable nature and are larger and stronger than any of the other Metallic Dragons. Their impenetrable scales protect them in battle, and their ability to take the form of the Timber Wolf makes them nearly unbeatable. Truth and honor lie at the heart of a Bronze Dragon and will always be the guiding light in his effort to be all his Mate ever needs. To Mate a Bronze Dragon is to accept all they are and honor the power shared between mates.”

“As one of the Twin Alphas of the Sampson Pack, the Lightning White Wolf, and a Female Alpha Dragon of the MacAllen Clan, do you, Magnolia Mae, take this man and his Dragon as not only your Mate but that of your Wolf and your Dragon?” Owen asked with authority and reverence in his tone.

“With all that I was, all that I am, all I will ever be, and all that we are together, I accept Heath, King Finlo, and Hugo into my heart and my soul and that of Nina, my Wolf, and my Dragoness when she becomes one with us. I will share everything I am with these spectacular males every day of our lives together, here and in the Heavens.”

Turning to Heath, Owen asked, “As a Bronze Dragon, a Timber Wolf, and the Furred Dragon of Legend and my son, do you, Heath Owen, take this woman, her Wolf, and her Dragon as not only your Mate but that of your Dragon?”

“For every day, rain or shine, fire or snow, day or night, with all that I am or all that I will ever be, I pledge to love, honor and cherish Maggie Mae, her Wolf, the dear Nina, and

her Dragon with all that I am. They will always come first, be the center of my focus, and the love of my heart.”

“Now is the time of the Marking, and I believe my son has something special planned for his Mate. At this time, the rest of us get to eat, drink, and toast to their happiness in the big house.”

As everyone left the garden, Maggie narrowed her eyes, trying to push past the mental blocks her Dragon had so expertly constructed, before whispering, “What are you up to, Mr. MacAllen?”

“Making you the happiest damned Mate in the whole wide world, Mrs. MacAllen. Your wish is my command.” Giving her a cheeky wink, he added, “Dream big, baby, because everybody everywhere is gonna know exactly who *your* Dragon is.”



Racing to his house with Maggie in his arms, he saw nothing but his amazing Mate and the love shining in her eyes. It no longer mattered that their home was on the northernmost corner of the Ranch. He and Maggie would have all the privacy they ever needed. All he had to do was get there before he died of anticipation.

Up on the porch, through the front door, and finally alone with his Mate, Heath could barely contain himself. There hadn't been a time since that day in the Diner when Fate knocked him over the head that he hadn't wanted to have her all to himself.

Letting her body slide down his, he pulled her tighter still the second her feet hit the floor. Running his fingers through her silken hair, he undid the fancy style he knew Bonnie had put there. Then grinning as she sighed with a seductive smile on her tempting lips, he rubbed and kneaded down her neck and onto her shoulders.

Pushing the gown off her shoulder, he couldn't help but put his lips to her body, kissing across her shoulder to her neck. Paying particular attention to the spot he knew would very soon wear his Mating mark, he waited until Maggie was breathless before he whispered, "*Tha mo chridhe taobh a-staigh thu a-nis agus gu bràth,*" into her mind.

Allowing his canines to extend and pierce her delicate skin, he held tight as she gasped at the exact moment the identical spot on his neck felt as though it had been burnt.

Saying the words written on his heart from the moment of his birth, Heath felt the missing piece of his soul click into place. “*Bho a-nis gu deireadh an ama bheir mi gràdh dhut le mo chridhe uile.*”

It felt as if his heart had grown wings when his little Wolf repeated the words in English, her voice breathy and heavy with adoration. “From now until the end of time, I will love you with all my heart.”

Pulling his fangs from her skin, he reached around Maggie’s back, continuing to kiss and taste her neck and shoulders, his need too great to do anything but love his Mate with all that he was. Needing to feel her body pressed to his, Heath made quick work of at least a hundred tiny pearl buttons lining her spine.

Capturing her lips as he pushed the soft fabric off her shoulders and down her arms, smiling into their kiss as it floated to the ground. Sliding his hands up her ribs, tracing the band of her bra, his nimble fingers unclasped the hooks, swiftly removing the troublesome garment and throwing it behind him.

Breaking their kiss, loving that Maggie moaned at the loss before opening her lust-soaked eyes and giving him a lazy smile, Heath’s heart beat double-time when she wistfully murmured, “Am I marked as yours forever and always, Dragon Man?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He looked at the magnificent glowing glyph, a Celtic Heart with a crescent moon to the left decorating the lovely column of her neck. “You are mine for all eternity, *Mo chroí*, all eternity and then some. You’ll never be without me.”

“Good,” she sighed. “I love it when a plan comes together. Now, when somebody dares to ask who’s your Dragon, Maggie Mae? I’m gonna point at my neck and wink.”

His Mate’s quick wit and brilliant sarcasm were only a few of the millions of things he loved about her. She was not only intelligent beyond anything he could ever hope to keep up

with, but she had an amazing, giving, loving heart and a body with curves in all the right places.

Lifting Maggie into his arms, Heath sped up the stairs and into their room, closing the door with a satisfying click before setting her feet on the floor. Reaching for the last scrap of material covering her body, her silky white panties, Finlo and Hugo purred, rolling onto their backs within the confines of Heath's mind and pushing the Guardsman to finish the long-awaited claiming for their Mate.

Sassy as ever, just the way he loved her, Maggie's fist hit her hip as she extended the index finger of her free hand and outlined his frame in the air between, all the while teasing, "Now, it's your turn, Mr. MacAllen. Get thee naked right now."

Standing completely still as she sighed, making a show of rolling her eyes and tsking, Heath could barely catch a breath as she closed the distance between them and slipped her hands underneath the soft cotton of the black turtleneck he wore under his surcoat. Lifting both garments over his head and instantly dropping them onto the chair to her left, Maggie ran her hands over his shoulders and across his chest, and all thoughts evaporated from his mind.

Currents of pure, white-hot electricity raced through his veins, filled every fiber of his being, and set man, Dragon, and Timber Wolf alight with the need to be one with their wonderfully wicked Wolf. Slowly shaking her head, Maggie whispered, "Slow down, Cowboy," as she ran the tips of her fingers along each ridge of his six-pack, then laid her hand on the waistband of his pants.

Demurely looking Heath in the eyes as she slowly unbuttoned the brass button, Maggie winked as she coyly cooed, "Do you know how very much I want you, Heath MacAllen."

As if her words had somehow released a fluffy cloud of her succulent scent into the room, Heath inhaled all he could of the perfect aroma of fresh air after a rainshower and desert roses. It was intoxicating and the ideal complement to

everything that Maggie was. Shivering at the sensation as the backs of her fingers moved closer to his erection, Heath held his breath, working hard not to pick his Mate up and ravish her where they stood.

There was no hiding anything from one another. Maggie wore his mark. It matched the one on his own neck. Although only an outward sign of their souls becoming one, it meant so much to Heath. He'd heard her thoughts and knew she wanted to take the lead, so no matter how hard it was for him, he would give his Mate whatever she wanted, whenever she wanted it – always and forever.

Sliding his pants over his hips, her hand bumped his throbbing erection. Heath fell right over the edge of reason and straight into the fiery passion of their combined desire. Unable to hold back, all the resolutions he'd just made fading in the fire of his need, the Guardsman slid his hands under his Mate's arms and held her to his chest.

Using the speed given to him by the Universe, Heath spun around and, within less than a single heartbeat, had Maggie on her back in the middle of their bed. One more quick move and her legs were over his shoulders, her hot center right in front of his face. Smiling as he rubbed his nose against the wet silk of her panties, the Guardsman inhaled his Mate's intoxicating scent, sure he would go mad if he didn't make love to her right then and right there.

Slipping his fingers under the silk at her hip, he tore the offending material from Maggie's body. Throwing it over his head, he growled as the scent of his warm, sexy Mate filled his senses, growing stronger with every inhale. No longer able to stand the torture of not being joined with her in every way possible, the tip of his tongue slowly licked up the glistening seam of her pussy.

Groaning low in his throat, his Dragon roaring in his head as Maggie's taste burst upon his tongue, Heath knew he'd found Heaven. Placing his hands under the wonderfully round globes of her ass, he lifted her pussy closer to his face, feasting on all that she was. Driving his tongue into her excited body as far as he could go, Heath licked every inch of his Mate,



curling the end of his tongue with every lick to tease the sensitive bundle of nerves at the top of her channel.

