

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

HELEN
HARDT

LOVING

THE DRAGON

HH VINTAGE



LOVING THE DRAGON

HELEN HARDT VINTAGE COLLECTION

HELEN HARDT

CONTENTS

Loving the Dragon

Dedication

Also By Helen Hardt

Praise For Helen Hardt

Author's Note

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

A Note From Helen

About the Author

LOVING THE DRAGON
HH VINTAGE COLLECTION

Helen Hardt

HS
HARDT & SONS 

This book is an original publication of Helen Hardt

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental. The publisher does not assume any responsibility for third-party websites or their content.

Copyright © 2022 Helen Hardt, LLC dba Hardt & Sons

Cover Design: Helen Hardt

All Rights Reserved

No part of this book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic format without permission. Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights. Purchase only authorized editions.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

HS
HARDT & SONS ❤️

For my readers.

I hope you enjoy this early work!

ALSO BY HELEN HARDT

Follow Me Series:

Follow Me Darkly

Follow Me Under

Follow Me Always

Darkly

Wolfes of Manhattan

Rebel

Recluse

Runaway

Rake

Reckoning

Billionaire Island (Wolfes continuation)

Escape

Gems of Wolfe Island (Wolfes continuation)

Moonstone

Raven

Garnet

Buck (coming soon)

Steel Brothers Saga:

Trilogy One—Talon and Jade

Craving

Obsession

Possession

Trilogy Two—Jonah and Melanie

Melt

Burn

Surrender

Trilogy Three—Ryan and Ruby

Shattered

Twisted

Unraveled

Trilogy Four—Bryce and Marjorie

Breathless

Ravenous

Insatiable

Trilogy Five—Brad and Daphne

Fate

Legacy

Descent

Trilogy Six—Dale and Ashley

Awakened

Cherished

Freed

Trilogy Seven—Donny and Callie

Spark

Flame

Blaze

Trilogy Eight—Brock and Rory (coming soon)

Smolder

Flare

Scorch

Blood Bond Saga:

Unchained

Unhinged

Undaunted

Unmasked

Undefeated

Sex and the Season:

Lily and the Duke

Rose in Bloom

Lady Alexandra's Lover

Sophie's Voice

Temptation Saga:

Tempting Dusty

Teasing Annie

Taking Catie

Taming Angelina

Treasuring Amber

Trusting Sydney

Tantalizing Maria

Standalone Novels and Novellas

Reunited

Misadventures:

Misadventures of a Good Wife (with Meredith Wild)

Misadventures with a Rockstar

The Cougar Chronicles:

The Cowboy and the Cougar

Calendar Boy

Daughters of the Prairie:

The Outlaw's Angel

Lessons of the Heart

Song of the Raven

Collections:

Destination Desire

Her Two Lovers

Non-Fiction:

got style?

PRAISE FOR HELEN HARDT

WOLFES OF MANHATTAN

“It’s hot, it’s intense, and the plot starts off thick and had me completely spellbound from page one.”

~**The Sassy Nerd Blog**

“Helen Hardt...is a master at her craft.”

~**K. Ogburn, Amazon**

“Move over Steel brothers... Rock is *everything!*”

~**Barbara Conklin-Jaros, Amazon**

“Helen has done it again. She winds you up and weaves a web of intrigue.”

~**Vicki Smith, Amazon**

FOLLOW ME SERIES

“Hardt spins erotic gold...”

~***Publishers Weekly***

“22 Best Erotic Novels to Read”

~***Marie Claire Magazine***

“Intensely erotic and wildly emotional...”

~***New York Times* bestselling author Lisa Renee Jones**

“With an edgy, enigmatic hero and loads of sexual tension, Helen Hardt’s fast-paced Follow Me Darkly had me turning pages late into the night!”

~***New York Times* bestselling author J. Kenner**

“Christian, Gideon, and now...Braden Black.”

~**Books, Wine, and Besties**

“A tour de force where the reader will be pulled in as if they’re being seduced by Braden Black, taken for a wild ride, and left wanting more.”

~***USA Today* Bestselling Author Julie Morgan**

“Hot. Sexy. Intriguing. Page-Turner. Helen Hardt checks all the boxes with *Follow Me Darkly!*”

~**International Bestselling Author Victoria Blue**

STEEL BROTHERS SAGA

“*Craving* is the jaw-dropping book you *need* to read!”

~***New York Times* bestselling author Lisa Renee Jones**

“Completely raw and addictive.”

~**#1 *New York Times* bestselling author Meredith Wild**

“Talon has hit my top five list...up there next to Jamie Fraser and Gideon Cross.”

~***USA Today* bestselling author Angel Payne**

“Talon and Jade’s instant chemistry heats up the pages...”

~**RT Book Reviews**

“Sorry Christian and Gideon, there’s a new heartthrob for you to contend with. Meet Talon. Talon Steel.”

~**Booktopia**

“Such a beautiful torment—the waiting, the anticipation, the relief that only comes briefly before more questions arise, and the wait begins again... Check. Mate. Ms. Hardt...”

~**Bare Naked Words**

“Made my heart stop in my chest. Helen has given us such a heartbreakingly beautiful series.”

~**Tina, Bookalicious Babes**

BLOOD BOND SAGA

“An enthralling and rousing vampire tale that will leave readers waiting for the sequel.”

~**Kirkus Reviews**

“Dangerous and sexy. A new favorite!”

~*New York Times* bestselling author **Alyssa Day**

“A dark, intoxicating tale.”

~**Library Journal**

“Helen dives into the paranormal world of vampires and makes it her own.”

~**Tina, Bookalicious Babes**

“Throw out everything you know about vampires—except for that blood thirst we all love and lust after in these stunning heroes—and expect to be swept up in a sensual story that twists and turns in so many wonderfully jaw-dropping ways.”

~**Angel Payne, USA Today** bestselling author

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Welcome to the Helen Hardt Vintage Collection! These are the back list of my back list—stories that I wrote back at the beginning of my career that were never published.

I wrote *Loving the Dragon* over ten years ago when I was a brand new author. At the time, I was trying all kinds of genres to find my fit. I love paranormal and fantasy, and I love dragons. I was born in the year of the dragon, and my only tattoo is a dragon.

So the Highland Dragons were born.

I originally sold this idea to my editor at the now defunct Ellora's Cave as a series of novellas, with the second being Micah's story, tentatively titled *Slave to the Dragon*. Ellora's Cave went out of business before *Loving the Dragon* was published, and my career took a different path, leaving Kristen and Aidan on the back burner along with the other stories in the HH Vintage collection.

You'll no doubt see that my writing style has evolved since this little story. It's not a category I write in now, but dragon shifters are still very popular. I hope you enjoy my take on the genre!

PROLOGUE

“**W**ho was he, Anthea?”

Aidan huddled in the corner, scratching at the golden scales that had erupted on the inside of his left forearm. He'd been happy when he noticed them. They signaled the first part of growing up. At five years old, he was showing the first sign of his Highland Dragon heritage.

He'd run to his father, proud of his emerging change.
“Da!”

“Aye, laddie. What is it?”

“My scales!” He'd held out his forearm with a smile.

But instead of the bear hug he'd expected, his father's eyes had widened and his lips had pursed into a frown. Da had run his thumb over the gilded scales, his face reddening to the color of a ripe strawberry. He pushed Aidan aside.

“Anthea! Damn it to hell, get down here.”

Aidan's beautiful mother had descended swiftly down the stairs, her dark hair fluttering behind her.

“*Crivvens*, Declan, what are you shouting about?”

“*Who was he, Anthea?*”

“Who was who?”

Aidan shuddered. He hated when his parents fought. They seemed in a constant state of war these days, usually about his

older brother, Micah. At only six, he'd gotten involved in a young gang of thugs and was always in trouble.

Da reached forward but then stopped. "The boy's showing his first signs."

"Aidan!" Mum smiled. "Let me see, sweetie."

Da stepped between them. "No, Anthea. First, tell me who it was."

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about," Mum said, casting her gaze downward.

"Damn it all, I'm not an idiot. Who, for the love of the gods, is the boy's father?"

Aidan widened his eyes and gulped. "But Da, you're—"

Da grabbed Aidan and pulled him toward Mum. "Look," he said, holding out the forearm Aidan was so proud of. "Golden scales."

"Yes? Is that what's troubling you? Why on earth—"

"My scales are black. As were my da's, as are Micah's. The color for scales is inherited from the father's line, Anthea, and there hasn't ever been a golden dragon in my line."

"Declan—"

Da's hand whipped out and slapped Mum's rosy cheek. At her scream, Aidan rushed toward her. He would protect her. Da would not slap her again.

"Who was it, Anthea?"

"I didn't know—"

He raised his hand again.

"Don't hit her!" Aidan pressed his small body backward against his mother's soft legs.

Da swatted him away. "Answer the goddamned question."

"Stop it!" Mum grabbed Aidan and pushed him behind her, shielding him. "I never meant—"

Da slapped her again. Aidan buried his face in the soft fabric of Mum's skirt.

"All right." Mum's voice shook. "It was Josiah. Your brother."

Da's face reddened further. "My half-brother, you mean. My father swore to me he'd keep him away from you. Damn it!"

Aidan peeked around his mother's legs.

Da's fists were clenched at his sides. "I should have killed him myself."

"He's dead anyway." Mum's lips trembled. "By his own hand."

"Not fucking soon enough." Da paced a few steps away and then turned back around to face them. "So the bastard begets another bastard." He inched closer. "You're no better than my own slut of a mother." He grabbed Aidan's arm.

Mum had pushed him behind her again. "Don't you dare touch him!"

"Fine. He's no longer any of my concern," Da said. "He's not mine, after all. The two of you have a half hour to get the fuck out of my house and my sight."

Not Da's? What did he mean? And why did Da want them to leave? Aidan opened his mouth to protest, but his mother shushed him.

Her red lips formed a thin line. "Come, Aidan."

"You'll not take my name with him. He's a Butler now. He was never a Campbell."

"Fine," Mum said, whisking Aidan up the winding staircase. "I'll be proud to have him carry my da's name."

Da's stomping vibrated the steps underneath Aidan's feet.

"You have no idea what you've done, do you?" Da yelled. "You've damned my son. And you've damned both of yours."

Aidan gulped as Mum shuffled him up the stairs. What was Da talking about? And why did they have to leave?

Da's voice continued to boom. "Ever wonder why Josiah pursued you so relentlessly? We were damned to the same cruel fate. Do some fucking research. And then live with what you've done to your sons."

His tattoo made her crazy.

Prim and proper Kristen Ross, reading glasses perched on her straight nose, glanced over the top of the book she held to ogle the colorful dragon carved into Aidan Butler's sinewy triceps.

The dragon moved, his reddish gold scales shimmered. Oh, Kristen knew it was just Aidan's muscles creating an illusion, but sometimes she could swear the dragon's eyes shifted. Never enough for her to be sure. But moments existed when she was nearly certain the dragon watched her. Then she would look again and realize she had imagined it.

He was right on time.

Every morning promptly at eleven thirty a.m., Aidan walked into Kristen's bookshop in the small town of Nederland, Colorado. He always pawed through the bargain books and then stood at the magazine rack and leafed through the car and motorcycle magazines, which put him and his dragon directly in the path of Kristen's gaze as she sat at her cash register.

Once, when he actually purchased a magazine, Kristen had seen his eyes. Emerald green, or so she had thought, because when she looked again to hand him his change, they were blue. Blue like the mountaintops on a summer day. She'd blinked, and they were green again.

She usually didn't see his eyes. Only his profile as he stood at the magazine rack, thumbing through the same

editions as he had the day before. More than once Kristen wondered why he didn't buy the darn thing and read it at home. Low on cash, maybe? Surely he got bored looking through the same magazines day after day. With the exception of *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *People*, she only changed the stock monthly.

Yet there he was, like clockwork.

And every day, like clockwork, Kristen sat, pretending to read. Gazing at him. His raw masculinity. His wavy dark hair pulled back in a ponytail. His chiseled jaw line that was always covered with a couple days' growth of stubble. His perfectly formed nose. His incredible body that made her heart leap.

And the tattoo.

Always the tattoo.

He never wore his leather jacket into her shop, always left it draped over his Harley out in the street. All the better for her to stare at his tattoo, to wonder how the golden skin it covered would feel under her lips. Her tongue.

At noon he left. Right on schedule. Kristen let out a breath and wished she were the kind of woman he might notice. Might kiss.

Might take to his bed.

She was so hot.

Or could be, if he could get her out of her librarian wardrobe and into a leather bustier and panties. Hell, skip the panties. In fact, skip the bustier.

He wanted her naked.

She didn't know he could see her. For his dragon's eyes were more powerful than his human eyes would ever be. While his human eyes stared cloudily at the blurred words on the glossy magazine page, his dragon eyes penetrated the lovely woman reading.

And his dragon's sense of smell... The spicy floral scent of yellow roses wafted from her body like a soft summer breeze. His groin tightened.

He watched her, wanted her. Imagined pulling her chestnut locks free of the constricting knot at the back of her head and then running his fingers through them. Silk, he'd bet. Silk threads against his roughened hands.

He'd remove her glasses and gaze into her amber eyes. Then her crisp high-necked blouse would go, ripped into shreds by his hands and teeth. Next, he'd tear her bra from her sumptuous breasts and roll her ruby nipples into hardened nubs. He'd kiss them, lick them, suck them, and then slowly, ever so slowly, he'd reach under her skirt into her heat.

She'd be wet for him. So wet.

Fucking hard on. He couldn't help it, staring at her, fantasizing about her. Always the same. He couldn't get on his Harley in this state. He closed his eyes, calmed the dragon, and willed his body into submission. A few minutes later, he left the bookshop, revved up his engine, and took off to face the rest of his day. To go through the motions of living until he could be in her presence again.

He wanted to give her time. But time had run out. He'd finally done that research that his Da—or not his Da—had mentioned all those years ago.

Tonight Aidan would claim Kristen Ross.

“I always knew you slept in the nude.”

The deep raspy voice penetrated the fogginess of Kristen’s mind and washed over her like a smooth red wine. She turned her head and stared at the man standing in the doorway of her bedroom.

Him.

Aidan Butler.

Scream. Yes, she should definitely be screaming. But as his gaze raked over her naked body—she hadn’t bothered with sheets in the heat—her vocal cords failed her.

“May I join you?” he asked.

“W-Why are you here?”

“For you.” He approached the bed stealthily, his eyes locked onto hers. His unbound black hair fell in sleek waves against his skin. His torso was unclothed, and he was even more beautiful than she had imagined. Broad shoulders gleamed golden in the moonlight from her bedroom window. A smattering of dark curls covered his hard chest and ripped abdomen, ending in a line that disappeared into the waistband of his jeans. Two brown nipples poked through the hair, tantalizing and kissable. When he sat down next to her, she rolled toward him as his weight sank the mattress.

