



DRAKE  
SECURITY

2

# SMOLDER

MIKA NIX



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DRAKE SECURITY

BOOK TWO

MIKA NIX

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# FOREWORD

Mika Nix is the combined paranormal alter egos of USA Today Bestselling authors of MM romance, K.M. Neuhold and Mia Monroe.

As Mika, this dynamic duo plans to light fire to your kindle with their upcoming series, Drake Security, featuring swoony brooding dragon shifter brothers as they discover their fated mates. It's a guaranteed thrill ride.

In their spare time, they...oh let's be honest. They're always writing. There will be shenanigans.

To connect with them on their shared social media, join [Wicked Hot Mates](#).

# BLURB

*I was hired to protect him, but will our smoldering attraction ignite into love?*

When my hot headed brother found his fated mate, a deep, aching desire opened up inside of me for my own. Everyone knows dragons are covetous, jealous... *possessive*. I am all of these things, but never more so than when I set my eyes on Dempsey for the first time.

Beautiful. Awkward. Sweet. Shy. *Perfect*. My dragon wants to wrap himself around him the moment he bumps into me outside of his antique shop. Dempsey, however, is not as keen on that idea as my inner beast is.

He hired Drake Security for protection, and he needs it even more than he realized. Unfortunately, we specialize in brute strength and burning sh\*t to the ground, and the problem Dempsey has is way out of our league.

Is he my fated mate or am I just so desperate for one that I'm falling for him too fast? Either way, I'll move heaven and hell to protect him, even if the forces that are after him are unlike anything I've dealt with before.

I've spent thousands of years hoarding books and storing their words close to my heart. Will the love stories that live inside my soul be enough to woo him? Is it too much to hope that fate has chosen him for me?

\*\*\*\* Smolder is book 2 in the Drake Security series and has a reluctant fated mate, dragon shifters, book swooning, ancient mysteries, and magic. The series is all dragons, NO MPREG.

Each book can be read on its own, but is so much better if read in order.



CHAPTER  
**ONE**





## HEMINGWAY

I drag my tongue along a soft patch of flesh, leaving scorch marks in my wake that heal almost instantly. The tangy flavor of sweat and something much sweeter makes my mouth water and my cock ache, a barely human sound rumbling through my throat. The petite man writhing in my arms makes the most addictive mewling sound I've heard in my life, desperation seeping from his pores and making his intoxicating scent even richer.

I tilt my head to see his face, wanting to imprint his expression in my mind for the next several millennia that I'll walk this Earth, but the light is too dim to see it. I frown, trying to remember what this man looks like, what my *mate* looks like.

An uneasy feeling stirs inside of me, and I grip him tighter just as the world around me starts to dissolve.

I bolt upright in my bed, my skin itching and drenched with sweat. My cock throbs in protest thanks to the utter tease of my dream. The same damn dream I've had every night for the past week.

My throat and chest constrict, my arms aching from the loss of someone I've never touched to begin with. My dragon is restless inside of me, making my skin feel too tight and all wrong as a curl of smoke puffs from my nostrils with my next exhale.

Is this what it feels like to be Nico—completely out of control of the beast tethered to his soul? Not that my hot-headed brother is getting an ounce of sympathy from me this morning. While I'm waking up painfully horny and longing for a man who likely doesn't even exist, he's still fast asleep in his own home a hundred yards away, wrapped around his mate and bonded for eternity.

I huff and another tendril of smoke escapes me.

“What’s the problem?” I ask out loud, even though it’s wholly unnecessary. “Would some time in the hoard give you a little peace? Or how about a trip up to the mountains this afternoon to stretch our wings?”

I feel like I’m trying to placate a stubborn toddler—offering my dragon alternatives to continuing to torture me with the incessant longing for something I may never have.

My brothers and I might have grown up hearing the stories of inescapable destiny and love deeper than most could comprehend, but they were just that: *stories*. At least, that’s all they were until Nico announced that he had found his fated mate in a fiery twink of a human. Now—I swallow around the raw, scorched feeling inside my throat—now my dragon is fucking *obsessed*.

I’m unsurprised when my suggestions don’t do a damn thing to calm the caged feeling that’s been growing steadily inside of me for days on end. I set my jaw stubbornly and fling my blankets off, swinging my legs over the side of my bed and snatching my glasses from my nightstand.

“Fine, be as stubborn as you like, but it won’t make a fated mate suddenly appear out of thin air,” I rumble, pushing my glasses on and standing up.

I shiver as the chill from the marble floor tiles races up my skin, causing goosebumps to prickle over my body. My cock is just as stubborn as my dragon, still hard and swaying between my thighs as I cross the bedroom towards my en suite, picking my phone up off my dresser as I pass.

I reach into my shower to turn on the water, cranking the nozzle to the highest possible temperature. At least there’s still *something* that can make my dragon swell with pleasure aside from thoughts of a fictitious mate. While the water heats, I check my phone to see a message from my oldest brother, Lord, waiting for me.

LORD: Don’t forget, you have a meeting with a potential new client this morning.

HE ATTACHED an address and a name as well. I groan. I don't *hate* the bodyguard business that Lord set up and then roped the rest of us into—most of the time it's a nice change of pace and it keeps me from staying locked in my hoard room for decades on end, reading through the endless volumes of literature I've amassed—but dealing with humans when my dragon is so out of sorts isn't all that appealing.

Instead of responding to Lord's text, I switch over to a different message thread.

HEMINGWAY: I'll give you that ruby you've been eyeing in my hoard for the past hundred years if you take this client meeting this morning.

MY DRAGON RUMBLES IN PROTEST, and I roll my eyes. He doesn't want to fly but he wants to go babysit a human with unknown enemies? Sure, that makes sense.

My phone pings with a reply. My brother Valentino's response is simply a series of laughing emojis. I guess that's a no. My chest vibrates with a pleased purr.

"Fine, I guess we're going," I grumble, setting my glasses down on the ledge outside of my shower.

As soon as the scalding water hits my skin, some of the tension knotting my muscles eases. A groan of pleasure falls from my lips as I slip further under the stream that would likely leave third degree burns on a human's skin but feels just right for a dragon.

I let my scales ripple along my back, allowing my dragon to soak up the warmth. He purrs again at the relaxing feeling of rivulets running along our thick, armored dragon flesh. I refuse to rush, taking my time soaping every inch of my body and then letting the water wash the suds away. My cock stays hard, but it gets easier to ignore.

I'm not sure why I don't just give in and jerk off. Maybe because there hasn't been any real relief for over a week. I jerk off and I'm hard again minutes later, an unsatisfied feeling sitting heavy in my gut that I can't seem to shake no matter what I do. Perhaps it's simply been too long since I've had someone warming my bed. Maybe I could take a leaf out of Valentino's book and swing by the nearest bar tonight, find someone to spend the night with and hope that will finally ease the ache.

I close my eyes, conjuring the image of a man on his knees for me, eager to wrap his lips around my intimidatingly large cock. My dick pulses at the thought, but my dragon recoils.

With a final huff of frustration at the stubborn lizard I'm bound to spend an eternity doing my best to tame, I shut off the water and step out of the shower.

After I dry off and get dressed, I send Lord a thumbs up so he knows I have it handled, grab the keys to my SUV, and give my dragon one last warning to try to behave, at least in front of the human, before I leave.

## DEMPSEY

*I REALLY SHOULD GET A MORE comfortable stool.*

Of all the concerns I could have this morning, this one falls directly under the "first world problems" heading. It feels particularly relevant, however, as I sit perched, half of my attention on the young woman with her hand pressed right up against the glass of one of my display cases. I try not to cringe at all the fingerprints she's leaving. Fingerprints that I'll have to clean off as soon as she decides that the priceless jewelry inside the case is outside of her price range. The other half of my attention is on the door, like a puppy waiting with its tail slowly wagging, not sure if it's expecting an intruder or a friend.

The woman pulls her hand away from the glass and turns around, sparing me a brief, tight smile before sauntering out of my shop. The soft jingle of the bell over the door is usually a



comforting, familiar sound, but this morning it sets me on edge.

I slide off of the stool and grab the glass cleaner and a square of paper towel from under the counter. Even the few steps I have to walk between my beautiful antique cash register and the smudged display case manage to ease my tightly coiled nerves a fraction.

“Hello, beauties,” I purr at the items inside of the glass case, the light glinting off the gems exquisitely.

I spray the glass and carefully begin to wipe it clean.

Most of my customers are shocked when they step inside Timeless Treasures. They’re expecting it to be an antique shop filled with dusty, rusted items, the faint scent of mold hanging in the air. They expect items they could find at any old estate sale or by cleaning out their grandparents’ basement. I beam with pride at the streak-free glass, some deep part of me preening at the surprising treasures I’ve spent half my life amassing to sell to other discerning collectors.

The bell over the door *tink-tink-tinks* again and I nearly jump out of my skin, the hair on the back of my neck rising immediately and my heart exploding into a gallop. I’m not sure what I’m expecting—it’s not like whoever broke the lock two nights ago and came into the shop without stealing a single item or so much as a dollar from the cash register is going to sashay back in here in broad daylight just to gloat about it.

I let out a shaky laugh at myself and turn around with my friendliest smile.

“Welcome to Timeless Treasures,” I say, the words a reflex at this point. Embarrassingly, I’ve even said them in greeting when stepping inside other stores. I never know which is worse, that or waving at someone who’s actually waving at the person behind you. Human cringe at its finest.

My eyes sweep the shop, but I don’t see anyone. I frown. That’s strange...

“Hello?” I call out just in case whoever came in is simply standing behind something tall.

No answer.

The hairs on the back of my neck prickle and my frown deepens. I reach up and use my index finger to push my slipping glasses back up the bridge of my nose in a nervous motion that does nothing to make me feel less rattled.

I take a step forward, the creak of the old wooden floor startling my heart into a gallop. I let out a shaky laugh at myself. Someone probably pushed on the door and then changed their mind before coming in. That prickling feeling along the back of my neck doesn't settle though. It feels like someone's watching me. I force myself to breathe slowly in spite of my hammering pulse, listening carefully for *any* sign of someone in the store.

It would be hard to sneak around in here. Between the creaking floor and the fact that half the shelves rattle as you pass them, stealth is an impossibility.

*Maybe it's a ghost.*

That thought draws another chuckle from me, this one fuller, loosening my constricted throat. Sure, there's a ghost in here, and my next-door neighbor is a vampire... Well, now that I think about it, he *is* rather pale...

I give my head a sharp shake before my imagination can truly start running away with me. My mother always warned me that if I let myself get too lost in books, I might never find my way back. She may not have been wrong, but honestly, who would want to live in the real world anyway? Zero out of five stars. The real world blows chunks.

In spite of the heavy feeling of eyes on me still raising goosebumps along every inch of my skin, I force myself forward. I sweep my gaze one way and then the other, ducking and craning my neck to check behind each shelf and in every corner as I make my way towards the front of the store.

Nothing is out of place and without a doubt, no one is here.

That break-in really did make me paranoid. All the more reason for a new security system. Considering the value of the items in my shop, a proper one is long overdue as it is.

When I reach the door, I push through it, setting the bell off once more as I step outside. I stand on the sidewalk and look in each direction again. I'm not sure what I'm hoping to see. It's not like there's going to be some dude in a trench coat holding a burlap sack with a dollar sign painted on the front and smiling sinisterly. Everyone on the street looks perfectly normal, just going about their day in this quiet little corner of the city. I let out a long breath, the heavy feeling lifting as quickly as it came.

"Get it together, Dempsey," I mutter to myself, spinning around and walking straight into a solid form. "*Oof.*"

"Sorry." The man grabs my arm gently. The baritone of his voice in that single word sends a little shiver down my spine as I brace my hands against his chest, noticing the warmth of his skin even through his shirt. No. Not just warmth, *heat*.

I'm not sure if I'm just more desperate for human contact than I realized, or if he's running a serious fever. Either way, I should probably stop touching his rock-hard pecs. Seriously, *now*.

I yank my hands back and sputter an uncomfortable laugh, dragging my gaze upwards to look at the man I just accidentally felt up.

He's frowning, everything about his body language screaming "don't fuck with me." He could be Clark Kent's stunt double, with smoldering blue eyes framed by a pair of thick, dark glasses and a jaw that's clearly made of steel. His biceps are straining the sleeves of his dark t-shirt, bulging from the clench of his fists.

*He* apologized when I bumped into him, so I'm not sure why he's looking at me like he wants to crush me with his fists. My tongue darts out involuntarily, the goosebumps turning to sweat instead as I stand caught in his intense gaze.

I don't know if *I* should apologize... Or maybe I should simply run for it, dart past him into my store as quickly as I can and lock the door behind me. Or maybe this is a T-Rex situation and if I'm careful not to move or make any sound, he'll just go away.

His nostrils flare and he narrows his eyes just a little more. Do I stink? I resist the urge to check my pits or my breath. My eyes are still stuck on his... I'm mesmerized, incapable of looking away. Without warning, his blue irises flash momentarily to a golden color. Not like a trick of the light, but a *full-on* color change.

"Whoa," I mutter, transfixed as they quickly turn blue again as if nothing happened.

"You must be Dempsey," he says in that same baritone. Quieter and more measured than I expected considering the intensity of his stare. Something about his voice rattles my insides like windows in a thunderstorm. *Ungh.*

I nod wordlessly, my mind spinning, trying to figure out how he did that with his eyes and how he knows my name.

"How...?" I clear my throat a second time, my mouth so dry that my tongue feels too thick and clumsy to form words.

He thrusts a hand forward and I flinch at the movement before realizing he's simply offering a handshake. "I'm from Drake Security."

"Oh." I let out a breath, my entire body sagging with relief. I clear my throat and do my best to shake off the feeling of heaviness that settled into my limbs in the last ten seconds. "Come inside." I gesture to the door behind him, and he nods.

As soon as we're inside, I hold up one finger in the universal 'give me a moment' gesture, before skirting around him to get my bottle of water from under the counter.

Little tremors continue to run through each of my muscles, my whole body shivering involuntarily as if I'm too cold, while in reality there are beads of sweat forming on the back of my neck. I twist the cap off my water bottle and guzzle it down in a few gulps, dragging the back of my hand over my

mouth when I'm finished. What is wrong with me? I feel like I've just run a marathon.

When I turn back to face Clark Kent... *er...* wait, did he give me his real name? Either way, he's right behind me, less than a foot away, staring at me with a look I don't understand. His lips are slightly parted and damp as if he licked them when I wasn't looking, and his eyelids are drooping as his gaze roams over me.

If I didn't know any better, I'd say he was checking me out.

"So, you're with Drake Security." Stating the obvious there, but I'm not sure what else to say. I'm half tempted to tell him "never mind" about this whole thing. I'm sure I can't afford it, and I knew that when I called last night, but I figured if it meant keeping my things safe from whoever broke in, then I'd find a way to offset the expense. "Right?" I prompt when he doesn't respond right away.

He takes a step closer without saying a word, and in a blink, he's taking up all of the air around me, filling it with his strangely intoxicating scent. My heart beats faster and my cock stiffens. I'm only human, after all, and he's... well, I already said *ungh*, didn't I?

"What—?" I start to ask, but before I can finish getting the sentence out, his mouth is descending towards mine.

My breath catches and on instinct, I pull my hand back before bringing it down as hard as I can across his cheek. The blow connects with a harsh, resounding *thwack*, leaving my hand stinging, his skin glowing red, and his glasses askew.

"Get out."



CHAPTER  
**TWO**





## HEMINGWAY

Fuck. My dragon whimpers.

“I am so sorry, Dempsey.” I raise my hands in defense. “If you could give me a chance to explain.”

The man crosses his arms over his chest, glaring at me from behind wire rimmed glasses. Eyes the color of honey gaze back with a hint of surprise. “Why should I?”

“Because you need me. I apologize for...” I rub my forehead. What the actual fuck is wrong with me? Sure, the minute I laid eyes on him a sensation like nothing I’ve felt before hit me square in the chest, but have a little class, man. “I forgot myself for a moment. Can we start over?”

Dempsey studies me as he moves behind the counter. “Okay, but you stay over there.”

“Fair.” I clear my throat, realizing that I never bothered to properly introduce myself. “I *am* from Drake Security,” I tell him again. “My name is Hemingway.”

Dempsey scoffs. “Hemingway? Are you kidding me?”

“Not at all.”

“And you didn’t know that I have a cabinet of first editions by the man himself that I refuse to sell?” He eyes me with well-deserved suspicion.

“How would I know that?”

Dempsey shrugs, blowing his mess of brown hair off his forehead. It covers too much of his face, but at the same time fits him perfectly. “Okay, *Hemingway*. Go on.”

“Well, I’d say the floor is yours. You called us for a consultation. There’s a concern about your store?”

At that point, Dempsey’s demeanor shifts. His shoulders slump and he nods slightly. My dragon clambers to the surface

again in its desire to comfort the man. Obviously, my dragon is confused and pining for a mate after we witnessed what happened with Nico and Lake. It has me rattled, that's all. But I'm in control. I know how to navigate a meeting with a total stranger.

"I think someone is trying to find something they think I have. Something rare and maybe valuable. My shop has been broken into, but nothing was stolen. I could tell things had been touched and gone through." He shudders like the thought of a stranger pawing through his things brings him physical discomfort. I understand that more than he could possibly know.

I nod, desperately trying to listen and not get lost in his eyes.

"I live upstairs, so it's very unnerving."

"I can see why it would be. Do you have any idea what they might be after?"

Dempsey shakes his head. "No, but..." He blows out a breath. "I'm not really sure how to afford this. I know you're expensive, but you're also the best." He drags his fingers through his already messy hair. "I'm scared."

My body vibrates with tension, my dragon rumbling deep within me, threatening to appear. I turn away from Dempsey to tamp it back down.

*What the fuck, dragon?*

"Don't worry about the price." I turn back to face him once I'm sure the dragon isn't showing. "We'll work something out."

"Are you sure?"

"Definitely." There's something about him that makes it impossible to leave him on his own. I couldn't take money from him. "Besides, I'm a fan of antiques. I run my own rare bookstore."

He eyes me skeptically again. After my little display, I can't say I blame him. "A bodyguard *and* a rare book

collector?” He arches an eyebrow at me, his glasses slipping a few inches down his nose.

I shrug. It would be hard to explain the whole situation under normal circumstances. With my dragon still panting and Dempsey glaring at me like I might leap over the counter and try to kiss him again any second, it’s damn near impossible to organize my thoughts.

“Have I heard of it?” he asks.

“Unlikely. It’s sort of an underground situation.”

Dempsey offers the slightest of smiles, but even barely there, it changes his face. I can see the beautiful, serious man underneath the fearful one. “So, we have something in common?”

My breath hitches and I force a smile to my face. “We do. Uh, yeah, so we can get things started if you’re ready. I’d very much like to work with you.”

Dempsey nods as he searches my face. “And no more of whatever that was when you came in?”

“Promise.” I just have to convince the dragon to chill out. Has it been that long since we’ve had some companionship? “You’re safe with me.”

“Okay then.” He blows out a breath. “That would be great. I feel better already.”

“Good. Let’s start with a tour of the shop and your apartment so I know where the exits are. You have a security system?”

“A very simple one. It’s never been an issue, but it did nothing to deter them from breaking in the other night.”

“We’ll rectify that.”

“I felt very uncomfortable earlier. I could have sworn someone came in and was watching me. It’s probably just paranoia.”

The back of my neck ripples with scales, but fortunately, Dempsey can’t see them. “I’ll keep you safe, Dempsey. You

have my word.”

He smiles a little more now, drawing my attention to his pretty mouth. His features are unusual—each a little too small or too large on their own, but the sum of them is perfect. His eyes though... I could lose myself in them.

“Hemingway?”

“Huh?”

“I asked if you wanted to look at my apartment.”

“Please. Lead the way.”

He nods, leading me into a smaller room filled with books, the old smell of leather and bindings wafting around me as we stop in front of a door with a padlock on it. Dempsey reaches into his pocket and pulls out a key, unlocking it and opening it for me.

“I keep it locked from the outside during the day so no customers wander upstairs. I can lock it from the inside at night.”

“Do you usually?”

“No. I’ve always felt safe in my store until a few nights ago.”

“Right.”

I follow Dempsey upstairs, halting at the top as I take it all in. It’s basically a studio, and to say it’s cluttered is an understatement. It’s not much different from the store except there’s a small bed in one corner, a worn armchair by the window, a tiny kitchenette, and a door I assume leads to a bathroom.

I walk over to the single window in the space while Dempsey picks up clothes from his bed.

“Sorry it’s such a mess. I haven’t had time to straighten lately.”

I only nod in response, too caught up in being in his personal space. His scent permeates every inch of the room, tickling my nose and hardening my cock instantly. Seriously?



“Would you like some tea?”

“Not right now, but thank you.” I open the window and gaze down. It’s high up enough that it would be difficult to get into. At least for a normal human.

“I’m gonna go to the bathroom really quick. Excuse me.”

I nod as Dempsey slips out of sight. Immediately, I beeline to his bed, lifting his bedding and inhaling his scent. Not everyone gets an erection from the scent of musty books, forgotten items, and...is that cherry? But I do.

A sweater sits on the armchair, calling me to it. I pick it up, holding it to my nose, my eyelids fluttering as my dragon memorizes every nuance.

I drop it quickly when I hear the door open again, and instead pick up a book he was obviously reading. I’m startled by my own reaction to this man.

“Fire and Blood?”

Dempsey chuckles. “Not a classic, I know. I gave in after several customers recommended it.”

“What’s it about?”

“It’s based in Medieval Europe. There’s a war between England and France, but not amongst kings. It’s between dragons and vampires.”

“You don’t say.”

His cheeks blush crimson as he pushes his glasses up his nose. “It’s just for fun.”