Maggie's hands dug into his hair, fisting the strands, and pulling with every ounce of strength as she moaned his name over and over. Smiling against her silken skin, loving how his Mate reacted to his touch, Heath used the flat of his tongue to lick her outer lips from bottom to top, teasing her aroused clit on every pass.

Tightening her legs around his head, her heels digging into his back, Maggie's screams of surrender rattled the windows as he sucked her swollen nub between his lips. Flicking it up and down with his tongue, teasing and taunting, his heart so full of adoration he thought it might burst as Maggie shouted her release to the Heavens.

Lapping at her essence as it flowed from her body, Heath nuzzled and nipped her puffy lips until Maggie reluctantly released his hair, and her breathing slowed. Slowly sliding her legs from his shoulders, massaging the tired muscles of her thighs, he looked up at his Mate, his body literally vibrating with the love he felt for this extraordinary woman. There had never been a more glorious sight than the one the Universe had made for him, completely satisfied, and looking like a Queen laid out before him.

Kissing her hip and then her belly button, he paid extra attention with the tip of his tongue until Maggie giggled under her breath. Nipping his way up her stomach, kissing the sweet spot between her breasts, he loved the feel of her heart beating in sync with his. Palming both her breasts, Heath gently kneaded the already raised peaks, grinning as they grew harder and harder. Kissing up her neck, he smiled against her heated skin as she let her head fall to the side, begging him with her actions to never stop loving her.

True to all he knew of her, his sassy, fiery Mate grabbed his head, pulled his lips to hers, and kissed him with the same wild abandon she did everything. Opening immediately, Heath made it clear with his actions that Maggie owned him wholly... body, heart, and soul. Just as passionate in bed and

in love as she was everywhere, his She-Wolf was nothing short of absolute perfection.

With her hands in his hair and her tongue sliding in and out of his mouth, Maggie tested every ounce of resolve Heath possessed. He was holding back his climax by the thinnest of unraveling threads. One more kiss and...

Losing the battle, Heath shifted his hips and thrust his cock into the haven of his Mate. Pushing until he could go no farther, Maggie ripped her lips from his and screamed, "Heath!... Yes!... Oh, my Goddess, yes!... I love you!"

Wanting to go slow their first time as a Mated couple, Heath lost all control as the muscles of her body contracted around his cock. Massaging, tempting, teasing, Maggie made it beautifully impossible for him to hold still.

Pulling out until only the tip of his rock-hard cock rested within her body, his control shattered a little more with every heartbeat. "Look at me, *Mo ghrá*. See the man who loves you more than life itself. You are my everything, Maggie MacAllen— absolutely the best part of who I am," Heath lovingly growled through gritted teeth.

Her eyes snapped to his, and the love he saw overflowing from his Mate's heart and soul was nothing short of humbling. Thrusting into her, then pulling right back out, Heath started a rhythm that Maggie met stroke for stroke with an explosive passion that was wholly and completely his wonderfully wicked She-Wolf. Always together in all things, that was the gift Heath had been given from the Great Creator and the Universe.

Staring into one another's eyes, their hearts beating as one, Maggie's Wolf reached for his Dragon and Timber Wolf, the Bronze scales of both Dragon King and Queen and black fur hovering over their bodies a split-second before their passion exploded, rocking both of them to the very bottom of their souls. Pushing her knees toward her chest, he lifted her ass, going deeper and filling her completely.

Rolling his hips, the head of his cock caressed the sensitive bundle of nerves that made the walls of her vagina close

tighter and tighter around him. Wanting to shout to the Heavens when her eyes rolled back in her head from the pleasure only he could give her, Heath's chest puffed with pride as Maggie struggled to catch her breath.

Reaching between their bodies, his fingers barely closed around her clit before her second orgasm propelled them both over the edge of ecstasy. Her mouth opened in a silent scream and Maggie's bright, blue eyes held the miraculous promise of all the love in her heart. What was he to do but follow her into the blissful cloud of adoration only they, as one, could create? There was no doubt, and would never be, that Heath would follow Maggie absolutely anywhere, even to the ends of the Earth.

Hours later, laying together, wholly satiated, her head on his chest, their legs intertwined, and their bodies cooling from several incredible hours of lovemaking, Heath's cheeks hurt from how much he'd been smiling. Reaching into the nightstand drawer beside their bed, he pulled a small black velvet box into the light.

Turning back to Maggie, he laid it in her open hand and laughed out loud when she looked up with a shocked expression and asked, "What's this? You said no presents. I already have a ring."

"Yes, you do. The biggest emerald I could find because I just knew there was something special about green and our future."

"You mean the Connemara Marble inscribed with the Celtic Heart that mamma hid the day they were killed, don't you?"

"I sure do," Heath nodded. "Sally Sue always did know how to care for all of us."

"She sure did."

"And..." he teased, kissing the tip of her nose. "I didn't say no presents. I remember being very specific and saying, you could not buy me any presents. I was careful of the wording so you couldn't beat me up when I gave you this."

His eyes shifted to the box for half a second, then returned to hers. “Open it.”

Lifting the lid, Maggie gasped at the eternity band made from a hundred tiny diamonds Heath had found nearly a century ago on the Isle of Skye.

“This is stunning.” Her words were little more than the tiniest puff of air. “It’s just... just... just gorgeous.” Looking up at him through her impossibly long, dark eyelashes, Maggie’s eyes glistened with unshed tears. “It’s too much... too beautiful. There are so many diamonds, Heath! I never knew so many of them could be in the one band.”

“You are the most beautiful, smart, amazing woman in the world. You are my Mate. You are my reason for living. And someday, with any luck, the mother of my children.”

“I don’t think we’ll need luck if we keep going like we are.”

“Maybe it will be twins like Bryn and Zach are expecting.”

“I bet so, but I really hope it doesn’t take as long.”

“Oh, darlin’, I have it on good authority that Wolves and Dragons only have a ten-month gestation period. We still don’t know what’s takin’ Bryn so long.”

“Then let’s get busy, Mr. MacAllen. I can’t wait to be the mother of your children.”

“Yeehaw, now that’s what I like to hear.” Kissing her soundly, he pulled back just enough to look into her brilliant blue eyes and promised, “We are going to be happier than ducks in a pond.” Giving her one more kiss, he added into her mind, “*And the whole world will know who’s your Dragon and how much he loves his wonderful Wolf.*”

“*Amen, Mr. MacAllen. Amen.*”

*Until we meet again....*

*Always keep your eyes on the horizon, believe with all your heart, and believe in the power of Love. If you do all that, you*

*can never go wrong.*

*XOXO, Maggie Mae*

# EPILOGUE



“Hello, Sam’s Diner. Maggie speakin’. How do you like your burgers?”

“Maggie?... squelch-squawk-squelch. Maggie, it’s Ettie, I’m in... squeeEEEEEEEEelch....”

“Ettie? Ettie, I can’t hear you. What’s wrong? Why are you using...?”

“No Magic. Max is lost. Can’t... squaaaawwwkkkkk – click – beeeeeeeeeeeep.”

Slamming the received back on its hook, Maggie spun towards her Mate and growled, “Something’s wrong. Ettie and Max need us.”

“Whatcha waitin’ on,” Heath responded, getting to his feet, and holding out his hand. “If they need us, we’re there.”

“Yeah, but I’m not sure where there is.”

“Bet I know someone who does.”

And with that, the couple was out the door....

COMING SOON!  
THE KING  
Big Cat Pride, Book 1

# CHECK IT OUT! THE STORY THAT STARTED THE MACALLEN CLAN: SAVE A HORSE, RIDE A DRAGON



“Dammit! Dammit! Dammit!”

Whap! Cluck! Kick!

“Owwwww, oh, owwwowwowwww. Shit! Shit! Shit!”

Hopping on one foot, cursing the day she'd ever decided to take a cross-country trip all by her lonesome, Dax glared at the steam shooting from the radiator of her bright red Jeep Cherokee. “What the hell, Daisy Mae? Why now? Why here?” Dropping her booted foot onto the dry, dusty ground even though her toes still ached from where she'd kicked her beloved jeep in the rear tire, she looked one way and then the other. “There's nothing but dirt, cactus, and coyote crap for miles.”

Stomping towards the vehicle and throwing open the back door, she grabbed two of her last three gallons of drinking water with a grunt and a groan. Making her way back to the front of the vehicle, she plopped them on the ground, and pulled her cell phone from the back pocket of her jeans. Might as well call her bestie and listen to her bitching while waiting for the engine to cool off enough to work on it.