“D-Do you even know who I am?”

“Of course I do”—he touched her cheek—“Kristen.”

“You know my name?”

“I always have.” He leaned down and brushed his full dusky lips across hers.

Her breath caught. Such a tender gesture, but it set her juices flowing. “W-What is it that you want?”

“I have a name.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Then use it. Please.”

“All right.” Kristen cleared her throat. “What is it that you want...Aidan?”

“You, Kristen. I want you.” He stood and peeled his faded jeans from his body.

Kristen sucked in her breath. Commando. He’d gone commando. And what a sight he was.

His erection jutted majestically from a patch of thick, dark curls. Kristen wasn’t very experienced, but she had seen a few in her day, and Aidan’s was...*large*.

“Oh my...”

“It’s all for you, baby,” Aidan said, sliding onto the bed next to her, his hard body a white heat against hers.

He reached for her, but she backed away.

“I don’t understand.”

“There’s nothing to understand.”

“But—”

“I won’t hurt you. I promise.”

Oddly, she hadn’t even considered that possibility. She wasn’t afraid. Not in the least.

“We don’t even know each other.”

“That’s what tonight is for,” Aidan said.

His skin glowed as little flickers of light danced over his fine facial features. Moonlight couldn’t...

Kristen looked around. Dozens of candles illuminated the bedroom. Did she even own candles?

Of course she didn't. She hated fire. But where was the pounding nervousness, the anxious nausea? This fire didn't frighten her.

"Uh...Aidan, I—"

"Shh." He flattened her on the mattress and covered her body with his. He buried his face in her neck and inhaled. "Mmm. Your scent drives me wild."

"I—"

"Every time I come into your bookstore, before I even see you I can smell you." He inhaled again. "Nutmeg. And cloves. And roses. Yellow roses."

"What? *Yellow* roses?"

"More exotic than red, more sensual than pink, spicier than white. Yellow." He breathed in once more.

"But how can the color—"

"You talk too much." Aidan clamped his mouth onto hers.

He teased, nipping and biting at her mouth, and he darted his tongue along the seam of her lips and probed for entrance. "Let me in, baby." His whisper vibrated softly against her sensitive skin.

She opened to him and tentatively let her tongue touch his. His groan sent a jolt straight to her core.

Explosive. Oh, she was in trouble.

He kissed her intimately, exploring every inch of her mouth. She reciprocated, running her tongue over his sexy lips, his teeth, the inside of his cheeks. He tasted like a Mai Tai.

Kristen *loved* Mai Tais.

Sweet pineapple, tangy orange, a touch of fresh mint. She sighed as she deepened the kiss. She couldn't get enough of him.

When he released her mouth he was panting, but he nibbled her cheek, her neck, and then settled on her ear and traced its outer edge with his tongue. “You’re so beautiful, Kristen. I’ve wanted this for so long.”

“You’ve wanted...*me*?” Kristen gasped, trying to catch her breath.

“Every day since I first laid eyes on you.”

“Then why didn’t you...?”

He sucked on her neck and made her shudder, and then he released the skin with a soft smack. “I didn’t want to scare you.”

“I’m not scared of you. How could you think that? You’re...amazing.”

He pulled away from her, braced his weight on his arms, and stared down into her face. His eyes were green. Definitely green. No, blue. Damn.

“You mean you noticed me?” he said.

“How could I not?”

“You never look at me. You’re always...reading.” His tone was flirting, teasing, and a lazy grin adorned his full lips.

Kristen warmed with embarrassment. “You know, don’t you?”

“Know what, baby?”

“You know I’ve been watching you.”

“Well...” He let out a soft chuckle. “You’ve been reading the same book for months.”

“God, how embarrassing.” Kristen squirmed beneath his gaze.

“It’s not embarrassing.” He gave her a lazy smile. “I’ve been watching you too.”

“That’s ridiculous. You never look my way.”

“Oh, I’m watching. Trust me. And I think you’re beautiful.”

“Me? Beautiful?” Her mousy brown hair and yellowish eyes were hardly the stuff of dreams.

“Oh yes.” His warm breath drifted over her cheeks, her lips. “The minute I saw you I wanted you. Wanted to taste you. Lick you. Sink my cock deep inside you.”

“Oh, Aidan. I can’t breathe.”

“I’m sorry.” He pulled his weight from her.

She whimpered at the loss.

“Am I hurting you?”

“No, no. I mean I can’t breathe around you. My pulse is racing, and my skin feels all tingly. All I can think of is…”

He ground his erection against her, slid it against her moist folds. “All you can think of is what?”

“You. You. Inside. Me.”

“You will have me. Every last inch.” He nudged in slightly.

She shivered in anticipation.

“But later. After I’ve tasted your cherry nipples and your sweet pussy.”

“Aidan—”

“Shh.” He trailed his tongue down her neck, nuzzled her pulse point, sucked her skin into his mouth, and released it with little pops. “You’re so gorgeous. So perfect.” He feathered butterfly kisses across her chest while cupping one breast in his palm.

Kristen squirmed beneath him, fisting her hands in his glossy hair, urging his mouth toward her nipple. But he licked and nipped, continuing to tease her.

“Aidan. *Please.*”

“Tell me what you want, love.”

“I want your mouth.”

“Where?”

“You know where.”

“You have to say it. Tell me.”

“Damn it, Aidan. On my nipple. Suck my nipple.”

“I thought you’d never ask,” he teased.

Kristen groaned as Aidan captured her nipple with his lips. He sucked it gently and then with more force, tugging it with his teeth. She arched her back, the tickle of Aidan’s tongue a whispery caress that covered her whole body and then centered in her core like a maelstrom. She wanted his mouth there, his lips and tongue inside her. She pulled at his locks again and then pushed his head downward.

“My pussy,” she rasped. “Lick my pussy, Aidan.”

“God, Kris.” He spread her thighs and buried his face in her moist folds.

Kristen felt each stroke of his tongue, each of his taste buds as he licked her. Her heart fluttered and she gasped for air.

“Oh, I had no idea. It’s so different with you.” She sighed, massaging her fingers through his hair, into his scalp. “Aidan...”

He continued to plunder her, biting, sucking. She writhed beneath him, ground her pussy against his face.

When he lifted his head, his chin and cheeks glistened with her juices. “You’re delicious,” he said. “I can’t get enough of you.” And he buried his head again.

This time his fingers slid into her, and she arched to meet them. Her walls clenched around him as he tormented her until her entire body seemed to implode into itself. Her blood like warm honey coursing through her veins, her heart pounding, her mind reeling. She screamed his name as his fingers slowly brought her back to reality, sliding in and out, around and around.

“Sweet Kristen.” His voice was husky as he looked up at her from between her legs. “I can show you more.”

“Yes, more.” Her eyelids were heavy, her vision cloudy as he advanced toward her.

As he thrust his tongue into her mouth, she tasted her own cream. Heady. Intoxicating.

“Are you ready for me?” he asked, breathless.

“Yes, Aidan. Yes.”

He plunged into her with purpose, intent. “Ah, Kristen.” His voice was hoarse, raspy. “You’re so tight, so sweet.” He pushed into her again and again, moaning her name. He bent his head to kiss her lips, her neck, her nipples. “Are you ready to fly with me, baby?”

“Wh-What do you mean?” Kristen’s voice was dark with desire. She hardly recognized it.

“I mean let’s fly together,” he whispered, circling his hips as he ground into her, massaging her swollen clit with his thumb. “Together. Always together.”

Kristen squirmed and writhed, his strong fingers heating her skin, her insides running toward the precipice. So good. So fucking good.

“Aidan, Aidan!” And then she leaped.

She was soaring. On the back of a beautiful golden dragon. His scales shone opulent in the moonlight. Into the mountains they flew, the silvery crescent bathing the snowcapped peaks in luminescence. The dragon swooped and swerved, gliding lower through the tall skinny evergreens, through the russet stone canyons, and then surging above the crests into the clear, starry sky.

A tide of pure delight coursed through Kristen. Peace. Sheer peace. And joy.

Endless moments later she lay in her bed, Aidan still above her.

“That was...amazing.”

“Mmm, amazing, yes.” He pressed his soft lips to her neck. “As I always knew it would be.”

O f course it had been a dream.

Kristen awoke in the morning feeling sated and well used. Wonderful. Oh, the earth-shattering orgasm had been real. But the rest? Definitely a dream.

For one, there were no candles in her bedroom. She didn't even own a candle. Her fear of fire stemmed from her childhood. Funny, the flames hadn't scared her in her dream. Usually fire occurred only in her nightmares.

For another thing, what would a hot Harley-riding stud like Aidan Butler want with her, Kristen Ross? Practical Kristen. Bookworm Kristen. Kristen who always wore sensible clothes and sensible shoes. Kristen who was afraid to show on the outside who she truly was on the inside.

Change.

That's what she needed.

As usual, her heart rate jumped as it did whenever she contemplated change. *Stay in the background, Kristen*, her little voice said. *Fly under the radar. Stay invisible, unnoticed, and then nothing can harm you. The flames won't find you again.*

"Oh, shut up!" she said aloud. She rose, walked into her bathroom, and stepped into the shower. As the warm water pelted her skin, she imagined Aidan's strong hands caressing her. Soon her nipples were crimson pebbles under her touch.

Her touch.

No one would guess she liked to masturbate. Or that she did it daily, always in the shower, and usually to the image of hot Aidan Butler and his sexy dragon tattoo.

No. Not prim, proper Kristen.

She fanned her hand lightly over her nipples, took a deep breath, and pinched them.

“Oh!” Her voice echoed in the shower stall.

Slowly she twisted them between her thumb and forefinger. She imagined Aidan’s full lips sucking on them, his teeth pulling at them. She trembled, and warm waves of bliss slid from her nipples down to her pussy.

She lowered one hand while the other continued its nipple play. Sifting her fingers through her dripping brown curls, she found her clit. That forbidden pearl of pleasure. None of her patrons would believe Kristen Ross enjoyed stimulating her own clit.

Her husky laugh reverberated through the balmy air. Slowly she circled her swollen nub, her body throbbing with need. The heat of the pulsating water, the whoosh of it as it sprayed, the sweet aroma of the steam as she inhaled—it all added to her sensory overload as she pleased herself.

Heat. Desire. Pure, pure rapture.

Her explosion sent tingles into every cell of her body, every corner of her mind.

It was wonderful.

But not as wonderful as riding her dragon in her dreams.

Damn.

Aidan nearly lost his footing as he stumbled out of his kitchen. He shot his load right there in his bathrobe. For no apparent reason. Except—

Kristen must have climaxed. It was the only explanation. But if she had climaxed...

Damn her! She was with another man. Silver rage rose within him. Aidan would kill him, whoever he was. And then he would fuck her so thoroughly that she'd never desire another as long as she lived.

He raced to his bedroom, showered quickly, and then sat down on his bed with his head in his hands. If there had been any doubt in his mind about Kristen, it had been dismissed last night.

She was *his*.

And he had begun the bonding with her. He would feel it every time she came from now on, just as she would feel every one of his orgasms.

Guilt ate at his gut. He had breached ethics by appearing to her in a dream. Okay, it hadn't even been a dream. He'd just made sure she thought it was. He had crossed a line. Normally, he'd have let nature take its course, but time was a luxury he did not possess. The bonding had to be initiated. He'd had no other choice.

And he'd be lying if he said he regretted his actions. Guilt was one thing. Regret? No way. Being with her, making love to her, had been the most intensely satisfying encounter of his life. She was part of him now. She existed in his heart, his soul. He'd waited nearly centuries for his mate.

After an eternity of solitary purgatory, he'd finally found her. The perfect woman to complete him.

From the first moment he had seen Kristen, looking like a schoolmistress sitting behind her counter in the bookstore, he had wanted her. Her spicy floral scent had invaded him, consumed him, and he'd sensed she was the one he had been seeking for so long.

Heat exuded from her. Oh, she tried to hide it underneath those conservative clothes and granny glasses, but fire lay within her. Fire Aidan could stoke.

Her eyes of gold, hair of ripe chestnuts, lips of crimson. And her fragrance... Remembering the intoxicating aroma made him stiff again.

Now all he had to do was wait for her to trust him. Then punish her severely for bedding another man. And fuck her senseless.

And he had to do all this before Micah discovered her.

Shit.

Seconds were ticking by. Precious, precious seconds.



SHE WAS WEARING her hair down—unusual for her at work—and sunlight streamed through the front window and sprinkled it with gossamer highlights. She'd left the top two buttons of her blouse open, and she absently trailed her fingers up and down the exposed flesh. Aidan's cock stirred in his jeans. Damn, she was sex on a stick, and she had no idea. How would he keep other males away from her?

He observed all this from outside the bookshop, his dragon vision boring through the bookshelves in his way. He sniffed, his dragon olfaction granting him solace. Thank God. He didn't smell another man on her.

He smiled as the image of Kristen, flushed and naked atop her rumpled bed, her finger sliding into her cunt, flashed through his mind. Of course. She had come by her own hand.

And she had thought of him.

His cock twitched again. He had to have her. Had to convince her. For real this time. Not in her imagined dreams.

He walked into the shop.

She looked up, frowned and then glanced at her watch. Yes, he was early. It wasn't even ten. But he needed to see her. Had to know for sure whether another man had touched her. He walked swiftly to the counter and looked her straight in the eye.

“Do you want to go for a ride?”

She removed her glasses. Sweet Lord, her amber eyes were beautiful. They were the color of the sunrise. Dark amber lashes—so long—radiated outward like the sun's rays.

“Excuse me?”

He cleared his throat. “A ride. On my bike. With me.”

“Mr. Butler, we hardly know—”

“Aidan. My name's Aidan.”

“Okay. Aidan. We hardly know each other. Besides, I need to stay at the store.”

“Aren't you the owner?”

“Yeah.”

“Then close up for a few hours. Come on a ride with me. Please.”

How pathetic was he? Begging a woman he had hardly spoken two words to—except during a liaison she didn't

remember—to ditch work and go riding. They were bonded, but she didn't know that.

“Look, I'm sorry.”

“Okay,” she said.

“What?”

“Okay. I'll go for a ride with you.”

C learly she had lost her mind.

Although closing the store on a summer weekday morning wouldn't cost her a lot of business, it wasn't something she ever did. And certainly not to get on a motorcycle with a man who was pretty much a stranger to her. Not in her fantasies and dreams, but in reality? Yes, he was a stranger. Abandoning her shop to go riding with a stranger, no matter how hot he was, was not Kristen Ross.

Yet here she was.

"Put this on." Aidan handed her a graphite gray helmet.