“I never judge people’s reading choices. I’m just happy to see a book.”

“Well, if you like dragons, it’s a great book. The vampires are kind of jerks.”

“I happen to be a fan of dragons.” I smirk.

“Me too,” he gushes. “I even downloaded an app to watch a few dragon shows on TV.”

My chest tightens pleasantly with the news.

“I don’t know how authentic they are,” he continues, then laughs. “I mean, if dragons were real.”

“Perhaps they are. Just because we haven’t seen something, doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist.”

“That’s what I think. Who’s to say there aren’t vampires or werewolves right under our noses?”

I smile. “Who indeed? Shall we continue our exploration?”

Dempsey nods. As we walk down, he looks over his shoulder. “It’s nice to talk to someone who understands my geek side.”

“I’ve often been called a geek myself.”

Dempsey scoffs. “I doubt it, but at least you get me.”

More than he could even know.

“I think we’ll work well together.”

Dempsey smiles. “Me too.”

## DEMPSEY

WHAT IS HAPPENING RIGHT NOW? The most incredible looking man is in my space, offering to help me, looking like I plucked him out of my favorite literature book, and for a second, he was going to kiss me. I’d ask him why, but there’s no way those words will come out of my mouth. He must have had a moment of insanity. In a sane world, a man who looks like him would never be attracted to someone like me. I’m sure I misinterpreted what Hemingway was doing when he got close. Ugh. And I slapped him like a lunatic. At least he’s still speaking to me.

I stand back from him, watching as he searches the back of the store, diligently checking the back door to the alley and the two small windows.

“You reported the break-in to the police?”

“I did. They came by and took a report, but without anything stolen there isn’t much they can do.”

As Hemingway nods, I'd swear I can hear a low growl coming from somewhere. "That's why people end up hiring bodyguards. The police often can't do anything without an active crime taking place."

"Right. Steve suggested it."

"Steve?" Hemingway looks up, focusing blue eyes on me.

I wave my hand dismissively. "Just the guy who runs the café next door."

Something about my statement seems to settle the tense look on the bodyguard's face.

"Would you like to see the storeroom?"

Hemingway nods, following me across the store. It's a small room, but it keeps my items away from the area in the back more susceptible to the outside temperatures.

"Anything of major value? Something a black-market collector might want?"

Shaking my head, I glance around. "I can't think of anything. I have a few boxes I haven't gone through, but it's just odds and ends from an older woman who lived outside of town. Nothing major, I'm sure."

Hemingway approaches slowly, eyes locked on me. The closer he gets, the more aware of him I am. Up close, the man is even more stunning. His eyes flicker to mine as his tongue darts across his lips, and I wonder if he's going to try to kiss me again. My whole body heats with excitement and embarrassment. I cannot *believe* that I slapped him. Instead, he tears his gaze away and returns it to some boxes.

"Maybe there's something in there you're unaware of?"

Clearing my throat, I answer, "I bought it from an estate sale. I often buy boxes of things left over. I won the auction for this lot, but it was described as books and costume jewelry. I bought it for the books, of course."

"Of course."

“I can’t imagine there’s anything super valuable in there.”  
A shiver runs through me. “At least I hope not.”

He offers a slight smile. “Don’t worry. You have me now. I’ll never let anything happen to you. Ever.”

His delivery makes my stomach flutter. No way am I going to develop a crush on a man who looks like him. Even if something happened, it would only end in heartbreak for me. People don’t stay with me. I’m dull. Too focused on my work. Hemingway is vibrant and beautiful.

“Do you have any regular visitors?” he asks. “Friends, family, a lover?”

I shake my head. “Rarely. My family lives out of state. I don’t have any close friends, and I’m not dating anyone.”

Hemingway’s hand pauses over an object as he looks up. “Okay.”

“Uh, what now?”

“Now, we decide on a security plan and go from there.” He smiles, making my breath catch from its brilliance. “I don’t suppose you’d be interested in going to London with me?”

“London?” Is this guy a total whack job or what?

Hemingway reaches for the back of his neck, rubbing it. “I really wanted to go to the rare book show there, but I totally understand if this is too last minute for you.”

“Oh. The book show. Right. Uh...” I glance around at my empty shop. I could probably afford a few days off. Heading to London with a perfect stranger, albeit a hired one, is up there with the craziest things I’ve done, but I do love book shows.

When I dare look over at Hemingway, he’s holding a small statuette in his hands. He turns to me with piercing eyes.

“Egyptian. Eighteenth dynasty?”

Nodding, I try to hide my shock. “How do you know that?”

“I’m very well versed in ancient Egyptian artifacts. I spent a few years there when I was younger.”

“If you have something like this, you could have more, right?”

“That’s one of my more precious objects. I haven’t decided where to keep it yet. That’s why it’s back here.”

“Smart.” He sets the item down. “So, London? What do you think?”

Exhaling slowly, I force a confident smile to my face even though confidence is the last thing I feel right now. “You know what? Why not?”

Hemingway graces me with a brilliant smile. “Why not, indeed?”



CHAPTER  
**THREE**





## HEMINGWAY

I grip my steering wheel so tightly it groans under the stress of it, the veins in the backs of my hands bulging and my knuckles turning white. Everything in me is telling me to turn my SUV around and go straight back to Dempsey's shop, including my dragon. He's been thrashing and rumbling since I finished setting up the new security alarm and camera at the entrance of Timeless Treasures and watched him disappear up the steps to his apartment so he could pack.

Leaving him alone goes against every instinct I have, but I needed time to pull myself together. My cheek is still stinging from the slap, not because it was particularly hard but because it was a wakeup call. What the fuck *was* that? I knew my dragon was horned up and unruly this morning, but trying to kiss a client?! That's way, *way* over the line. I don't care how incredible he smells or how fucking cute he is.

I blow out a huffing breath, filling the car with dense smoke. I grumble and jam my finger against the window button to roll it down and clear the air. It's been nearly fifteen hundred years since I've felt so out of control of myself. Scales and smoke at inconvenient times aren't likely to go unnoticed for long. And I *know* he saw the flash of my dragon peering through my eyes, desperate to look at the delicate human for gods know what reason. We've all teased Nico for allowing his own dragon to live so close to the surface, and here I am suddenly no better.

*Mate.* My dragon rumbles the word deep inside of me. No, not the word, that's not really how he communicates with me. It's the *feeling*, the sense, the deep knowing of what it is he's trying to tell me.

I grunt aloud at the single-minded beast inside of me. I always thought he had more sense, but apparently not. Just because Nico stumbled upon his fated mate doesn't mean

that's what Dempsey is. The odds are outrageously low that I would find my own mate so soon after Nico... if at all. No, the logical explanation is that my dragon is desperately coveting what my brother has. At the core that's what dragons do, isn't it? We covet and we hoard, and when we're still not satisfied, we do it all over again. Again and again until our homes are filled with riches and our lives are empty.

I rub my chest against the twinge of sadness and longing that ricochets through me.

Traffic slows to a stop in front of me and my belly burns, the feeling creeping up my throat along with the urge to let my fire loose, to incinerate every unfortunate soul in my path daring to keep me apart from Dempsey any longer than necessary. *Not* because he's my mate, but because he's a client and if we're going to get to London, we need to get moving.

*Dempsey.* A smile tugs at the corners of my lips and the heat in my belly shifts from fire and impatience to something much more pleasant. What a perfect name for the most lovely man I've ever seen. I roll my eyes at the whiplash of my thoughts, but fuck it, if I'm stuck in traffic, I might as well indulge myself for a moment.

"Dempsey," I murmur his name aloud just to feel the weight of it on my tongue.

When he bumped into me outside of his shop his scent hit me so intensely it nearly knocked me off of my feet, wrapping itself around me and calling to my dragon...

I cringe at the memory of the confusion and fear in his eyes as my dragon pushed me to get closer to him, to take him in and pull him closer. And then once we were inside of the shop... I grunt again and shake my head. The look in his eyes when I leaned in and nearly kissed him is almost too much to bear remembering.

The fire in his eyes that followed the slap, however...

I smile more widely and sigh like a besotted schoolboy. So many sides to see in such a short time, and all I can think of now is how many more there must be to discover. What does

he look like when he's absorbed in a good book? What does he sound like breathless from a kiss? What does he smell like warm and half slumbering in the early hours of the morning before the sun has dared to disturb him?

My dragon rumbles inside of me again, the sound vibrating through my chest and into my throat. For the love of fuck, my beast really is on one unswayable track today, isn't he? I can't imagine a few days in London will do much to convince him to behave, either.

"He's not ours," I mutter helplessly, hoping to convince myself.

The traffic clears eventually and once I'm outside of the city, I press the accelerator to the floor, half tempted to pull over to the side of the road and fly the rest of the way. But that would only lead to more complications, so I settle for going as fast as the SUV can manage until I finally slow to a stop in front of the towering stone mansion that's not quite as nice as mine, as far as I'm concerned.

I barely have the car in park before I jump out, leaving it running as I slam the door behind me. My own house is visible in the distance, less than half a mile away. Impatience rides me hard again, urging me to abandon this side quest and focus on getting a bag packed as quickly as possible so I can get back to the city... back to Dempsey.

I stop at the bottom of the steps, dragging my hand over the rough stubble on my jaw and simply allowing myself to feel all of the things raging inside me for a moment. Nothing wild is ever truly tamed by force, but maybe if I acknowledge the frantic tug of my instincts, screaming at me to return to Dempsey's side and never let him out of my sight again as long as I live, I'll be able to get a better handle on them. It's no different than seeing a shiny trinket that my dragon desperately covets... except I usually give in and take it, which isn't an option in this situation.

Each breath I take is too fast, my heartbeat fluttering like hummingbird wings. A hot yet somehow clammy feeling breaks out over my skin.

I pull my phone out of my pocket and check the cameras I just finished installing. The front of his shop is as quiet as I left it, but even that only calms me a fraction. I blow out a long breath and shake my head. Perhaps my brother will have a better idea of how to marshal my instincts. At least he can tell me what it feels like to have a mate and give me a way to prove to myself that Dempsey isn't mine.

My footsteps echo on each step up to the massive front door of Nico's home. Typically, I would give him the courtesy of knocking, but even that feels like time I can't waste at the moment.

I pause for a fraction of a second as soon as I pass the threshold, listening for sounds of Nico and Lake to guide me. The calm *thump, thump, thump* of my brother's steady heartbeat and the fluttering sound of paper draws me in the direction of his kitchen.

I burst through the door and Nico is on his feet in seconds, his chest puffed and a flicker of flame issuing through his nostrils before he realizes it's me.

"Calm, brother." I put my hands up in surrender, and he glowers at me.

"Heard of knocking?" he grumbles.

"Hey, Hem." The cheerful voice of his mate gives me all the excuse I need to step around Nico and pull out a seat at the vast table.

Nico makes another irritated noise before rounding the table to pick up the chair he toppled in his haste to protect his mate from whatever threat he thought was striding casually into his home in the middle of the morning.

I eye the table in front of me with a raised eyebrow. It's covered with sketches of tuxedos and dresses, photographs of flowers and cakes, color samples, silverware...

I blink away the chaos and shake my head, dragging my attention across the table to Lake, who beams at me.

"Wedding planning," he answers my unspoken question.

“Ah.” A fresh feeling of longing twists in my chest while my stomach leaps with excitement. Will Dempsey want a big wedding? I’ll sell off half my hoard and give him a wedding so lavish it will be written about in history books if that’s what he desires. My dragon purrs in agreement, the sound escaping my human throat in a half growl as I clench my jaw and grind my teeth against my train of thought.

“Feeling alright?” Nico asks, eyeing me curiously. “Weren’t you supposed to meet with a client this morning?”

“He’s my mate,” I blurt, unable to hold the information in for even another second.

“Who?” Nico frowns.

“The client?” Lake guesses, his smile only getting brighter.

I groan and drag my hands through my hair, tugging it sharply, hoping the sting on my scalp will jolt a little sense into me. Instead, my body heats at the thought of Dempsey’s hands in their place, pulling my hair while I swallow his cock and get myself off on his taste and the sound of his moans alone.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what I’m saying,” I rasp, leaning my elbows against the table and slumping forward. “What I meant to ask was, how did you know that Lake was your fated mate?”

“Because you think our new client is your fated mate?” he asks, his tone dripping with skepticism and a hint of mockery.

I growl and my skin ripples as my dragon pushes close to the surface again, prepared to tear my own brother limb from limb if necessary. He reacts with a deep, threatening rumble of his own, sitting forward and flashing a set of golden eyes in my direction.

Lake puts a hand on Nico’s arm, stroking his skin with his fingertips like someone might pet an enraged cat in an attempt to calm it down. Surprisingly, it works. Nico relaxes back into his chair, pulling back his dragon and waiting for me to do the same.

“No,” I grind out, my teeth clenched tightly again as my dragon thrashes in protest. “I’m just... curious. What did it feel like? How did you know?”

Nico rubs his hand over his stubbled jaw, seeming to consider the question. “It’s hard to explain. My dragon knew before my logical mind was willing to accept it, that’s for sure. I thought perhaps it was lust. My protective instincts were in overdrive.”

I swallow hard. “How so?”

“Well, I toyed with the idea of throwing him over my shoulder and bringing him back here to lock in my hoard.” Nico chuckles fondly at his own memory.

Lake gasps and slaps Nico’s arm, a playfulness in the gesture that makes my heart ache. “You wanted to *lock me up*, you brute?”

My brother gives a one-shoulder shrug, not an ounce of shame or apology in his expression. “I still haven’t ruled it out, treasure.” He grins, purring the threat in a low voice as he leans in close to his mate.

Lake giggles and nuzzles their noses together. I clear my throat.

“So, that’s it? Nothing more specific? You were *so* sure when you told us.” I press for something more. From what he’s telling me, it’s impossible to know if I’m going off the deep end with jealousy over their bond or if my feelings for Dempsey are actually real.

“By the time he told you guys, we’d spent a lot of time together,” Lake points out. “Do you think your client could be your fated mate?” His tone is far more gentle than my brother’s but it rankles all the same.

“No,” I snap. “I’m... My dragon is going through an obsessive phase, that’s all. It’s no different than when we were whelps and all-out war would break out over any trinket one of us would find.”

“You want what I have,” Nico surmises in the simplest possible terms.

“Yes,” I confess. “But I’m not a fool either. Just because fate was kind enough to drop your mate in your lap doesn’t mean that I would find mine so soon. There’s no guarantee the rest of us even *have* fated mates. The gods smiled on you, brother. My dragon needs to get that through his thick skull.”

I push back from the table, my agitation rising. I’ve been away from Dempsey for too long, who knows what might have happened at the shop in the time I’ve spent asking my brother pointless questions.

“I’m leaving for London. I just need to stop home to grab my things first.”

“What? You’re on assignment.”

“Dempsey will be joining me,” I explain. “I’m going to send you the link for the cameras I installed at his shop for the time being.”

“Hold up.” Lake waves his hands in front of himself. “You walked into his shop, introduced yourself, and then invited him to London. Just like that?”

“I don’t want to miss this. It’s the Rare Tome Showcase and I’ve been looking forward to it for months. It’s rumored there’s an original *King Lear* up for auction.” I practically salivate at the thought of getting my hands on something that rare. I had a brief fling with the man himself and while the flames between us burned out quickly, my love for his work never faded.

“Perfect. You can take the time to get to know him then, maybe woo him a little, see if there’s something there outside of your dragon-y instincts.” Lake has that soft, romance-addled look in his eyes that makes his advice suspect at best, but perhaps it couldn’t hurt. We’ll be together in London for several days and I’ll be tasked with getting to the bottom of his security issue once we’re back, so I might as well do my best to get to know the man.

I nod and push my chair in, pausing before I turn to leave. “Thanks for the advice.”



“Sure,” Lake says, returning his attention to the wedding plans in front of him.

I take a deep breath and remind myself of Lake’s advice as I leave the house. I’m going to rein my dragon in and get to know Dempsey.

My dragon hates that plan, feeding me more images of Dempsey tucked safely away inside my hoard where no one will ever lay a finger on him again. His pale skin will look breathtaking covered in my large collection of sapphires, and perhaps a ruby necklace to drape across his delicate throat.

My cock swells and aches and I let out a shivery breath. It’s obvious the beast is going to make things *very* difficult.

## DEMPSEY

LEFT ALONE in my apartment to pack, it’s clear to me that I’ve lost my ever-loving mind. I’m packing a bag to go to London with a perfect stranger.

“He *is* technically my bodyguard,” I remind myself, muttering out loud as I search my drawers for my passport, trying to remember where I put it for safekeeping. I snort at myself and shake my head. “A bodyguard who may or may not have tried to kiss me within seconds of meeting me.”

I stop searching for a moment, straightening up and pushing my glasses to the top of my head so I can rub my hands over my eyes, sure that if I rub hard enough, I’ll clear away this insane day and wake up just before my alarm to discover this whole thing was a dream. I drop my hands and my glasses slip back down.

Nope, not waking up. So, a strong dose of reality instead...

There’s no way Hemingway tried to kiss me. Zero. He invited me to tag along to London because he doesn’t want to miss this event and he somehow got saddled with making sure I don’t get robbed or assaulted. Then again, I’m not entirely sure how any of this is supposed to protect my shop, which is what I originally called Drake Security about.

I glance over at the half-packed suitcase sitting open on my bed a few feet away. It's not too late for me to come to my senses. I can tell him I changed my mind about the whole thing when he comes back to pick me up, and then tomorrow I can call one of those alarm companies to come install an upgraded system and some cameras around the shop for me. That's the logical thing to do, and I've always prided myself on being logical.

I yank open the next drawer down on my dresser and see the navy blue of my passport book staring back at me. I pick it up and clutch it tightly in my hand, feeling the outline of the raised emblem against my palm. I can put it away again and call this whole thing off, or I can do something completely out of character and follow my sexy, possibly insane bodyguard to London. Maybe I'm insane too. This is very Edgar Allen Poe of me. I snort a laugh at my own joke, pushing my glasses back into place after they slide down my nose.

Before I have the chance to even weigh the pros and cons of either decision, my feet are carrying me across the short distance to my bed and my passport is tumbling onto the mattress right next to my suitcase.

*I've never been able to resist rare books,* I reason as I finish filling my bag with enough clothes to last a week, leaving plenty of space for anything I might be lucky enough to bring home with me.

I jump when my cell phone vibrates in my back pocket. Pulling it out, I see an unknown local number filling the screen.

"Hello?" I answer.

"I'm outside." Even over the phone, the deep tone of his voice seems to vibrate through my bones like a struck tuning fork.

"Okay. Um, I just realized that I don't even have a plane ticket. That seems like a pretty big problem."

"It's not," he says, and for some reason I can't explain, I believe him.

“Okay, I’ll be right down.”

“I’ll be here,” he says, and the words have so much weight that a hot shiver runs down my spine.

“Stop being weird,” I groan out loud, shaking my head at myself after I end the call.

I stuff my phone back into one pocket and put my wallet and passport in the other, then close up my suitcase and heave it off the bed. It thunks down each step on my way down. I pause inside my shop and look around at all of my precious things.

Hemingway *did* install a few cameras and an alarm before he left, and he assured me that his brothers will respond to any alert that might come while we’re away. I doubt whoever broke in will even come back. If they *were* looking for something specific, they clearly didn’t find it, so why come back?

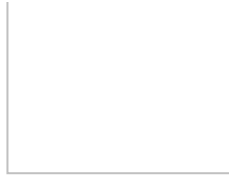
Everything will be fine while I’m gone...

I look towards the door and spot Hemingway leaning against the outside of the building. My skin warms and I huff out another laugh at myself.

And maybe when I get home, I’ll make an appointment to get my head examined because I’ve clearly lost my entire mind.

CHAPTER  
**FOUR**





## HEMINGWAY

The moment I lay eyes on Dempsey again, my heart flutters, my stomach flips, and my dragon surges to the surface.

“I know, bud. Be cool, though? If we want Dempsey to like us, we gotta lay low.”

I feel the resentful grumble as my dragon settles down with a pout. I get it—I’ve never felt so physically drawn to another person. It’s unnerving and intoxicating at the same time. I just need to remember that my dragon is wrapped up in a fantasy.

Dempsey opens the back door, lifting his suitcase in and glancing at me before joining me in the front. As he buckles his seatbelt, stealing another glance, I fight back the ripples threatening to break through my skin. He’s uncomfortable.

“Is something wrong?”

Dempsey shakes his head. “Not really, no.”

“But?”

“I guess I’m just wondering how my shop will be safe while I’m gone.”

“My brothers are monitoring the security system. They’ll be there at the first sign of trouble.”

“Won’t that take a while?”

I smile, wishing I could tell him why he doesn’t need to worry, but we definitely aren’t there yet. “Trust me, Dempsey. There’s a reason our firm has such a stellar reputation. Nothing will happen.”

Dempsey holds my gaze for a moment before gracing me with a soft smile. “Right. I need to remember that. I’ve never been in a situation like this.”

Resisting the urge to touch him somewhere—anywhere—I put the car in drive instead. “Let’s enjoy London for a few days. You do have a passport, yes?”

“Oh yes. I travel often to shows and auctions.”

“As do I.”

As we drive, I notice Dempsey fidgeting a lot, picking at imaginary lint on his pants or at a cuticle. He’s nervous with me, and I can’t have that.

“How long have you had your shop?”

“Oh.” He chuckles, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose. Adorable. “Ten years or so now.”

“That’s incredible. I’m sad I never dropped in.”

“I guess if you’re a collector yourself you probably don’t need to.”

“I focus on books mostly. I used to be into furniture and rare artifacts, but something about books... There’s nothing like them.”