Leaning her butt against Daisy Mae's front quarter panel, she slid her finger along the screen, tapped in her password, and spat, “Son of a...” Shaking her fist that was holding the device towards the cell phone gods, she slapped the useless

phone against her thigh and snarled, “No service. None at all. Why the hell do I even pay the stupid bill? I swear to the Goddess that damn salesman said, ‘Coverage all over the world’. I oughta burn down his stupid little bubble-gum-pink shop.”

Marching back to the vehicle, she opened the driver’s side door, dropped into the seat and slapped the palm of her free hand against the steering wheel again and again as she threw back her head and screamed, “What did I ever do to you? I give to charity, feed stray animals, don’t litter, and say my prayers. Can’t I at least get a break this one time? I mean, come...”

The sound of her cell phone playing ‘Poison’ by Bel Biv DeVoe had Dax whipping the device up from her leg and punching the green button with so much force the tip of the nail on her index finger went flying through the air. Slamming the phone to her ear, she demanded, “Bryn is that you? Bryn? Bryndle Ma...”

“Stop right there, Dakota Jane Sparks. I swear I’ll turn you into a toad and laugh my ass off every single time your ass bumps the ground.”

Rolling her eyes and taking a deep breath to keep from shrieking at her best friend, Dax quickly changed the subject and asked, “How did you call me? This stupid phone has no service. I swear, this whole damn cell phone thing is a serious rip-off. I oughta...”

“Did you really just ask me that?” Bryn interrupted with a tsk. “I am part witch, ya’ know? Just like you, except for the fact that I know how to use mine for more than heating up my coffee, popping popcorn, and making the margarita glasses frosty.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, you’re a regular Sabrina the Teenage Witch.” She thought about calling the woman who’d been her bestie since grade school Endora but knew that would only make the five-foot-nothing bundle of piss and vinegar feistier than she already was, so Dax had gone with the cute, little, blond TV witch just to keep the peace.



And Bryn will pay for that shit later...

Was there something wrong with embracing her Fire Horse side and basically ignoring her Elemental Witch side? Being a horse that could fly, breathe fire, manipulate fire – basically make fire her *beyotch*, not to mention having a swirly, glowing-like-an-ember horn like a Unicorn was way better than zapping empty bottles with spells and wands any old day of the week.

Sure, her mom would never understand why she didn't practice. For the tall, slender redheaded witch with the face of an angel and a heart of gold, being a witch and wielding Magic had come naturally. She'd taught many a novice with elegant expertise – every single one, but her own daughter that is.

The battle had been ongoing from the first-time sparks flew from Dax's fingers when she was still in nappies. "Yoo cannae expect tae master yer Magic if ye ne'er try, Dakota, me loove. Flyin' aroond wi' yer hooves in th' air will only git ye sae far." She could hear her mother's thick Scottish brogue as if the fiery redhead was standing at her side.

Of course, right on the heels of her mom's warning came her dad's smooth, southern drawl of reassurance. "Now there's nothin' wrong with Dax spreading her wings every once in a while, Darlin'." He'd always pull his wife close and kiss her on the head before adding, "Besides, if she doesn't blow off some of that fire, she might just combust."

Too damn cute for words – that was her parents. Even the story of how they met was something that made everyone swoon. It was actually kinda sickening and absolutely adorable, and something Dax wanted more than she would ever in a million years admit out loud.

"Hello! Earth to Dax. Come in, Dakota Ja..."

"Dammit, Bryn, shut your mouth!" Dax seethed, feeling the fire building in her veins and working hard to keep it under control. "I let it slide once, but that's all you get. I may not be able to turn you into a toad, but I can darn sure set that closet of yours ablaze."

“You wouldn’t?” Bryn squealed.

Clearing her throat and getting her brain out of the clouds while ignoring her friends outrage at the threat to the metric ton of clothes, shoes, and purses she’d acquired over the hundreds of years they’d been alive, Dax snapped right back to reality and sassed, “Since you didn’t whip up this phone call to help me with my car troubles, and I’m praying it wasn’t to just call me by my Christian name and lecture me for the umpteenth time about Magic, why don’t you just get on with it?”

Yes, she was winding her bestie up, but that’s what friends are for, right?

“No, I will not help you with that beat-up, hunk of junk. I’ve told you a hundred times that you...”

“I need to get a new car or learn the spell to fix it or both,” Dax groaned in unison with Bryn’s usual litany, laughing out loud when her friend added, “Because I am older, smarter, and prettier.”

Laughing even harder when she heard the chuckle in Bryn’s voice, Dax teased, “And more of a pain in the ass.”

“Hey, now, I resemble that statement.”

Laughing so hard she had to work to catch her breath, Dax wheezed, “Yes, you do, my dear, but then again, so do I.”

“No, truer words were ever spoken.”

Switching her phone to her other ear so she could get a drink of water, Dax was finally able to form a coherent sentence and asked, “So, before you bibbidi-bobbidi-boo my pleasantly round ass home, what did you call for?”

“Oh, yeah, that.” Bryn suddenly sounded distracted right before an eerie buzz joined their conversation. “I was...I was...yeah...ummm...”

“Out with it. I’m sweating like a turkey the day before Thanksgiving. This place is hot as hell and twice as dry.”

Waiting for a snappy comeback from the girl who’d taught her to cuss with fluid elegance, blow spitballs with accuracy,

and shoot beer cans off a fence at a hundred yards with an ancient Winchester, a creepy feeling started to climb up Dax's spine. Something was off. Bryn was never quiet, even if she had nothing to say. The tiny witch had two speeds – fast and faster – and that was for her feet, her mouth, her mind, and her Magic.

Sitting up straight as she threw the empty water bottle over her shoulder and into the backseat, Dax growled, “Bryn, you're freakin' me out. What the hell is goin' on?”

“I just can't... It's that...” Her voice sounded hollow and oh so very far away.

“Alright, enough messin' around. This isn't funny at all. Talk to me. Dammit, Bryn...”

“The Seventh Scale – the Crystal of Aganunitsi - has risen.” Deep, gravelly, and haunting, Bryn's voice sounded like a really bad Vincent Price impression after a night of drunken karaoke and too many unfiltered cigarillos with a touch of a British accent. Creepy didn't begin to describe.

Goosebumps danced up and down Dax's arms while her friend continued. “The blood of the Enchanted it seeks. Ripped from its host. Satiated for centuries. The tempest must bathe in the blood of the righteous, feed on the entrails of the just, and devour the soul of the virtuous.”

“Okay, you've sufficiently messed with my mind,” Dax jumped in when Bryn took a breath. “You were right. I was wrong. I shouldn't have done this on my own. You should be here with me.”

Waiting for nearly a heartbeat, she went on, “Good enough? You win. Now, make with the hocus-pocus and get me out of here.” When no answer came, she added, “Alright, alright, I'll practice my Magic, learn the damn spells. I'll...”

“The Horse of Fire shall meet the Scaled Warrior. Only the joining of their flames can stop the Crystal of Aganunitsi.”

“Ha. Ha. Ha.” Dax scoffed. “Let me guess, Dungeon Master. This is my quest. You are not funny.”

“The time is at hand. Blood will be shed. The Unktena must be bathed in fire.”

“You have got to be kidding me!” Throwing her phone to the side to keep from smashing it to bits, Dax launched into the bat shit crazy tirade she’d been planning. Jumping out of the Jeep, throwing her hands in the air and pacing around Daisy Mae, she ranted, “Great! Super! Fan-freakin’-tastic! Bryn is having a breakdown, I’m trapped in the asshole of nowhere without a working phone, and for some reason, I can’t even reach my parents with our freaky telepathy.”

Stopping as she rounded the side of her Jeep, she leaned her hip against the what used to be her shiny, silver Black Horse Bull Guard, and raged, “Hell on earth! That’s what this is. Gotta be. No other explanation.”

Thoughts of Bryn and the creepy way she was speaking in riddles, Dax let her chin fall towards her neck, wiped the sweat from her brow and shook her head. “Not one damn thing here makes sense.” She sighed. “Not even a little bit. Bryn has always been able to see the future, but the Crypt Keeper act is all new and seven shades of demonic.”

Raising her head as she pushed off the Jeep, she slammed her hands to her hips and turned to the right. “What the hell just happened? If there was water instead of all this godforsaken dirt, I would swear I was in the Bermuda Triangle.”

Doing an about-face just to be sure she was *not* imagining the miles and miles and *miles* of freakin’ dirt, she growled, “And what is a freakin’ Unktena? Who is the Scaled Warrior? And if he’s so effing cool where the hell is he?”