She placed it on her head, and Aidan adjusted the straps for her, his beautifully rough fingers grazing her jaw line. She closed her eyes as he secured his own helmet and relished the lingering heat of his touch. When he swung his jean-clad leg over the bike and straddled the seat, a spark ignited between her legs.

Beautiful, beautiful man.

"Get behind me, okay? And hold onto me. Tight."

She climbed aboard and tentatively touched his waist.

He turned around, and his gaze—green this time, like a dark emerald—rocked her. "I said tight. You don't want to fly off, do you?"

She wrapped her arms around him and buried her breasts in his back. Muscle, pure muscle. And so warm. Her nipples

hardened into tight buds.

“Perfect.” He started the engine. “Something you should know.” He spoke loudly over the pipes. “When we turn, lean into the turn with me.”

“Lean in? But I don’t want to fall off.”

“You won’t. Centrifugal force. Don’t be scared. I’d never let you get hurt.”

Her heart believed him, though she didn’t know why. But her head? “Never?”

“Never. I promise. Are you ready?”

She gulped. “Yeah. Sure. I’m ready.”

He smiled at her—Lord, he was gorgeous—and then he turned around and kicked the bike into gear.

Within seconds Kristen wondered why she had been frightened. She had her arms and legs wrapped around Aidan’s wonderful body, and she was flying. The wind flowed through the long tresses hanging down out of her helmet.

So free. So alive.

They rode through the foothills and into the mountains. Kristen breathed in the sweet scent of pine, the spicy perfume of Columbine. And best of all, the musky heated aroma of Aidan in front of her.

Only the soft cotton of his forest green T-shirt separated her from his heated skin. Her nipples stiffened even further, and she eased away from him, convinced she was poking two holes into his back. As if on cue, he cut a curve in the road, startling her. She tightened her arms around him again and thought she felt the vibration of a chuckle.

Aidan pulled the bike into a small crevice in the canyon, parked, and helped Kristen dismount. She removed her helmet.

“So where are we?” she asked.

“Just off the canyon a bit,” he said. “I found this place a while back. It’s impossible to navigate in a car, and hikers rarely come here because it’s off most of the worn trails.”

“Well, then.” Kristen licked her lips. “Why exactly are *we* here?”

“I want you to see something.”

“What?”

He took the helmet from her, snapped the strap, and hung it from the handlebars of his bike. He did the same with his own and then took her hand in his. “Come with me.”

He led her up a rocky pathway, lifting her over the steeper stones.

“Where are we going?”

“Wait and see.” He entwined their fingers together.

His hand was warm but not sweaty, so large, so very masculine.

Though her body was ever aware of Aidan’s virile presence, Kristen’s thighs burned from the climb, and her feet weren’t well protected in her canvas tennis shoes. Aidan had on black leather biker boots, so he couldn’t know how her heels were aching.

“If I’d known we were going rock climbing, I’d have worn different shoes.”

He didn’t answer. He simply lifted her into his arms and carried her the rest of the way up the stones. Without meaning to, she wrapped her arms around him and caressed his rock-hard shoulders. Could her nipples get any harder? Yeah, they could, and they did. Within a few minutes he set her down.

“That wasn’t rock climbing, love.”

Love?

“Just a quick peak climb. Only a few hundred feet from where we started.”

“But why?”

“Because...”

He pulled her back to him and shifted their bodies so that Kristen was looking down into a valley rimmed in red rock.

No, red wasn't the word for it. Vermillion. Even that wasn't quite right, but she couldn't find another word to describe the amazing hue.

"Aidan." She breathed the piney air into her body. "This is beautiful. Just beautiful."

"I've never brought anyone else here." He tightened his arms around her.

She turned to look into his green eyes. And yes, they were definitely green today. And sexy. Oh so sexy.

"You haven't?"

"No."

"Why did you bring me? We barely know each other."

"I'd like that to change." Gently he turned her to face him. Her senses leapt to life. "I want to know you, Kristen Ross."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. Only you."

"But you could have any woman. I mean *any* woman. Why me?"

"You're beautiful. And you're kind."

She laughed softly. "Beautiful I'm definitely not. And kind? Maybe, but you don't know me. How can you even say that?"

His fingers grazed her shoulder. So warm.

"I've been coming to your shop for months now. I know how kind you are. How you always take the time to help a child find a book, even when you know he isn't going to purchase anything. How you befriend your customers. Why do you think your shop continues to thrive even though there's a Barnes and Noble a block away?"

"You... You've been watching me?"

"I have."

"Why?"

“Because you *are* beautiful, Kristen. So beautiful. And I’ve been waiting a long time. So long.”

“For what?”

“For this.” He brushed his thumb lightly over her bottom lip and then lowered his mouth to hers and nibbled where his thumb had been. His tongue darted out, and he traced an outline around her lips and then probed for entrance along the seam.

Kristen’s skin erupted in tiny bumps. Tingles surged into every pore, every cell. She quivered and her legs turned to jelly as Aidan made love to her mouth. Oh, she wanted to kiss him, wanted to so badly. But could she? She had little experience. Her body rippled with energy. Sexual, sensual energy. Finally, the entrancing friction coerced her lips to part.

And she was lost. He swept his tongue into her mouth and took possession. He kissed her frantically, with purpose and intent, although she didn’t know why. She didn’t particularly care why at the moment. She melted farther into his embrace as he continued to ravish her mouth. Little moans escaped her. Sounds she had never heard from herself before. In her mind she whispered his name.

Aidan. Aidan. Oh, Aidan.

When he removed his lips from hers and pressed small sucking kisses to her neck and throat, Kristen whimpered, her self-control nearly annihilated. He reached her ear and forced his tongue into the shallow cove.

“Touch me,” he whispered.

“Wh-What?”

“Touch me. Put your hands on me. *Please.*”

Kristen’s arms hung at her sides. So surprised had she been at his embrace, she had left them dangling. A passive participant.

Timidly she reached up and touched his stubbled cheek she pressed her other hand into his chest.

Rock hard man. He was warm to her touch. So warm.

More, her mind shouted at her. *More. More!*

With a wave of courage she didn't know she possessed, she grasped his shirt, tugged it out of his jeans, and ran her palms over the naked skin of his chest. The hair covering him was soft, like the down of a newborn kitten. When she fingered a nipple she was surprised when it pebbled under her touch. Then a low groan rumbled from his chest.

He was turned on. Aidan Butler, stud extraordinaire, was turned on.

By her!

She let her hands wander upward, caressing his neck and then smoothing over his taut shoulders. Then down, along his upper arms, his triceps flexed—

A spark! Out of the corner of her eye Kristen saw the flicker of a flame. *Fire!* She broke away quickly.

“Love?” Aidan's eyes, blue now, shone in confusion.

“A spark. I saw a spark. Wh-When I touched you.” She reached for him and saw his tattoo. “Your dragon. There was a spark when I touched your dragon.” Kristen breathed deeply and tried to steady herself. “You must think I'm a complete idiot. It's just that...I... I'm deathly afraid of fire.”

Aidan gathered her into his arms. “It's okay. I promised you I wouldn't let you get hurt, and I meant it.”

“Silly, isn't it? I must have been seeing things. It's just a tattoo, after all.”

He cleared his throat. “Right.”

Kristen laughed shakily. “I suppose I've ruined the mood now, haven't I?”

Aidan's lips curved upward, his grin denting a small dimple in his right cheek. So tousled and sexy. “I'm always in the mood.”

“I suppose most men are.” Kristen broke away again, needing some distance. “I really need to get back to the shop. It's not like me to close during the day like this.”

“Sure. I understand.” He kissed her cheek lightly. “But I’d like to see you again. Could I?”

“Well, yes, I suppose so. If you want to, that is.”

“I wouldn’t have said it if I didn’t want to.”

“O-Of course.” Could she ever stop stammering?

He scooped her into his arms and began descending toward his bike. “What time do you close the shop tonight?”

“Six.”

“I’ll pick you up then.”

“For what?”

“What do you think? For dinner.”

Kristen nodded, unable to speak.

She was afraid of fire.
Kristen. His mate. Soon to be his completely bonded mate.

Kristen was afraid of fire...

And he was a fire breathing dragon.

Christ.

He had waited so long for her. The joy of finding her. Of touching her. Of kissing her. And he'd found her before Micah had...

He pulled his Harley in front of her bookshop at six sharp. He would simply have to ease her fright. To show her fire was nothing to fear, especially not from him. The bonding depended on it.

But how? Micah came closer every minute. Aidan's skin pulsed with the nearness of his half-brother.

If Kristen couldn't trust Aidan as her mate—

He couldn't go there.

Kristen was turning the sign from open to closed when he entered.

"Evening," he said.

She looked at him and then looked away quickly. So shy, his Kristen.

“I’ll just be a minute,” she said. “I have to close the register.”

“Take your time.”

How was she more beautiful now than she had been that morning? When she turned her back to him, her chestnut hair fell into bouncy waves against her white blouse. Highlights of redwood and mahogany glimmered as she moved briskly behind the counter.

He found himself behind her within seconds, not sure how he got there, his nose buried in her hair.

She jerked against him. “Aidan?”

“Your hair is so beautiful, love,” he said, inhaling. The silky tresses held the scent of pine and wildflowers from their morning in the mountains.

“Th-Thank you.” She cleared her throat and squirmed. “It’s horribly tangled from our bike ride. I need to—”

He turned her around briskly to face him and lowered his mouth to hers.

This time she responded without coaxing. Her body sagged into his as he kissed her. She reached for his cheeks and stroked his jaw line. When he heard her sigh into his mouth, his heart leaped, and he rubbed his arousal against her pliant body. The urge to thrust into her warmth overwhelmed him. His cock throbbed, and his balls tightened. Tiny pulsing jerks ran along his shaft.

Easy, Aidan. He calmed his dragon to cool the flame.

He feathered his fingers along the creamy satin skin of her neck and then began to nimbly unbutton her blouse.

Oops. Too far.

Kristen turned her head, broke the kiss and panted against his shoulder. “What are you doing?”

Aidan caught his breath and pushed her away from his aroused body. “I’m sorry. So sorry. I... There’s no excuse. Except that you’re beautiful and I want you.”

“I-I thought we were going to dinner.”

“Yes, yes. Of course. Dinner.” Aidan turned around and calmed the dragon again, easing the ache in his loins.

Kristen’s voice, cracking and timid, interrupted him. “I’m sorry Aidan. Really. I just don’t... I don’t understand what’s going on here. With you. With...*us*.”

Aidan swallowed and turned around slowly to face the woman who was his destiny. What to say? He knew she didn’t understand. He wished he could take things slowly with her. But time was scarce, with Micah gaining ground every second. And this wanting. This inescapable desire for her. It was eating him up inside.

“I know you don’t, love.” He stepped forward and brushed his thumb across her bottom lip. “But I told you this morning that I would never hurt you, and I meant it.”

Kristen backed into her cash register. “Please...”

“Don’t fear me.” He moved slowly. “I couldn’t bear that.”

She reached out her arm to stop him from embracing her. “Dinner? Please Aidan.”

He forced his lips into a smile. As he watched Kristen release the tension from her body, smiling became easier.

“Dinner. Come on.” He reached out to her.

She put her hand in his. He felt her anxiety, but as her fingers curled into his he sensed her desire for him.

Oh, this was going to be a long dinner.

Kristen followed the tuxedo clad host into a private dining room. She didn't know the Black Forest Inn even had a private dining room. But here it was, small and dimly lit, with one cozy linen-covered table beckoning them. An elegant chandelier cast delicate light about the small room. Candles were noticeably absent, thank God, and in the center of the table was a budvase that held one long stemmed yellow rose.

Kristen felt underdressed in her white blouse, khaki pants, and canvas shoes. Aidan wore jeans and a white button down. His gorgeous hair was pulled back at his neck. Casual, but deliciously sexy. He looked like he belonged here.

She watched as he slipped the host a folded bill and was surprised when the man left before seating them.

When the door closed and they were alone, Aidan lifted the yellow rose from the vase, smelled it, and then held the soft petals to Kristen's lips and lightly caressed her with them.

Kristen closed her eyes and inhaled the floral perfume. Yellow roses. In her dream he said she smelled like yellow roses. All roses smelled the same. How did he know the difference?

“Shall we?”

She opened her eyes. The rose was back in the vase, and he held out her chair for her.

“I had all the candles removed,” Aidan said. “I know you don’t like fire.”

“That was thoughtful of you.” Kristen trembled as she sat down. She looked at her lap. This was all so strange. So surreal. Here she was with the object of her fantasies, and he seemed to want her.

Aidan sat down across from her. She drank in his nearness, so intoxicating. His blue eyes—yes, they were blue tonight, or maybe it was the dim light—gazed into hers as he picked up the bottle of wine that sat on the table and poured some into her goblet and then into his. He raised his glass.

“To us,” he said.

“To us?”

“Yes.” He smiled. “To us. To getting to know each other better.”

She smiled shyly. He seemed sincere. And she did want to get to know him. Not only was he the most gorgeous man she had ever laid eyes on, he also intrigued her. He seemed genuine. *Nice*. And of course, her body responded to him with an intensity she hadn’t known possible. Even now her nipples ached, her pussy pulsed.

“Okay,” she said. “I would like to know you, Aidan.”

He grinned, and her skin tingled.

“I’m glad.”

“I like your accent. Are you from Scotland?”

“Originally. But I thought I’d lost my accent by now. Very few people mention it anymore.”

“Really?” Kristen was surprised. “I can hear it. It’s very subtle, but it’s...charming.”

His dimple flashed. Was he blushing? Could he get any more adorable?

“I’m glad you like it.”

“So. How did you end up here then?”

Aidan cleared his throat. "I'd much rather talk about you."

"But I thought we were supposed to get to know each other."

"We will." He cleared his throat again. "I've lived here in the states most of my life. About ten years ago I traveled through Colorado on a bike trip. I fell in love with the mountains, so I stayed. I found Nederland a few months ago, and the rest is history."

"I see."

"How about you?"

"I was born here."

"Is your family still here?"

"No." Kristen fidgeted with her napkin. She disliked talking about her family. A change of subject was definitely in order. "You know what I do. What do you do for a living?"

"I'm a writer."

Kristen nearly jumped out of her seat. A writer! Books were her whole world. "I had no idea! Oh, Aidan. What do you write?"

"Fantasy fiction. And I also paint. Mythical creatures." He cleared his throat once more. Was he catching a cold? "Mostly dragons."

"I'd love to see your work sometime. As you can imagine, I love books of all kinds." She was gushing like a schoolgirl, but she couldn't help herself. "And I'm nearly as fond of art. Have you been published?"

"Only in magazines so far."

"That's wonderful!"

"It's a living. My art has been more lucrative than my writing."