I catch Dempsey glancing at me. “I feel the same way. It’s the only path to immortality that I know of.”

My dragon reacts to that statement, nudging me as if to say I should tell him the truth.

*Not yet, boy.*

“Yes, I see your point. For example, I heard there might be a first edition King Lear. Holding something in my hands that Shakespeare himself did, all these years later when he no longer can...” I smile. “It is a form of immortality.”

He lights up then. “Right. Can you imagine how many amazing books you could own and read if you never had to die?”

I smile, wishing I could tell him how amazing it is.

“You probably think I’m such a weirdo.”

“No,” I reply quickly. “I feel the same way. Book lovers are a special breed.”

“We are. The other stuff I procure is mostly to sell, but the books are mine. Guess I’m a book hoarder.” He chuckles but my chest tightens. “Did I say something wrong?” Dempsey asks.

“No. Not at all. I’m definitely a book hoarder.”

He smiles again, and as I stop at a light, I can barely tear my eyes from him.

“So, who is your favorite author?” he asks. “Shakespeare?”

“Uh, definitely top three. I like Wilde and Austen as well.”

“Ah, but not Hemingway?”

Chuckling, I shake my head. “He’s on the list but not at the top.”

“Fair. Don’t you think it would be incredible to sit at a table with Wilde and pick his brain? Or even better, have all our favorites around a large table in a dark study, sipping cognac and smoking cigars or pipes and waxing poetic on literature?” Dempsey laughs, his cheeks tinged slightly pink. “I only feel comfortable sharing ridiculous fantasies with a fellow book lover.”

“Not ridiculous at all. If there is a heaven, that would be it.”

Dempsey nods, shifting his gaze to his hands. I wish I could tell him I have sat at tables with both Wilde and Shakespeare. I stole Earnest’s name after a brief meeting with the man since I felt it was fitting for the next iteration of my life. Oh, the things I could share with Dempsey.

Lost in my thoughts, I nearly miss the turn to the private airport where the plane is waiting. I take a hard right, smiling as Dempsey gazes out the window with wonder on his face. As we pull into the hangar where the Drake Security plane is being fueled, he turns and looks at me.

“You have your own plane?”

“Well, it isn’t mine. It’s owned equally between me and my brothers.”

“Hmm. Guess the bodyguard business is profitable.”

I chuckle, shutting the car off. “Along with other investments, yes. Ready?”

He nods, studying me with curiosity as he slides from the passenger seat. I get our bags from the back, handing them over to the baggage handler.

“Mr. Drake.”

“Hello, Mike. This is my guest, Dempsey Ryan.”

“Welcome, Mr. Ryan,” Mike says.

This seems to fluster Dempsey, who nods, keeping his eyes trained down. Reaching out, I place my hand on his lower back to lead him to the stairs, reveling in the momentary contact. Once we’re on the plane and buckled in, sitting across from each other, Dempsey seems to settle a bit.

“Another new situation.”

“What?”

“A private plane, doting staff, people calling me Mr. Ryan like I’m important. Is this your normal life?”

“No. I don’t always take our private plane to travel, but with taking on your case, I didn’t want to miss the start of the show.”

“Do you have, um, staff, at your home?”

“Absolutely not.” I clear my throat. “I don’t enjoy people in my space except family and those specifically invited in.”

“Ah. I’m guessing you don’t live in a cramped apartment with drafty windows above an antique store.”

My dragon stirs within me, restless and agitated. Is he trying to find incompatibilities?

“I don’t, but that doesn’t really matter, does it?”

Dempsey shrugs. “No, I guess not.”

Our flight attendant comes out to offer us coffee or drinks before takeoff which we both refuse. As the plane taxis and



ascends, I notice how stiff Dempsey's demeanor is, his knuckles white from clenching the seat's arms.

"Are you alright?"

He exhales in a huff, nodding at me. "Sorry. I'm always nervous at takeoff and landing."

"You are perfectly safe with me, Dempsey."

He nods, but I see the doubt in his eyes. He doesn't know that if anything went wrong with this plane, I'd shift and have him safely in my arms within seconds.

After the plane levels off, Dempsey seems to relax, sinking into the soft leather of the chair. "So, um, how old are you, Hemingway?"

"What?"

His brow crinkles. "Sorry. That was forward, but I was wondering how old you are. I'm only asking because you look younger than me, but the way you carry yourself seems like you're older."

"Oh. Right. I'm, uh..." My brain struggles to find the mortal age I should be right now. "Forty. I think."

He laughs. "You lose track too? I'm forty-two. I mean, forty plus two. Not forty also."

I smile as he fumbles over his words. "I understand."

"Anyway, you look amazing for forty. Must be the gym time."

"I don't go to the gym."

Dempsey scoffs. "Well, that's hardly fair. You were just gifted with all that muscle?"

My dragon chuffs with pride, filling my chest with the sensation. "Uh, yes. It's genetic."

"Wow. I'm not sure I even have muscles."

"Of course you do. They're required for movement." He looks at me with an odd expression before I chuckle. "I'm teasing."

“Oh. Right.”

“But, Dempsey, there are many characteristics more attractive than muscles.”

“I think that was a compliment.”

“It was.”

His cheeks flush again, tempting me to taste those lips, but I quickly remind myself that he’s a client and that I’m going to take the time to get to know him before I let my dragon act impulsively again.

He glances outside for a moment before turning his pretty eyes back to me. “Are you, um, married? Kids?”

“Neither.”

“Same.”

“I know. I read your bio.”

“Right.” He picks at his nail bed again. “Do you, um, do you like, I mean, do you date or are you, um...”

Barely holding back my grin, I just tilt my head and wait for him to find his words.

“It’s none of my business,” he says.

“You can ask me anything you like. I’d like to get to know you since we’ll be working so closely together.”

Dempsey blows out a breath, shifting the hair over his forehead. “I guess, I wondered how you felt about men who date men. Because I do. I date men. Well, theoretically anyway. Not that I get much action... I mean, I’m gay. Is that, um, an issue for you?”

“Why would it be an issue?”

“Some people are like that. Not so much where we live, but every now and then it rears its ugly head.”

The very thought of someone mistreating Dempsey has the back of my neck rippling and smoke threatening to billow from my nose.

“It infuriates me that some people will mistreat another simply for who they love.” I exhale slowly to calm my shaking voice. “But it’s not an issue for me. I’m also gay.”

Dempsey’s eyes go wide for a moment as he mutters something under his breath too low for even my sensitive ears to pick up.

“You seem surprised.”

He nods. “You’re an enigma, Hemingway. Gym rat on the outside, book nerd on the inside, and you’re even gay. How are you not in a relationship?”

“I’m rather picky.”

“Of course. Yeah. That makes sense. You should be.”

“So should you, Dempsey. I’ve always believed in waiting until it’s exactly right.”

The light in his eyes dims slightly, and I wonder what I said to cause it. “Yeah. Me too.”

Dempsey spends the remainder of the flight sleeping while I read a book. I could be everything Dempsey needs, but I have to figure out a way to woo him without overwhelming him, and definitely without going all dragon on him. He might not be my mate, but he could be a great partner. As my dragon rumbles with frustration deep within me, I sigh. This is going to be a lot harder than I anticipated.

## DEMPSEY

I FEEL like I need a stick-it note dangling in front of my face reminding me that not only is Hemingway a dream of a man, but he is also my bodyguard and miles out of my league. The more time I spend obsessively analyzing that near kiss, I’m pretty sure it wasn’t a kiss attempt at all. Maybe I had something on my face he was going to brush off. Yes. That must be it. A man like him looking at me with any kind of interest just doesn’t make sense.

He ordered a car to take us to the hotel, but insists he’s not so loaded that he travels in luxury like this all the time. Okay.

Sure. And I'm F. Scott Fitzgerald. Still...it is very nice. I feel kind of special even though I know this is nothing more than a business trip between two men with shared interests.

Two *gay* men.

Gazing outside, I exhale as softly as possible. I can't let him get under my skin. I'm acting like a teenager with a crush. I need to hold myself together and focus on why we're here, and most importantly, why someone is stalking me.

"Here we are," Hemingway says as the driver pulls into the lot of one of the city's finest hotels.

I know this because it's been on my list of places to visit, situated within steps of Hatchards, London's oldest bookstore.

"You can't be serious, Hemingway."

"About?"

"This hotel. Really?"

He frowns. "You don't like it?"

"Of course I like it. I just can't believe I'll be staying here."

"Oh." He smiles. "I know the general manager. I come to London so often that I pretty much have a standing room reservation. I was able to get you a room as well. Your own room."

"I'm not sure I can repay this."

"Oh please, no. It's on me. I dragged you here, after all."

"I can't accept that."

"Dempsey, it's a business expense. Shall we go inside?"

I nod, still feeling slightly uncomfortable. The Eloise is the very definition of luxury while still maintaining a welcoming charm to it. As we enter through gold and glass doors held open by formally dressed doormen, my jaw drops. The pictures online do not do it justice.

Hemingway, apparently completely at home in this environment, struts to the front desk while I trail behind him

like a child.

“Welcome back, Mr. Drake,” the young man at the desk greets. “How was your flight?”

“Pleasant, thank you, William.” Hemingway turns in my direction, motioning for me to join him.

I can feel my cheeks burn with embarrassment over my shabby work clothes. I force a polite smile to my face.

“This is Mr. Ryan. You should have a reservation for him as well.”

William clicks on the computer keys, smiling. “Ah, yes. It’s an adjoining room. Will that be alright?”

“Yes, fine,” Hemingway says.

“Perfect.” William does a lot more clicking, his face prim but dashing. More than once, his eyes flick up to Hemingway, and I see an emotion I’ve experienced often in them. Longing. Hemingway doesn’t seem to notice.

He hands Hemingway an envelope. “Mr. Easton wishes to extend a dinner reservation for two in our restaurant. Your keys are inside the envelope. Level four. A porter will bring your things up shortly.”

“Thank you, William.”

Hemingway gestures towards the elevator, but I notice as William’s eyes linger on me.

I nod my thanks and follow my bodyguard. Inside the elevator, I lean against the wall.

“Are you feeling okay?” Hemingway asks.

“I am. A little overwhelmed maybe, but in a good way. You might think it’s silly, but I’ve always wished I could stay here. I’ve come to London quite a few times too, but I always go for the economy stay.”

“Smart,” he says. “Keeping overhead down is important. If this trip was for my bookstore, and without my friend Mr. Easton, I would choose a less expensive location as well.”

“It’s not for your bookstore?”

“Well, it is, but since you’re here, I’ll charge it to Drake Security.” He chuckles. “Lord won’t notice.”

“Lord?”

“He’s my oldest brother. The business was his idea.”

“I see. Maybe I booked this whole thing with him?”

“Probably. He answers the phone most of the time. Until recently. We hired someone.”

“Are you close?”

“Yes. We live in a compound together.”

I crinkle my brow. “I’m sorry. You live with your brother?”

“Oh no.” Hemingway chuckles. “We have a huge plot of land just outside the city center. We each have our own homes.”

“Ah. How many of you are there?”

“Five. Lord, Nico, Arson, Valentino, and, of course, myself. Well, six now with Lake, Nico’s ma...” I frown and Hemingway clears his throat. “*Fiancé*,” he corrects himself.

“Your parents make interesting name choices.”

He laughs but says nothing else. The doors open and we walk down a hall that looks like it should be in Buckingham Palace. As we reach rooms 403 and 404, Hemingway hands me my key.

“It’s late, how are you feeling?” he asks. “Do you want to sleep or are you hungry? There’s a rare bookstore just a few blocks down from here, but I’m sure it’s not open at this hour.”

“Hatchards. I’m familiar. We should definitely go tomorrow.” I press the key to the card reader and listen to it click open, noticing Hemingway is still standing in the hallway, gazing in my direction. “I slept on the plane, so I’m actually feeling pretty punchy at the moment.”

Hemingway smiles and nods. “What about food then?”

My stomach rumbles right on cue, and I let out an awkward laugh as I place my hand over it. “I could eat.”

“Perfect. Why don’t you drop your things off and get dressed and we can find somewhere that’s still open.”

“Do you mind if I take a few minutes to shower too?” I ask.

“Of course not. Take your time,” he assures me, his gaze roaming over me again in a way that heats my skin.

I tug my bottom lip between my teeth. “What should I wear?”

“Whatever you feel comfortable in,” he answers.

“Uh, well, I don’t have super nice clothes. I wasn’t expecting to—”

“Wear what you want, Dempsey. Be yourself. That’s more than good enough.”

I open my mouth to say something. What, I have no idea, but apparently my brain can’t think of anything anyway, so I simply nod and enter my room with a small wave.

Inside, my jaw drops for the second time. The room is... opulent. It brings to mind our earlier conversation about Fitzgerald again. I think Gatsby himself would feel right at home here.

I kick off my shoes just to feel the cushioned gold and maroon carpet beneath my feet. Walking across the room to the windows, I gape at the view of the London Eye and the Thames. Wow. Just wow. Even at night, the city lights cast a stunning glow over everything. This is definitely better than anywhere I’ve stayed in London before.

The bed is the dominant feature of the room, layered in richly textured linens of cream and gold and framed in mahogany. There’s an armchair and a small table in front of the window, an armoire in the corner, and I’m sure a gorgeous bathroom behind the closed door.

I flop down on the bed, spread out like I’m making a snow angel, a childlike sense of glee rushing through me. I’m in my

favorite city in my bucket list hotel with a gorgeous man who barely lets me out of his sight. Who cares if he's being paid to do it. I can pretend this is my life for the next few days.

Even in the middle of the night, the excitement in my veins would make it impossible to rest. For now, I think a shower is in order and then traipsing around London with a man who likes books as much as I do. It beats organizing a dusty storeroom any day.



CHAPTER  
FIVE





## HEMINGWAY

I can hear every move Dempsey makes on the other side of the door that joins our two rooms. Every shuffling footstep, every creak of his mattress, every heartbeat... It's comforting and yet sets me on edge all at once.

We agreed to shower and dress, but all I can seem to do is stand here, staring at that door, my cock hard and my heart racing as I resist the urge to fling it open just to make sure that Dempsey is safe and happy on the other side.

Gods of fire, maybe there's something to this mate business after all.

*Mine*, my dragon purrs, and I huff at myself. Or maybe it's all wishful thinking.

Lake was right, the only way to know for sure is to get to know him, to see how I feel outside of my instincts. And the first step in that direction is for me to get my ass in the shower so I can take Dempsey out for a late bite to eat.

I strip my shirt over my head and drop it on the floor next to my suitcase, forcing myself to turn away from the door and focus on anything else for five minutes. The sound of the shower starting on his side of the wall *should* help me regain control of my thoughts, instead all it does is fill my mind with images of him naked and dripping wet, shrouded by steam, and suffering with an erection that only *I* can truly relieve.

I groan, my cock twitching and swelling as I shove my pants and underwear down. I palm myself, cupping the weight of my heavy balls in my hand and then dragging my touch slowly up along my thickening shaft. I refused to give myself any relief yesterday when I woke up horny and agitated. I thought I was punishing my dragon for his one-track mind, but perhaps it's only added to my confusion. Lust clouds a rational mind.

I stroke myself a few times, heat spreading slowly from the pit of my stomach downwards to wrap itself around my groin, tightening, aching, making me feel so *heavy* with need. On autopilot, I shuffle forward until my knees hit the bed and then I crawl onto it, splaying myself face down with my erection pressed to the silky, expensive sheets.

I close my eyes and Dempsey's face fills my mind immediately. To my surprise, it's not the filthy fantasy of him hard and needy in his shower a few yards away. No, it's the fiery look in his eyes right after he slapped me. Twelve plus hours later and I can still feel the sting of his hand against my skin.

I bury my face in a pillow to muffle the moan that rumbles past my lips, my hand back around my cock as I flex my hips, fucking into my tight grip. Thick, slippery slick pours from my slit, wetting my hand and soaking the bed where the head of my cock drags against it with every thrust.

The sanitized scent of the pillow makes me wrinkle my nose. I would pluck the scales one by one from my own back for the chance to bury my nose in the crook of Dempsey's neck and breathe in his scent. I groan more loudly this time, imagining how it would feel to fill my lungs with his unique scent of old book pages and sweetness while I fill him with my cock, finding that sensitive spot inside of him and drawing shuddering, pleading moans from him until his throat is raw and his balls are sore from being drained so many times.

My dragon rumbles inside of my chest and flames lick at my tongue as I bite back the urge to shout Dempsey's name while my balls contract and my cock starts to pulse in my grip, spilling my hot, thick release all over my hand and the bed sheets beneath me. I huff and grunt, fucking my hand and wondering if there's even the slightest chance that Dempsey is doing the same on the other side of the wall.

When I'm finally spent, I roll over and sigh. My flesh is momentarily sated, but my dragon is as restless as ever. *And* I've made a mess of my sheets... I glance at my pillow, a hole torn in it from my teeth as I bit down to stifle the sounds of my pleasure. A few feathers poke out, the edges of the pillowcase

lightly singed as well. I'm not even going to *try* to explain that one to housekeeping.

Since my top sheet is already a mess, I wipe my hand off on it before rolling off of the bed, gathering the sheet up, and tossing it onto the floor for housekeeping to take tomorrow.

It doesn't take me long to shower and dry off, my excitement rising as I strut back into the main part of my room to get dressed. Dempsey confessed he loves London, but something tells me he hasn't seen it all. There are a million places I'd love to take him, and only a limited number of hours to fit it all in before we head home.

The showcase itself is later today, and even as keyed up as he is right now, I'm sure he'll want to sleep sometime between now and then. That leaves us with another whole day free tomorrow, so I'll need to prioritize. In the meantime, I get to show off a side of the city few ever see.

I drop my towel and open my suitcase, grabbing underwear, jeans, and a t-shirt. When I pull the last item out, a ruby ring tumbles out of its folds and lands back in the neatly folded heap of clothing. I frown and reach down to pick it up.

It's from my hoard, there's no doubt about that, but I don't recall packing it, nor do I have a reason to have brought it with me all the way across the ocean. I tighten my hand around it, holding on to it for some unknowable reason while I dress with my free hand. It's difficult dressing with one hand—more difficult than it needs to be—but I can't make myself put the ring back into my suitcase.

Once I'm dressed, *and still clutching the ring*, I slip on my shoes and then cross the room to knock on our adjoining door. My heart beats hard as I listen to the echo of his footsteps moving around inside of his room, the slight uptick in his own pulse and breathing as he nears the door... Does he feel something between us too, or do I simply make him nervous?

The lock clicks noisily and then the door swings open. His hair is wet, and the smell of the hotel's lavender shampoo hangs heavily over his natural scent. He's dressed similarly to

me in a pair of jeans and a t-shirt, a hooded sweatshirt zipped halfway up.

Dempsey's eyes roam over me slowly for a moment, and I swear I can feel every inch of his gaze like a lover's touch. My dragon purrs and the sound rumbles through my throat as Dempsey snaps his gaze to mine.

"Won't you be cold?" he asks, and I grin.

"I run warm," I assure him. "Are you ready?"

He licks his lips and I track the movement with my eyes, heat smoldering over my skin. Lust or fate... It's impossible to tell. Perhaps bedding him would be enough to decide. Unfortunately, Dempsey doesn't strike me as the type of man given to frivolous flings, and I'm equally positive that Lord would have my balls for fucking a client, especially if my only excuse is that Nico has a fated mate and I want one too.

"Hemingway?" My name on his lips snaps me out of my thoughts.

"I'm sorry?"

"I said I'm ready to go."

"Right, sorry." I step aside to let him come through my room, watching the way his gaze darts curiously to my half-stripped bed before he turns and heads towards the exit.

Without an ounce of conscious thought, I watch in a daze as my hand moves towards Dempsey from behind, the ring pressed tightly against my palm. I slip the jewelry into his back pocket in one swift motion, yanking my hand back as quickly as I can.

He whips his head around and raises his eyebrows at me. "Did you just grab my ass?" That fire is back in his eyes. Why do I like it so damn much?

"There was lint," I lie.

He studies me for a second before seeming to decide that I must be telling the truth.

“So, where are we going, anyway? What’s even open at...” He checks the antique watch around his wrist. “Three in the morning.”

I flash him a smile and guide him into the elevator with my hand on his shoulder. “I know a place.”

## DEMPSEY

EVEN IN THE dark of the early morning, I can’t help looking at every building we pass walking down the street. No matter how many times I come to London, I never get tired of it. Hemingway’s hand is on my shoulder, heavy and warm, chasing away any possibility there might have been of me feeling nervous about walking down the street in a foreign city in the dead of night.

There’s the occasional car that drives past, but other than that, everything is so...*quiet*. It should be creepy, but it feels kind of magical, like I’m getting to see a secret side of London that almost no one else does. I can’t wait to come back out and enjoy everything in the daylight, but right now this is absolutely perfect.

Hemingway tugs me to a stop outside of a tall, modern building. *Duck & Waffles* is written across the door with operating hours underneath. It’s open until five in the morning, which means we have plenty of time to sit and eat.

My stomach rumbles again, reminding me that I slept through the whole flight and haven’t eaten anything since yesterday morning. Granted, the time difference is making it seem like I’ve gone longer than I have, but either way, my stomach is more than ready for something tasty.

He guides me inside and we step into a glass elevator, our view of the city lights only getting better as it ascends higher and higher. I catch myself leaning into his touch a little harder, fighting the urge to blush about the fact that I jerked off in the shower thinking about him before we left. He’s hot, so sue me.

The doors ding and then slide open, revealing a stunning restaurant with windows showing fantastic views on all sides,

a bar, and very few patrons aside from the two of us.

“Wow,” I murmur. “This place is incredible.”

“It’s one of my favorites,” he agrees, his voice low and so close to my ear that it sends a warm tingle down my spine.