Throwing her hand in the air and waving like a schoolgirl trying to get her favorite teacher’s attention, she added in an exaggeratedly high-pitched, girly-girl voice, “Here I am. Damsel in distress. Ass in a sling and admitting she needs help. I’m not an ax murderer. I have a conscience and morals and...”

“And a fine ass it is up there in that sling.”

Spinning so quickly she had to slap her hand down on Daisy Mae's hood at the deep, drawing baritone rumble that sent shivers up her spine. Opening her mouth to issue a litany of curse words and flaming insults, Dax damn near swallowed her tongue and fell on her ass as something akin to a fifty-million-watt lightning bolt zapped her in the heart.

Standing eye-to-eye with the best-looking man alive, her heart trying to jump out of her chest, her mouth hanging open, and her Horse pushing to be let free, she managed a "Wha...? Wh..? I..."

The smile widened across his brilliantly tanned skin deepening the dimple in his right cheek and showing his sparkling white teeth. Twinkles, like stars in the night sky, made his dark brown eyes sparkle with mischief and Dax unable to contain a shiver of excitement.

Pulling the glove off his left hand and extending it, he winked as he introduced himself. "Name's J.D. I have a thing for damsels in distress, and I just happen to be the Unktena you were askin' about."

**[READ THE WHOLE STORY RIGHT HERE!](#)**

# WANNA FIND OUT WHAT TRIGGERED THE CURSE THAT ALMOST GOT MAGGIE AND HEATH KILLED?



CHECK OUT THE DRAGON OF VALENTINE'S PAST!

Here's a Sneak Peek!

"I don't get it."

"You don't get what?"

"I don't get how you were in the Underworld...."

"Otherworld. Annwn, to be precise." Faye sighed, correcting her sister for the umpteenth time. "Not Hell. Not Hades. Not even the Underworld. I was in the Otherworld or Annwn. And don't get it confused with...."

"Enough. There are just too many damned names for *everything* Below. So, let's just say that you were wherever you were and leave it at that," Desi ground out through gritted teeth. Then shaking her head and huffing out a sharp cleansing breath, she smiled and continued with a single nod of her head, "I do *not* understand – Make that *cannot fathom* - how you were 'There'...." She made finger quotes. "...from Halloween through Easter, the First Day of Spring, and missed the US's Independence Day and never so much as kissed *that* man. It's against the laws of our good, sweet Auntie, Mother Nature, or Auntie Nat as I try to sneak in when I'm sure she's not listening. What were you thinking? Were you sleeping the

whole time? Catching up on your reading? Watching stupid trash TV?”

“Hold it right there. Are you saying I was supposed to feel all lovey-dovey when that Celtic and Welsh god had me chained to a barstool in the CopacaNetherworld, aka the dumbest name for the club, no matter where in this great big galaxy it happens to reside? Do you seriously think I should’ve swooned when I was forced to listen to the Rat Pack morning, noon, and night? It was like being in that posh speakeasy back on Valentine’s Day 1929 all over again. I just waited for the other shoe to drop or the gunfire to start. When I....”

“Could’ve been worse,” Desi snorted. “You could’ve been at Studio 666 with the Hell Cat of Legend, that little permanently pissed-off Banshee and her sloshed sidekick. Oh, and let us not forget – Andy Frikkin’ Warhol.”

“Hey,” Faye objected. “I love me some, Andy. You know I love me some, Andy. That Hell Cat, not so much. She swings the pendulum in the opposite direction, stopping all the way on nutso-crazy balls. She can pound sand. And do not get me started on that Banshee and her boyfriend. I just pretend they’re not there. But I love me some Andy. So, do not diss the Warhol.” She gave a little shimmy of her shoulders. “And the music.” Swaying in her seat, she hummed a couple of bars of Blondies’ *Heart of Glass*, then added, “That is *my* music.”

“Yeah, okay, whatever.” Desi rolled her eyes. “You would tap your toes to a jug band jamboree and do not even think about zapping us to the ‘happiest place on Earth.’ I can’t take the heat and humidity of Orlando in August, and the mouse and his cohorts give me a rash in places I can’t scratch. So, excuse me if I don’t take your suggestions for a playlist – or a vacation.”

“I would not do any of that. At least not without asking first. You take that....”

“My point is...” Desi went on without missing a beat and not listening to her sister at all. “...you could’ve gotten out of said chains with less than a thought because you are who you

are, Faye? You could've been listening to any singer past, present, or future with less than a snap of your perfectly manicured fingers, right? You could've been drinking the crappy green tea you like so much. I don't know how you do it. It tastes like somebody boiled weeds out of the garden and poured the mixture over ice. Am I wrong? No, I am not."

Again, she didn't so much as pause or take a breath. She just kept going like a runaway freight train with no brakes. "You could've been doing the horizontal mambo with one of the sexiest gods ever created by our great and fabulous Auntie, the Universe, and all the other Powers That Be - God with a capital G, and the Great Goddess. And that let us not forget Chaos. You know I ain't whistlin' *Dixie* here."

Shaking her head but still not giving Faye a chance to get a word in edgewise, Desi huffed, "Pfft. Yeah, and I was born yesterday, never have to work another day in my life, and finally got my hands on a pair of size nine-and-a-half Christian Louboutin Calfskin Crepe Poseidon 120 Peep Toe Pumps 35 in Perle." Twirling a silver curl around her index finger, she continued without so much as a breath she didn't need but always took for added effect. "If you weren't gonna play nice and admit Mr. Sexy Celtic and Welsh Deity was the One made for you by Auntie Universe, then why did you stay down there for so long? Why didn't you zap and zoom yourself outta there, and I don't know.... Knit something?"

"First of all, I do *not* knit. And secondly, I had to be there for Darek and Brandywine."

"Sure ya' did." Rolling her eyes, Desi mumbled under her breath, "And they were makin' with the *bow-chica-wow-wow* months before you ever made poof with your chains and popped yourself back up here. I know it. You know it. Everybody knows it. So, are you really gonna stick with the 'had to help my Dragon and his Mate' defense?"

"I *did* have to help my Dragon and his Mate. I had to be sure they got...."

"They got their happily ever after?" With a pointed tilt of her head, a click of her tongue, and a grimace that said she was



about to say something Faye would regret, Desi sighed, “Girl, you got more excuses than a pregnant nun.”

“No, wait....”

“Not gonna happen. We’ve *all* been waitin’ long enough. Why aren’t you jumpin’ on the love train and makin’ with the whoopie? All your Dragons of Fate are Mated, and you don’t have to worry about another set or a spare or a lost Dragon with a destiny unlike any other and in need of a Clan coming down the path for a loooooong time. At least not that I’ve seen, but I can check again when we’re done. And even if you get an odd one here or there, which has been known to happen, the Stone boys are more than ready to train the guy and get him out there fightin’ the evils of the universe. They’ve got it all covered. The world can go on turning for a day or two - or a week or two or fifty-two if things go well - without your watchful eye. Hell, I got your back. What are sisters for? Yeah, I’m backin’ up that crazy Celtic Matchmaker, but that’s a walk in the park. We both know I’m the best Love Guru ever to exist. I can find Supernaturals their Mates with my eyes closed, both hands tied behind my back, and walkin’ in flats. I got all the time in the world and then some to help you.”

Switching from the right leg crossed over the left to the left over the right, she gulped a breath and continued to toss out questions like bullets from a Tommy gun.

“What is it? Do you not want a Mate? Are you scared of the hours of great sex you’ll have with a dude who knows what makes you happy even before you do? Does being with the one who completes you like no other freak you out? Again, I have to ask, do hours of great sex, mind-blowing, phenomenal, and orgasmic sex not sound like something you’d enjoy? Hell, I know I would. Do you like being up here in your Mansion of Realms with a stodgy old butler and more rooms than a Four Seasons with nothing to do but click through billion, million, trillions of channels filled with reality TV and reruns?”

*“How can I tell her that I’m scared? Me? The Omnipotent Being known as Fate, her big sis, is actually afraid of starting a relationship and having it fail – again? She’ll tell me to talk*

*to Auntie Uni, but I did that, and of course, She told me that all would be okay. But will it? I can't hurt Arawn. He's been through enough. I have to... Oh, hell, I have to try to head Desi off at the pass before she figures me out.*” “No, it's just that....”

“It's just that... It's just that.... It's just that, *what?*” She leaned forward as far as she could, her eyes open wide and her head nodding sharply with every word she said. “Out with it, Faye. Please enlighten me. Dazzle me with your brilliance. Tell me what is better than living forever and three days with a man who was made for you and wants nothing more than to make you happy twenty-four/seven/three-sixty-five/forever and ever.”