"I can't imagine anything more wonderful than to live the life of a writer."

"Do you write, Kris?"

Warmth bubbled through her. Kris. A childhood nickname she hadn't heard in ages. It sounded right coming from him. Familiar, even. Of course. He'd called her "Kris" in that wonderful dream she'd had. Heat infused her cheeks.

"I only dabble, really. I've always wanted to do more, but the store takes up so much time. Not that I don't love it. I do, but..."

"But what? What's stopping you?"

"I...don't really know you well enough..."

"Go on."

"This isn't something I talk about. It's...personal."

"But you asked to see my work. What makes you think it's not personal to me?"

"Well, because you're published, for one. And you said your art has been lucrative. It's what you do."

"I see." His face hardened.

Was he angry with her?

"I'm sorry, Aidan. I didn't mean to upset you. I just... I've never talked to anyone about my writing. I mean, not *anyone*."

He softened his gaze. "Then I won't push you. But I'd love to hear about it sometime. When you're ready."

Kristen smiled at him. "You know, for some reason, I think I might tell you. Someday." Where had that come from? Stranger still, she meant it.

He seemed pleased. "I was wondering if you might answer a question for me."

"What?"

He took a sip of his wine. "Why are you afraid of fire?"

Oh, God. That was another thing she never talked about. "Aidan..."

"Hmm?"

"I...can't tell you that."

“Why not?”

“It’s... It’s hard for me to talk about.”

“Maybe I can help you.”

“I doubt it.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s just part of who I am. I’ve accepted it. What’s the big deal?”

His full lips pursed into a tense line. Damn, she had upset him again.

“I only want to help you.”

“That’s kind of you.”

“I want you to trust me.”

“I barely know you.”

He sighed. “Yes. I know.”

They sat in silence for a few moments. Kristen sipped her wine, desperate for something to do with her hands. She looked at the man across from her. His phenomenal male beauty—both outside and inside—ensnared her. Why on earth was he interested in her?

“Because you’re special,” he said.

Dear God, had she spoken out loud?

“I’m sorry?”

“You’re special. I want to know you. Be with you.”

Kristen stared at him, flustered. Her cheeks warmed. He certainly sounded sincere. And he had kissed her like no one ever had. She took a deep breath and gathered her courage.

“I was nine,” she said.

“What?”

“Nine,” she repeated, “when I lost my family.”

“In a fire.” His green eyes—yes, they were green now—were kind.

“Yes. In a fire.”

“Do you want to tell me what happened?”

“Yes, I think I do. But I’m not sure why.”

“It doesn’t matter why.”

“I suppose not.”

She finished her wine and glided her glass across the table. He refilled it.

“It happened during the night. My mother and father and baby brother were all killed. And my dog. I was the only one...” Her eyes grew misty. Images brewed beneath the surface of her mind. Images she hadn’t allowed herself to see since that fateful night.

“Stop.” He reached his arm across the table and took her hand in his. “You can tell me the rest some other time.”

Kristen breathed deeply. A tidal wave of relief shot through her. “Thank you.”

“Thank *you*,” he said. “Thank you for beginning to trust me.”

She smiled. Trust? She wasn’t quite there yet, but something felt right. “You’re welcome. Very welcome.”

“Are you hungry?”

Kristen laughed. “You know, I am. I hadn’t thought about it until now, but I’m absolutely famished.”

Was it possible that telling Aidan about the fire had lightened her heart somehow? Or was it just being with him that fed her elation?

“Good.” He rang a small bell next to his wineglass.

Soon a waiter appeared with a plate of seared Ahi tuna.

Kristen had never eaten tuna prepared this way, but Aidan speared his fork into the soft fish and held it to her lips, coaxing. It was delicious. Almost creamy on her tongue, with a tangy heat from the green stuff he called wasabi.

“It’s wonderful,” she said, after swallowing.

“See?” he said. “I told you to trust me.”

She lifted her lips into a grin. “Are you going to open my eyes to a whole new world tonight?”

“I’d like that.” He winked at her.

A tremor shot through her, heating her skin and settling between her legs. Did he mean to take her to bed? God, she hoped so.

They feasted on mixed greens next and then braised beef tenderloin with baby vegetables. Dessert was chocolate fondue. They laughed together as they fed each other strawberries dipped in the bittersweet confection.

What could be better? Quite a few things, Kristen thought, her cheeks heating. *Chocolate dipped Aidan, for one.*

When Aidan walked her to her front door, Kristen assumed he would want to come in. She was ready to allow it. The wine, the chocolate, the fun conversation—she couldn’t think of a nicer way to end the date than some slow lovemaking with this amazing man.

He kissed her on her porch—a scalding, possessive kiss. She moaned as he bit at her lips, nibbled on her neck. And when he sank his tongue into her mouth, she sighed, imagining the hard thrusts of his cock in her wet and ready pussy.

But he pulled back and smiled. He took her key from her and opened the door.

“Aidan?”

He gazed at her, his green eyes full of smoke and desire, but he made no move to enter. Instead, he touched her cheek.

“Goodnight, love,” he said. “Dream of me.”

Leaving Kristen on her front porch had nearly killed Aidan. But she had to trust him. That was paramount. If she didn't... Well, he didn't want to go there.

His nemesis loomed closer each day. If Micah found him... Worse, if Micah found Kristen before Aidan could complete the bonding—

It couldn't happen.

He could have taken her. How easy it would have been to stay with her, seduce her, make love to her all night. She'd been ready. The heady scent of her arousal still lingered in his nose, still flowed through his veins. Oh yeah, she would have let him in. Into her home, and into her body. His cock throbbed. This hunger intensified with every passing second. He'd heard the desire was great when a dragon found his mate, but he hadn't imagined the savageness of it. The complete dominance of his body and soul.

Kristen owned him. Completely.

He'd bent his scruples once by going to her before she fully trusted him. He could not live with himself if he did it again. Relieving himself was always an option, but Kristen would climax if he did. The thought of that... Well, he'd just end up hard again.

Slowly he breathed. In. Out. In. Out. He drove home on his bike. Once home at his cabin in the foothills of the Rockies, he relaxed. Riding always relaxed him. He parked the bike and walked leisurely to his door.

Until an uninvited presence assaulted his mind. His body thrummed, but not with sexual anticipation this time. With fear. Terror. A dagger pierced his heart.

Micah.

“Hello, brother.”

Micah’s voice slithered over Aidan. Serpentine. Micah had always seemed serpentine rather than dragon. As a child, Aidan had imagined his brother as a snake in the grass.

He turned. His brother stood, his blondness a stark contrast to Aidan’s own darkness. Micah had the blondness of his father. Aidan, of course, had the darkness of their mother. He didn’t resemble Micah’s father at all, for of course, Micah’s father was not his father. Aidan hadn’t seen the man who’d been his da for the first five years of his life in nearly a century. Nor had he seen his brother. Yet he recognized him. His look, his scent. The evil in his eyes.

Micah hadn’t always been evil, though he’d been headed down a bad road when Aidan and his mother left all those years ago. Snake-like, though snakes weren’t inherently evil. Since their separation, Aidan had felt the evil taking over Micah. Though only half brothers, they still shared the fraternal dragon bond, and Aidan knew Micah had turned. His father had taught him to hate their mother, Anthea. Twice, before they’d left Scotland for good, Anthea had tried to take Micah from his father and escape with both boys to the states. But Declan had thwarted her plan and had eventually taken Micah into hiding. As a young man, Aidan had promised Anthea he would try to find Micah, but he’d given up after several years as the evil had taken his half brother. While Aidan could sense him, he couldn’t find him. Clearly, Micah hadn’t wanted to be found. Aidan hadn’t had the heart to tell Anthea of her other son.

“So you found her.” Micah again.

“I did.”

“Did you think *I* wouldn’t?”

Aidan sighed. So many years had passed, he'd wondered if maybe a mate for the two of them didn't exist. "I hoped."

"I see our mother didn't bother educating you on the ancient code."

"She didn't know anything about it. I educated myself. I still know very little."

"She's lying. She knows. Her infidelity damned us," Micah said. "We're fated for the same mate."

"Yes, I was able to figure out that much."

"Of course you would find her first. You, the one our mother chose and favored. But you had to know I wouldn't be far behind."

"I had no idea where you were, Micah. I haven't seen you in nearly a century. I tried to find you early on for Mum. She wanted you."

"She wanted me?" Micah let out a huff. "She's the one who damned me. By being unfaithful to my father, she damned us both."

"You're too late, Micah. I've begun the bonding."

"How little you know, dear brother. It's never too late. The woman will choose. Not you."

"But the bonding..."

"It doesn't matter. Don't you get it? She bonds to both of us or neither. And the one she doesn't choose will die."

Aidan's heart thumped against his sternum. But he was determined to present a brave front. "Then I'm in the clear. I see what you've become. She will never love you."

Micah scoffed. "Who said love anything about love? I didn't say she had to love me. I said she had to *choose* me. And she will."

Aidan shook his head. "You don't care if she loves you?"

"Why should I? All I care about is winning her choice. That way, I live and you die. Simple and efficient. I will

avenge my father.”

Aidan swallowed the lump that had formed in his throat. Declan Campbell. What had happened to him? He’d been a good da...until, of course, he’d kicked Aidan and Anthea out without a thought. “How is our...*your* father?”

“Of course, having no blood tie to him you wouldn’t know, would you? He never recovered from our mother’s infidelity. He became a recluse and later died of a broken heart before I was eight years old.”

“A broken heart?”

“A dragon cannot live without his bonded mate, brother. Do you know nothing of our heritage?”

Aidan bit his lip. Not enough, obviously. “Then Josiah... my father...”

“Is dead.” Micah spat on the ground. “He died before my own. Once Anthea left the Highlands, neither of our fathers stood a chance. But while I was forced to grow up alone and make my own way, you had the love of our mother.”

Understanding dawned. No wonder Micah had turned to evil. “Micah, our mother loved you. Still loves you. She wanted you.”

“Not enough, apparently.”

“Declan kept you from her. He shrouded your existence in some way. Even I had trouble sensing you.”

“Doesn’t matter. I no longer care. I don’t want to see her.”

“But don’t you see? It doesn’t have to be like this. You can change.”

“I can’t. Nor do I want to. Besides, all the mother’s love in the world won’t change our fate. I want my mate, and I want to see you dead, brother.”

The death threat meant nothing at the mention of Kristen. Primal instinct raged through Aidan’s veins. *Mate. Mine.*

“You stay away from her,” Aidan said through clenched teeth. “I’d gladly die to keep you from her.”

An evil smirk curled onto Micah's lips. "Good to hear you say that, though it's not necessary. You'll die anyway. And you won't keep me from her. That I promise you."

Micah turned and shimmered into a shining black dragon.

Aidan beheld his brother's magnificence. How could something so beautiful be so evil? He'd never gotten the whole story from his mother. She'd always said she didn't know anything, and she'd been unwilling to talk about any of it. Was Micah right? Had she been lying?

Now was the time. He would no longer give her a choice.

Kristen woke with a throbbing headache. Her temples burned.

Fire. Icy talons of horror crept over her arms and legs, seeped into her head, probed her brain. Pain. Sharp, pounding pain.

Micah.

The name forced its way into her mind and sliced through her consciousness with an evil grip.

Micah.

Then Aidan. Aidan. Her soulmate. Yes, damn it. He was her soulmate. Why had she fought it? Why had she not trusted him fully? Now he searched for her, trying to reach her.

Please, come to me, Aidan.

But something—or someone—held him back.

You're mine, Kristen, a strange voice spoke into her mind. Mine and mine alone. You'll never belong to Aidan.

She leapt from her bed. Darkness still shrouded the night. She glanced at the digital clock on her nightstand. Two a.m. Four hours since Aidan had left her.

Aidan.

Again, she felt his presence, his essence, trying to reach her through the fog in her mind.

Still the other presence lingered.

You're mine, Kristen. Mine.

She ran to the bathroom, nausea overtaking her. She awoke later, her head resting on the toilet seat. She had no memory how she'd gotten to the bathroom.

“Hello, Mum.”

Anthea sat on her terrace overlooking the mountains. “Aidan, darling. It’s been so long.”

She was still beautiful, her hair now long and silver, like a luminescent mane around her wrinkled but still lovely face.

“He’s back.”

“Micah, yes. I felt him.”

“How long have you known he was coming?”

“Not long. I wish to see him. Where is he?”

“I didn’t bring him with me. He... He doesn’t want to see you.”

Her head fell to her hands. “I feared that. Even after all these years, he still holds a grudge.”

Though he felt for her, Aidan didn’t have time to indulge his mother’s regrets. “Mum, I’ve found my mate.”

Fear clouded his mother’s face. “You have? And that’s why he’s...”

“Yes. He sensed her also.” Aidan sat down and took his mother’s hand. It wouldn’t do to take a forceful stance with her. She wouldn’t respond. “It’s time for you to tell me the whole truth.”

Anthea didn’t bother to feign ignorance this time. “I suppose it is.” She sighed. “Sit.”

He sat.

“Micah’s father comes from an ancient line called the Highland dragons. My father’s clan was originally Welsh, so I wasn’t familiar with the code binding your father’s line until... well, until after he found out you weren’t his.”

“I see.”

“Your father and I met when I was a girl of sixteen. I fell for him quickly, and we married in haste. Though I adored him, I always felt like a part of me was missing. Then I met Josiah.”

“Da’s half brother.”

“Yes. *Your* father. He found me, and I knew at once that we belonged together. Yet you must understand, I also knew I belonged to your father. I can’t explain the feeling. It was so overwhelming, and I felt I was being pulled in two opposite directions.

“It happened because Declan’s father’s mother had been unfaithful. She had an affair, and the result was Josiah. Because of the ancient code, when a mate of a Highland dragon male is unfaithful to her husband and both unions result in a son, those sons are fated to be bound to the same mate.”

“I found out the basics when I did some of my own research. But I have to say that none of this makes any sense, Mum.”

“I know it doesn’t. And I don’t know the circumstances of Declan’s mother’s infidelity, but I can say that I felt for your father, Josiah, as much as I felt for Declan. I was equally pulled toward both of them and I couldn’t choose between them. I was fated for them both.”

“And you damned Micah and me to the same fate as Declan and Josiah.”

“Unknowingly, yes.”

“But Mum, I’ve found her. I’ve found my mate. Her name is Kristen, and she’s beautiful. She’s fully human. No dragon

blood.”

“Not surprising. There aren’t many of the old blood here in the states.”

“But how? How can I be fated for a human?”

“It happens, Aidan. My grandfather bonded with a human.”

“How can I share her with Micah? I’ve already fallen in love with her.”

And he had. With all his heart. He hadn’t realized that truth until this moment.”

“You’ll have to find a way around the code, Aidan.”