He didn’t really grab my ass back at the hotel, just like he didn’t try to kiss me when we met yesterday. He’s ridiculously attractive and my mind is playing tricks on me. The best thing I can do is try my hardest to keep my wits about me, so I don’t make a fool of myself.

I shift away from his touch and immediately regret the move when the weight of his hand disappears. A hostess approaches us and takes us to a table by the windows. She hands us our menus and then leaves us with the promise that someone will be over shortly to take our order.

I flip it open and frown immediately. “This place is really pricey,” I whisper across the table. I should have known considering the location.

“Don’t worry about it. Get whatever you like.” Hemingway waves off my concern.

“Is this how you treat all of your clients? International trips, expensive food in the middle of the night... I can see why Drake Security is so highly rated.” It’s meant to be a tease, but the words feel heavy as I say them, my stomach squirming with nerves.

He looks up from his menu, his eyes catching mine and lingering as if he’s studying me, or maybe trying to see something. What, I’m not sure.

“No, this isn’t how we treat all of our clients,” he admits.

“So, why me?” I almost don’t want to ask. I like being special for once in my life.

“I don’t know.” It should feel like a cop out, but there’s the slightest edge of desperation in his voice that makes me think he wants an answer just as badly as I do.

“Chalk it up to our shared interest in books.” I offer him an out, and his lips twitch in a smile.

“Yes, I think that’s exactly it. And I mean it, get what you’d like. I’m charging it to my company card and my brother Lord can fret over it later. It’s no scales off my back.”

I sputter a laugh. “It’s...what?”

“Just an expression. Something silly my brothers and I have always said.” He turns his attention quickly back to his menu. “The duck confit and waffles are to die for, by the way.”

“Duck and waffles? Huh. I suppose that’s the fancy version of chicken and waffles,” I muse, finally looking down at my menu again and actually paying attention to the food options this time rather than the prices. “Oh my god, they have a drink called Waffle on the Rocks and it has waffle flavored vodka. I have to have it.”

Hemingway chuckles, the sound is warm and does something funny to the inside of my chest. “Duck and waffles, and a Waffle on the Rocks,” he agrees, setting his menu down.

A waiter comes a few minutes later to take our order and remove our menus. Once we’re alone again, I shift in my seat and look out over the twinkling lights of the city skyline through the window. Something digs into my left ass cheek, so I lift up and sweep my hand over the chair. I sit back down, and the feeling is back immediately. I slip my hand into my pocket, and I’m surprised when my fingers brush something hard and round.

I tug the item out and hold it up to get a better look at it.

“That’s strange,” I mutter, studying the ring that I’m sure I haven’t seen before. It’s beautiful though—likely sixteenth century with a gold band and a large oval ruby. I absently slip it onto my finger and a low sound that can only be described as bordering on orgasmic rumbles from Hemingway’s lips. My cock jerks and I dart my gaze across the table towards him.

His eyes are half lidded as he stares at the ring on my finger. Does he have some weird jewelry fetish? I slide the ring off, my face burning and my cock fully stiff inside of my jeans.



“It must have fallen into my bag somehow,” I reason when he doesn’t say anything. “It has to be from my shop, right?”

He clears his throat. “Perhaps.”

“It’s strange though, I don’t recognize it. I’m so meticulous about my treasures. I remember every item I’ve bought and sold over the years, every single one. But this...” I shake my head, still studying it.

“Mm,” he hums, not offering any other suggestions.

“Well, I suppose I don’t want to lose it.” I slide it onto my finger again, watching his reaction out of the corner of my eye. I swear his eyes flash gold again for a moment. It’s not a trick of the light, but what would cause such a thing?

I’ve always loved research. Perhaps I’ll take some time to find out if it could be a medical condition or something similar.

I fold my hands and place them in my lap, feeling my body vibrate under his gaze.

“Tell me about the first book in your collection,” I prompt, and that snaps Hemingway out of whatever strange trance he seems to be in.

“*The Tale of Genji*. It’s said to be the first novel, and as soon as I laid eyes on it, I had to have it.” The passion in his voice sends sparks all over my skin.

“Can you read Japanese?”

“Yes,” he answers, and I gape at him. “What about you? What was the first in your collection?”

We fall into a passionate yet relaxed conversation about our book collections, each trying to impress the other with our rarest and most cherished tomes. Our food comes and goes, and the conversation never pauses. We sit there until the sky is starting to grow light outside with the impending sunrise and the wait staff are clearly closing things up.

“Are you tired yet?” he asks as we leave the restaurant, stepping back onto the street that’s now growing busier with early morning traffic and people starting their day.

“Not yet. Take me somewhere else?” I ask impulsively and Hemingway grins.

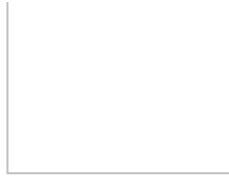
“Anywhere in particular?”

I shake my head. “Surprise me.”

Hemingway’s gaze intensifies. “I would love to.”

CHAPTER  
**SIX**





## HEMINGWAY

Now is my chance to show Dempsey how special his life could be with me. I pull my phone from my back pocket and shoot off a text to my friend Hareem, hoping he can hook me up.

HAREEM: Bloody hell, Hem. It's the ass crack of dawn.

HEMINGWAY: Oh, so sorry. I had no idea vampires were now keeping daytime hours.

HAREEM: LOL. Ass. What can I do for you? Let me guess. You want into the store?

HEMINGWAY: You know me well. If it helps, I have an oblivious mortal with me who I am desperately attempting to woo.

HAREEM: Hmm. That is tempting. I'm intrigued to see what you look like in love.

HEMINGWAY: As am I. It's early on but we're here for the rare book show. I want to show him something no one else could.

HAREEM: You appeal to the hopeless romantic in me. Can you be there in five minutes?

HEMINGWAY: I can. Thank you.

HAREEM: As long as I'm invited to the wedding.

A PANG of longing claws its way around my chest.

HEMINGWAY: One can hope there will be one.

I TURN to Dempsey with a smile. “Come on. We need to be at our location in five minutes.”

He nods happily. “Okay.”

We hurry down Broad Street, stopping in front of a very old building that was a church at one time. Dempsey tilts his head.

“I didn’t take you for the religious type.”

Laughing, I gesture to a door on the side of the building, nearly hidden by crawling ivy and wandering tree branches. A mere second later, Hareem appears, his curious gaze focused on the man next to me. Then he turns to me, his smile growing.

“Hemingway. Good to see you.”

“You too, my friend.” After a brief hug, I turn to my guest. “Hareem, this is my...friend, Dempsey. He’s an antique collector.”

Hareem’s eyes go wide. “How delightful. I think you’ll enjoy my shop.”

“Nice to meet you,” Dempsey says, moving ever so slightly closer to me as if he’s intimidated by my friend. I get it though. Hareem is massively tall, with sharp features that make him look angry all the time, and haunting black eyes, but he’s one of the nicest people I know. As long as you’re not part of his dinner plans.

“Stay as long as you like,” Hareem says, unlocking the door and then pressing numbers into a hidden keypad. “You know how to lock up when you leave.”

“I do, and I really appreciate this.”

“You know you’re always welcome in London. Your brothers are well?”

“Everyone is great. Nico is getting married.”

Hareem’s thick eyebrows rise so high I wonder for a second if they might jump off his face. “Your hot-headed brother found someone who can tolerate him?”

I laugh softly. “Even better. A mate,” I whisper, making it clear with my eyes I don’t want that part discussed too loudly.

“Well. Wonders never cease.”

“I know.” When I glance at Dempsey, he’s got his head tilted back, studying the architecture of the building. “Perhaps I can be so lucky.”

“He seems very much your type. Handsome in an...Oxford professor sort of way.”

“Perfect description.” We hug again. “I’ll let you know when we leave.”

“Enjoy. If you see anything you must have, just let me know.”

“I will.” I turn to the handsome man a few steps from me. “Ready, Dempsey?”

“Yes.”

Hareem is gone in a flash, using his super speed to get back to wherever he was when I called. Dempsey gazes down the suddenly empty alley.

“Um, wow, he walks fast.”

“He does. Come in.” I open the thick wood door, stepping to the side to let Dempsey pass then following him in, locking the door behind us from the inside.

When I flick the light switch, Dempsey gasps. “What... Oh wow. Hemingway.”

I smile with pride, feeling my dragon preen as well. “It’s only for well-connected, affluent collectors. You have to know Hareem or someone in his organization to get in.”

Dempsey steps forward, pausing at a table piled high with display cases full of jewels. “How do you know Hareem?”

I couldn’t possibly tell him that we saved him from a violent wolf attack in London back in the 1500s. “We run in the same circles.”

“Oh. Sure. Did you date him?”

The slight tinge of jealousy in his tone lights me up. “Not at all. We’re just friends.”

Dempsey nods, glancing at me before kneeling down to look closer at the jewels. “This is a seventeenth century Russian sapphire.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Only royalty would have had something like this. How did Hareem get it?”

“I don’t ask about his methods.”

Dempsey’s lips pinch. “Is he a black-market dealer?”

“He is not. I can’t say for sure where his sources get their items though.” I walk to the other side of the table. “I do know that to buy from Hareem you have to be the final buyer. He doesn’t work with brokers.”

Dempsey’s expression relaxes. “It’s tempting, you know? To procure things so rare you know they have to be stolen.”

“Yes.” I wonder what Dempsey would think of Arson.

“I try really hard not to give in.” He glances up at me. “Do you?”

“Give in?”

He nods.

“No.” It isn’t necessary. Most of my treasures I got when they weren’t yet antiques, not that I can tell Dempsey that. “But I can appreciate Hareem’s shop.”

“Me too. It’s incredible.” He walks down another row, stopping at a display case of books.

Only I know that Hareem, like myself, obtained much of what he has at a time when he got them from the artist or writer directly. His storerooms are so large, he cycles what is on display. He’ll never run out of items to sell.

“Oh my Hamlet and Ophelia,” he gasps.

I snicker at his form of swearing. “What?”

“Is this... It can’t be.”

“What is it?”

“It looks like Shakespeare’s First Folio.” He moves closer to the glass, peering at the tag. “It’s a first run from 1622.” He gazes up at me with wide eyes and pink cheeks. “I can’t believe it.”

“Do you want it?”

He guffaws. “Do I want it? Well yes, but it must cost millions.”

“Probably.”

“I can’t afford that.”

“I can. Would you like it as a gift?”

Dempsey stands, his posture stiffening. “No. You absolutely may not buy me a gift like that.”

My dragon rumbles with grief inside me. I upset him.

“I’m sorry, Dempsey. I wasn’t trying to offend you.”

“I’m not offended.” He blows out a breath. “It’s just...not appropriate.”

“Right. I forget. I, um, enjoy giving people things.”

Dempsey studies my face for a moment before giving me a curt nod. “I appreciate the gesture, but no. Thank you.”

Nodding, I pull out my phone once Dempsey is distracted by another find and send off a text.

HEMINGWAY: Can you hold the First Folio for me? Dempsey wants it but it’s too soon.

HAREEM: I have an even better one in storage. I’ll put your name on it.

SMILING, I shoot off my reply.

HEMINGWAY: You’re a gem.



HAREEM: Yes, I am.

LAUGHING SOFTLY, I put my phone in my pocket, then get caught up in all of his newer finds.

Dempsey's reaction to the folio fills me with anticipation for the day he sees my own collection. There are things in there that are impossible to get because there's only one in existence.

Dempsey lingers in front of a case of jewels, marveling at their details. My fingers itch to pick one up and drape it around his neck. He would look beautiful with emeralds against his pale flesh. Or rubies. Yes. The prettiest, finest rubies.

The very idea of Dempsey draped across my bed, surrounded by coins and gems, is a vision I can't get out of my head, nor do I want to. How do I convince him to let me in?

I suddenly feel pulled in a different direction, my dragon clearly leading the way until I stop abruptly in front of a far table. On it is the most beautiful diamond bracelet I have ever seen. I pick it up, spurred on by the beast inside me, and walk it over to Dempsey.

Without words, I slide it on his wrist, my breath hitching at the sight while my dragon goes wild with lust and affection inside me.

"This is stunning," Dempsey says softly, pressing his fingers delicately over each jewel. "Why did you put it on me?"

I blink, realizing what I've done. "Um, I just thought you'd appreciate it."

He lifts his arm, letting the dim light catch the jewels. "Beautiful."

*Yes, you are.*

My cock swells in my jeans, making its presence known as my breath tightens in my chest. I almost think I could come

from the sight of him in jewels.

“I wish I was the kind of man who could wear pretty things like this,” he says, a wistful tone to his voice. “You know the type. Makeup and pretty clothes. Jewels.”

“You could be that kind of man. All you have to do is want it.”

“I’m too plain.”

My dragon growls at his critique, and I turn away to let the puff of smoke out. Fucking hell. Why is my dragon acting like this? Too many pretty books and gems around got him worked up?

“You are not plain, Dempsey. You are...” The words catch in my throat. Beautiful, stunning, perfect. *Fucking perfect.* “Very handsome.”

Dempsey’s face scrunches up like I slapped him. “What? You can’t believe that. Are you, like, a self-esteem coach in your off time?”

“No. I believe that. I don’t lie. I’m sad you can’t see it for yourself.”

He twists the bracelet around his wrist, keeping his eyes focused on it. “It’s not that I don’t. It’s that no one does. Why do you think I’m over forty and still single?”

I twist my neck to calm my dragon. “I’m forty and single.”

“Yeah, but I figure it’s because you’re...well, you know.”

“No, I don’t know.”

“I have to say it?”

“I really don’t understand what you’re hinting at.”

“You’re gorgeous, Hemingway. Obviously. You probably have to beat people off of you. You can afford to be picky.”

“Dempsey—” I stop abruptly to clear my throat when my voice sounds more animal than human.

He looks up at me with wide eyes, and I realize my dragon is probably showing. I blink hard and exhale slowly, pushing

him back.

“I’m sorry that others haven’t seen what you have to offer, but I do. I see it.”

Red blotches pop up on Dempsey’s neck and cheeks. He takes the bracelet off and hands it back to me. “That’s the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me. Thank you.”

I watch him put distance between us as he passes through the remaining treasures. I put the bracelet in my pocket. I’ll send Hareem money later for it, but it has to be mine. Or more accurately, it has to be Dempsey’s.

Clearly, I’ve lost my fucking mind. If Dempsey isn’t my mate, then I have no idea why he’s having this kind of effect on me. I’ve got to keep my head straight around him or I’m going to scare him off. Or worse, do something inappropriate.

All I know for sure is that if Dempsey says yes, I’ll make him mine forever. And that thought scares the fuck out of me.

## DEMPSEY

HEMINGWAY IS STRANGE. Not in a bad way. Just very unusual. And clearly, the man is mildly insane if he thinks I’m handsome. Maybe he needs new glasses. Or a mirror. Or to get out more. Something.

I can still feel the weight of the diamond bracelet I took off. A weird part of me wanted to keep it on so badly, but what would someone like me do with something like that? Not to mention the cost of the damn thing.

*“Do you want it?”*

Hemingway asking me if I wanted one of the rarest books in the world with the casual tone of someone offering an ice-cream cone shocked me. Do I want it? Of course I fucking do. Would I let my hot bodyguard buy it for me? Absolutely not.

I study a vase that has to be Ming dynasty porcelain. How the hell did some random guy in London get his hands on this? I want to buy something special to take back with me, something no one else would see, but I’m afraid all of this is

out of my league. Thousands I can spend. Millions, not so much.

I glance over my shoulder at Hemingway as he checks the condition of a book. There's something so odd about him, but I can't put my finger on it. Sometimes I swear I see puffs of smoke around him or gold eyes shimmering back at me. It's almost like he's not human, but that's obviously not a possibility. With my life flipped upside down, I'm clearly imagining things.

"Do you like this?" Hemingway asks, holding up a strange object.

"What is it?" I walk over slowly. It just looks like a heap of metal.

"I think it's a model of an early printing press." He hands it to me. "Maybe someone's prototype to get funding for it."

I take the object, looking it over. "Oh, I think you're right."

"It fits with your store's vibe."

His comment warms me through. "It does. What does it cost?"

He turns his head to look at the display where it was. "Twelve hundred."

I exhale with relief. "I can do that."

"It's Italian too. Renaissance."

"Perfect. Thank you for finding this. I really wanted to buy something."

"My pleasure." His eyes linger on me, sending a shiver of anticipation down my spine. What exactly I'm anticipating is anyone's guess.

"Are you tired?" he asks.

"No. I feel amazing. Honestly, I feel better than I have in ages." I frown. "Weird, right? My life is possibly in danger, but I feel energized. Maybe it's a strange reaction to adrenaline. I normally see about as much excitement as someone watching paint dry."

“Maybe it’s the change in routine.”

“Yeah.” I look around. “How do I pay for this?”

“I’ll take a picture and send it to Hareem. We’ll go from there.”

“He’s very trusting.”

“He knows who he can trust before he opens the door for them.”

“Makes sense.”

Thirty minutes later, we arrive back at our hotel to drop off the item I bought and freshen up before we grab a car to take us to the big show. I gotta say, Hemingway might look like a model, but he knows how to show an antique-lover a good time.

“Ready to go?” he asks as I join him by the elevators.

“I am.”

I can’t stop my gaze from roaming over him in his black pants and gray sweater, with a cashmere scarf around his neck. On his feet are trendy ankle boots. Yep, model. Meanwhile, I’ve got my standard khakis and button-down with a cardigan. All beige. And he thinks I’m handsome. *Pfft.*

Once we’re in the lobby, he leads me outside with a gentle hand on my lower back, making me wish for just a moment that this was more than two colleagues with a shared interest. Hoping for something like that is a fast track to disappointment, but I can dream for a while.

Inside the black car, I sit back against the cream leather, remembering how he insisted he doesn’t travel in luxury all the time, but this isn’t a taxi. It’s not even an Uber. Maybe his definition of luxury is so far from of mine, he thinks this is normal. I’m not complaining though.

“I know of a restaurant that blends Japanese, Peruvian, and Brazilian cuisines. Are you up for that for dinner?” Hemingway asks.

“That sounds wild. Sure. What’s it called?”

“Sushisamba. It’s at Heron Tower on the thirty-eighth floor, so the view is mind blowing.”

“Sounds expensive.”

He smiles, glancing at my hand where it rests on the seat before meeting my gaze. “It’s not bad actually. A little high end, sure, but reasonably so.”

“I have a feeling our definition of expensive differs.”

He chuckles. “Business expense, remember?”

I nod, even though it feels uncomfortable to accept this.

“Dempsey.”

“Yes?”

“Please allow me these indulgences. I adore London and want to visit all my favorite places with you. Maybe some of them will become your favorite places too. Why not just enjoy it?”

I mull over his words for a moment. Why not? It’s not like he said I have to suck his dick to get dinner. My face heats from the ridiculous thought. As if I would say no. Wait. I would say no. Right? Right. It’s inappropriate to think such things. Here he is being a nice guy and I’m being a total pervert.

“Are you okay?” Hemingway asks.

“Oh yeah. Totally fine.” I clear my throat. “I’ll try to enjoy it.”

“Good.”



SIX HOURS LATER, we exit the convention center with bags stuffed full of finds, not even counting the purchases we’re having shipped back. As we wait for the car, I find myself filled with happiness that bubbles up and spills out in the form of laughter.

Hemingway smiles in my direction. “What’s funny?”

“Not funny. Joyful. This was an amazing experience. Thank you for bringing me here.”

His expression softens. “My pleasure, Dempsey. It’s nice to have someone to share this with. My brothers don’t get it.”

“What about friends?”

“My brothers.” He chuckles. “I have casual friends like Hareem, but no one I spend time with often.”

“I don’t have friends either. Not really. A few people from university I stay in touch with, but no one who’s in my life daily, you know? Maybe I’ve been too focused on work.”

“Understandable. Sometimes things are easier than people.”

“Absolutely.”

The car pulls up and while the driver loads our bags into the trunk, I’m focused on Hemingway and how he watches over the process, ensuring our items are handled carefully. When the driver is done, Hemingway opens the back door for me, and I feel myself blushing again. He’s either going to catch on that I think he’s amazing, or think I have an unfortunate skin condition.

“I was lucky enough to snag a reservation for dinner at nine,” Hemingway says once we’re on our way back to the hotel. “Is that enough time for you to rest?”

Nodding, I smile. “I don’t need to rest. I’ll probably sleep like a rock tonight, but I feel good still.”

“Great.”

After arriving at the hotel, we agree to meet by the elevators at eight-thirty, then go our separate ways. In my room, I flop down on the bed with the biggest smile on my face. What an incredible day. It would be really hard to top it.

A few minutes later, I pull myself up and decide on a shower after being surrounded by very old things all day. As the water heats, I brush my teeth and study my face. I always

wished I could be a guy who had stubble on his face after a long day like Hemingway does, but nope. My genes are doing their best to keep me looking like an adolescent boy with my choppy patches. At least it's light enough that I can choose whether or not to shave. I'm going with not tonight.

I peel out of my clothes and step into the luxurious shower, tilting my head back as the rain showerhead pours over me, my mind replaying the day. Sometimes Hemingway looks at me with such heat in his eyes that for a few seconds, I almost think he might want me, but then reason kicks in. We were around things he loves all day. He was reacting to that.

Still...

I slide my hand down my chest and torso until I give in and reach between my legs to grip my swelling cock. How uncouth of me to even consider jacking off to thoughts of my bodyguard—*again*—but what he doesn't know won't hurt him, right?

But ugh. I'll know.

I pull my hand away in shame, trying to shake the lustful thoughts from my head. I'm definitely not imagining what he looks like in a shower, all naked as steamy water pours over his muscles.