Feeling cornered, badgered, and basically outwitted, outmaneuvered, and ready to run screaming from her very own special place in the universe, Faye did the only thing she could do. She went on the defensive and got in a jab of her own.

“What's with the twenty questions? Are you channeling Brenda Leigh Johnson? Has there been a murder backstage in the galaxy, and you need to ferret out the perpetrator? Shouldn't you be saying, ‘Thank you. Thank you very much’ in the most sarcastic southern drawl you can muster before I even open my mouth? I mean....”

“You *mean*, you don't want to talk about it. And while that's your right, I need to point out that you are binge-watching *way too* many reruns of old TV shows in an effort to avoid all thoughts of Mr. Tall, Dark, and Dangerous, or you would *not* have likened me to one of my favorite characters ever to light up the boob tube then dared me to solve the mystery that is quite simply your lack of commitment to your own happily ever after. The worst thing Auntie Universe ever did was put wireless internet into every corner of the galaxy. The Great Goddess, Auntie Nat, Chaos, or God with a Capital G should've stepped in and made it impossible for you to have access to every show ever created, no matter where you were.”

“No, it's not....”

“It’s not that you don’t want to talk about it? It’s not that he isn’t Mr. Tall, Dark, and Dangerous and made for you in every way possible and then some? It’s not that you aren’t binge-watching too many reruns? Or it’s not that pushing wireless internet into every corner of the galaxy wasn’t the worse thing Auntie Uni ever did?”

Holding up the index finger of her free hand, Desi took a sip of the sparkling water with cucumber and limes - the concoction she insisted Faye ‘whip’ up every time they were about to have a ‘serious’ conversation - sighed blissfully and went on. “How ‘bout streamlining your whole denial process by just saying all of the above? However, you know, and I know, that you would be lying. So, the correct answer is - not only do you *not* want to talk about it or him, or love or sex, but rather you would like me to be the good little sister, shut up, and do as you say. Or, in other words, join in your delusional existence and pretend you haven’t had a Mate since ten minutes after God with a capital G gave life to Adam and Eve. You want me to pretend to be deaf, dumb, and blind, not to ask questions, and to let you continue to make a mess of your immortal existence for the rest of... Well, for the rest of *forever* because that’s how long we have. You want....”

Holding her finger up, Faye forced the words through gritted teeth, “No! I do not want....”

“Don’t even try it. We’re both *literally* older than dirt – like we were here before dirt was even invented – *that’s how old we are*. Some even call us Omnipotent Beings. Personally, it sounds a little too on the nose for me, but hey, different strokes for different folks. We were there when Chaos realized They weren’t alone and when the Universe breathed life into the Primordial ooze. We were present when God with a capital G said, ‘Let there be light,’ and when the Great Goddess zapped the big blue and green ball *you* like to call home with tons of metaphysical mojo to make it circle the Sun. I know when you’re tryin’ to pull the wool over my eyes. Hell, I know damn near everything because I am who I am, and I didn’t get a choice in the matter. There’s something you’re not telling me, don’t want me to know, or are embarrassed about – or....”

She shoved the perfectly coifed, long, silvery curls over her shoulder and rolled her eyes again. "... all of the above. You know it. I know it. Hell, I bet those blasted Dragons of yours know it too. They have to have wondered a time or two why you're still single. I mean, let's face it – you, my sista, are a catch and then some. However, at this moment, your Winged Warriors are just too busy being in *lurve* and making whoopee to call you out on your bullshit. That's where I come in. Just like always, it's left up to me to...."

"To be a giant pain in my ass? To make me want to pull out my hair? To march into my mansion like you own the joint? To never give me a moment's peace and make me think about all the things I try not to contemplate about all the other minutes of all the other days of all the other...?"

"If that's what's called for, then yes," Desi once again butted in. "I have no problem being the bad guy, calling it like I see it, and making you – dear sister - stop being an obtuse butthead, and get on with your happily ever after that will last even after the world stops whirling and twirling."

"Come on, Desi, can't you just...?"

"No, I cannot." She shook her head with such vigor that the immaculately curled ends of her incredibly long silvery tresses – yes, the ones she'd just moments before pushed backward -swung to the front with such vim and vigor they tickled the tip of Faye's nose before landing elegantly over her sister's shoulder. "And I will not."

Refusing to sneeze, the oldest sister – or so they'd been told for all of time by the other Powers That Be - swiped the end of her nose with the side of her index finger and glared. Of course, Desi was glowering right back. It was the age-old staring contest. The one true test of wills that would only end when one of them feigned to blink – or ceased to exist. Of course, neither would ever happen without the world coming to a horrible, terrible, fiery end or a silverfish crawling across one of their shoes. But still, every time they engaged in one of these battles, Faye had to wonder who would be the first to blink.

“Wonder no more. It will not be me,” Desi huffed.

“Stop reading my mind.”

“Stop projecting louder than the Boston Pops playing an old, but still favorite, John Phillip Sousa march,” Desi sassed. “You know, I have been waiting since Cupid shot his first arrow for you and that hunky Celtic god of Annwn to get your *bow-chica-wow-wow* on, get to the Mating, and make me an auntie.”

“Not gonna happen.”

“What’s not gonna happen? You’re not gonna play nice and kiss whatever needs to be kissed on your man? You’re not gonna *bow-chica-wow-wow*? You’re not gonna get Mated? You’re not gonna have kids? Oh, puhlease,” Desi ended by rolling her eyes for the umpteenth time.

“I win!” Faye clapped her hands, shimmied her shoulders, put her feet up on her desk with the confidence of the one and only Omnipotent Being known as Fate, crossed them at her ankles, and gave a resounding fist pump. “You just couldn’t resist gettin’ all petulant and rollin’ your eyes at me. So, I win! What’s that now? Infinity plus twenty-seven to the millionth power? Face it, Sis. I am the Omnipotent Winner of the Staring Contest! I should have a trophy or a medal or something made. Sure, I could whip it up, but it means more when it is handmade. I wonder what Hephaestus is up to.”

“Yeah, that’s what’s important here. You winning some silly kid’s game and getting a trophy made.” Snapping her fingers, Desi conjured away her fancy schmancy water. Then she zapped up a steaming mocha-choca-carmelleto latte from her favorite coffee shop owned and operated by their dear friend and Dragoness, Martha Dellencourt.

“And having coffee is central to whatever point you’re trying to unsuccessfully, I might add – to make?” Faye couldn’t help but mirror her sister’s previous action and toss *her* long ebony curls over her shoulder - but without tickling Desi’s nose.

After blowing away a puff of steam, Destiny took a slow sip of her drink and then continued in a tone that made Faye want to Magick up a pair of noise-canceling headphones and send herself to a deserted island that had yet to be created with all the romance books ever written, a playlist of all her favorite tunes, and a handheld TV already loaded with Netflix.

“You have got to have more than a few screws loose. Arawn is the Welsh god of Death. He controls the Pearly Gates and Darkness, strikes fear in the hearts of all who dare to stand before him, has the most brilliant crystal blue and glowing eyes that make your special spot get all hot and bothered with barely a glance, and wears a smoldering cloak held together by slivers of smoke from the fires of the Otherworld.”

Letting her head fall to the side, the youngest sister of the Fate and Destiny duo, which was an integral part of The Powers That Be, refused to stop. “Not only that, but he is also the Celtic god and Ruler of Annwn – the place most people call the Pearly Gates. He’s also the Keeper of the Fires of all the Underworld, the Otherworld, the... Oh, Hell, whatever name it’s been given today. How about we go with ‘everything farther south than our humans can travel’?” After finishing with a sarcastic set of finger quotes, she dropped her hands and gave a sharp, satisfied nod. “Dude, your Mate is the Holder of the Keys of the Gates of Everything Below and has the finest ass I’ve ever seen.”

“Desi, you really need to....”

“Do I really need *you* to explain three things to *me*? Damn straight, I do, Sister. That’s what I’ve been sayin’. I need you to crap or get off the pot or tell me why you’re not doing either of those things. That’s what I really need.”

Knowing that her sister would stop only when Faye answered her questions and made some idiotic pinky promise she would hate with a burning passion, the Omnipotent Being known as Fate laid her hand out, palm up, in the air between them and did a backward wave with her fingers – the universal motion for ‘hurry the hell up’ - and sighed, “Okay, out with it. I have things to do and people to see. What three things do you really need to know?”