“But how?”

“I wish I knew. I’m so sorry to have put this upon you. But there must be a way. I will help you find it. I carry some magic in my line. Perhaps...”

“Even if there is a chance, what of Micah?”

“I had to choose between you long ago. It was forced on me. If I could have Micah back, I’d take him in an instant, but I fear his father has poisoned him against me. Not that I blame him, for what I did to you boys. If I had only known...”

“I know, Mum. I know.”

“We must save your Kristen from my fate. The guilt has eaten at me all these years. I’m no longer living. I’m just alive in death.”

“I’ll figure something out, Mum. I have to.”

“Either he will...or *I* will.” The serpentine slithering again.

Aidan turned to see Micah striding toward them on the terrace.

“How did you get in here?” Aidan demanded.

“I can still sense our mother.” He turned to her. “I’m sure you’ll forgive me for not visiting before now.”

Anthea's sad eyes misted, and she nodded. "Yes, I do understand. You look good, Micah."

"Flattery will get you nowhere, Mother."

"I'm not flattering you. I'm just stating the truth. It's so wonderful to see you."

"You'll excuse me if I can't say the same."

She nodded again, her eyes sunken. "How is your father?"

"You mean the good son here hasn't told you?"

Aidan shook his head. "I couldn't."

"Let me clue you in, then. He's dead, Mum. Dead of a broken heart. Same as dear Uncle Josiah. Neither could live without you. Something Da didn't consider when he kicked you and Aidan out."

"I guess he wasn't as familiar with that code of his as he thought he was," Aidan said.

God, what had he begun with Kristen? He couldn't let her walk down this path. He'd have to let her go.

"Kristen doesn't deserve this heartache. I'll tell her to stay away from both of us. I'll let her go."

"Then you condemn us both to death, brother. Don't you get it? Why do you think Da and Josiah died so young? Because neither could live without their fated mate—the woman we both call Mother."

No. Aidan refused to believe it. "There's got to be a way out of this."

"Damn right there is." Micah curled his lips into a snarl. "Kristen will choose *me*. I'll live, and you, Aidan, will die."

"No!" Anthea shouted.

"You'd rather *I* die, Mother?"

"Of course not, Micah. Of course not. Oh, damn it all to hell. If only I could go back in time and..."

"And what?" Aidan asked. "Anything you had done differently would have resulted in one or both of us never

being born.”

“How am I supposed to live like this?” Anthea threw up her hands. “I’m damned as well as you two. As well as both your fathers. We’ve got to find a way out of this godforsaken code.”

“The only way out of it is for Kristen to choose one of us,” Micah said, “and it’s going to be me.”

He turned and jumped off the terrace. He changed in midair, and the black dragon flew toward the mountains.

“What on earth happened to him?” Anthea asked.

“He’s been on his own since he was a kid. He’s turned... evil, I’m afraid.”

“But why?”

“I don’t know. But I’ve sensed it over the years. I had no idea Declan had died so young until Micah told me a day ago. Perhaps he fell into the wrong crowd or something. But you’d think he’d have come to his senses by now.”

Anthea squeezed her hands together. “You know, Aidan, it’s been so long, I wondered if you’d ever find your mate. Part of me hoped you wouldn’t.”

“Trust me, I’ve had the same feeling. But I’ve found her, and so has Micah. I’ve begun the bonding, but until it’s completed...”

“It doesn’t matter. She’ll bond with both of you if she has the chance. She won’t be able to help herself. Trust me. I know.”

“Then I’ll find a way out.”

Aidan turned his back on his mother. He’d find a way to make Kristen stronger than Anthea.

He had to.

Wow.

The man was striking. Light blond hair, long, in a ponytail, and striking blue eyes. Or were they green? Slightly taller than Aidan, and longer and leaner, but strong. Definitely strong. Kristen could tell by his build. And oddly, a dragon tattoo...only his was a black dragon with a golden eye.

An odd current ran between them. Different from what she felt around Aidan, but present. Definitely present. He was attractive in a different way. More refined—and more dangerous.

Kristen cleared her throat. “May I help you?”

“Yes, you can, Kristen.”

He knew her name. Strange. Then again, not so strange. She looked down at her name tag.

“I’ll be happy to help you with anything you need. Are you looking for something in particular?”

“Do you have any books on dragons?”

“Yes, we have a few. They’d be in the mythology section. Here, follow me.” She emerged from behind the counter.

A strange sensation overwhelmed her. Not quite lust, not quite...honestly, she wasn’t sure what it was. She wanted to be close to this man. Yet she didn’t want to.

The strangest feeling....

“Here we are,” she said, finding the dragon books. “If you don’t find what you’re looking for, I can always order anything out of the catalog for you.”

The man picked up a book. “What can you tell me about his one?”

“I’m not an expert on mythology of any kind,” Kristen said, “but that’s a pretty popular one. We sell a fair amount of that title.”

“Does it cover the Highland dragons?”

“The what?”

Had she heard that term before? No, she couldn’t have, but it resonated within her. As a sort of...truth. What were the Highland dragons?

“The Highland dragons.”

“You can certainly look in the table of contents or the index. That ought to tell you.”

“I want *you* to tell me.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know anything about the Highland dragons. I’m sorry.” She turned, wanting to head back to her desk, but unable to move her feet. “Feel free to look around.”

With herculean effort, she picked up one foot and made her way back across the floor to her desk.

A few minutes later, the blond man came to her desk with two books. “I’ll take these.”

“I’m so pleased you found what you wanted.” She rang up his purchase.

“Oh yes, I found what I wanted.” His firm lips curved upward. “And the books too.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You, Kristen. I found *you*.”

“I beg your pardon?” she said again.

“Will you have dinner with me?”

Dinner? But Aidan...

Of course, they didn't have a relationship or anything. They'd only been on one date, and they hadn't been intimate yet.

She both wanted to accept this offer of a date, and at the same time she didn't want to accept. What was wrong with her mind?

He smiled. "Are you going to stand there with your mouth hanging open, or are you going to answer me?"

She clamped her mouth shut. God, she must have looked like a halfwit. She hoped drool hadn't oozed out.

Why not? It wasn't like had any kind of commitment to Aidan. Though he'd been driving her crazy for months.

"Sure. Where do you want to go?"

"I'll pick you up here at six."

"Um..." Her nerves skittered. "I don't even know your name."

"Micah.

Micah. Again, some sense of knowledge resonated within her. But she'd never heard the name before nor seen this man's face.

"Well...Micah... I'd rather meet you somewhere. We just met and all."

"I understand." His gaze bored into her. It was green this time. "But I promise you will be safe with me."

Yes, she'd be safe with him. Yes, yes, yes. Of course she would. Why had she been thinking otherwise? Of course she would. This was Micah.

Micah.

She shook her head. *Aidan.*

No, Micah.

Damn it! What was going on in her head?

And then Aidan was there, entering the store with a jostle, his gorgeous dark hair in disarray, and his eyes green.

No, blue.

No, green.

Micah turned around, visibly tensing.

Aidan strode toward the desk. “Hi, Kristen. Micah.”

“You two know each other?”

“Micah’s my brother.”

“Your...*what?*”

“Half brother,” Micah said.

“Wow. No wonder I had this weird feeling...”

“What weird feeling?” Aidan asked.

“Like I knew him.”

“So I’ll see you at six,” Micah said.

“You’ll what?” Aidan’s eyes widened.

“We’re going to dinner tonight.”

“Like hell you are.”

Kristen dropped her mouth into an O. What was Aidan going on about? It’s not like they had a relationship. No matter how badly she wanted one. He hadn’t made love to her the one time they went out, even though she’d been longing for it.

“Why shouldn’t this lovely lady go to dinner with me?”

“Because she’s mine. That’s why.”

Kristen stood in a daze. Two men—two gorgeous men—were arguing over *her*. Two gorgeous men she barely knew. Was this really happening? Mousy librarian Kristen the object of a fight between two amazing men? Were the planets out of alignment of something?

If she had to choose, she’d choose Aidan, of course. She’d been lusting after him for months, after all.

But Micah...

Here stood Micah. Totally different from Aidan, and just as attractive in his own way. The pull she felt toward him was uncomfortable—so different from what she felt pulling her toward Aidan—but it was a pull nonetheless.

With Aidan it was lust, but something more. With Micah it was... She wasn't sure.

“She’s going out with *me* tonight,” Aidan said.

“Funny, I think she just said she’d go with me,” Micah said.

The fog began to clear, and Kristen regarded the two handsome men vying for her attention. “I’m not sure.”

“Kristen, I thought we—”

“Let her choose, Aidan,” Micah said.

Kristen bit her lip. Her heart quickened, and the skin on her arms tightened as though it were shrink wrapped. An invisible breeze pushed her toward one but then toward the other. “I don’t want to come between two brothers.”

Choose Aidan. Choose Micah. Choose Aidan. Kristen grabbed two fistfuls of her hair. “Stop it!”

“Stop what?” they both asked.

“In my head. I can’t choose. I can’t—”

“Easy, Kristen,” Aidan said, reaching out to touch her arm. “Easy.”

The fog cleared again, and she drifted off as a curtain fell before her eyes.

What was that about?” Micah said through clenched teeth.

“She was going crazy. We were both in her minds, and she couldn’t take it. I had to let her sleep.”

“For God’s sake, Aidan,” Micah pounded one of his fists on the counter, “she has to choose one of us. It’s her destiny. And it’s going to be me.”

Aidan shook his head, sighing. “You think she can choose? Our mother couldn’t. Do you really want her to have to go through that?”

“I don’t give a rat’s ass what she goes through as long as she ultimately chooses me.”

Aidan seethed. This man, brother or not, was not worthy of Kristen. “How can you say that? If she’s truly your soulmate, then you ought to care about her.”

“I care for no one. I haven’t since my father died.”

“But this is in your blood. She’s your mate. You *have* to care. You have to love her.”

“I love no one. And I never will,” Micah said, his voice a low monotone. “Since you put her into dragon slumber, she’ll be out for the rest of the night. I guess neither of us has a date tonight, brother.” He strode to the front of the store and left.

Aidan cradled Kristen in his arms. “Come on, baby,” he said. “Let’s get you home.”



AIDAN STAYED AWAKE LATE into the night, studying the highland dragon legend. The code. He had to get a copy of the code. How could he and Micah be fated for the same woman if Micah didn't love Kristen? Wasn't love a part of the soulmate thing?

The only person who might have a copy of the code was Declan, and he was dead.

Did Micah have the code? There was one way to find out.

He deposited Kristen in her bed and made sure her home was secure, and then he went to find his brother

The code.

He had to see the code.

He had no idea where Micah was staying, but he could track him. He didn't like using his tracking sense. It was an invasion of privacy. But in this case, he had no choice.

He summoned his dragon and inhaled.

Micah.

Serpentine. Black soul. He was near.

Aidan went outside, changed swiftly and flew.

Kristen hugged the hard body on top of her. Mmm, perfectly masculine, perfectly perfect. Sweet firm lips touched hers, a tongue tracing them, teeth nibbling them. She arched upward into the male hardness.

The lips left her mouth and nibbled across her cheek to her earlobe, and then down her neck to the swells of her breasts. Her nipples hardened, aching for attention. And the lips obliged, kissing one nipple every so lightly, and then sucking, pulling, tugging. Heat pooled between her legs and her pussy throbbed.

A deep voice spoke straight into her mind.

“I’m going to suck your cunt, baby. I’m going to eat all that cream out of you until you’re screaming for me to let you come.”

Harsh words. But God, so sexy. She spread her legs. She wanted those full sweet lips on her pussy, that tongue deep inside her.

And then it found her. Those lips tugged at her folds and ate at her core. The tongue flicked across her clit. She grabbed the sheet on either side of her, careening toward the precipice. Just when she thought she was ready to fly, he pulled back just a little, and then began his torment again.

“Such a sweet cunt, baby.’ The voice vibrated against her thigh. “So wet for me. So wet for my mouth and my tongue. You taste amazing. God, I want to lick your pussy forever.”

She writhed, grinding against his mouth, his stubble chafing her, but she didn't care. It felt so good. So good she wanted to soar.

Just as she was about to lift off, he pulled back once more.

“God, please!” she begged. “Please, you have to let me come, Aidan.”

The dark head rose from her vulva, and Aidan smiled. “Since you said please.”

He dived back in, feasting on her, licking, kissing, slurping. And she came, rising above again on the back of her black dragon. Chasing the mountains in the moonlight.

Black dragon?

The orgasm continued, her body convulsing. her mind soaring.

Black dragon. Last time Aidan was a golden dragon.

But God she felt so good. The tremors kept coming, surging through her like tidal waves.

Black dragon, black dragon, black dragon.

She plummeted down to earth and a handsome face smiled between her legs.

A handsome face framed in long blond hair.

Micah!

Dear God!

How did he get into her bedroom?

She thrashed and squeezed her legs together. And suddenly her eyes popped open. No Micah. She was alone in her bedroom. It had been a dream, thank God.

She should have known he wasn't Aidan. “I'm going to eat your cunt, baby.” Those words would not have come from Aidan's mouth. They were too crass. Too harsh. But oh God, had they turned her on.

Aidan had asked her to say what she wanted in her dream about him. Micah had said it himself. Different, but both

exciting.

But Aidan was who she wanted. Who she had lusted after for so long. But could she destroy the bond between two brothers?

Perhaps she should just walk away.

She sat straight up and took a long drink from the cup of water she kept on her nightstand. She'd had one date with Aidan, none with Micah. She was fretting over dreams, for God's sake.

Oh, why had Micah turned up? Now she'd have to give up Aidan. And never even have a chance with Micah. But she couldn't come between two brothers. She just couldn't. She had to be strong.

She got up. Damn, her pussy was still throbbing. Had that orgasm been real? She longed for another.

She'd only masturbated in the shower before. But why not in her bed? If only she had a dildo to imagine Aidan's cock sliding in and out of her.

Or Micah's.

No, Aidan's. It was Aidan. It had always been Aidan.

He was the one who had come to her store, who had tantalized her. Who stood reading magazine after magazine until he'd finally come to talk to her.

He's the one who'd taken her on a wonderful ride into the mountains and to an amazing dinner.

She closed her eyes, and suddenly a cock filled her wet pussy. Yes, the thickness, ramming into her, thrust after delicious thrust. Who needed a dildo? All she needed was her imagination.

She fingered a nipple with one hand, pinching the hardened nub, while she slid her other hand downward and massaged her aching clit.

And the invisible cock fucked her into oblivion.

G *od damn!*

Aidan walked out of Micah's bathroom, his dick still pulsing. Kristen must have come again. This was crazy. He hadn't imagined her as a masturbator, but clearly she was. She'd done it twice now. He had to complete the bonding or he'd go crazy, creaming his pants every time she came.