Exhaling slowly, I picture the stack of books I bought today, only to have the image replaced with a smiling Hemingway. With an annoyed grunt, I reach for my cock again, giving in to it. Maybe if I just do it once more, I'll get it out of my system and stop being creepy.

I grab the bodywash and pour a hefty amount in my hand, washing my body until I get to the throbbing distraction between my legs. The mere touch of my hand causes a stream of precum to dribble out. Okay, this was long overdue. I'm just horny. It's not Hemingway specifically.

That's what I tell myself as I stroke myself hard and fast, picturing Hemingway standing in the shower with me, dripping wet, watching me with those sexy blue eyes of his,



and smiling in satisfaction because he knows he's doing this to me.

"Fuck," I growl out as cum shoots from my cock and splashes against the tiled wall. I slow down my stroke, inhaling thick, humid air as I try to find where I left my composure. I shiver as sticky ropes of white liquid flow from me like lava. I guess it really was built up.

After rinsing off and ensuring housekeeping won't find any remnants in the morning, I leave the shower, grab a towel, and return to the bedroom. As I lie down on the bed, I shake my head, laughing. That was not my finest moment, but hey, at least my libido still works.

Once I'm dressed and looking like a respectable person again, I take a deep breath and leave my room to meet Hemingway. He opens his door at the same time, and my breath catches at the sight of him.

He's wearing slacks and a blue sweater the same color as his eyes that buttons in front. It fits tightly and shows off his physique, including his nipples, which I suddenly really want to see. Possibly bite.

"Hey," he says softly.

"Hi."

"Hungry?"

"Definitely."

We walk to the elevators. "I hope you don't mind, but I ordered a car again. I really don't enjoy London traffic."

"I don't blame you." We step inside when the elevator arrives. "Why would I mind?"

He shrugs. "Spending money seems to bother you a little."

"Oh, um..." Now I feel like an asshole. "Like you suggested earlier, I'm gonna enjoy it. This might be my only trip to London where I can travel like this."

Hemingway holds my gaze but his eyes are full of emotion I can't decipher. I start to say something, to ask what's on his

mind, but the doors open, and more people pile on with us.

Maybe it's for the best that I don't ask. For once I can leave well enough alone. He wants to spend money, let him.

The ride to the restaurant isn't long but it's full of starts and stops thanks to the traffic. We spend the time chatting about the things we saw today, including the King Lear Hemingway wanted. I avoided looking at the price tag for it.

The car stops in front of Heron Tower, and excitement fills me. If it were up to me, I'd be at a simple fish and chips shop or a pub, but this is nice. It's not that I couldn't afford to eat here if I wanted to. It's just not how I use my money.

"Hem?"

We both turn at the sound of a man's voice calling Hemingway's name. Hemingway's face lights up.

"What the hell are you doing in London?" Hemingway asks the man, who also looks like a model, for the record.

"Last minute trip. I didn't know you were already here, or I would have called." The man's gaze lands on me with interest. "Oh my. Who is this?"

Hemingway's demeanor hardens immediately. "Dempsey. He's a client."

"Oh. The antique dealer?"

"That's the one." Hemingway clears his throat. "Dempsey, one of my brothers, Arson."

"Hello."

Arson steps closer, taking my outstretched hand and holding it entirely too long. "You didn't tell us he had such pretty eyes, brother."

Hemingway nearly yanks my hand away from Arson. "That's because he's a client, *brother*."

"Tsk. All work and no play, Hemingway."

"We have reservations," he answers tightly, moving closer to me. "I'll call you tomorrow."

“I could join you. I’m sure they could squeeze in one more.”

I swear on all the books ever printed that Hemingway just growled. He turns sharply, facing his brother and whispering something I can’t hear. Arson reacts with a tight smile, and if I’m not mistaken, he gets that weird golden hue to his eyes too.

“Settle down, Hem,” Arson says with a sweet smile. “I’m just having fun. Besides, don’t you think I have my own date?”

“Then go,” Hemingway says, still clearly annoyed with his brother.

Arson laughs. “I’m going. Pleasure to meet you, Dempsey. Have no fear. Hemingway will take excellent care of you.”

“Arson,” Hemingway says through gritted teeth.

Arson winks at me before turning to his brother. “Cheerio and all that.”

Hemingway huffs out a breath before grabbing my elbow and leading me inside.

“Do you not get along with Arson?”

“I adore him. He just likes to push my buttons. It’s his thing.”

“Ah. He was flirting to be funny?”

Hemingway is silent but his jaw is tight as we wait for the elevator. “He was flirting...yes. To be funny.”

I have a feeling there’s more to that statement than he’s revealing, but I decide to leave it alone. “Well he’s gone now, so we can just enjoy our meal.”

That seems to soothe him and his handsome smile returns. “Yes. Let’s enjoy the rest of our evening.”

I want to say that it almost seemed like Arson was flirting with me for real, but again, why would he? It had to be some kind of brotherly thing that has nothing to do with me. I push

all that away and let myself settle into my fantasy where this is my life and Hemingway is my man.

A boy can dream.

CHAPTER  
**SEVEN**





## HEMINGWAY

Dempsey is positively glowing all through dinner, gushing about all the books we had the chance to see today and those we both eagerly purchased for our own hoards. Well...it may not *technically* be a hoard that Dempsey is working on for himself, but it's certainly in the same spirit.

The way he speaks of his own treasures, I wonder if there may be a little dragon blood in his veins, perhaps many generations back—diluted now but still pumping through him, beckoning to him to collect and cherish. I imagine I look like quite a fool, gazing at him across the table, my heart thumping out heavy beats as I memorize every one of his features.

Perhaps he could be my mate. Perhaps fate has smiled down on me with such charity that this beautiful, delicate man sitting across from me with his own deep love for books and travel, and an appreciation for the wonders of history could be meant solely for me.

My dragon purrs deeply, the sound rumbling through my chest and vibrating inside of my throat. Dempsey stops talking abruptly to look at me with wide eyes.

“Indigestion,” I lie, rubbing my chest.

“I’m sure I’ll be paying for eating all this rich food later too,” he says with a chuckle, scooping one last bite of his meal into his mouth before setting his fork down and nudging the plate away.

“Finished?” I check, realizing I barely touched my own food, I was far too busy staring at...my *mate*. Oh yes, my dragon likes that. My throat tightens and my skin tingles and heats just from allowing myself to think the word.

I don’t want to get ahead of myself though. Nothing is certain—not yet, anyway. Nico said he wasn’t positive until he

kissed Lake, and something tells me that Dempsey isn't about to let that happen anytime soon. My cheek tingles with the reminder of his reaction yesterday. Was it really so recently? It feels like a lifetime since he ran directly into me outside of his shop.

"Yes. I actually am starting to feel a little bit tired," he admits, and I notice for the first time the deep bags forming under his eyes. They almost look like bruises. I frown with concern.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have let you stay up for so long. What has it been at this point? Twenty-some hours?" I pull a couple of hundred-dollar bills out of my wallet and drop them on the table to cover the cost of our meal, not willing to wait around for our check when Dempsey is clearly seconds from falling asleep on his feet.

He waves his hand dismissively, the ring he's still wearing catching the light and filling my chest with warmth again.

"You didn't *let* me. I'm a grown man. I decide when I sleep."

"Hm," I grunt, not completely in agreement with his assessment. Yes, he is an adult and can make choices for himself, but he's also my responsibility to care for, to protect, to cherish.

My chest swells and I clear my throat to dislodge the overly large feeling inside of me. Without giving it a thought, I put a hand on Dempsey's back as I lead him out of the restaurant, feeling the ghost of his warmth through his clothes. It's just enough heat to tempt me to slide my hand under his shirt to feel his skin directly. I manage to resist, but the feeling rides me hard all the way out to the street.

"We're not far from the hotel, are we?" he asks as we step out onto the sidewalk in front of the restaurant.

"No, only a few blocks." I spot the car waiting for us where I instructed.

"Would you mind if we walk?"

“You’re dead on your feet,” I point out, torn between protecting him from his own exhaustion and the urge to immediately give him anything he asks for. Is this how Nico feels with Lake? I can only imagine how his little diva of a mate must exploit it, although I have no doubt that Nico loves every minute of it.

He gives a weak one-shouldered shrug, looking wistfully around at the city surrounding us. “We’re leaving tomorrow, right? I just... I don’t want to miss the chance to soak it in before we go.”

I want to promise him that we can come back, that I’ll bring him as often as he would like. But that wouldn’t be well received right now, I’m sure of it. Lake said to take things slowly, and the more I’ve gotten to know Dempsey in the past thirty or so hours, the more clear it’s become that his advice was dead on. Dempsey is thoughtful, he’s careful, he doesn’t do things wildly or on impulse. If I want to win his heart, I have to be patient.

I nod, considering how to appease both of us. “Give me a moment.” I leave him standing in front of the restaurant just long enough to dismiss our driver for the night and confirm the time for our pickup tomorrow to take us back to the private airfield that we’ll be leaving from.

When I return to Dempsey, I untie the scarf from around my throat and drape it around his neck. He gives me a curious look. I turn my back to him and stoop down.

“Hop on,” I say.

A startled laugh bursts from his lips. “You want to give me a piggyback ride?”

“You’re too tired to walk, but you don’t want to take a car. Do you have a better solution?” I reason.

“It’s ridiculous,” he insists, but I can hear the waver in his resolve already.

“You hired me to guard your body, did you not?”

“Yes,” he concedes.



“Well, this may not be an outside threat, but your body is my responsibility at the moment. So, your choices are to hop on my back for a walk back to the hotel, or I can call the driver back to take us instead.” I put enough firmness into my tone that he’s not left any room to come up with alternative options.

Dempsey sighs, and seconds later, he places his hands tentatively on my shoulders. It’s entirely too easy to imagine the two of us in a similar position for different reasons, both of us naked and needy, his cock bumping eagerly against my ass cheeks before he spreads them so he can fill me.

Heat flares in my gut, wrapping around my cock and balls as I bite back a groan and try to shake the fantasy away.

It takes him a second to work out how he plans to mount me, his feet shuffling against the sidewalk, his hands tight on my shoulders, until he finally gives up and simply hops onto my back with an adorable little squeak. I catch his thighs as he wraps them around me, his arms going around my neck. He situates himself so I can feel the puff of his breath against my ear and the semi-soft swell of his cock against my back. Where his chest presses to my back, I can feel something hard and round, a locket perhaps? I did notice a chain around his neck when we met, but whatever is attached always seems to be tucked under his shirt.

“I feel silly,” he complains as I straighten up and start to walk.

“Hmm... I was just thinking of how intimate this feels, as if we’re lovers,” I muse dreamily. His breath catches and he tightens his arms around my neck. “Do you see that building?” I take a hand off of one of his legs, squeezing the other more firmly to keep him in place, even though I could easily hold his entire body weight in one hand. I feel him nod, his head bobbing right next to mine. “It’s the Temple Church. It was the headquarters of the Knights Templar.”

“Oh cool.” The reverence in his voice sends a pleased shiver down my spine.

I continue to point out lesser-known historical sites as we walk, giving him an insider’s tour of London. He asks

questions and throws in a few facts of his own. We get a few strange looks from passersby, but nothing more serious than that, and it seems Dempsey quickly gets over feeling *silly* for letting me carry him.

We pass a quiet, unlit alleyway and a cold chill dances over my skin, like a cool breeze that's out of place on this otherwise warm evening. He stiffens against me, his arms and legs tensing around me as he goes still like a frightened bunny, the same way he did when I made him uneasy in front of his shop.

I slow my steps and take a deep inhale, testing the air for any sign of danger. I don't smell anything out of place, only a cacophony of human scents, a damp garbage odor, and, of course, Dempsey. I let my eyes shift, hoping my keen dragon vision will give me some clue, but there's still nothing.

I huff. Maybe it *was* just a cool breeze. I pick up my pace again, but as I walk, I can't seem to shake the uneasy feeling prickling along the back of my neck. It feels like someone is watching. I sweep my gaze back and forth, on high alert, walking faster and faster until I'm nearly sprinting by the time I reach the hotel doors.

"Hemingway," Dempsey asks in a small voice, his limbs trembling around me. "You felt that, right? I'm not...I'm not crazy?"

"Yes," I answer in a growl, refusing to set him down until the elevator doors swish closed behind us and the eerie feeling finally snaps like a string being broken. "I felt it."

"What was it?" He slides off my back, and I grab his bicep to tug him protectively under my arm.

"I don't know."

## DEMPSEY

I CAN'T SEEM to stop trembling. It's as if I've been standing in the cold for too long and my body is desperately trying to warm up, except I'm burning hot all over. My skin feels so

warm that the necklace I have tucked under my shirt, resting against my skin, feels ice cold in contrast. *Too* cold actually. I gasp and tug it away from my skin before letting it fall back again.

Hemingway is in full bodyguard mode now, his posture stiff and ready as he leads me down the hallway from the elevator to our hotel rooms, his eyes darting back and forth as if he expects an assailant to burst out from any of the rooms that we pass.

We're being silly, right? There was no one following us. I'm sure there wasn't. I looked over my shoulder more than once while he practically ran down the street carrying me, and there wasn't anyone coming after us. But I still couldn't shake that *feeling*. It was the same one I had at Timeless Treasures just before I met Hemingway. I'm not sure if it's a relief that he felt it too or if it's all the more terrifying to realize it wasn't just my mind playing tricks on me.

When we reach his room, he tugs me to a stop, putting a hand on the back of my neck to hold me in place while he eases the door open. It's the kind of overly possessive gesture I would normally hate, but for some reason it sends a thrill of heat through me.

"All clear," he announces after a moment.

"How do you know? You didn't even go in."

"I'm good at my job," he says gruffly, leading me inside and then locking the deadbolt behind us as well as flipping the toggle lock. "You should sleep in here."

"What?" I sputter, my face heating at the thought of snuggling into bed with Hemingway.

"It's not safe." He's practically vibrating with tension. "Or I can come sleep in your room if you prefer."

"What if we just leave the door between the rooms open?" I bargain.

"Mm," he grunts, not seeming particularly thrilled with the idea, but he doesn't argue either.

I'm still feeling jittery, but underneath the surge of adrenaline, I can feel my exhaustion more acutely than ever. My eyes are burning, and all of my muscles feel sluggish and heavy.

"I think maybe we both just got a little anxious being in an unfamiliar city," I reason, and he narrows his eyes again, very clearly not in agreement but still not disputing my attempt to minimize whatever weirdness just happened.

"You need sleep," he says instead, and I nod.

He opens the door joining our two rooms and does the same thing he did with his own room, sticking his head in and standing silently for several seconds before waving me in. I step through and he's right behind me like a shadow. I chuckle and spin around to put a hand against the middle of his chest, feeling the heavy thump of his heartbeat and the scalding heat of his skin through his clothes.

"Alone," I remind him, and he bristles, but takes a step back.

"I'll be right here. Nothing is going to come through either of our doors without me knowing." There's so much certainty and such a weight of protectiveness in his words that everything inside of me settles.

I truly do believe that as long as Hemingway is here, nothing is going to hurt me. He's still a stranger, but I've never been more sure of anything in my life.

"Thank you."

He waits in our joined doorway while I go to my own door and double lock it the same way he did. Then I grab my pajamas out of my bag and slip into the bathroom to get changed, since he seems set on not taking his eyes off of me, and the last thing I need is for my gorgeous bodyguard to see my skinny, pale body.

When I step back out of the bathroom, Hemingway is firmly back in his own room, sitting on his bed and staring towards my room. I laugh and shake my head. Something tells me he's not going to sleep tonight or even move from his post

if he can help it. Another warm, safe feeling settles over me, like being wrapped in a security blanket.

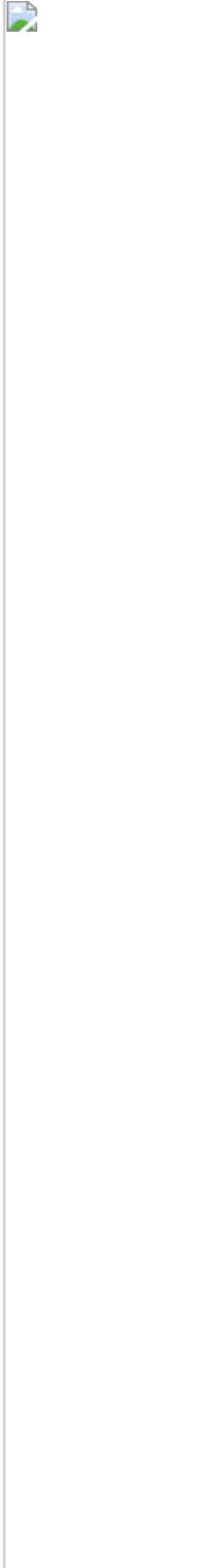
“Good night,” I call to him as I climb into my bed and close my eyes.

“Good night,” he answers softly. He murmurs something else at the end that almost sounds like the word *mate*, but I’m sure it’s my overtired brain making things up, because I don’t even understand what he would mean by that.

I fall into a deep sleep almost as soon as my head hits the pillow, but it’s anything but restful. My dreams are filled with dark alleys and towering, shadowy figures. In one dream, the necklace I’m wearing grows so cold against my skin that it becomes painful, but the more I struggle to take it off, the more impossible it becomes. In another, a terrifying, striking man with sharp features and copper skin looms over me, staring into my eyes in a way I can’t seem to escape from no matter how hard I try. I cry out for Hemingway and then he’s there. In the dream? In real life? It’s all a blur. All I’m aware of is a soothing baritone voice whispering in my ear that everything will be okay.

A cozy feeling comes over me—like I’m being held close by someone—chasing away all of my broken, unsettling dreams and replacing them with more peaceful dreams of books and flying, soaring through the air unencumbered. And fire. Not scary fire, but warm fire that wraps itself around me, protecting me, keeping me safe...

CHAPTER  
**EIGHT**





## HEMINGWAY

Three hours later and I still can't shake the feeling of whatever was outside. I've checked on Dempsey a ridiculous number of times, finding him peacefully asleep, except for a few moments of restlessness hours ago. I wanted to touch him, pull him into my arms, but I simply whispered to him that he was safe with me.

My dragon is agitated and so am I. How do I protect him from something unseen? I give in and call Arson. Fuck even knows whose bed he's in.

"It's the middle of the night, Hem," he growls into the phone.

"And?"

With a heavy sigh from him, I hear a rustling noise. "What's going on? It must be something big for you to call me."

"You're in this time zone. Sorry if I woke whoever you're with."

"I'm alone."

I raise an eyebrow, even though he can't see me. *Okay.* "I do have a question. Tonight, after dinner, Dempsey and I were walking back to the hotel and we both felt something..." I rub my forehead. "Foreboding. Dark. Cold."

"Uh huh."

"Couldn't see anything. Just felt it. I was positive we were being followed but no one was there. Have you ever heard of something like that?"

"You mean ghosts?"

"For fuck's sake, Arson. It wasn't a ghost. We were outside."

“And ghosts can’t be outside?”

“Why would they be?”

“Why not? It’s London.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “What else besides a ghost?”

“Hmm.” I hear the gurgle of water as he drinks. “I got nothing. Demon?”

“I have no experience with either. Maybe Hareem would know if there’s something supernatural going on in this city.”

“Maybe the vampire can tell the dragon shifter if there’s something supernatural going on?”

I actually chuckle at that. “More supernatural.”

“Well let me know what you find out. Did you bed your mate yet?”

“I don’t know that he’s my mate.”

“Really? You almost ripped your own brother’s head off for complimenting him. Does that seem normal to you? Just a client, Hem?”

“My dragon is acting weird lately.”

“Uh, because he’s near his mate.”

“We don’t know that,” I rumble again, my heart racing. I can hear Arson’s sheets rustling on the other end of the phone, his tone relaxed. Of course it is, he hasn’t been awake all night worrying about some dark, ominous presence.

“Well, one of us doesn’t. You guys are cute as fuck together.”

My chest tightens with longing. Are we? “He’s cute, isn’t he?”

“Definitely. Totally your type. I guess he’s into books and shit like you?”

“Yeah. He’s not into me at all though.”



Arson snorts. “Oh please. Who wouldn’t be into you? He looked at you like you were fucking Shakespeare himself.”

“Did he?” My heart swells and beats faster.

“He did. He looked at me like he thought I was gonna bite him.” My brother chuckles.

“He’s a little guarded and scared.”

“Fair, but he didn’t warm up after he knew who I was. I think he’s into you. Maybe he just needs time to realize it.”

“Maybe.” I rub a hand over my forehead, fighting against the tsunami of feelings that is rushing around inside of me.

“You like him though. I could feel it. Your whole vibe was different.” There’s something gentle, almost wistful in his tone.

“Different how?” I ask, my throat tightening. Maybe Arson has some secret insight into how to tell if Dempsey is definitely my mate or not.

“There was a peacefulness to you, even when you were puffing your chest out at me.”

“That’s nice to know.” I drag my hand over my face again and sigh. “But before I worry about my love life, I need to find out who is chasing him, and if anything was really around us tonight.”

“Let me know what you find out. I’m leaving London tomorrow.”

“What were you here for?” I sit down on the end of my bed and look across the space towards Dempsey’s sleeping form again.

“Artwork. What else? I’m heading to Morocco tomorrow.”

“Be careful out there, Arson.”

“I always am. Talk soon.”

“Bye.”

After ending the call, I rise to check on Dempsey again. He’s burrowed under his blankets, his face squished against

his pillow. He looks younger without his glasses on, and I notice for the first time just how long and thick his lashes are and the smattering of very faint freckles around his eyebrows.

I force myself away from his bed before I climb in beside him and decide to check in with Hareem.

“Another early call, my friend.”

I laugh softly. “Sorry. I couldn’t sleep.”