Looking way too satisfied, Desi, aka the Omnipotent Being known as Destiny, gave a haughty nod, winked, and took another sip of her coffee. “Now, was that so hard?”

“You have no idea.”

“Whatever.” With a flick of her fingers, the heavy ceramic mug disappeared into the Ether, leaving the scent of caramel, coffee, and cream behind and making Faye want to go and see Martha as soon as the torture of talking to her sister was over.

Leaning back into the overstuffed cushion of the chair she always occupied, Desi crossed her legs, smoothed the hem of the jacket of her merlot-colored Elsa Schiaparelli suit, and gave Faye a smile to rival the Cheshire cat. “I know you want me to think you don’t want to be with Arawn. And I know you think that I think you’re unhappy....”

“When do the questions start?”

“Sh-sh-sh-sh-sh. Stop interrupting, or I’ll make this take a month of Sundays.” Dropping her chin, closing her eyes, and holding up her hand as if she was channeling Tammy Faye Baker, Desi threw out her best southern accent and unashamedly assured, “And y’all know I can do it. With God with a capital G as my witness, you know I can and will make you sit right there and wait, wait, wait. It’s my right, nay, my duty as your little sister, to make you crazy. It’s why younger siblings were created.”

Making a show of zipping her lips and throwing away the key, Faye had to wonder if all the other Powers That Be, gods, goddess, Omnipotent Beings, and otherwise Powerful Ones in the universe were reduced to placating their siblings, playing nice, and generally wishing to have their nails pulled out by tiny Gnomes with rusty pliers when forced to converse with members of their Family. She couldn’t be the only one, right? They all went through it.

“Why yes. Yes, they do,” the Omnipotent Being known as Destiny sarcastically nodded with a satisfied grin that made the little hairs on the back of Fate’s neck stand on end.

“Stop. Reading. My. Mind.”

“Pfft,” Desi goaded with an offhanded swish of her hand. “Looks like you need a heavy-duty imaginary lock for those lips, Sis.”

Refusing to rise to the bait, Faye mirrored her sister’s posture – down to the hand with the tapping index finger poised on the apex of her knee - and sat perfectly still. Looking at Desi – her exact opposite right down to her silver hair and onyx eyes that twinkled with starlight - the Omnipotent Being known as Fate had to admit they made a pretty good pair.

From the beginning of time, they’d been sisters, best friends, and an unstoppable team. They were the hidden Powers responsible for the beginning, middle, end, and everything in between of the existence of every living being. Of course, in the beginning, they’d argued over who would do what, but Auntie Uni stepped in, pulled them by ear, and put things in order.

From that moment on, Destiny did all the planning, and Fate controlled the flow and sequence. Both could do what they did best – Desi was the organizer, and Faye was the chaos. Talk about a match made in Heaven. And so, it had been until the creation of the Primordial gods, the Titans, and the Welsh and Celtic gods. Or more to the point, the one and only Arawn.

Caught off guard by his glowing blue eyes, the aura of Power, and yes, his sexy butt, Faye was unprepared and unwilling to admit that she – the Omnipotent Being known as Fate - had been given a Mate. What was Auntie Uni thinking? Had She lost Her ever-loving mind? What was the Being responsible for the flow of the lives of... of... of....

“The word you’re lookin’ for is *everything*,” Desi chuckled. “And you know exactly what all The Powers That Be were thinking – that you and I would live forever and ever amen, and we would need a partner in crime – other than each other – to live with throughout said happily ever after. Of course, they also expect us to be ‘fruitful and multiply.’ And while that’s not a bad thing, I want the ratio of practicing to



childbearing to be about one-point-three-two-five million to one.”

“Yes, but....”

“Yes, but nothing. So, you’ve found yours, and I haven’t. That’s the way things go. I’m sure my hunka-hunka-burnin’ love is out there....” Holding up her index finger and popping it side to side like the pendulum of a metronome, Desi pushed out a sharp breath and kept right on going. “But until then, we need to get you on the road to your fairy tale ending because, as we both know, Fate will not be denied.”

“There are days that I truly hate that saying.”

“Yeah, well, you should try being stuck with Destiny waits for no man.” Giving a deadpan stare, Desi quickly added, “Because, Sis, I’ve been doing just that for longer than I care to admit.”

“Well, what about the Universe does not make mistakes?” Faye snorted. “We both know....”

“Watch it...” The low rumbling of a smoky voice shook the confines of Fate’s office. “I brought you into this world. And I can take you out.”

Eyes widening and mouth dropping open, Faye burst out in uncontrollable laughter. Whether it was the fact that Desi had the same look on Her face or that they’d been caught dissing none other than THE Universe by that very same Omnipotent Being, or that Fate was just glad not to be talking about Mr. Tall, Dark, and Dangerous anymore didn’t matter. It was good to laugh.

Waiting until the shake and shimmy of her office ceased, Fate looked left and right, up and down, then whispered, “Busted.”

Laughing so loud there was no doubt they could be heard by the creepies and crawlies who lived all the way in the depths of The Milwaukee Deep in the Bermuda Triangle and everywhere else, Fate added through the chuckles, “And here I thought She was done eavesdropping on us.”

“Never,” Desi teased. “Aunt Uni can’t help but keep an eye – and both ears – on us. You know, She’s always been a control freak and has never trusted us farther than She can throw us.”

“Yeah, but it comes from a good place.”

“Whatever you say.”

Shifting in her seat, Faye reached up and pulled on her right earlobe. An irritating buzz that hadn’t been there before was doing its darndest to bore a hole into her brain. Something close to the static of a shortwave radio that wasn’t quite tuned into the right channel and was turned all the way down, the annoying whir made her envision the turntable of a victrola going round and round as the needle dug a groove into a warped record.

Unable to stop, she did the same to the other ear. Rolling her shoulders backward, forward, then backward again, she straightened her spine and inhaled deeply. Nothing had even been created she couldn’t shut down – or ignore in a grandiose fashion. So, why was the noise getting louder?

Trying to pay attention as Desi continued to rant about Fate’s love life – or lack thereof – the little hairs on the back of her neck and up and down her arms stood on end for the second time. Opening her senses wide, Faye listened for any disruption in the universe, the Heavens, or down on the Earth below. Opening her mouth to ask Destiny if she was experiencing anything weird, Fate stopped short as her sister’s brow furrowed, her lips turned down, and she reached up and pulled on *her* left earlobe.

“Since neither of us is auditioning to replace Carol Burnette, I’m thinkin’....”

*Knock! Knock! Knock!*

Before Faye could stop what she was saying, change the gears of her brain, and respond, ‘Come in,’ the door to her office burst open with such force that the shimmering silver knob went deep into the gleaming white wood and her butler rushed in like a bat out of Hell.

Usually looking as if he'd just walked off the centerfold of Butler's Quarterly, Carlton was nothing short of a disheveled mess. The three gray hairs usually combed over his age-spotted cue ball of a head were sticking out in every direction. One of the very pointed tips of the collar of his *heavily* starched white shirt was tucked in correctly while the other stood at attention. His tie was untied – something Fate had never seen in all the millennia he'd been in her service - with the tails flying willy-nilly on the copious waves of Magic the old man exuded. And to top it off, his watery blue eyes were the color of gunmetal, and his voice sounded like he'd been on a three-day bender drinking hundred-year-old scotch and smoking unfiltered menthol Pall Malls with the Rat Pack.

Of course, none of that, nor the increasingly annoying buzz in her ears, stopped Fate from being a stickler for the rules. “Since when do you enter my office *before* I have given you permission?”

“Since the Gates of Hell have opened wide, your Dragons and their Mates are trying to fight off the population of the deepest Pits of the Underworld, and Arawn cannot be found.”

“Well, shit,” Desi complained. “I guess that means I don't get to ask my three questions.”

“Thank God with a capital G and Auntie Uni for small favors.”

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# THE STORY THAT STARTED THE WHOLE DRAGON GUARD SERIES



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“Dammit, Grace, pick up the phone,” she growled through gritted teeth at the third voicemail she’d had to listen to in the last five minutes.

“Everything okay, Kyndel?” Barney, the *nice* guy in her office, asked.

“Yeah, everything’s fine. Just trying to find Grace.”

“Oh! Anything I can help with?”

Kyndel thought about telling him her troubles, but Barney had been spending an inordinate amount of time in her office lately. At first, she’d thought he was just being nice, but then he joined her hiking group, and just yesterday he showed up with her favorite no whip, nonfat, iced white chocolate mocha from the *frou frou* coffee shop on the corner. It had been then Kyndel realized she was Barney’s newest crush. It had been a long time between boyfriends and Barney was nice, but... um...*no*. As flattered as she was, there was no way she was having an office romance.