But how could she have been masturbating? He'd left her in dragon slumber.

God. Micah!

And with a thought, his brother appeared.

Doing a little snooping, Aidan?" Micah tilted his head. "You look a little flushed."

"Where have you been?"

"That, brother, is none of your business. However, it is my business why you broke into my home."

"Home? This is a suite in a hotel, for God's sake."

"Home away from home, for the time being. What do you want?"

"The code. Where is it?"

"How should I know?"

"Your father is the only one who could have had it. He must have left it to you when he...died."

“He left me nothing. I’ve been on my own since I was eight.”

A knife of sympathy sliced into Aidan. How sad for Micah to be left alone at such a young age. If only Declan hadn’t shielded him from Anthea. She could have taken care of both of them. They could have grown up as the brothers they’d been meant to be.

But the pity faded when Aidan gazed into his brother’s evil stare. “Then how will we ever find a way to get around this stupid ass code we’re bound to?”

“Get around it? Are you kidding?” Micah scoffed. “There *isn’t* a way. Our fathers are proof of that. They both died without our mother. You and I share the same fate. We don’t have a fucking choice.”

“There’s always a choice,” Aidan said, hoping like hell we spoke the truth. “There’s got to be a way out of this, and damn it, I’m going to find it.”

“Ha. Good luck. You think I haven’t tried?”

“How could you have if you don’t have the code?”

Micah’s lip quivered ever so slightly.

“Damn it, you *do* have it! Where is it?”

“Who says I have it?”

“You may think you have a heart of stone, brother, but I can see through you. We share the same maternal blood, remember? You know something, and I’m going to find out what it is.”

“I don’t know shit, Aidan.” He grabbed his T-shirt and pulled it over his head. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m beat. Get out so I can go to bed.”

“Damn it.” Aidan moved closer. “You tell me...”

A waft of nutmeg met his nose. He sniffed. Nutmeg, yes. And cloves. And roses. *Yellow* roses. The skin on his face tightened as jealousy knifed through him.

“Fuck! You were with her!”

Micah smirked. “I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I can smell her on you. I know her scent anywhere.” He leaned in. “It’s all over your mouth. You went down on her, you bastard.”

Micah smiled. “She wasn’t complaining.”

“She was asleep!”

“Right. The dragon slumber you inflicted on her, as you’ll recall. And you *haven’t* started the bonding ritual, I suppose?”

Aidan pursed his lips. Micah didn’t need to know he’d done the same thing. At least Micah hadn’t consummated the deed. Aidan could only smell her on his mouth.

“This is how our race operates. You know it as well as I do. As long as she doesn’t tell us to stop, it’s not a violation.”

Aidan knew. And he’d known, in the back of his mind, that Micah would try this. Thank God he hadn’t fucked her. That orgasm she’d had—the one that had spurred him to come—had come from Micah.

It would *not* happen again.

Fuck! His skin tingled, and his cock began to pulsate.

“I’ll get out of here. I have to use the can first.” Aidan walked quickly back into the bathroom.

Wincing to keep from groaning and crying out, he pushed down his pants in time to come again. This time she was obviously masturbating, because Micah was right here.

And Micah wasn’t coming. So he *hadn’t* begun the bonding...

But how? If Kristen had come...

Damn it, he needed to see that code!

He wiped up, washed his hands, and flushed the toilet. After a few steadying breaths, he pulled up his jeans and snapped everything into place.

“Thanks for the hospitality,” he said as nonchalantly as he could. “I’m out of here. Got a code to figure out.”

“Good luck.”

“If it’s the last thing I do, I’m going to find a way out of this. For Kristen.”

Yes, for Kristen. Though he wanted to save himself and his brother, his primary concern was for Kristen. And it broke his heart to imagine her ending up like his sad and lonely mother.

He could have made love to Kristen after their date and completed the bonding then...but he would have condemned his own brother to death, according to what he knew of the code.

Damn.

He had to get his hands on that code.

It was ancient. Was it even written down? It could very well have been handed down orally, in which case it died with Declan.

Aidan had known Micah was on the move. He’d sensed the fraternal bond. There had to be a way to save his brother and make sure that he, Aidan, ended up with Kristen. And he had to make sure Kristen wanted *him* rather than Micah.

For he had already fallen in love with her. She was his mate of the heart as well as his mate of the soul.

He had to have her.

And he had to find a way to save Micah.

He could not condemn his brother, evil or not, to death.

Anthea hadn’t been able to choose, and she’d condemned her sons to the same fate as her lovers.

Kristen would have to choose.

And she’d have to choose Aidan.

Somehow... Some way...

He would go to her, make love to her. But he would hold off on the bonding. He’d find a way to make her fall in love

with him without harming his brother. There had to be a way.
And he would find it.

God, she looked lovely.

“Aidan. What are you doing here?”

Aidan smiled and handed the dozen yellow roses he’d brought with him to Kristen. “Do I need a reason to come see my girl?”

“Your girl?” She blushed an adorable shade of raspberry.

“To me, you’re my girl. But if it makes you uncomfortable, I won’t say it again.”

She flushed a hue darker. “No. I mean. It’s okay. I kind of...like it.”

“I’m glad. May I come in?”

“Sure. Of course.” She held the door open. “Do you want something to drink? I have iced tea.”

“Sounds wonderful.”

“Have a seat.”

He sat down on a lush burgundy sofa and waited. A minute later Kristen came in with two tall glasses of tea.

“Thanks.” He took a sip. “What are you up to today?”

“Just my usual stuff. Sundays are my only days off. The only day I close the store. Except when handsome men ask me to go on a motorcycle ride.” She smiled, a shy but flirtatious smile. So pretty.

“I was a pretty bad influence on you that day,” Aidan said.

She shook her head. “To the contrary. It was a wonderful day. And then a wonderful dinner. I’m glad I went.”

“I’m glad you went too. But there is one regret that I have.”

“What’s that?” her lips trembled slightly.

“I regret I didn’t make slow, sweet love to you afterward.”

“Oh, God...” Her lips quivered.

So luscious.

He stood and strode toward her. “Let me take you to bed, Kristen.”

“I—”

“Please. I want you so much. I need to be inside you.”

He traced the line of her jaw, her skin like silk under his touch. God, he wanted her.

Please say yes, he pleaded inside. I must have you. I’ve already fallen in way too deep. You are my heart as well as my soul, Kristen.

But the words wouldn’t pass his lips. He didn’t want to scare her.

“We need to talk first, Aidan.”

“About what, baby?”

“Oh, God. Baby. You called me baby.”

“Yeah. Is that okay?”

“I had a dream last night...”

“About me, I hope.”

“I thought it was, at first.”

“And?”

“I thought it was you calling me baby. But it turned out to be...your brother.”

“Micah?”

Of course. He'd gone down on her last night. Her scent had been all over him. And Kristen thought it was a dream, just like she thought the time with him was a dream.

"Yeah, Micah." She reddened and looked away.

He cupped her cheeks and forced her to face him. Jealousy ate at his gut, but he forced it away. *Be strong for her.*

"It was just a dream, Kristen."

"I know, but it seemed so real."

"Have you had a dream like that before?" He knew darn well she had.

"Only once."

"And?"

"It was with you. We... We made love."

He smiled and pushed a stray hair out of her eye. "I hope you enjoyed it."

That adorable raspberry color covered her flesh again. "I did."

He leaned toward her and brushed a soft kiss against her silken cheek. "How about if we see if the real me lives up to your dreams?"

A soft sigh escaped her throat. "I really should do some inventory. I have so much stuff in my basement..."

"Hey, it's your day off."

"Yeah... It is."

He kissed her softly again, this time on her mouth. Her lips were like a rose petal. God, he had to have her.

He took her hand. "Show me the bedroom."

She led him to the room he was already familiar with. He'd been here, after all. And if he could figure a way out of this code business, he'd be the only man ever in this room.

Her green silk comforter was adorably ruffled, as if she'd bypassed making the bed that morning. God, she was so

perfect.

“Let me make love to you,” he said again. “Let me show you how great I can be in reality.”

“Yes, oh yes,” she said, her breath a soft whisper against his neck. “I want you, Aidan.”

“And I want you.”

He crushed his mouth to hers and claimed those petal soft lips.

The kiss was frenzied yet tender, passionate yet soft. He slid his tongue across the seam of her lips until she parted them slightly, and then he dove in.

She tasted of orange juice and spice. Of beauty and passion. And his soul surrendered to her in that very kiss.

The bonding...

He couldn't complete the bonding.

But was it too late? Could the bonding be completed with a mere kiss?

He stopped thinking. He just felt. His cock rose in his jeans, yearning to escape and plunge into her wetness.

And she was wet for him already. Her yellow rose musk wafted through the air, rousing his superior dragon sense of smell.

“I want you, baby,” he whispered against her lips. “I want you so much. Please tell me you want me too.”

“I do,” she said. “I want you so much, Aidan.”

He lowered her onto the bed and began undressing her slowly. First, he unbuttoned her white cotton blouse and shoved it over her shoulders. Then her bra, and those rosy breasts sprang free. God, how gorgeous she was! He couldn't help himself. He lowered his lips to one red nipple and kissed it lightly. It hardened under his lips. So he kissed it again, and again, and then he flicked his tongue across the hard bud.

“God, yes,” she sighed. That feels so good.

“Mmm, your nipples are beautiful and delicious, baby.” He feasted on the other one while rolling the first nipple between his thumb and forefinger.

She groaned and moaned. “Yes, Aidan. God, yes. That feels so good. Suck them, Aidan. Please suck my hard nipples.”

He pulled one nipple between his lips and tugged and then added his teeth with little nips. Her hips rose off the bed in invitation. And that scent—that wonderful heady nutmeg scent of her wet pussy.

He glided his fingers down her soft tummy as he continued to suck her nipple. He worked the snap of her jeans free and then glided one hand underneath her panties and between her thighs.

God yes, she was so wet.

“Wet for me, baby. So wet for me.”

“Aidan, I want you.”

“And you will have me.”

Reluctantly, he let the nipple drip. With ease, he eliminated her jeans and panties and then spread her legs. She glistened. Her folds and her pussy glistened with her cream. He swiped his tongue across her slit slowly, savoring her unique flavor. Mmm. Only one woman for him.

This—this perfection, this nirvana—this was what finding your one mate felt like. Every other woman he’d tasted seemed like mere sugar compared to Kristen’s melange of sweet and spicy flavors against his tongue. Honey, sweet citrus, nutmeg and cloves, earthy musk, and just a hint of jasmine. Every aroma and flavor that had ever enticed him lived here in her pussy. He could eat her forever and never get enough of her.

She wriggled under him, and he tongued her clit. “You like that baby?”

She moaned in reply, grinding against his mouth. He licked her some more, loving her sweet nectar. Then he inserted a

finger, and then another, searching for—and finding, according to her moan—her G spot. He thrust against the soft anterior of her walls as she writhed. He loved to finger a woman. Nothing, not even a cock, could make a woman come like his fingers could. Her wetness gushed out at him.

“More, Aidan, more,” she begged.

He inserted a third finger and continued his thrusts, stretching her. She winced at first but continued writhing, her sweet pussy accommodating his three fingers.

She begged for more and he added the fourth, nearly fisting her.

His Kristen was so small, so delicate, but she took it all and continued moaning. God, she was hot. God, she was sexy.

As much as he loved fingering a woman, he'd never gotten a whole fist in. He had big hands, after all. But she continued to moisten with each thrust. Maybe...just maybe...he could give an amazing gift to her while pleasing himself as well.

“You okay, baby?”

“God, yes, Aidan. It's amazing. Is it going to feel this good with your cock inside me?”

“Even better, baby. I promise.” He continued his work. “You want more, baby?”

“Yes, please.”

He worked his fist inside of her tight pussy. Her walls clamped around him, sucking him in, and he imagined how her tightness would feel around his cock.

God, it would be heaven.

She groaned. Winced a little and then continued thrusting her hips.

“That's so good, Aidan. God, I'm so full. It's so good.”

“Yeah, baby.” He moved his fist in and out of her. “Yeah, you enjoy it. I love pleasing you.” He leaned down and flicked his tongue against her clit.

She exploded around him, her walls milking his fist as she came.

Surprisingly, *he* didn't come. Something strange. Did he only respond to her orgasms when they were separated? He knew so little about this damned code that bound them.

He eased his fist in and out slowly as her orgasm waned. Then he let it slip out of her. Her labia still pulsed with orgasm. He couldn't help taking a little taste. And she was off again. Onto another orgasm.

This time he flicked his tongue in and out of her while she came. Her juices gushed into his mouth, and he lapped them up. When she slowed once more, he slid his tongue downward, to the sweet pucker of her asshole. It was wet with her juices, and he licked it, loving how she tightened a little bit, winking at him.

"You have a sweet little asshole baby," he said.

Her body stiffened beneath him. Not an anal girl? Well, that was okay. She'd learn. He replaced his tongue with his moistened finger and massaged the tight hole until she loosened a bit.

"Trust me, baby," he said, and he slid his pinky in up to the first knuckle.

She gasped but then relaxed around him. "Aidan..."

"Shh. Trust me. I'd rather die than hurt you. You'll love this. I promise."

She didn't stop him. He moved his pinky in and out, slowly at first, and then increased the tempo a bit as he closed his mouth back down onto her delicious pussy. As he lapped at her juices, he gradually replaced his pinky with his index finger and fucked her little ass in tandem with the flicks of his tongue on her clit.

One day he'd take her in the ass. He'd always wanted to try it but never had. He'd saved it for her. He hadn't known that until just now.

He continued slurping at her juicy cunt, letting her cream flood his tongue. Mmm, he could never get enough of her. She was his. Totally his. No way could she belong to Micah or anyone else. Thank God he'd found her first.

He couldn't live without her. At once, new understanding dawned—the dragon mating, and how a dragon would die without his mate. No way could he ever fucking live without her. Declan had died without his mate. So had Josiah.

And so would he, without Kristen.

He'd find a way to make it work. To spare his only brother's life.

He continued to plunder her, bringing her to climax after climax, and lapping her into another.

He'd never seen a woman climax as much as she did. But she kept going, never wavering, her pussy convulsing against his tongue and lips.

His cock throbbed, and he reached with his free hand to unfasten his jeans. Soon his erection sprang free. He longed to thrust it into her moist heat...

But the bonding...

Would it?

His body took over. Not caring what the consequences might be, he moved swiftly upward and plunged into her.

Ah, God, what a welcoming sleeve for his hard cock. She encased him fully, so sleek and comforting, and so, so good.

She moved her hands up and down his back, her touch scorching him. He pulled back out and then thrust in again, every ridge of her vagina a welcome stimulant for his dick. She was made for his cock. She fit him like a tight glove. And Good God, it felt amazing.