“What is wrong?”

“I hope nothing, but... is there anything unusual happening in London? Anything more... supernatural than normal?”

“Not that I’m aware of. Did something happen?”

“It was just a weird feeling I had. I might have thought I’d imagined it, but Dempsey felt it too. It was like something we couldn’t see was following us.”

“Well now, that is interesting. I’ll put out some feelers and see if I come up with anything.”

“I appreciate it. We’re leaving later, but if something is lurking you should know anyway.”

“Correct. How did Dempsey like the shop?”

I smile at the memory. “Like a kid in a candy shop. Oh, by the way, I took a bracelet.”

“Let me guess. The diamond cuff.”

“How did you know?”

“You dragons are rather predictable characters. It was the shiniest object.”

“Yes. Bill me for it along with the Folio. Oh, and Dempsey picked out something. I’ll send you a picture.”

“You got it. I’ll have it shipped to you.”

“Great. I really appreciate it. He was impressed.”

“You can always rely on me, my friend.”

“I know. See you next time.”

“Be well, Hemingway.”

“You too.”

I spend the remainder of the night packing up our things so we can head out earlier. Something feels wrong here, and I don't want Dempsey around it any longer than necessary.

## DEMPSEY

I DON'T FEEL RIGHT.

That's the thought plaguing me the entire trip from London home. Something is off, but I have no idea what it is. Jet lag? Not enough to eat? Something else? I feel sick, but it's not any kind of normal sickness.

Hemingway is aware something is happening to me too. I can tell from his lingering concerned gaze, comforting smile, gentle words. He reacts to every movement or sigh I make. Honestly, I feel a little silly. Here I am on this whirlwind trip with a drop-dead sexy man and I can't keep up. He must think I'm so lame.

As we approach my shop, his gaze turns outside, silently casing the area. I'm relieved to see the shop windows intact, ignoring the fact that everything looked fine the last time they broke in too.

“I'm going in with you,” Hemingway says, and the words send a wave of comfort through me.

“Thank you.”

“Of course. Nothing was reported while we were gone, but it never hurts to double check.”

“I appreciate it.”

He turns that penetrating gaze to me, studying my face. “Are you feeling okay?”

“Worn down.” I chuckle. “It's rare I take a day trip to London.”

Hemingway doesn't laugh. "I apologize. We should have stayed longer to acclimate."

"It's okay. It was amazing. I loved every second."

"Good. It was nice having company. I mean, someone who gets it like I do."

"I understand."

Our driver pulls into a spot and Hemingway slides out of the car to get our bags while I linger on the sidewalk, feeling woozy like I drank too much wine. I must sway a little too hard because Hemingway's arm slides around my waist as he pulls me into his side.

"Whoa. Let's get you inside. Do you have your key?"

I nod, reaching into my front left pocket for it and handing it to him. He unlocks the door, helping me inside, and leaning me against a counter while he searches the bottom floor. While he's gone, I look around myself. The feeling of home that normally hits me after a trip, the comfort usually surrounding me from being around my things, isn't there.

I become aware of the chain around my neck. It feels like it's subtly vibrating, cooling my skin. I lift my hand to touch it, but change my mind halfway to it, choosing instead to close my eyes.

*Dempsey.*

I hear my name whispered in the air, as if it's far away and carried on a breeze.

A face appears in my vision, angry black eyes staring. The face is familiar somehow. Did I dream it? A ripple of foreboding rolls through me, clenching around my chest and stomach, until I feel the need to gasp for air.

"Dempsey?"

Hemingway.

I struggle to open my eyes, to break free of these invisible chains around me, but I feel too weak.

“Dempsey?” He gently shakes me this time, but it’s not until he physically jostles me to a different location that I snap out of it.

I take a gulp of fresh air as though I was suffocating and stare at my bodyguard with wide eyes. “What happened?”

“I was going to ask you that.”

I shake my head, clutching his forearm for stability. “I-I don’t know. It felt like I was trapped in a dream. That’s never happened to me before.”

Hemingway’s concerned gaze turns instantly dark. “Do you believe in magic?”

I pull my head back slightly. “No. Should I?”

He drags a hand through his normally stylish hair, causing it to move out in different directions. Somehow, he still manages to look incredible.

“Something is happening, and I’m starting to think it might be supernatural.”

“Like...a ghost?”

He shrugs. “Not sure that’s the right word. I need to think on it some more, but the thing in London and now this...”

I nod slowly as it sinks in. “It sounds crazy, but we both felt that...whatever it was.”

“Yes.” He holds my gaze to the point where I want to look away. I swear the man can see right into my soul. I wonder what he’ll find, and if he’ll like it.

“Hear me out.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Okay.”

“What would you say about staying with me for a few days?”

“What?”

“My house has plenty of space. You’d have your own room, bathroom, everything. I’m not sure I can leave you alone, but if you insist on staying here, I’ll be here too.”

“Sleeping where?”

He shrugs. “Floor.”

The thought of this magnificent man sleeping on my dusty wood floors seems wrong, but then again, the idea of going to stay at his place feels strange. I glance up the stairs at my closed bedroom door and imagine sleeping there alone tonight given what’s happened the last few days. I shiver with anxiety.

“I’ll go with you.”

He visibly relaxes, his shoulders dropping and his frown fading. “Good. I’ll feel a lot better about that. You’re very safe at my place.”

“Okay. I guess I’ll go pack up a few things.”

“Yes.” He looks around again. “Would it hurt your business to be closed for a few more days?”

“Um, not really. Why?”

“An experiment. I want to give whoever or whatever is chasing you a chance and see what they do. Do they stalk the store, attempt to break in, try to find you? I’ll know what we’re dealing with then. We still have to figure out if they are after you or something in your store.”

“Why would anyone be after me?”

“No clue. That’s what we need to know.”

Hemingway follows me up the stairs, lingering by the window while I pack a bag of clothes and personal items. He’s back in bodyguard mode, and danger aside, he is a masterpiece when he’s protecting me.

Everything about the man is a dream. He’s strong, funny, sexy, and a total book nerd underneath his supermodel exterior. If I were crafting a soulmate, they would be just like him. Only they’d be interested in someone like me who obviously spends more time with things in the past than his looks or style. But that’s okay, right? A soulmate likes you just as you are. Even if my hair is too long and unruly, and my clothes don’t quite fit right. Even if my nose is a little too big

and I have freckles in weird places. A soulmate would like those quirks. At least I think that's how it goes.

"I'm ready."

Hemingway nods. "Good. I don't feel settled here."

We exit the store, and as I lock up, a car pulls up to the curb. I remember that's how he picked me up for the airport. The driver takes my bags to put in the trunk, and as I head for the backseat, a man walking down the sidewalk walks straight into me with a force that sends me back a few steps.

Hemingway is on the man in a flash, and I watch in stunned silence as his eyes shine gold and he growls at the man, digging into his arm.

The man raises his hands in defense, cowering in the face of Hemingway's fury over bumping into me. The man is holding a bag and frantically explaining he has a food delivery to make.

"Watch where you're going," Hemingway says, but his voice is deeper and raspier than usual.

When I look at his face again, his eyes are their normal color, and I wonder, not for the first time, if my brain is playing tricks on me. You can't switch eye colors when you get mad like you're *The Hulk*. Now that we're home, and it sounds like I'll have a few days of down time away from the shop, I'm going to do some research into changing eye colors.

"Get in the car, Dempsey," Hemingway commands, and without thinking I scramble inside just so he doesn't use that tone with me again.

Once we're inside, he exhales, the scent of campfire wafting past my nose. He rubs the back of his neck then seems to reset himself, bringing a gentle smile to his lips.

"I apologize for being gruff. It startled me when he ran into you."

"No apology needed. You were doing your job, and I appreciate it."

He averts his eyes for a moment before lifting them to meet mine. When he reaches for my hand, I let him take it, feeling instantly soothed by his warm touch.

“Regardless of what kind of threat this is, human or otherwise, I will *always* protect you.”

I tilt my head, my brain replaying the emphasis he placed on the word always. A little seed of hope that lives deep inside my chest wants to believe he means that in the literal sense. The way he’s looking at me right now, I could almost believe it.

After a moment, he releases my hand, leaving me feeling bereft of his touch. I probably shouldn’t let myself entertain the idea of me and Hemingway together, but tell that to my fantasies.

By the time we reach his compound, as he calls it, and the huge iron gates leading into it open up, the panic and discomfort from earlier are all but gone. I feel a little less tired too.

The car leads us along a circular drive, past elaborate fountains, manicured lawns, and statues dotting the landscape. If I didn’t know better, I’d swear we’d stepped onto a French emperor’s palatial estate.

“It’s the third house on the left,” Hemingway says as we pass two large homes in different styles.

Hemingway’s house appears to be the middle house in a group of five. When he said he had enough space for me, he was grossly underplaying it. His house—not the word I would use—looks like it was plucked out of sixteenth century Italy, with massive stone columns in the front, arched windows, and stunning stonework.

“Wow,” I whisper.

Hemingway offers me a hesitant smile. “Do you like it?”

“Of course. It’s...magnificent.”

His smile warms as something like pride flashes across his expression. “Come inside.”



He grabs all of our bags in his arms despite my protests that I should carry my own. Inside, I stop, simply stunned as I take it all in. Everything is so luxurious it makes The Eloise look like a roadside motel.

“Is this travertine flooring?”

Hemingway smiles. “There’s a palazzo in Italy that I fell in love with and I basically had it recreated here.”

“Impressive.” I run my hand over the pristine cream banister. “My apartment must feel like a hovel to you.”

“No,” he rushes to say. “Not at all. It’s wonderful.”

“Wonderful,” I scoff. “Come on, Hemingway. I’m not stupid.”

“I’m not kidding. It’s full of your things. It smells like you.” His eyes go wide. “Uh, that sounded creepy as fuck. Sorry. I just meant it’s...” His words trail off. “Um, I could show you the guest wing.”

“Wing?” I grin. “Okay. No butler, huh?”

“I told you, I don’t like people in my space.” He clears his throat. “Except invited guests.”

Before we can walk up the stairs, the front door flies open, and a very stylish young man enters. He’s wearing jeans so tight I have no idea how he walks, ankle boots with a stiletto heel, and a black top made of lace. His blond hair is styled perfectly, and if I’m not mistaken, he’s wearing a bit of makeup. Two seconds later, another man enters, looking slightly flustered.

“You’re back,” the younger, glamorous man says. Then his eyes settle on me. “Oh. Hello.”

“Hi.”

Hemingway clears his throat. “Uh, Dempsey, this is Lake and my brother Nico. Lake is Nico’s fiancé.”

“Pleasure,” Lake says, extending his hand dramatically.

I’m not sure if I should shake it or kiss it, so I play it safe with a shake.

“Dempsey is our client.”

“I know,” Lake says. “I set up your file. I work with Drake Security.”

“Ah. Is that how you met Nico?”

Lake smiles, linking arms with the scowling man beside him. They don’t exactly look like a match, but I’m not one to judge anything based on looks.

“Nico was my bodyguard. Now he’s my ma—”

“Fiancé,” Hemingway says again, interrupting with a strained smile.

“Fiancé,” Lake repeats. “Are you staying here?”

“Yes,” Hemingway answers. “In fact, I need a meeting with all of you. Soon.”

“I’m happy to get settled in,” I offer.

“I’ll show you the room.”

“No, no. I’ll do it,” Lake says. “You go do your bodyguard thing. I’ll catch up later.”

“That’s not necessary,” Hemingway says.

“You don’t think you can trust your client with Lake?” Nico says in such a deep voice I expect the windows to rattle.

“Of course I trust Lake. I just don’t want Dempsey to be uncomfortable.”

“Listen,” Lake says, dropping Nico’s arm and wrapping an arm around Hemingway’s shoulder. “If he’s going to be staying here, he might as well get used to us.” He turns his glamorous smile in my direction. “I have a feeling we’re going to be fast friends.”

I have no idea why Lake would think that, but it’s fine. I could use a few friends. Hemingway gazes at me with questioning eyes, so I nod.

“I’m fine with Lake.”

“Okay then.” He seems reluctant to leave me, even though I doubt there’s a safer place I could be.

“Sooo, how was London?” Lake asks, picking up two of my bags while I grab the other.

“Wonderful. It was quick, but magical in a way.”

“How so?” he asks as we ascend the stairs.

“Hemingway knows places mere mortals don’t.”

Lake pauses halfway up the stairs. “Mortals?”

“Oh, you know, regular people. Like he has a friend with an underground antique store.”

“Ah. Right.” We continue up the stairs.

“You probably think books and antiques are boring.”

“On the contrary. Granted, I’m much more into fashion, but I can appreciate the craftsmanship of antiques.” Once we reach the landing, he leads me to the right. “You know what I like the best?”

“What?”

“How people light up when they have a passion. Hemingway looks like a little boy at Christmas when he talks about his books. Who could find that boring?”

I smile, nodding. “I agree. What do you do for Drake?”

“Manage the books, customer relations, and scheduling. They are very good at what they do, but being as busy as they are, they can use the help. Plus, Lord thinks it’s the early 1900s and hasn’t bothered to automate anything.”

I laugh at that. “That’s funny.”

“Yes, he’s...interesting. Very intense.”

“Have you met all the brothers?”

“Oh yes. There’s bookworm Hem, frequent flier Arson, the lover not a fighter, Valentino, Lord, whose name is indicative of his demeanor, and my favorite hot head, Nico.”

“I met Arson in London.”

“Ooh, an Arson in the wild sighting. What was he doing there?”

“No idea. He and Hemingway had a tense interaction, but Hemingway said he adored his brother.”

“And he does.” Lake opens a door. “They are incredibly close and fiercely loyal to each other, but...let’s call it, easily triggered.”

“Ah.” I step through the door and Lake walks into me as I stop abruptly. “Sorry. This is the guest room?”

“Guest suite, I suppose, which is so weird since they rarely if ever have guests. I’d venture to say you’re the first person to stay in this room.”

“It’s...opulent.”

“Yes.” Lake smiles, crossing the room and opening a shade. “You have a lovely view of the woods. It’s amazing how far away we feel from the city.”

“It really is.” I gaze outside for a moment. “Do you live here now?”

“Yes. Our house is right next to yours on the right. Come in anytime you want but be prepared to see us either naked or banging.”

A surprised laugh bursts from me. “Thanks for the warning.”

“Of course. Are you part of the rainbow mafia?”

I twist around to face him. “What now?”

“LGBTQ etc.?”

I chuckle again. “I’m gay.”

“Wonderful.” He claps his hands. “Being straight is so last century.”

“I’m pretty sure gay has always been a thing.”

“Oh, of course, but you know, it wasn’t always safe to be open about it. What a time to be alive. Not that it’s perfect, but we’ve come a long way, baby.”

“We have indeed.”

“Do you know it’s still illegal in, like, seventy countries? Illegal to love someone. Can you imagine?”

“Pretty awful.”

“Enough downer talk. I’m glad you’re one of us.” He sits on the edge of the bed and bounces. “So...any fireworks between you and Hem?”

I swear all the blood drains from my face. “Uh...no? I mean... It’s not...um...”

“Sorry, Nico says I’m too blunt sometimes. I didn’t mean to put you on the spot. It’s really none of my business,” he says. I nod, unsure of what to say. “But...if there were fireworks, I would encourage you to pursue. These brothers are...special. Each one of a kind. I can say that confidently. Ten out of ten. Do recommend.”

A smile pulls at my lips while I listen to the pretty man. “I have a question for you.”

“Sure.”

“Have you always dressed like that? Um, embraced your feminine side?”

“Not always, no. It took me a while to feel comfortable with it since I was still a teen when the urge struck. I have pretty important parents too, so I kind of had to be two people for a while. When I turned eighteen, I started to give myself permission and eased my parents in.”

“Oh.” I sit in an armchair by the fireplace that I’m pretty sure is Louis XV. “When we were in London, Hemingway put a diamond bracelet on my wrist.” I focus on the ruby ring still on my finger. “I accidentally packed this ring, and I’ve been wearing it since I found it. I’m not really the type to wear pretty things.”

“But?”

“For a few seconds, I felt really glamorous.”

“And isn’t that what it’s really about? How you feel in the things you wear? Who cares what the world thinks? Most of the world needs an enema anyway.”

I laugh at that, but as I sink deeper into the chair, exhaustion takes hold. “Um, Lake, I think jet lag is taking over.”

“Gotcha. I’ll leave you to it. You’re totally safe here so let your guard down and get some rest. I’ll see you again soon.”

“Thank you. It was nice meeting you.”

He laughs. “Get used to me, Dempsey. We’re besties now. I just know it.”

He exits the room with a flutter, leaving me slightly stunned, but in a good way. Maybe Lake would know how to bring out my better qualities. Not that I want to be like him, but maybe somewhere inside me is a more refined version of myself. A prettier one. A glamorous one.

I kick off my shoes, feeling my limbs grow heavy, and climb into bed, not bothering to pull the blankets down. I need sleep. I’ll deal with the rest of my life when I wake up.

CHAPTER  
**NINE**





## HEMINGWAY

**M**y dragon grows restless the moment Dempsey is out of my sight. My flesh tightens and ripples and a puff of smoke billows from my nostrils.

Nico puts a firm hand on my shoulder and that's the only thing that keeps me moving forward towards Lord's house rather than turning to go straight back to him.

"Lake's not going to let anything happen to him," Nico says.

"Lake is only human," I remind him dryly.

"And my dragon is so keenly aware of every breath my mate takes, regardless of how far apart we are, that I would know if the shadows inside your home so much as shifted."

A feeling of longing grips my chest. *I want that.*

"Back from your little book fair already?" Valentino taunts with a toothy grin as he comes up behind us on our way into Lord's house.

"*Book fair,*" I mutter, shaking my head. "Imagine if I called your priceless art doodles. Would you care for that?"

Valentino booms out a laugh. "I'm just riling you up. Did you leave your sense of humor across the pond? Or are you channeling Nico today?"

Nico huffs.

"I'm sorry. I'm jet lagged and overtired."

Valentino ruffles my hair to let me know there are no hard feelings and then shoulders past us both to claim his regular seat in Lord's conference room. Our eldest brother is already waiting for us, seated at the end of the table in the grandest chair with his feet propped up on the long wooden table that I'm sure cost more than most cars. He's wearing a pair of



dressy shoes with brown leather on the toe and heel and a black and gold floral pattern over the rest. Something tells me that Lake has grown bored of Nico's closet and has begun systematically working his way through the rest of our wardrobes. I make a mental note to put a padlock on mine before I end up with a tweed jacket or a paisley vest hidden amongst my clothing.

Lord looks up from the newspaper he's reading and immediately looks me up and down, assessing.

"You look like shit."

"How kind of you," I say dryly, pulling out my chair and plopping myself down.

My eyelids feel heavy, and I resist the urge to calculate how many hours I've gone without sleep at this point. I'm exhausted and wired all at once, and something tells me I won't be getting any meaningful rest until I'm sure Dempsey is safe.

Once we're all settled, all eyes turn to me since I'm the one who called a meeting. I clear my throat and sit forward with my elbows on the smooth, shiny wood of the table.

"I assumed when I met with Dempsey originally at his shop that we were dealing with a run of the mill thief, albeit one with a penchant for antiques. It's possible that's still the case, but something happened in London that has my dragon on edge. We were followed."

"By whom?" Lord asks, immediately all business. "Or is it more of a what?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know?" Valentino furrows his eyebrows in confusion.

"I didn't see anyone or anything, even with my dragon sight. And I didn't smell anything out of the ordinary."

"So, how do you know you were followed?" Lord asks.

"I could feel it, and Dempsey could as well. I have a vampire friend asking around the city, but Dempsey gave me

the impression that this has happened to him before...*here*, at home.”

“You don’t think it was something in London. You think it was something following Dempsey?” Nico clarifies, and I nod.

“Are we fucking ghost hunters now?” Valentino quips, and I growl.

“I’ll be whatever the hell I need to be to make sure he’s safe.” My voice takes on the deeper tone of my dragon, another puff of smoke wafting out with my exhale.

Lord pinches the bridge of his nose. “For the love of fucking fire, don’t tell me that this human is your mate.”

*Yes.* My dragon surges and thrashes inside of me. I swallow deeply, clenching my jaw as I wrestle the beast back, not saying a word until I’m sure I have a hold of myself.

“I don’t know.” My words are tight, *clipped*, and I’m sure all of my brothers notice it.

“I’m officially opting out of my next rotation. I can’t risk fate sticking me with just one person for the next two thousand years.” Tino’s voice is thick with horror as he shudders dramatically.

“Mmm, yes, sounds awful,” Lord mutters, his tone thick with sarcasm.

“You’re still not sure?” Nico asks, ignoring our brothers.

*Yes.*

“No,” I answer, ignoring that voice in my head. No, less of a voice and more of a gut feeling.

“Alright, back to the main issue. An unseen assailant, possibly supernatural, stalking Dempsey for we don’t know how long,” Lord summarizes.

“That’s about it.”

“Could it be tied to an item in his shop?” Nico muses. “If we’re seriously considering the ghost angle. He has a lot of old shit, right?”

“Antiques,” I correct with an eye roll. “And if it were something in his shop, why not take it when they broke in the first time? Why follow him all the way to London?”

“Good point. What else could it be? Some kind of curse?” Lord guesses. “I’ll have to dig through my contacts. We can have Lake get in touch with one of the local covens to see what they might know.”

I nod in agreement. “I don’t know what the fuck else would be invisible.”

“Vampires can glamor so you can’t see them, but you’d still smell them. Fuckers smell like corpses.” Valentino shudders.

“I can’t think of anything invisible *and* without scent,” Lord agrees. “He’s here now, so he’s fairly safe. We’ll look into getting some advice from the witches and go from there.”