‘Don’t shit where you eat’ was one of the pieces of sage advice Granny had given her just after graduation. Not that it

ever truly made sense to Kyndel, but she got the gist of it... keep your personal life *out* of the office.

She saw the puppy dog look on Barney's face and hated to crush his spirit, but Kyndel decided a brisk walk home would be better than leading the poor fellow on, in *any* way.

"No but thank you so much." Then, to make sure he got the hint and skedaddled, she added, "Have a nice a weekend," before turning her chair and dialing Grace's office for the third time.

Voicemail *again*. Time to pack up and get the heck outta dodge before someone found something else for her to do. Bag on shoulder, scowl on face, and more than a little disgusted, Kyndel headed out of the office.

*Never loan Grace the car... Never loan Grace the car...* was the mantra playing on a loop in Kyndel's mind. She was madder than a wet hen and getting hotter by the minute. It was *no fun* to walk home after ten hours of work. *No fun* to be abandoned and forgotten by the best friend she'd loaned her car to. *No fun* to make the five-block journey past the park...in the dark.

At twenty-six, she rarely admitted her fear of the dark and held her aunts responsible for the phobia. Had they not made her watch 'The Brain Eaters' when she was only six years old, Kyndel was positive everything would've been just fine. It wasn't that she believed aliens would set loose a horde of parasites to eat every human brain on the planet; she had a *little* more sense than that. It was the feeling of being watched...like someone was hiding in the shadows, just waiting for an opportunity to scare the living daylights out of her. At the mere thought of her 'phantom stalker', the hair stood up at the nape of her neck and she walked a bit faster.

A sudden *thud*, and what sounded like footsteps pounding on the hard ground, had her stopping in her tracks. "What the...?" She gasped, opening her eyes wide, hoping it would help her see through the shadows.

Several tense seconds later—that felt like damn near forever—and Kyndel moved again. This time, her eyes slid

side-to-side like the stupid black and white cat clock her granny used to have in the kitchen.

The farther she got from where she'd heard the 'thump', the easier it was to convince herself it had just been kids sneaking into the park after hours. Manlove Park was a well-known make out spot for teenagers. There might've even been a time after moving to the city when Kyndel herself had been convinced to take a walk on the wild side, but that was a story for another day.

*Shoot, now I wouldn't know the wild side if I tripped and fell in it.*

It had been almost a year since she'd dated the muscle-headed jock from the gym. Three long, tortuous dates and all because he had an incredible body. Of course, dating the douche bag had come at a price. She'd spent the entire time listening to him drone on about his body parts...*and not the good ones...*and *only* when he wasn't checking out every other woman in the joint.

It wasn't that he'd hurt her feelings. Kyndel knew who she was and had never been under the misconception she would be Miss America. She had a few extra pounds and her curves had curves, but she was cute and had a brain, something not everyone could claim. What had pissed her off the most about dating Vinnie was, she'd wasted three whole evenings of her life that she could never get back. The one compliment the jerk had given her had been about her skin; he thought it was beautiful. Her granny always called her complexion peaches and cream and said her freckles added character.

*Yeah, 'cause I need more of that.*

She sighed as she thought about how much of her youth she'd wasted hating those tiny brown spots, until the day she realized they weren't going anywhere. It was time to buck up and learn to love them, or stop looking in the mirror. From that day forward, she stopped using makeup to cover them and embraced her 'freckled-self'. She also learned to accept her curves. *If ya don't like em, don't look at em* was her motto. For the most part, she ate right and worked out at least three times

a week. But dammit if she didn't love her Ben and Jerry's Cherry Garcia and someone would lose a hand if they tried to take it from her.

A loud '*thud*' echoed between the buildings. Kyndel stumbled to a stop. She looked and listened. The longer she thought about what she'd heard, the easier it was for her to convince herself someone had yelled for help. So, for the second time in about as many minutes, she searched the inky shadows for signs of life. Her anxiety level quadrupled the longer she stood still. She wanted to scream when only the sound of leaves rustling across the sidewalk and the occasional car passing by reached her ears.

Disgusted, she grumbled aloud, "You've gone bonkers, Kyn." The sound of her own voice somehow calmed her rankled nerves and she added, "Get to stepping, girlie."

The clicking of her heels bounced off the brick wall of the library as she hurried past. Resuming her original mantra, she added *Must kill Grace* at the end for good measure.

"I swear when I get my hands on..."

Her words were cut short as the unmistakable sound of a man groaning came from the shadows.

A chill skittered down her spine.

Goose bumps covered her arms.

She counted to three, unable to move...simply listening...praying it was only her imagination. One deep breath later, she slid her right foot forward, prepared to make a beeline for home at a high rate of speed.

The groan came again. Closer than before. More desperate...almost pleading.

The need to help the injured grew within her. Turning towards the darkness, Kyndel searched for the source of the noise.

Shaking so much her teeth chattered, she looked for any sign of the man she *knew* needed her help.

“It’s time to make a decision, Kyndel. Fight or flight. What’s it gonna be? God knows standing like a bump on a log isn’t solving a *damn* thing.”

Flight won. She turned, almost running, her satchel clutched tightly to her side like a lifeline.

“Keep your head up and eyes front. Home’s only a few blocks away,” she reassured herself, with the promise of snatching her best friend bald for the stupid mess she was in.

Feeling guilty and worried for Grace, her heart at war with her brain, Kyndel thought aloud, “Hope everything’s okay...”

Grace had always been a little scatter-brained, but she’d never just *forgotten* Kyndel before. It bothered her that there’d been no answer at Grace’s office or on her cellphone when Kyndel had tried to track her down before leaving the office. She’d even taken a chance and tried her own home because Grace had a key, but only got voicemail there, too. It was a war between anger and worry that accompanied most of her thoughts about her friend lately.

The running joke was that Grace spent most of her time hooking up with eligible bachelors she met at work. The good Lord *knew* her bestie was gorgeous; five foot nine, long raven hair, blue eyes, and a curvy body without an extra ounce of fat. To top it off, she was a first-year lawyer, with a promising career. Grace had it all...brains and beauty, the total package.

Giggling nervously, she gave herself a mental swat to the back of the head. She didn’t want anything bad to happen to Grace, just a bump or bruise, even a hangnail would explain being left. If she really had just forgotten, Kyndel was going to be *pissed* and more than a little hurt.

The shadows seemed to be closing in. Fear pushed Kyndel until she was almost jogging in her sensible work heels. Looking over her shoulder, the toe of her shoe caught an uneven piece of concrete, and from one heartbeat to the next, she was falling forward. Arms flailing, mouth stretched wide in a wordless scream, the sidewalk racing toward her face, everything around her seemed to happen in slow motion. All she could think was *that’s gonna leave a mark*.



Bracing for impact, she squeezed her eyes tight and prayed...then nothing happened. Opening one eye, then the other, Kyndel found herself hanging above the sidewalk, looking at a pair of the biggest feet she had ever seen—and they were sexy.

*Sexy feet? I really am losing it. Wait! Why the hell am I above the concrete?*

Warmth radiated from the perfectly muscled arm wrapped around her midsection. Goose bumps emanated from the extra-large hand holding firmly to her blouse, just a little too close to her breast.

She wiggled to change position, the cushion of her well-rounded ass finding the ridges of an incredibly hard set of abs. She trembled. Her heart raced. Just the thought of the man that could hold her upright made up for all her previous mishaps.

Within just a few seconds, Kyndel's world turned on its axis. The scenery blurred as she was effortlessly spun around and immediately found herself sitting atop the body of her rescuer, looking at faded denim covering extremely muscular thighs. Laughing aloud, she asked herself, *“Wonder what part I'll see next?”*

The same muscled arm that had saved her face from certain demise now kept her upright. She did a one-eighty, draped her legs over his thighs, with her knees barely touching the sidewalk, and got her first look at the top half of her rescuer. All she could do was gape. He was absolutely the most handsome man she'd ever seen, with features that looked like they'd been carved by expert hands.

Even with his eyes closed, he gave off the distinctive air of authority. The dim light highlighted his high cheekbones and aristocratic nose, adding to the power she felt radiating from his every pore. His perfectly formed lips made visions of passionate kisses and hot sweaty nights dance through her brain. It didn't help that all he had on was a pair of well-worn blue jeans.

She imagined that denim riding low on his tapered hips when he stood, highlighting the incredibly sexy dimples that

sat on the front of his hips. She absolutely knew without looking they were there, and that simple bit of knowledge made her temperature rise another degree, despite the cool breeze.