Too soon, the tiny convulsions started in his balls and raced upward along his shaft.

No, no, don't want to come yet...

But he couldn't stop it.

With the roar of a freight train, he came, thrusting deeply and emptying into her.

“Aidan.” Her voice caressed him like a soft breeze.

“Kristen,” he replied.

“That was so amazing.”

“Yes, it was, baby.”

“I...I...” Her words drifted off as her eyelids fluttered closed.

He smiled. No wonder, after all those orgasms. He yawned. He could use some sleep himself. He rolled off her and onto his side and then pulled her against him, spoon style. There he too drifted in the realm of nirvana.

Aidan awoke, the soft cotton sheets ruffled around him. He sighed, content. His body was so relaxed, yet his cock stirred. He wanted Kristn again. Languidly he reached toward her.

What?

He bolted upright.

Where was she?

He stood and wandered out of the bedroom. Perhaps in the shower? Had she gone into work? Of course not. It was still Sunday evening. He looked at a clock in the living room. Ten p.m. Where on earth had she gone?

His nerves skittered, and he whisked away invisible spiders from his neck. Something was wrong. Very wrong.

Micah.

Damn it! His brother had taken his mate.

Their mate.

What could he do?

He lifted his head and roared, the change beginning. He quickly calmed himself. He couldn't change in Kristen's living room. He'd emerge like a hatchling from an egg and destroy her house.

Calming the dragon inside took all his energy.

Aidan left Kristen's house and then let the dragon free. He jumped into the air and changed in midflight. His dragon heart wept for his love as he flew toward her. His senses led the way.

He would find her, and he would claim her.

He no longer cared about condemning his brother to death.

In his dragon form, his animal nature took over, and he would fight for his mate like an animal in the wild.

Kristen yawned and stretched her arms over her head. Her head felt heavy, as though the pillow around it was a helmet. Her body still tingled, and her pussy felt deliciously used.

She turned to curl into Aidan's arms.

But...no Aidan.

Where was he? He hadn't left her, had he?

She opened her eyes and let them adjust. As the blurry images cleared, she gasped.

This was not her room!

Where was she?

She lay in a large bed, surrounded by red satin sheets.

She was alone.

And naked.

She gasped as a flame flickered in the corner of her eye. She turned.

A fireplace! It roared to life right in this room!

Aidan knew she was afraid of fire. He would never bring her to a place with a fireplace or at least not leave it blazing.

Her nerves tightened and her heart pounded.

She let out a blood curdling scream.

"What, what?" Someone rushed in.

Micah.

His long blond hair framed his eerily beautiful face. His eyes were green today. Or were they blue?

“Where am I? Where is Aidan?”

“You’re perfectly safe here, Kristen.”

“Get some water! I don’t want that fire!”

“Calm down. It’s just a gas fireplace.”

“Stop it!” She curled her fists into the red sheets. “I hate fire. Get rid of it.”

“I can turn it off with a switch, see?”

He walked toward the flames and flicked what looked like a light switch on the wall. The flames disappeared.

Kristen let out a breath and her heart began to calm. But only a little. She grasped the satin in her fists and covered her exposed breasts. Where was Aidan? And how had she gotten here?

“Why am I here? Where is Aidan?”

“First, stop yelling, okay? You’re perfectly safe here. I would never harm you.”

“You’ve already harmed me. I don’t remember coming here. You... You took me, didn’t you? You kidnapped me. You abducted me.”

“I only took what was mine.”

“Yours?” What the heck are you talking about? I’m not yours. I’m not anyone’s.”

But the words were a lie. She didn’t realize that until she uttered them.

She was Aidan’s.

She had given herself to him last night.

Or yesterday afternoon.

Or... What time was it, anyway?

“Where is Aidan?”

“Still in your bed, I’d suspect,” Micah said.

“What did you do to him?”

“Nothing. Do you really think I’d harm my own brother?”

Kristen honestly didn’t know. Would Micah harm Aidan? Something about Micah didn’t gel quite right. Oh, he was gorgeous, and she was drawn to him, but something was off.

“How did you get me out without him noticing? Is he okay?”

“I still have a few tricks up my sleeve that my baby brother hasn’t figured out. He’s fine. Trust me.”

“Trust you? Are you kidding? You’ve abducted me. How could I ever trust you?”

He gazed into her eyes. “Tell me you want me, Kristen.”

“No.” She fought the invisible bonds she felt tying her to him. “I will not.”

“Aidan hasn’t been honest with you. You don’t know anything about him.”

“I know all I need to know. I—”

“God, don’t say it.”

“I can’t help it. It’s true.” She pulled the sheets more tightly around her nude body. Her body was for Aidan and no one else. “I *love* him. I’ve loved him since he first walked into my bookstore.”

Micah sneered. “That’s crap. You are equally fated for me.”

“What the heck are you talking about?”

Kristen’s nerves skittered across her skin. God, she wanted some clothes. She wanted to get out of here. Most of all, she wanted Aidan.

“It’s an ancient code, one that binds both Aidan and me. I suppose he’s told you nothing about his heritage.”

“Just that he’s Scottish.”

“Has he bothered to tell you that he’s several centuries old?”

Kristen chilled. Not only had she been abducted, she’d been abducted by a lunatic. She’d have to tread carefully.

“What? You’re talking crazy.”

“And I’m older. His elder by a year.”

“Right. You’re telling me you’ve been alive since the dark ages? I don’t think so.”

Keep him talking, Kristen. Keep him talking so he doesn’t do something really crazy.

“See? How can you love a man who hasn’t been completely honest with you? I, dear Kristen, will be honest.”

“You’re lying now. Why should I believe anything you say?”

“Feel me, Kristen.” He drew nearer. “Feel the bond between us, and know that I will never lie to you.”

She couldn’t deny a bond. It pulled at her. He was attractive. So very attractive. Similar and yet completely different from Aidan.

And yes, she was drawn to him. In a way she couldn’t quite describe or understand. It was a desire yet it wasn’t. A lust, yet not. So very different from the desire and lust that Aidan inspired.

She’d just met Micah. Had he come to her store months ago, would she be feeling for him what she felt for Aidan?

“Don’t you wonder,” Micah continued, sitting next to her on the bed, “why you feel this uncontrollable pull toward me? Especially when you claim to love my brother?”

She shivered, both wanting and loathing his closeness. No words left her lips.

“We are of an ancient race, Aidan and I.”

She widened her eyes, still saying nothing.

“We’re scattered near and far now, and very few of us remain. We are the dragons of the highlands.”

“What?”

“Dragons, love. Shifters.”

“Shifters? I don’t understand.” Kristen gulped.

She must keep him talking. Keep him from doing anything harmful until Aidan got here. And he *would* get here.

“We can change shape.”

“Like a werewolf?”

“Yeah. Just like that. Only instead of insignificant wolves, we become magnificent dragons.”

“But, dragons are...mythical.”

“And wolves aren’t?”

“Wolves, no. Werewolves, yes.”

“I hate to screw with your perfect little world, love, but werewolves do exist. And I assure you dragon shifters exist. I can demonstrate if you’d like.”

“No!” She shuddered, fear engulfing her. “Please don’t.”

Her mind went numb. Dragons? Micah was clearly delusional.

Then an image popped into her head. Soaring across the horizon on the back of a golden dragon... And then a black dragon...

She jolted. Aidan’s tattoo. Lord, it had driven her crazy since day one. And she’d ridden a magnificent dragon during that amazing dream. Had it been...?

Yes. It was me. And I’ll take you on the ride of your life if you bond with me. You need never fear fire. You need never fear anything, as my mate.

Aidan? He was near. Somehow she knew.

“Oh, God...”

“I see it in your eyes. You know the truth in your heart.”

“I don’t know...anything.” She shook her head and closed her eyes, hoping if she squeezed them hard enough all the images would fade.

“You do.”

“He should have told me. This is way too much for me to handle.”

“You can handle it. And you will.” He touched her arm lightly.

She backed away.

“Your fate is to be mated to one of us. And it’s going to be me.”

“What about Aidan?”

“You can’t possibly love him.”

“But I do.”

“He wasn’t honest with you. I was.”

She swallowed. How could Aidan have kept something like this from her? He had lied. Well, not exactly...but he’d omitted very important information. And Micah was right. She knew it was true. How she knew baffled her, but she did.

Micah hadn’t lied. But he *had* kidnapped her.

Six in one, half a dozen in the other?

Not quite. Kidnapping was a crime. Lying was not. And Aidan... God, she had already fallen so hard for him.

But this bond thing... She was pulled to Micah. Was it desire? Lust? She wasn’t sure. But she did know one thing. It sure as hell wasn’t love.

Suddenly something crashed through the air.

Aidan stormed into the room.

“Did you really think you could hide her from me?” he growled to Micah through clenched teeth.

“No. I knew you’d come running after her. But by now she’s no doubt made her choice.”

“I doubt it.”

“Don’t be so sure, brother. *I’ve* told her the truth.”

Aidan stopped in his tracks. His blue—no, green—no, blue eyes widened, and he stared straight into Kristen’s soul.

“Dear God...”

“You should have been honest with her, Aidan. She deserved that.”

Kristen’s skin tightened. A mass formed in her belly. What would she do?

“Kristen—” Aidan began.

She held up her hand to stop him. “I need the truth, Aidan.”

“I don’t know what he’s told you.”

“That you’re dragon shifters, and that you’re fated for the same woman.”

“Yes. *You.*”

“But why me? I’m nothing special.”

“You’re everything,” Aidan said. “God, baby, you’re absolutely *everything.*”

“Both of you are so...grand. So beautiful. So strong, massive... And even magical. And I...”

“You are who the universe chose for us, Kristen. The universe is never wrong. I promise you that.”

“But you... *You* didn’t choose me then.”

“When I saw you, smelled you, heard your sweet voice...I knew you had been created for me. You *are* mine.”

Aidan’s voice melted over her, but she stopped it cold.

“But he says I’m *his* too.”

“You *are* mine,” Micah said. “And I’ve proved more worthy by telling you the God’s honest truth.”

“But you kidnapped me. Neither of you is innocent here.”

Neither spoke.

Well, of course they couldn't. She was right. She gathered the sheets around her and rose from the bed.

“Get me something to wear,” she said. “I’m out of here.”

Kristen woke with a start, her heart pounding.
Aidan.

Aidan was in trouble.

In the depths of her soul, she knew.

He needed her.

She'd gone to bed determined to put some distance—any distance—between herself and her two dragons.

God. Dragons.

The bookstore. Aidan was at the bookstore. She didn't have time to ruminate on how she knew. She just did. He was there.

And he wasn't alone.

Kristen pulled her hair into a ponytail and shoved her legs into a pair of sweats. No time to worry about her looks. Aidan needed her.

He was hers. Why deny it? She'd been drawn to him for months. To find out he was attracted to her had been heaven. But mere attraction this was not. It went far deeper. She was part of him, which is why she could sense him now.

Micah was a threat. A threat to Aidan and to her.

A threat to their love.

She jumped into her car and screeched into the night.

She smelled the giant flames before she saw them. The pungent stench of melted paint and scorched wood. Bitter, yet oddly sweet. Thickness invaded her mouth, her lungs. Billows of gray smoke danced like shadows across the moonlit sky.

Her temples throbbed as age-old images and sounds flooded her mind. Her childhood home. The screams of her mother, the roar of her father, the innocent cries of her baby brother, and the squeaking yelp of her helpless dog.

And she stood still. Unable to help. Yet unable to flee as her father ordered.

Just as in the past, weights held her feet to the ground now as her bookstore burned.

Kristen! Kristen! I need you!

Aidan. Must help Aidan.

Still her feet wouldn't budge.

"It's a shame, is it not?"

Kristen turned at the deep voice, similar, yet so dissimilar, to Aidan's.

Micah's gaze was glued to the blazing building. Blond waves fell around his broad shoulders. He was dressed all in black leather, except for one ungloved hand. Long, pale fingers beckoned her.

A sharp pain pricked Kristen's eyes.

"Micah."

"Yes, my dear."

Invisible evil slithered from his pores. Kristen shivered.

"I apologize for the loss of your bookstore," Micah said.

One finger trailed over her shoulder.

Evil again. Pure evil.

Kristen stepped away from Micah's repulsive touch, her back heating from the flames engulfing her livelihood. "Where's Aidan?"

“On a mission. One that won’t be successful, I’m afraid.”

“He’s in there, isn’t he?” Evil be damned. Kristen rushed forward and gripped the lapels of Micah’s leather blazer. “Don’t just stand there. Help him!”

“I cannot.”

“You mean you won’t. Why are you torturing Aidan? He’s your brother!”

“Why do you assume I’m to blame for this?”

“Because you... You’re in my mind.” Her vision blurred with tears, yet indignant courage rose within her.

Aidan. She had to help Aidan. Protect him. Save him.

“You’re trying to keep Aidan and me apart. You want me for yourself. It’s that...code thing of yours. You’ve—”

Then she knew. The facts speared into her mind. Micah had created her greatest fear.

Fire.

And he’d trapped Aidan inside.

He knew she wouldn’t go after him. That her fear would paralyze her.

She stood, numb, her body frozen.

Micah’s finger touched her top lip and eased toward the bottom one. Though repulsed, Kristen didn’t step back.

Oh, the stench. The smoke was acrid now. Dense and unbearable. She longed to escape this horrid place. But still, her feet wouldn’t move.

Kristen shook her head to clear it.

Aidan needed her. If Micah wouldn’t help him, she’d do it herself. Fire be damned. She had to.

She loved him. And though the bond toward Micah was strong, she would never love him.

She summoned all her strength, all her courage, and lifted the lead weights of her feet. Her belly lurched, and nausea rose

in her throat.

No. She wouldn't succumb to the fear, wouldn't let it rule her. The first step was slow, but the next step easier, until she ran with all her might into the burning building.

“Aidan! Aidan!”

Smoke coated her throat. The flames blazed around her. She couldn't survive. Somewhere in the back of her mind she knew this fact, yet still she persevered. Finding Aidan was more important than her life. More important than anything.

Kristen. I'm here. Follow your heart.

Aidan's voice saturated her mind. The flames. Into the deeper flames. Her pulse raced.

Do not fear, my love. I will protect you.

Protect me? You're burning alive, Aidan. How can you protect me? How can you ask this of me when you know my fear?

Trust me.

Trust him? When her building was falling to cinders around her? When she feared fire more than anything else in her life?

No. The jagged edge of foreboding softened around her heart. Yes, the fire frightened her beyond all comprehension. But deeper still lingered an even greater fear.

Losing Aidan.

Pink warmth surrounded her trembling body and blocked the harmful heat of the fire. Her nipples tightened and tiny tingles shot through her. Aidan.