“Sounds like a plan.” I’m pushing back from the table before I’ve even finished my sentence, desperate to get back and make sure Dempsey really is okay.

“We used to have a little decorum,” Lord gripes, and I flip him the bird over my shoulder on my way out.

I’m not sure I’ve ever made it from Lord’s house to mine quite so fast, barging through the door into my entrance hall a mere fifteen seconds later. I can hear the television playing from the living room, so I head in that direction. When I step into the room, I find Lake making himself at home, sprawled out on my couch with one of my blankets draped over himself, his feet up over the back of the couch and his head cocked at an angle that can’t possibly be comfortable while he watches women who’ve had far too much plastic surgery scream at each other on the television.

“Where’s Dempsey?” I ask immediately.

“Sleeping. He looked exhausted.”

I grunt and nod, and then turn to leave the living room. Nico passes me on my way through the hall, here to collect his mate, I’m assuming. I hear Lake’s peal of laughter and the unmistakable sound of kissing on my way up the stairs.

“Do not fuck in my home,” I shout, my voice booming around the high ceilings of the entryway.

“Someone should,” Nico taunts.

“Fucker,” I grumble under my breath. He’s not exactly wrong, but it’s still a rude thing to point out.

I’m on autopilot as I head straight for the guest wing of the house. I should have put him in one of the bedrooms closer to mine...or better yet, *my* bedroom. A pleased sound rumbles through my chest at the thought of him safe in my bed, tucked tightly against my body while we slumber. Somehow, the thought is more arousing than an outright sexual one. Fantasies of Dempsey’s soft sleeping breaths and warm skin send ripples of pleasure through me.

I stop outside the door where I can hear the same slow, gentle breathing I was just yearning for, and I quietly twist the handle. I poke my head in, careful not to wake him. He’s cocooned under the blankets, so small compared to the enormous size of the bed itself. The room already smells of him, intoxicating in the way it beckons me to crawl in next to him and join him in his slumber.

I can’t imagine he would be thrilled to wake up that way, but maybe one day, if I’m very lucky and fate is kind.

I force myself to leave him to sleep. It’s clear he needs it. I’m aware of my own exhaustion as I make my way back down the hallway, but I don’t see how I will be able to sleep so far away from him when I still don’t even know what threat is plaguing him.

I come to a stop in front of my hoard room. Perhaps being among my treasures will settle me some. I unlock the door and step inside. It’s my sanctuary, my favorite place in all the world. The walls are lined floor to ceiling with bookshelves, a rolling ladder against each wall. The vaulted ceiling with a large skylight leaves enough room for me to shift into my dragon form and also creates a lovely, warm greenhouse effect in the middle of the day.

I let out a sigh, stripping out of my clothes and folding them neatly. When I'm bare, I stretch my arms over my head and groan deeply from my core. The sharp tug on my muscles is a feeling of pain and relief all at once, like uncurling from a cramped position. My joints pop one by one, my skin growing taut and rippling with scales again. This time, I don't fight it. I embrace the deep itch of my leathery skin as it crawls along every inch of my body, replacing the softness of my human flesh.

I stand at my full height, stretching my wings and sighing again. My dragon eyes are attracted to the glimmering shine of each ruby and jewel, every piece of gold and silver, all piled high around the room. The almost vanilla scent of the lignin decaying in every one of the pages of the books on my shelves tickles my nose and turns my mind immediately back to Dempsey, snoozing not far away.

I can hear his breaths from here with my dragon senses, and in this form, there isn't an ounce of doubt in my mind that he is mine and that I would burn the world down to keep him safe. I lumber onto the nearest pile of treasure and flop down heavily, sending priceless pieces skittering over the floor in all directions. My thoughts are so much simpler when I'm a dragon. There's a peace to it.

As far as the beast is concerned, the moment Dempsey slipped my ring onto his finger, he accepted me as his mate. The rest of it is just a technicality. I breathe out a ripple of smoke and wrap my tail around myself, closing my eyes and trusting that if anything were to happen to Dempsey, I would know.

He's safe here in my sanctuary. And I intend to keep him that way... *Safe and here.*

Perhaps offering him more treasures from my hoard will show him what a good mate I could be. He did seem pleased with the ring, even if he didn't realize it was mine. What would Dempsey like? A necklace perhaps? The shiny diamond bracelet placed around his wrist while he sleeps?

No. His heart wants a different kind of treasure. I can give him that too. I'll give him everything.

## DEMPSEY

I WAKE up feeling groggy and stiff. There's light streaming through the windows just like there was when I laid down to sleep, so either I slept a very short time, or an extremely long time. I rub my eyes and frown. Something feels weird but it's hard to tell what exactly with my brain all cottony from jet lag and sleep.

I stretch in the large, luxurious bed. I've never felt anything as soft as these sheets in my life. It's hard to wrap my head around the amount of money Hemingway and his brothers must have. I grew up *aspiring* to be dirt poor—that's how little we had. The kind of poor where I got too used to that gnawing, hungry feeling in my stomach because going days without eating was just the norm.

I got my first job when I was ten, working for the old man who owned Timeless Treasures before me, Mr. Randall. I can't imagine what he thought the first time I stepped into his store, all gangly and skinny, salivating over all of the beautiful things he kept on his shelves. I'm sure he pegged me for a potential thief, but if he did, he never treated me that way. He patiently answered my questions about every item that caught my eye, telling me their stories and history. It couldn't have been difficult to see that I wasn't well off, so he offered to pay me ten dollars for every delivery I made for him. I jumped at the chance, of course, and over the next twenty years, he taught me everything there was to know about buying and selling antiques, running a business, and life in general.

It must have raised quite a few eyebrows, a teenager being best friends with the old man at the antique shop, but he understood me in a way most people didn't. My mom always said I had an old soul. I suppose that's why Mr. Randall and I got along so well, and probably why I've never managed to connect with anyone my own age. I'd say I'm chronically

single, but I'm not sure it counts if I gave up on bothering to hope for any man to sweep me off my feet years ago.

Hemingway's intense gaze and smooth, deep voice fill my mind instantly, sending hot shivers through my body. *If only...*

I sigh and sit up in bed, blinking around the room again and finally realizing what feels weird. I'm not wearing my glasses, but I can see. *What the fuck?* I reach for my face, groping at where my glasses should be just to make sure that I didn't fall asleep with them on. Nope, nothing, but somehow I can see the details on the floral pillow resting on the couch on the other side of the vast room, and each individual leaf on the tree that's growing right outside of the window.

This doesn't make any sense. I'm just shy of legally blind. I shouldn't even be able to see my hand clearly when it's right in front of my face without my glasses on. I swallow nervously, grasping for an explanation, logical or irrational, anything. A brain tumor pressing on my optic nerve? Would that improve my vision? A demon possession? I haven't spewed pea soup or spun my head around, so it's probably not that one.

"What the fuck?" I mutter out loud this time, reaching for my glasses just to see what will happen if I put them on.

I slide them onto my face and the room blurs nauseatingly. I remove them immediately and set them back on the bedside table. Okay, this is going to be fine. Whatever this is, whatever the fuck that invisible thing was, all of it has some kind of explanation and I'm going to figure it out.

I push the blankets back and swing my legs over the side of the bed. First things first, I need to find Hemingway. I tug on the same jeans I wore yesterday. Or earlier. Whatever.

I button the jeans and smooth my hands over each pocket out of habit...which, come to think of it, makes it all the more strange that I didn't notice the ring I found in my pocket the other night sooner. There's a subtle lump in my back pocket, so I dip two fingers in to tug it out. It's a folded piece of paper, slightly yellowed with age and stiff like the kind from a very old journal maybe.

I unfold it carefully, thinking back over the haze of the last few days, wondering when I might have put this into my pocket and forgotten about it. But when I have it all the way open, it's obvious that the handwriting isn't mine. It's a smooth cursive that almost looks like it was written with a quill rather than a pen, with small splotches of ink where the writer stopped or started.

*The curves of your lips rewrite  
history.*

My heart flutters at the simple sentence. I recognize it immediately from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Did Hemingway write this and put it in my pocket? Why?

I stare at it for several seconds, trying to make any kind of sense of why he would give me this note before giving up and folding it up again. This is way too many things to puzzle through before an ounce of caffeine.

I make a quick stop in the attached bathroom, which is just as over-the-top luxurious as everything else in this house, and then I go in search of my bodyguard.

I'm worried I'm going to end up wandering through the enormous house all day, but there's a strange little tug in the center of my chest that leads me down the stairs and to the left. I don't have a clue where I'm going, but wherever I end up is as good a place to start as any.

I'm halfway down a long hallway on the main floor when I smell coffee and hear the rustling of paper. I pick up my pace until I reach a large kitchen. It's breathtaking, another obvious homage to his love of Italy. On the far side of the room, a set of double doors open to the outside, where I'm assuming Hemingway is.

I make my way over to the counter where there's a coffee machine as well as a smaller espresso machine, appropriate sized cups set next to each. I put the espresso cup in place and



start the machine before turning around to grab one of the flaky pastries from the plate on the large island counter.

With my steaming cup in hand, I approach the open doors, the greenery of a courtyard catching me immediately. It feels like I'm stepping right into Tuscany with cobblestone and hanging plants, a bubbling fountain, and a pergola covering a sitting area with small purple flowers blooming on it.

"Dempsey." Hemingway's voice is soft, but it startles my heart into a gallop all the same. "How did you sleep?"

"Good...I think. Do you know what time it is?"

"About eleven," he answers, setting down the book he's reading and gesturing to the seat opposite his at the small table. There's an empty espresso cup in front of him as well, and I wonder how long he's been out here reading, waiting for me to wake up.

"Wow, I slept for like eighteen hours."

"Do you feel better?" His eyes roam over me as if he's going to read the answer written somewhere on me, or maybe he's simply appalled at my wrinkled clothes that no doubt stink of sweat after how many hours I've been wearing them.

"I feel weird," I admit, taking the seat and sipping my espresso. "You're probably going to think I'm crazy, but I don't need my glasses."

He frowns. "What do you mean?"

I gesture at my face. "I'm not wearing my glasses and I can see. I don't understand how. I've been blind as a bat since I was six years old."

His chair scrapes against the stone as he stands up quickly, coming around the table to loom over me with concern etched all over his expression. He drops to his knees so he's eye level with me and puts his hands on either side of my face. My stomach jolts and heat creeps up my neck and into my cheeks.

He searches my eyes with his own, staring deeply into them. I don't know what he's looking for, but he's so close I can feel the flutter of every breath he exhales. He smells like a

campfire again somehow. I wonder if it's a fancy soap he uses or something. His eyes shimmer gold again. Unmistakably and undeniably, bright gold.

A logical voice in the back of my head tells me that there's something very wrong with that. It's not a trick of the light or my own exhaustion. No. His eyes have fully changed color in a way that seems intentional. But for some reason, a strange sense of peace settles over me deep inside. It's what I always imagined coming home is supposed to feel like.

"Does anything else feel off?" he asks, his voice even raspier than usual.

"Hm?" I hum in a daze as I look deeply into his eyes.

"Dempsey," he says my name gently. "Does anything else feel off or wrong?"

"Oh, no, I don't think so."

He lets go of me and stands up. I sit further back again, the locket tucked under my shirt shifting heavily against my skin. It doesn't feel cold anymore, but it feels heavier than usual. Or maybe I'm just hyperaware of everything right now, trying to find anything that isn't quite right.

"I'm guessing this has something to do with whatever else is going on."

"What do you think is going on?" He had made an offhand comment about it being supernatural yesterday. I'm not sure if I believe him or not, but this whole thing is just odd enough that I'm open to any possibilities.

"I don't know yet, but we're looking into it. We have calls out to...local experts."

"Do I want to know what that means?"

"No, probably not."

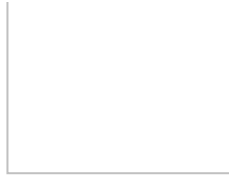
"Okay." I nod.

Hemingway takes his seat again, and I do my best to convince myself that everything is normal. A weird, possibly

invisible stalker, sudden super vision, a bodyguard with shifting eyes... Yup, *normal*.

CHAPTER  
TEN





## HEMINGWAY

This is not good. Not good at all. Something is happening to Dempsey, and so far, I am powerless to protect him from it. But what the fuck could it be?

A ghost? With what purpose? And since when do ghosts follow a person across continents? Never, in my experience. I really hope Lake is able to learn something, otherwise I'm going to tear the world apart until I find out who or what is threatening him.

When I snap out of confused internal rage, I notice Dempsey sipping his coffee but studying my face. His expression is unreadable though.

“Do you have a question?”

“How do you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Make your eyes flip to gold?”

That was not the question I expected. I open my mouth while my brain scrabbles for an answer, but the only thing that comes out is a puff of smoke I hold back by snapping my mouth shut just in time.

*Mate. Mine. Need.*

“Uh...well... You see—”

“Good morning, beauties,” Lake says, bursting into the courtyard with excellent timing. For once, his lack of announcing his arrival worked in my favor. “Dempsey. Did you sleep well?”

Dempsey's expression softens with affection, leaving my dragon and me pouting. “I did. Basically. How are you?”

“Not as good as I'd like to be.” He plops down uninvited in a seat next to me. “I wasn't able to find out anything of

substance. The wit—” He stops, catching himself with a smile. “Our friends weren’t aware of anything unusual.”

“Dammit,” I grumble.

“But one of them offered to stop by the shop and get a sense of...” His gaze switches between me and Dempsey. “Well, the energy there.”

“Like a psychic?” Dempsey asks.

“Something like that,” Lake answers. “Hey. You’re not wearing your glasses.”

“No.” He makes the move to push them up his nose, then realizes they aren’t there. “Um, I woke up not needing them.”

Lake tilts his head like a puppy. “What do you mean? You’re not wearing contacts?”

“Nope. It’s like somehow my vision improved while I slept.”

Lake gasps, clutching his chest. “Ooh. The plot thickens.” He turns to me. “It has to be connected, right?”

“I would imagine so, yes.”

“Maybe you found the fountain of youth. Did you drink anything odd?”

“No.” Dempsey shakes his head. “Besides, anything I’ve had, Hemingway had too.”

“Yeah, but Hem is—”

I nudge his arm with my elbow and give him a look.

“Uh...” Lake continues. “So interesting.”

“Arrange it with the expert to visit Dempsey’s shop,” I say, changing the subject. “We can go from there.”

“Excuse me, but don’t you think you should discuss this with me? It is my store, after all.”

My dragon whimpers within me. “Apologies, Dempsey. It’s your decision.”

He taps his fingers on the table, glancing out at the water fountain. “I don’t believe in psychics, but if you trust this person might be able to help, I’ll give it a shot.”

Lake smiles, reaching across the table and putting his hand over Dempsey’s, until I release a low growl. Rolling his eyes, he removes his hand. “I’m on it. What are you up to the rest of the day?”

Dempsey shrugs. “I have no idea. I spend all my days tinkering around my store. Without that, I’m sort of anchorless.”

“Do you want to go out with me? I’ll be shopping for some new clothes.”

“Like you need new clothes,” I mutter.

“There is never *not* a need for new clothes,” Lake replies flippantly. “Anyway, it could be fun. We’ll get lunch and—”

“No,” I growl. “He’s not going out.”

Dempsey narrows his eyes at me. “I’m sorry to pull rank here, but who hired who? How dare you tell me what I can and can’t do like I’m a child.”

Lake makes an “oh shit” face, whispering, “Fix it fast, Hem.”

Gripping the back of my neck to keep my dragon from taking over, I bow my head. “I can be...overly protective of my clients.”

Dempsey scoffs, clearly not believing me.

“Your safety is more important to me than I can express. I don’t like the idea of you being out of my sight.”

“Then come with us.”

Lake watches my face like he’s trying to puzzle out a difficult math problem.

“Fine,” I grit out between my teeth. I don’t have much of an option. I need Dempsey to be safe and my dragon needs him to be happy. Dempsey raises an eyebrow, obviously

waiting for me to elaborate. “I won’t attempt to control your actions going forward. Only when a clear threat is present.”

“Thank you.” He smiles and shifts his gaze to Lake. “I’d love to go shopping.”

## DEMPSEY

I HATE SHOPPING.

But it’s the principle of the situation at this point. While I appreciate Hemingway’s dedication to his job, I’ll be damned if he’s going to treat me like a helpless child. So now I’m sitting in a boutique shop in the fanciest part of town watching Lake command the room like the diva he is.

Hemingway and Nico linger by the door, casing everyone walking in and out. Like my stalker slash would-be thief would show up in a place like this.

The longer I watch Lake trying on glamorous heeled shoes, the more self-conscious I feel about my own appearance. I can’t imagine what the salespeople and other customers must think of me sitting here in my loose-fitting khakis and polo shirt that have definitely seen better days. My brown shoes are comfortable, but scuffed and worn.

Unfortunately, I wouldn’t have the first clue how to go about updating my look. I glance to the side and see my reflection—slouching, curled in on myself. I order my clothes online from the cheapest store I can find. Not that I’m broke. It just never mattered to me, so why does it now?

Is it because of Lake and all his fabulous style? Is that influencing me? Or is it something else? I peer over my shoulder, meeting Hemingway’s gaze. Is it wanting to be more appealing to a man I have no business thinking about in that way?

Lake appears before me a moment later with a huge smile on his face. “Are you sure you don’t want to try anything on?”

I laugh. “Do I look like anything here is my style?”

“How would you know if you don’t try?”



“I’d feel ridiculous, but thanks. Where to now?”

“A shop two doors down. I want to get something for Nico. He’s slowly letting me get him out of tight t-shirts and into tight regular shirts. Baby steps.”

I laugh, following him as he saunters out of the shop like it’s a catwalk. When we reach Hemingway, he puts his hand on my lower back to lead me down the sidewalk and suddenly words I never expected spill from my lips.

“I think I want a makeover.”

Everyone stops walking and turns to look at me. Lake’s smile is so bright it could light up the city.

“Are you serious?” he asks.

“Yes.”

“No,” Hemingway says sharply, then seems to remember himself. “Um, you don’t need a makeover.”

“No, he doesn’t,” Lake says sweetly. “You’re absolutely charming as you are, but...” He walks around me in a little circle. “A little style can do wonders for self-esteem.”

“I don’t want him to look like you,” Hemingway says, provoking Nico, who grabs his arm and pulls him far enough away that we can’t hear them.

“What is that about?”

Lake frowns, crossing his arms over his chest. “Obviously, our boy Hem is a fan of you just the way you are, and offending me, accidentally or not, is a sure way to get Nico riled up.”

I watch them argue but since we can only see them from the side, it’s impossible to see if the eye thing happens again. I wonder what Lake knows about that. I have a feeling he knows a lot. Do I want the answers?

A moment later, both men return, now composed, but Hemingway’s expression is tight. “Do whatever you want,” he grumbles.

“I planned to, but thanks for the unnecessary permission.”

He huffs, looking at the street instead of me.

Lake simply laughs, hooking his arm through mine. “Tell me what excites you.”

“I have no idea.” I gaze at the people walking by us, all of them just as fashionable as Lake. “I don’t think I’m ready to level up to where you are, but are there maybe some small steps I could take?”

“Of course.”

“Um, what would you suggest?”

“You have gorgeous hair. You could do a lot with it.”

“Yeah, it’s overgrown. I haven’t made time for a haircut.”

“Well, that’s a good place to start then.”

“Yeah. Okay.”

“Let me make a quick call.”

We step out of the way of pedestrians as Lake pulls his phone out of his pocket. Hemingway is still glaring and entirely unpleasant, but I suppose it’s a compliment that he feels so strongly about my looks. Which, okay, he clearly has a nerd kink.

“Done,” Lake announces, ending his call. “I can get you into my favorite salon. My stylist is a master. He’ll know exactly what to do with you.”

“Great. Uh...clothes, I guess?”

Lake nods happily, running his gaze over me. “I’m guessing you need comfort given your job?”

“Yes.”

“Durability, nothing that easily wrinkles or stains?”

“Exactly.”

Nico beams with pride. “Isn’t he amazing?”

“He is, yes.”

Hemingway only huffs in response.

“I know just the place,” Lake says, dragging me by the wrist down the sidewalk.

We enter a shop that immediately settles my nerves. The clothes are nothing like the stuff Lake would wear, which is way beyond where I’m at right now. I see slacks, nice shirts, sweaters, and blazers.

A tall, stunning man with dark skin, a bald head, and the most incredible presence approaches us, wearing black from head to toe.

“Lake, darling.” They air kiss. “Good to see you.”

“Hello, Kiko. We’re shopping for my gorgeous friend Dempsey today. Can you work your magic?”

Kiko studies me with a keen eye. “Oh yes, I love a challenge.”

“Hey,” Hemingway growls. “He’s not a challenge.”

Lake grins, winking at me.

“Oh, no offense meant,” Kiko says. “He’s gorgeous. I can just tell there’s someone hiding under that hair and baggy clothes waiting to make his debut. Are you ready, darling?”

Hemingway growls again but stays silent.

“I’m ready.”

Kiko deposits me in a fitting room while he and Lake flit around the store picking out things for me to try on. My guess is Nico and Hemingway are sitting somewhere where they can keep an eye on the store.

Lake appears after a soft knock on the door. “We’re going to start you off with a few things we think are in your current wheelhouse. If you need a different size, just holler. We’re right on the other side of the door.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

I close the door and begin switching my old clothes for my new ones. Lake and Kiko chose a pair of taupe pants in the softest material ever. They’re structured and pressed neatly, and the tag says Wrinkle Resistant. Good start.

I pull them on, studying myself as I button them. They feel...nice. Next, I try on a cream shirt with three quarter length sleeves and three buttons near the collar. My awareness of the necklace around my neck pricks at my senses, but the bronze color of the chain looks nice with the cream shirt.