At the touch of her fingertips against the cool skin of his neck, an electric current arced between them. Flashes of light burst before her eyes. She blinked to clear her vision, then felt for his pulse, strong and steady against her digit. Heat rose from his skin, making her worry he might have a fever. Her eyes wandered down his well-toned body. She scoffed, unsuccessfully trying to convince herself she was only checking for further injury.

*Who the hell do you think you're fooling?*

She continued her perusal, taking note of his massive shoulders and a chest that could've been sculpted from granite. The light smattering of hair that glistened in the shards of light from the streetlamps emphasized his nipples, which were pebbled from the cool breeze. Her mouth watered and her pulse raced.

*What the hell is it about this guy? Is he doused in pheromones? Or am I in heat?*

Her eyes landed on the best set of abs she'd ever seen. Unable, or maybe it was unwilling, to stop her hand, she traced the defined lines of his eight-pack, mesmerized by the feel of his skin beneath her fingers. The electricity continued to flow between them. The sound of a horn in the distance pulled her from her musing and brought her current situation into the glaring light of reality. The sexy man that had kept her from breaking her face on the concrete was out cold, and she was paying him back by sitting on his lap and copping a feel.

She scrambled to her feet, surprised her rescuer hadn't moved an inch during her less than graceful attempt to remove her butt from his lap. But there he lay, unmoving, except for the rise and fall of his chest. The longer he remained unconscious, the more panicked she became.

Looking up and down the street and cursing Grace for the hundredth time, Kyndel wished for her car. First Aid class had

taught her *never* to move an injured person unless you knew what was wrong. Not that she could pick him up and carry him, anyway. The dude was *HUGE*. At least six foot-three or four, and his muscles had muscles. She prayed he hadn't hit his head on the sidewalk. A concussion could be really bad if not treated.

"You're worried about a concussion now?" She scolded herself. "You've been drooling over the guy while his head is lying on the cold, hard sidewalk. Brilliant, Kyn, just brilliant." Reaching for her satchel, she grabbed her old sorority sweatshirt from inside, wadded it up, and knelt forward to lift his head.

Her fingers tangled in his soft, brown hair. The scattered shards of light made it look like melted chocolate flowing over her skin.

*Would it shine in the sun or maybe have highlights? Some lighter brown mixed with red, even a few blond streaks woven throughout?*

The silky softness of his tresses turned to something wet and sticky.

*Blood!*

Kyndel gulped. Panic seized the breath in her lungs as the true severity of the situation smacked her in the face. She fought to keep her calm. Now, there was absolutely no denying he needed medical attention. Reaching into her bag and cursing herself for not thinking of it sooner, she dug around for her cellphone.

Coming up empty-handed, she instantly remembered plugging it into her car charger the night before, not giving it the slightest thought until that moment. Cursing and threatening death to anyone in the immediate vicinity, she sat back on her heels and thought.

*All I know to do is run down the street for help.*

Looking at the fallen man, then in the direction of the Mini Mart, she reasoned he'd probably be okay. She'd be gone five minutes...*tops*. Run in, use the phone, run back. It all seemed

very logical, but fear something would happen to him in her absence kept her in place.

This guy was important to her. That alone had all her red flags flying and bells and whistles screaming in her brain. She tried to push her feelings aside and look at the situation with logic, but that was like holding back a freight train with her pinky finger...*not gonna happen*. Besides, her granny would most definitely haunt her and probably kick her butt if she turned her back on someone who needed help.

“No one’s gonna mess with this behemoth, even if he *is* unconscious,” she reassured herself. “He probably doesn’t have a wallet to steal anyway.”

Should she dig in his pockets to try to find one? Some kind of ID?

*Nah.*

She wasn’t keen on trying to explain her hand in his pants if he woke up. Her cheeks warmed at the thought of touching him again.

“What are you doing out at night in just a pair of jeans and bare feet, anyway?” she asked the unconscious man. “Guess it doesn’t matter. You need help, whether you’re dressed properly or not.”

Hooking her satchel over her shoulder, Kyndel stood and took one last look at her ‘patient’. Before she had barely moved an inch, a huge, warm hand latched onto her bare ankle.

“What the hell?” she screamed, trying to pull her leg free while looking down to see what new fresh hell had befallen her.

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# ABOUT JULIA



Find all my stories on [Amazon!](#)

Hey Y'all! I'm Julia Mills the New York Times and USA Today Bestselling Author of the Dragon Guard Series. I without a doubt admit to being a sarcastic, southern woman who would rather spend all day laughing than a minute crying. Living with my two most amazing daughters and a menagerie of animals, keeps me busy but I love telling a good story. Now, that I've decided to write the stories running through my brain, life is just a blast!

My beliefs are simple. A good book along with shoes, makeup, and purses will never let a girl down and no hero ever written will compare to my real-life hero, my dad! I'm a sucker for a happy ending and alpha men make me swoon.

I'm still working on my story, but I promise it will contain as much love and laughter as I can pack into it! Now, go out there and create your own story!!! Dare to Dream! Have the Strength to Try EVERYTHING! Never Look Back!

I ABSOLUTELY adore stalkers so look me up on [Facebook](#), sign up for my newsletter at [JuliaMillsAuthor.com](#) and follow me on [Amazon](#).

Send me a message!

XOXO Julia

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*Although this epic journey travels through many Clans, many lands, and many couples, one thing remained constant -*

*Fate Will Not Be Denied!*

*Each book is written as a standalone story, but just like M&M's, Lay's Potato Chips, and my momma's queso, they're better when binged.*

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8. Her Dragon's Heart
9. Her Dragon's Soul
10. The Fate of Her Dragon
11. Her Dragon's No Angel
12. Her Dragon, His Demon

- 13, Resurrecting Her Dragon
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- 17, Guarding Her Dragon
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22. Dragon Down
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- Dragon Guard Series: Volume 2
- Dragon Guard Series: Volume 3
- Dragon Guard: The Thunder Rolls
- Dragon Guard: Enforcers Arise
- Christmas Magic: Dragon Guard Holidays Volume 1



### **Dragon Intelligence Agency**

- Dragon Falling
- Dragon Dreaming



### **Dragon Guard Berserkers**

- Banning



Asher  
Raynor  
Dragon Guard Berserkers, Volume 1



**Ladies of the Sky**

Sadie's Shadow



**Kings of the Blood**

Viktor

Roman

Achilles

Kings of the Blood, Books 1 - 3



**Dragons of Fate**

Chestnuts Roasting Over Dragon Fire

Unwrapping Her Dragon

She Needs A Little Dragon

Falling Off Her Dragon

Dragons of Fate Collection, Books 1 - 4



Dragon of Destiny  
Dragon Him Out To Sea



## **Dragon Guard Holiday Love Stories**

It's The Great Dragon, Molly Brown

A Little Elfin' Around

Heart On For Dragon

Dragons Fall Hard

Dragon Guard Holiday Love Stories, Books 1 -3



## **Not Quite Holiday Love Stories**

Kissing Cupid

Kissing Claws



## **Maidens of Mayhem**

That Hound Don't Hunt

That Pig Gonna Fly

That Mule's Got A Kick

That Rex Gotta Roar

That Shark is Red Hot

That Dino's Hanging Ten

That Dragon Gonna Blow



## **Not Quite Love Stories**

Vidalia

Phoebe

Zoey

Jax

Heidi

Lola

Sammie Jo

Harmony

Daphne



### **Magic & Mayhem Collections**

The Not Quite Collection Volume 1

The Not Quite Collection Volume 2

Maidens of Mayhem Collection Volume 3

Maidens of Mayhem Collection Volume 4



### **Southern Fried Sass**

Later Gator

Nosey Rosie

Lazy Daisy

Jamie's Got A Wand

Southern Fried Sass: Volume 1



### **Up Shift Creek**

Tree Frog and Her Honey Badger

Doc and Her Dragon  
Dusty and Her Dino



**Daughters of Poseidon**

Out of the Ashes  
Scorched Embers



**Lords of Hell**

Hades Halo



A Vampire's Thirst: Alaric



Condemned: A Vampire Blood Courtesan Romance  
Caught: A Vampire Blood Courtesan Romance



Marrok: Hunger For His Mate



**Coloring Books**

Bitch Please! I Color Dragons  
Witch Please! I Color Dragons

# Dragons of Legend Coloring Book



## **Planners**

The Dragon Never Sleeps

No Rest for The Dragon



## **Reading Journals**

On the Wings of Words

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