Bravely, she walked into the flames.

Fire is a part of me, Kristen.

Aidan.

Don't fear me.

But you... You couldn't have.

No, I did not set fire to your store. Trust me. I will see you put to right. I swear it. But right now I need you if I'm to survive. Come to me.

I'm coming, Aidan. I'm trying.

Try harder, Kristen. I need you.

She ran through the blazing inferno. No longer orange, the flames burned blue, purple, white. Haze clouded her vision. The roar of the fire droned in her ears, and the putrid stench flooded through her veins. She fought to keep her mind clear of muddled thoughts. Fought to keep the fear at bay.

Aidan! I'm coming.

Just a little farther, love. Just a little farther.

She trudged forward, through the heat, through the diabolical blockade.

And then Aidan's arms clamped around her, and his mouth was on hers. Though the fire blazed around them, a pink bubble protected them.

"God, Kristen." He bit her bottom lip and licked the trickle of blood that oozed from it. "I was so afraid. So afraid of losing you."

"I'm here, Aidan." Her breath shot out in rapid puffs. "But...I don't understand."

"It's magic, love, created by the enduring bond of true mates. You and me." He crushed his lips to hers in a kiss so fierce, so possessive, it was almost painful. No gentleness this time. He ripped her tank in two and squeezed her bare breasts. "I need you. Now."

He clamped onto one of her nipples and sucked her hard.

"Ah, God!" Ripples shot between her legs.

"Mmm. Yellow roses," he said against her breast. "You always smell like yellow roses." He sighed against her flesh, his denim-clad arousal poking her belly. "You're so brave. I know how hard it was for you to come through the fire after

me. You faced that fear, so you need fear nothing from now on.”

Her heart pounded. Fear? No. But still, apprehension drifted over her. Whatever Aidan was—man or dragon or both—he was her destiny. Of that she was certain.

“I need to bond with you. Tonight. For the bonding to be complete, you need to know what I am, and you need to come to me willingly.”

She traced his chiseled jaw line. “I know who you are, Aidan. You’re the man I love.”

He crushed her to him. “Oh God, Kris. I love you, too.”

Her insides melted. “Take me. Bond with me. Whatever you need to do. I know all I need to know.”

“You don’t.” He pulled away slightly, and she whimpered at the loss. “You must know that you will always be pulled toward Micah. And if you choose me over him...”

She touched his cheek. “What?”

“He will die.”

You’ve condemned me to death, brother.

The words seared Kristen’s mind. Had Aidan heard them? They’d been spoken to him.

But Aidan seemed unmoved by the inaudible words. He must not have heard them. But they speared into Kristen’s heart. She wanted to bond with Aidan, but she couldn’t do it at the expense of his brother, no matter how evil he was.

“I can’t come between two brothers.” Tears ran down her cheek. “I just can’t. Please, Aidan, I will leave. You’ll find someone else.”

A mighty wind rose above them then, and in mere moments the fire had turned to wisps of smoke. The pink bubble disappeared.

An elderly woman, beautiful and regal, but with a sunken sadness in her eyes, rose before them. She was dressed in a silver cloak and a golden bag hung on one shoulder.

“Mother?” Aidan stepped forward through the ash that had been Kristen’s bookstore. “How did you get here?”

“I always know where my sons are,” the woman said. “You are never out of my heart, though I understand your hatred for me.”

“I don’t hate, you,” Aidan said.

“She was speaking of me.”

Kristen looked around to see Micah stalk forward. Fire blazed in his blue eyes.

“So this is your lady.” The woman bowed to Kristen.

“Yes, this is Kristen,” Aidan said. “Kristen, my mother, Anthea.”

“And my lady too, mother, lest you forget, since it was your weakness that damned me.”

Anthea nodded solemnly. “I understand, Micah. And I’m sorry. But open your heart. Please.”

“How can I? How can I exist without the mate of my soul?”

“You can, and you will.”

“You’re forgetting. I cannot. My father and Aidan’s are proof of that.”

“Your father and Aidan’s didn’t know of an ancient magic. Perhaps their mother didn’t know of it either. I am descended from the great sorcerer Merlin himself, and I possess one last shred of magic that will spare you both.” She turned to Kristen. “You, my dear. Where does your heart truly lie?”

“With Aidan. I am drawn to Micah, but I’m in love with Aidan.”

“Only because he got to her first,” Micah said with disdain.

“No, that’s not true, Micah,” Anthea said. “One with such strength of character is able to choose.”

“What does that say about you then, Mother?”

Anthea lowered her gaze to the ground. Kristen's heart ached for the older woman.

"I was not as strong as Kristen. I admit that. I failed both of you and your fathers, but I can save you both now. It is the last gift I offer you."

She turned to Aidan. "Bond with your mate, my son, and I promise you, Micah will live."

Micah scoffed, kicking at the ash beneath his feet. "I need no favors from you. What if I don't want to live without her? You would condemn me to life without a soulmate?"

"Are you in love with her, Micah?"

"I care for her."

"That's not the question I asked. She is your soulmate, your fated one. But love grows from that. It has deepened for Aidan. Has it deepened for you?"

"Of course it has."

Anthea's blue eyes darkened. "Do not lie to me Micah. I have disappointed you, I know. But I am still your mother. And I know you're not in love with her."

"I could grow to love her."

"Perhaps in time. Right now your heart is so full of hate for me and for your father and uncle and even your brother, that you cannot begin to experience love."

"And whose fault is that, Mother?"

"I fear I had much to do with it, but you chose the path of evil and hate, Micah. Not I. Do you really think I would have chosen it for you?"

"You chose Aidan over me."

"I did not. Your father left with you. Josiah died soon after our coupling because I refused to leave your father. I knew the day would come when he found out. Even if he hadn't found out when Aidan's scales appeared, he would have eventually known when the two of you pursued the same mate."

Kristen listened intently. Clearly she still didn't know the whole story.

She turned to Micah. Tears wet the whites of his eyes. The bond deepened, and Kristen started to pull away from Aidan to go to him.

But something held her back. She stood still, though she ached for Micah—for the little boy whose mother had left him with an angry and betrayed father.

“Why didn't you come for me?” Micah asked. “Fight for me?”

“Your father enchanted you. I could no longer sense you. Don't you think I would have done anything to have both my sons with me? To this day I cannot sense you. But I do have one gift left, and it's with my life that I give it to you.”

“What are you talking about, Mum?” Aidan asked. “I won't allow you to give your life for anything.”

“I'm an old woman, Aidan. I've only kept myself alive this long with enchantments, and I did so for this very reason. So that both of my sons would live.”

She pulled out a dagger from the golden bag at her side. “I give my life for my sons, gladly. With the spilling of my blood, Micah will be free of his bond to Kristen, and she free of any ties to him. Micah, you will be free to live and find a love of the heart.”

“Mum, no!” Aidan cried.

Micah lunged forward as well, saying nothing.

But both were too late. Anthea plunged the blade into her heart.

“God help me. I couldn't choose between your fathers. I adored them both and was equally drawn to them. Kristen, you are stronger than I. You and Aidan will have a wonderful future, thanks to your strength of heart and character. And Micah, though a dragon has but one soulmate, a mate of the heart is just as precious, and in many instances, more rare. You will find her...”

Time seemed to flow backward as Anthea's hair changed from white to raven and her skin from wrinkled to rosy and fair. She slumped to the ground, blood soaking the silvery fabric of her cloak.

"Call 911!" Kristen cried. "Do something!"

Aidan shook his head. "It's too late."

Kristen's heart broke as Anthea's body faded into the ash surrounding them. A moment later, a swift breeze blew what was left of her into the air.

The ground seemed to shift, and Kristen knees buckled. She dropped to the ash.

"Baby!" Aidan fell over her. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, I just... It's like I got the wind knocked out of me."

She sucked in a breath, and a sharp pain lanced through her chest. Then it disappeared.

Micah stood over her. She looked up at him, at his green-blue eyes devoid of feeling. The invisible bond between them was gone.

She was free. Free to love Aidan and have a life with him.

"I guess it worked," Micah said.

Aidan turned to his brother while holding Kristen in his arms. "How do you feel?"

"No bond. It's gone."

Kristen nodded. It was true.

"And I see you're still alive," Aidan said to Micah.

"Well, we won't know if it works for a few years. It took Dad a little over two years to die without our mother."

"But the bond is already broken. You'll be fine."

"Yes, it is." He sniffed at Kristen with disdain. "I'm glad to be free of you. You were never my type anyway. I'm out of here. If I never see either of you again, it will be too soon."

He walked away, the ash clouding around his legs. A few moments later he shifted, and the black dragon flew over the mountaintops and disappeared.

Kristen gulped. Micah's words shouldn't have hurt, but they did. They sliced into her. She'd always been plain, and she still was. Of course a man as spectacular as Micah wouldn't be interested in her unless he was under some kind of spell.

And what of Aidan? Was it the same type of thing?

He answered before she could ask. "I love you, Kristen, and that has nothing to do with our soul bond. You heard my mother. A mate of the heart is just as precious, and in many instances more rare."

"But I'm so...average."

"Average? Are you kidding? Did you not just hear my mother? You have a strength of heart and character that she didn't have."

"But she was so beautiful."

"On the outside. And so are you. But you're more beautiful on the inside than she ever could have been. And that's where true beauty lies."

She managed a small smile. "If you say so."

"I say so."

She shifted in his arms and kissed his sooty cheek. "I'm so sorry about your mother...and about Micah."

Aidan kissed the top of her head. "My mother lived a long life, and I truly think she died doing what she wished she could have done in life. As for Micah, at least he's alive. And maybe he'll find his way. I hope he does."

Kristen smiled broader this time. "I hope so too."

"I do love you, Kris. Only you. And it's not just because you're my soulmate."

Happiness melted over Kristen. She had no doubt Aidan spoke the truth. "Take me home, Aidan."

A quick motorcycle ride later, and they were in Kristen's bedroom, undressing each other.

"Let me love you," Aidan said. "Just tell me yes. Tell me you want me to make love to you."

"I...I..." She was ready for him. Ready to take him into her heated body, her open heart, her destined soul.

"Please, Kristen." He stroked her wet folds.

"Of course, I want you." God, did she want him. Her pussy was drenched.

"Tell me to take you. To make love to you." His finger pierced her pussy.

"Aidan!" She gyrated her hips, helping him go farther.

He added another finger, and she nearly exploded.

"Not yet, baby. We come together."

"Make love to me, Aidan. Come with me." She curled her fingers around the hard curve of his bicep and pulled him onto the bed. "Take me now. Hard. No foreplay. Just your cock inside me, where it's meant to be.

"God, Kris." He traced one finger over the curve of her cheek, down her neck, over the swell of her breasts and down to her navel. "Damn, you're beautiful. So fucking beautiful."

Kristen's body hummed. Every nerve in her body sizzled. She was so aware of Aidan. His chest was golden, smattered with dark hair. So beautiful. She reached for him, gripped his marble pecs, thumbed the silky softness of his nipples. He groaned, and they hardened under her touch.

She bent to lick one. Mmm, he tasted of salt and cinnamon. So very male.

He fumbled with his jeans until they were puddled on the floor next to the remains of her sweats. She gasped when she saw his cock. Gorgeous, it stood magnificently from his black bush. So big, so beautiful. Her pussy pulsated as she licked her lips.

His lazy smile stabbed at her heart.

“Now, Aidan. Take me now.”

He turned her quickly and plunged his cock into from behind. Vivid colors swirled around her. She envisioned the fires she had rushed into, and her fear left her. The flames no longer held pain and torment. Now she saw only the golden dragon who loved her.

“I can’t hold on too long, Kristen,” Aidan rasped in her ear. “I need to come. Need to complete the bonding.”

“Come, Aidan. Come inside me.” She fingered her clit. The spasms began slowly and then heightened, taking her on a whirling ride.

“Yes, Kris, yes!”

She was soaring again, on the back of her golden dragon. Above they flew, over the mountaintops and into the moonlight.

Aidan’s skin was scaled yet soft, and she gripped him tightly as he began his descent toward the burning building.

You need no longer fear, my love.

A whoosh of his dragon’s breath erased the flames from her memory.

I’m sorry about your store, Kris.

She leaned down and brushed her cheek against his soft scales. “It’s okay. I’m insured. We’ll rebuild it together. Rebuild our lives together.”

He responded not in her mind, but straight into her heart with warm joy. Love.

He loved her. And she loved him with all that she was. Yes, they would rebuild their lives together. Smiling, she leaned her whole body into his. His skin vibrated in soothing thumps. His heartbeat.

The sun edged over the tip of the mountainous horizon. Aidan landed gently and then shimmered back into his human form. Kristen stood spellbound.

He stroked her cheek with one long finger. “You’re amazing.”

She sighed and closed her eyes. “Will it always be like that for us? There’s still a lot I don’t know about you, Aidan Butler.”

“I know. But I swear you have nothing to fear now.”

She let out an anxious laugh. “I’m not sure it matters what I don’t know about you and your kind.”

“It doesn’t?”

“No, Aidan, because what I do know is that I can’t exist without you now. You’re part of me. I can’t explain it any better than that.”

She swept her fingers over his broad shoulders, his muscled chest, down his ripped abs, until she gripped his hard cock.

“Damn, Kris.”

Kristen grinned, lowered her head, and took him between her lips. Like velvet over steel. He tasted of salt and man, of trust and eternity. Of love.

Her hips undulated in time with her oral thrusts as she pleased her mate. She took him deep and relished his groans. When strong hands grasped her shoulders and forced her upward, she sank onto his cock and rode her dragon into the sunrise.

THE END

A NOTE FROM HELEN

Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading *Loving the Dragon*. If you want to find out about my current backlist and future releases, please visit my website, like my Facebook page, and [join my mailing list](#). If you're a fan, please join my Facebook street team (Hardt & Soul) to help spread the word about my books. I regularly do awesome giveaways for my street team members.

If you enjoyed the story, please take the time to leave a review. I welcome all feedback.

I wish you all the best!

Helen

Sign up for my newsletter here:

<http://www.helenhardt.com/signup>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

#1 *New York Times*, #1 *USA Today*, and #1 *Wall Street Journal* bestselling author Helen Hardt's passion for the written word began with the books her mother read to her at bedtime. She wrote her first story at age six and hasn't stopped since. In addition to being an award-winning author of romantic fiction, she's a mother, an attorney, a black belt in Taekwondo, a grammar geek, an appreciator of fine red wine, and a lover of Ben and Jerry's ice cream. She writes from her home in Colorado, where she lives with her family. Helen loves to hear from readers.

Please sign up for her newsletter here:

<http://www.helenhardt.com/signup>

Visit her here:

<http://www.helenhardt.com>