With a deep breath, I open the door and step out. Lake's face lights up while Kiko sizes me up.

"What do you think?" Lake asks.

"I think I like it."

"We can do better," Kiko says, throwing a few more hangers at me.

Forty minutes and a blur of outfits later, I put the last one on, but I'm not sure I can handle it. Opening the door, I peek out for Lake.

"Can you come in here?"

"Sure." He slips inside, smiling when he sees the outfit. "Wow."

"Yeah, wow. Good wow or 'what do you think you're doing' wow?"

"Listen, Dempsey. All of fashion is about how it feels. It doesn't matter what anyone else thinks as long as you feel good. So, tell me, when you look in the mirror, is it a good wow?"

I turn my attention back to the mirror, taking in my reflection. I'm wearing black skinny jeans, a sleek ankle boot, and a cashmere sweater, which Kiko said was a great casual dinner look.

Running my hands down the front of the sweater, I feel a smile pull at my lips. "It's nice. I feel like me, but upgraded. Just a little though."

"You look incredible, and very much like the man I met. Just a little polished."

"Do you think..." I stop myself from actually voicing the ridiculous words that were about to leave my lips.

“Do I think Hem would like it? Yes, I do.”

Exhaling slowly, I sit on the velvet bench in the room.  
“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“You said Nico was your bodyguard, right?”

“Yep.”

“And you fell in love?”

“Absolutely.”

“So it’s not ridiculous and inappropriate if I’m kind of hoping that Hemingway’s overbearing protectiveness means he likes me as more than a client?”

Lake’s expression softens as he sits next to me and pulls my hand into his lap. “The thing about Hem and his brothers... Well, let’s just say that bodyguard is the right occupation for them. When they like something or *someone*, they’ll do anything to protect them. Anything.”

I nod, considering his words.

“Do you like him?” Lake asks.

“I think so, but I’m holding back. It just doesn’t seem realistic that someone who looks like him would be into me.”

“You stop that kind of thinking right now, boo. You are gorgeous. Only a shallow jerk wouldn’t be able to see that, and Hemingway is far from shallow.”

“Gorgeous. Right.”

“I swear on my Pradas. I knew right away why Hem was enchanted. Bonus that you have things in common.”

“That is nice.”

He squeezes my hand. “Promise me this little makeover is about you though, and not impressing Hem.”

“I promise. I felt like a slug in London. He took me to a few amazing places, and I realized I’ve been living my life pretty small. Blending into the background, you know? It was

just easier. But then I saw you living so vibrantly, and it made me want to step out of the shadows a little bit.”

“I’m so glad. You deserve to feel good about yourself.”

“I do. Yeah.” I look at the hanging rack of clothes I picked out. “And here go my life savings, but I’m doing it. I’m buying all of this.”

Lake’s eyes brighten even more. “I’m so proud of you. Next thing you know I’ll be teaching you how to contour.”

“I don’t know what that is, but I wouldn’t count on it.”

Lake laughs, releasing my hand and standing up. “Seriously though, give Hemingway a chance. Underneath the gruffness and inappropriate possessiveness is a man who will take your breath away. Trust me on that, Dempsey.”

“Thanks, Lake.”

“You’re welcome, boo.” He leans in and kisses my cheek. Something tells me that I’m going to have to learn to get used to Lake’s whole over-the-top thing. I don’t hate it though.

His eyes drop to my locket, hanging loose instead of tucked inside my shirt like I usually keep it. As soon as his gaze lands on it, a weird panic creeps up my spine. It feels like he’s looking at me stark naked—it’s vulnerable and uncomfortable. My heart flails as he reaches a hand towards the necklace, seemingly oblivious to the sudden caged feeling that’s come over me.

“Don’t,” I growl and slap his hand away. The word doesn’t even feel like it comes from me, except that I can feel it vibrate on my tongue as I spit it out.

Lake’s eyes go wide, and he yanks his hand back.

“Sorry.”

I tuck the necklace inside of my shirt quickly and release a trembling breath. “No, I’m sorry. I don’t know what that was. I think I must still be tired.”

He looks at me curiously for another second before nodding. “I’m sure that’s what it is. Why don’t you finish up

so we can show off your new look?”

I nod and reach to push my non-existent glasses up my nose.

Once he leaves, I look at my pile of old clothes. I can't put those back on after experiencing what nice clothes feel like, so I keep the jeans on and choose one of the other shirts. It's pale blue and buttons down the front, with the sleeves intentionally rolled up to the forearm.

When I step out of the dressing room, Kiko slips in, grabbing my purchases. “Do you want the clothes you wore in?”

“No. You can toss them.”

Kiko smiles. “Absolutely.”

I drag my hand through my hair as I walk to the front, waiting for Hemingway to notice me. When he does, the look on his face takes my breath away, just like Lake said.

He approaches me slowly, looking me up and down. “You look...nice. Like you.”

“Thanks. Lake and Kiko know what they're doing. I didn't want to change who I am. I just wanted to freshen it up.”

“I'm sorry for earlier. I didn't mean—”

“Shh. It's okay, Hem.” I smile. “Can I call you Hem?”

“You can call me whatever you want, Dempsey.”

“I appreciate how much you care about me. It feels good. We'll figure out our boundaries as we go along.”

“Thank you.”

“You're welcome.”

As he walks away, the scent of campfire wafts around me, settling anything still agitated inside me. If I can update my style after twenty years, maybe it's time I step out of my comfort zone in the romance department too.

I have a feeling Hemingway could be worth it.

CHAPTER  
**ELEVEN**







## HEMINGWAY

Dempsey bustles around my kitchen like he's right at home. The ease with which he opens cabinets and makes himself a cup of coffee to go like he's lived here for years makes my insides smolder with a pleasant warmth. I track his every movement, every single flick of his wrist and the flutter of his lips when he exhales, storing each one up inside of myself like a hoard even more precious than the one I keep locked away upstairs.

It's been two days since the "makeover", and I have to admit, he *does* seem more confident in his new clothes. I'm just glad for all our sakes that Lake didn't try to put him in clothes to match his own style. I would have been forced to murder Nico's mate and the whole thing would have become very messy. But this style is all Dempsey, just a little more tailored and high-end. The haircut is the same—shorter and more tamed, but still all Dempsey.

I gave Lake my credit card and asked him to order more of the same, since Dempsey could only afford a couple of items at the shop and flat out refused when I tried to pay at the time. The rest of his new clothes should be arriving today.

He turns around with his travel mug in hand, and my eyes are drawn to the way that locket of his bounces under his shirt. I've been hyperaware of it since Lake hurried out of the fitting room and told me in a whispered voice about Dempsey's reaction when he tried to touch it. Is it simply an extension of his tendency to hoard? I'm sure I would react much the same if a near stranger tried to touch any of my treasures. Or is it related to the strangeness surrounding this entire situation? I'm hoping the witch will be able to give us a better idea of the answer today.

"Ready?" I ask, absently brushing my fingertips over his bare forearm when he nears me.

Goosebumps rise on his skin, but he doesn't pull away anymore from the light touches I can't seem to keep myself from giving him. Is he warming to me? I desperately hope so. How much longer before I can feel the softness of his lips under mine? How many more nights will I have to sneak into his bedroom to sleep in the chair near his bed instead of having him curled up next to me?

"I think so. Is it weird that I'm nervous? I don't even believe in the whole psychic thing, but... I don't know, what if she looks right into my soul and tells me when I'm going to die or something?" He tries to keep his tone light, but the tightness of worry underneath it is undeniable.

"You're not going to die," I growl.

He takes a sip of his coffee and chuckles. "I don't mean *today*, but we all die eventually, Hem."

I narrow my eyes. Not for thousands of years if I have anything to say about it, but he's not ready to hear that yet.

"You're not going to die," I mutter again.

He rolls his eyes and pats my chest in a move I'm sure he picked up from Lake, like he's trying to soothe my dragon without even realizing what he's doing. My heart beats harder, trying to escape my chest simply to be closer to him.

He passes me and, without a thought, I fish a piece of paper out of my pocket. I tore it fresh from my notebook this morning with a new treasure scrawled onto it. Dempsey wasn't entirely impressed with my shiny trinkets, but he values the riches of words the same way I do. Although, he never mentioned the first one I left for him. Did he find it? Does he still not know it was from me?

I carefully slip the paper into his back pocket. He pauses and looks at me over his shoulder with a raised eyebrow. He's no longer on the defensive, ready to tear my limbs off one by one for daring to touch him, but that fire still simmers under the surface of his gaze.

"We're going to be late," I point out to distract him.

"I'm sure the psychic already knows that," he jokes dryly.

I rumble a laugh. I suppose he would be right about that if we *were* meeting with a proper psychic. We just didn't know how to explain to him why a witch would be investigating his shop, so it was easier to call her a psychic. All of the lies are wearing on me. I would prefer everything to be out in the open, but I still haven't worked out how to broach the subject without Dempsey thinking the whole lot of us have lost our minds.

Lake and Nico are already waiting by my SUV when we step outside. Lake insisted on coming to this meeting today, pointedly reminding us just how well we all play with others. A witch is hardly on par with a wolf shifter, but I get his point. And, of course, Lake goes nowhere without his hulking shadow of a mate.

As soon as we reach the bottom of the stairs, Lake loops his arm through Dempsey's, stealing him away from me and leading him to get into the backseat. My brother gives me a silent nod in greeting and climbs in on the passenger side.

By the time I make my way around to the driver's side and get in, Lake is already talking Dempsey's ear off about wedding plans. Apparently, there was some kind of drama with the flower arrangements he wants made. I think there's a word for someone like Lake... Ah yes, I remember. It's *bridezilla*.

I snort a laugh to myself, and Nico gives me a questioning look in response. I wave my hand dismissively. I'm sure he would throttle me if he heard me call his mate that out loud, even if he knows it's true.

I pull out of the compound and head in the direction of the city, towards Timeless Treasures. Every so often, I glance in the rearview mirror to see Dempsey seated next to Lake, looking at whatever he's showing him on his phone, still going on and on about attire and decor.

"I thought you were having a small wedding?" I ask as neutrally as I can manage.

Lake looks up from his phone and flashes me a threatening grin. "Small doesn't mean it won't be fabulous. It's family

only, but I want it to be a day to remember for the next three-thousand years or so.”

“That’s an oddly specific amount of time,” Dempsey says, sounding amused.

“It’s a figure of speech.” Lake hurries to smooth over his mistake.

“You excited to wear a solid gold tux?” I razz my brother.

Nico grunts. “If he’s happy, I’m happy.”

Dempsey makes a sweet little sighing sound from the backseat in response to Nico’s declaration. My heart does a somersault. If that’s what he wants, I’ll happily give it to him in spades.

I find a parking spot close to the shop, and we all get out. I’m at Dempsey’s side within seconds, my hand on his lower back as I sweep my gaze over the sidewalk and street, sniffing subtly for anything that might seem out of place. Everything seems normal, and the hairs on the back of my neck don’t rise with any unseen threats.

Our contact is waiting for us outside of Timeless Treasures as we approach. I’ve had plenty of dealings with witches over the centuries, but it’s been a good long while. If this one in particular is anything to go by, they’ve clearly modernized to move with the times.

The woman leaning against the large glass window in front of Dempsey’s store is beautiful and intimidating in equal measures. She’s all of five feet tall, but the jut of her chin and the set of her shoulders says she’s ready for a fight if necessary. Her hair hangs in loose waves all the way down to her waist, dark purple in color with a few silver streaks that catch the sunlight. Both of her arms are covered in colorful tattoos all the way down to her knuckles, which have the phases of the moon from one pinky all the way across to the other. She straightens to her full height when she sees us approaching.

“Drake?” she asks, eyeing each of us with a quick sweep of her gaze.

“Drake Security,” Lake says, stepping ahead of the rest of us with his hand outstretched. He’s already in full business mode, emanating confidence and authority. “I’m Lake, this is Hemingway, Nico, and our client, the owner of the shop, Dempsey.” He gestures to us one at a time.

“Dahlia,” she says, shaking his hand.

“Yes, we spoke on the phone. I appreciate you coming out to do a”—he clears his throat—“*reading* for us today.” He gives her a meaningful look, giving me the impression that he let her know about the required discretion in front of Dempsey.

“I have to admit, your description of events piqued my curiosity.” She flips her hair over her shoulder to get it out of the way while Dempsey unlocks the door and turns off the alarm to let us all inside.

## DEMPSEY

A COMPLICATED MIXTURE of relief and anxiety settles in my chest as I wave them all into Timeless Treasures. I’ve been away for days, but it feels like much longer. There’s an itch under my skin compelling me to check on every one of my things to make sure nothing has been moved or gone missing. Everything needs dusting and polishing, I’m sure.

I pause as I pass the jewelry case, remembering the ring that I accidentally brought to London and have been wearing ever since. I slip it off my finger and open the case to place it inside among the other rings.

There’s a quiet growl behind me that I could swear belongs to Hemingway. I turn to see what’s wrong, and he clears his throat but doesn’t elaborate on his reaction. After a few days of staying with him, he’s more of a mystery than ever. It feels like there’s so much he’s not telling me, and why should he? We’ve known each other all of a week and technically we’re nothing but bodyguard and client. Why is that so hard to remember? Why does he have this way of making me feel like I’m more? Like I’m *important*...

“You have a stunning collection,” Dahlia says, the heel of her boots clicking softly against the wood floor as she strolls around the shop, running her finger delicately over several objects. Is this the reading? Is it going to be like a TV show where she’ll touch something and have an intense vision about its sordid origins?

“Thank you,” I manage to get out around the nerves clawing their way up my throat.

Lake sidles close to her, putting a hand on Dahlia’s arm. He leans in and she mirrors his movement so the two of them can have a conversation that’s too quiet for me to hear. If only I’d woken up with super hearing this morning.

I’m not even sure I should get used to the super vision. Last night my eyes blurred several times, like whatever is causing the change is already fading. No, not fading. It feels harsher than that. I feel drained. I slept for fourteen hours again last night, and sixteen the night before. Maybe I caught some kind of strange bug in London.

She nods in response to whatever Lake is saying to her, and then her steel blue eyes snap to me. She and Lake part and she returns to what she was doing before, meandering in a seemingly aimless way up and down my aisles, slowly making her way closer to where I’m lingering near the checkout counter.

When she finally reaches me, my body tenses, but I’m not sure why. It’s like someone is reaching into my chest and squeezing their hands tightly around my lungs.

“Are you okay, honey?” she asks me in a tone far more gentle than I would expect from her badass exterior. The question feels much deeper than surface level. It’s not a nicety or a formality.

“I’m not sure,” I answer with a slight quaver in my voice.

She wraps her arms around me in an unexpected hug, and a louder, deeper growl tears from Hemingway’s throat a few feet away.

“Down boy,” Lake says in a lazy kind of drawl. “Let the nice lady do her job.”

I close my eyes and relax into her, a wave of calm washing over me for half a second. The contrast of it makes me suddenly aware of something deep inside of me that’s knotted and heavy, something that feels like it doesn’t belong to me at all but has made a home there without my knowledge or permission.

I drag in a sharp breath, and she holds me a little tighter.

“I know,” she whispers. After another moment, she releases me. “I need to see the necklace.”

The same sense of panic that I felt in the fitting room the other day grips me. It’s like I’m a wild animal backed into a corner, all I can think of is *flee* or *fight*. My body vibrates with the sudden surge of anxiety and adrenaline, and I take a step back, already shaking my head rapidly.

“No.”

“Dempsey,” she says my name with such weight of authority that it stops me in the middle of my attempted escape. “I won’t touch it. I just need to look at it.”

I keep shaking my head, unable to stop myself, as if I’m being controlled by an unseen puppet master. The increasingly familiar warmth of Hemingway’s body surrounds me from behind, not only keeping me from stepping any farther away from Dahlia but managing to soothe me as well. I should feel even more trapped now, with my escape route blocked, but his nearness is like a blanket wrapping itself around the unease in my soul.

The nervous vibration deep inside each one of my cells shifts to something that feels more like purring, as if every atom in my body is pleased to have Hemingway so near. Well, *almost* every atom. That tight black, inky thing that feels out of place thrashes and resists his presence, making it that much more obvious that the panic isn’t really mine. So, whose is it?

“Don’t touch,” I say weakly, and Dahlia nods.

With trembling fingers, I use one hand to tug the collar of my shirt down an inch and the other to reach inside and pull the heavy locket free to rest in plain view.

True to her promise, Dahlia's hands stay firmly at her sides while she studies the necklace with her eyes alone, squinting and leaning in to get a better look.

"Well?" Lake asks impatiently after several silent seconds.

"Hm," is her only response. When she straightens herself up again, I tuck the locket away. "Where did you get it?"

"An auction. The authentication certificate lists it as Egyptian, eighteenth dynasty. It cost too much, honestly, but as soon as I saw it... I don't know how to explain it, but I couldn't leave without it."

She nods. "And you intended to sell it here in your shop?"

"That was the plan, but I liked it too much, so I put it on instead."

"That's it? You liked it and you put it on?" It seems like she's expecting there to be more to the story.

"Oh, um, I did read the markings etched along the side first. Then I put it on, and that was pretty much it. I actually forgot I was wearing it until we were in London, and it felt really cold against my skin after that weird, invisible stalker thing happened."

"And were there any other bidders? Anyone you think might want to steal it from you?"

"There were a lot of bidders. It was weird, actually, like people were as frantic to have it as I was."

"Hmm," she hums again.

"What do you think?" Hemingway asks.

"I think that I don't know enough." She pulls a little satchel out of her pocket and hands it to me. "These herbs are for protection and health, mix a little into your morning tea until I have more answers for you."



I curl my fingers inwards to clutch the pouch tightly. “Thank you.”

“Let me walk you out,” Hemingway offers. He drags his fingers lightly along my back in a way that I’ve gotten used to in the past few days with him, and right now, his touch is like a balm on the rawness of my soul.

Lake seems to sense my unease, crossing the space to put an arm around me in Hem’s absence, while Nico follows his brother to show Dahlia out.

They step outside with her and talk for a minute or two. Again, I can’t hear a word they’re saying, but Hemingway’s body language grows increasingly tense during the conversation until he spins around and storms back into the shop, his steps clomping so heavily on the floor that he rattles the shelves as he passes.

He exhales sharply and a cloud of gray smoke swirls in the air around him. It’s not the first time, but, like the other morning with his eyes, it *is* the first time that I can’t find any way to rationalize it. He just breathed smoke.

“You need to calm down,” Nico says in a voice that’s even deeper than usual as he follows Hemingway back into the shop.

“*Calm down?* Calm the fuck down?” he roars, spinning on his brother and grabbing him by the front of the shirt.

Lake drops his arm from around my shoulders immediately, rushing to insert himself between the two men who tower over him, seeming even larger in their pulsing rage.

“Both of you need to relax,” Lake barks.

Hemingway releases Nico’s shirt and spins around to pace away from him while Nico smooths his clothing back down with a huff.

“What did she say?” I work up the courage to ask, my words barely penetrating the tension in the room.

“It might be better...” Lake’s tone is all diplomacy and de-escalation, and I’m wound *way* too tightly for it.

“I want to know. This is about me and my shop, and if something’s wrong, I need to know what it is.”

“She doesn’t know for sure,” Nico says.

Hemingway huffs.

“But she told you what she suspects.” It’s the only explanation for Hemingway’s sudden violent fit. “It’s bad, right? Did she say I’m possessed by Satan or something?” I try to make light of the situation because it’s easier than admitting I’m about two seconds from a full-on panicked meltdown.

“She thinks there’s some kind of curse on the locket... amulet... Whatever the fuck she called your necklace,” Hemingway answers. “And she thinks—” He stops mid-sentence and swallows roughly.

“What?” I press again.

“She thinks it might be slowly killing you, like feeding off of you or something,” Nico answers. “And also, that whatever’s following you is likely someone very powerful who wants it for themselves.”

“What?” I breathe the word out like a punch in the gut this time. “Fuck, they can have it then.” I reach up to claw at the necklace, ignoring everything inside of me that rages and resists the idea of taking it off.

“Stop,” Hemingway roars, wrapping himself around me and holding my arms down at my sides. His body surrounds me, dwarfing me with his size as he curls around me with his lips right beside my ear. In spite of the terror of this whole situation, my body reacts to him, my heart beating faster and my cock swelling. His breath tickles my ear with his next words. “She said that she felt something inside of you. She thinks if you take the damn thing off, that might kill you too.”

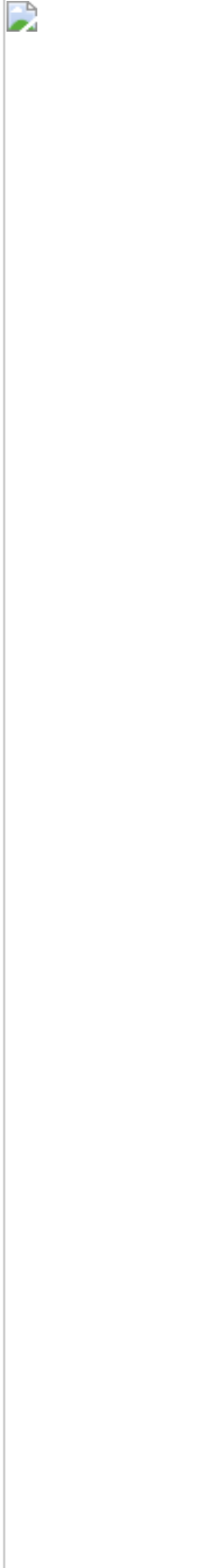
His words hit me like a tidal wave, and I gasp out a sob. I’ll die if I leave it on. I’ll die if I take it off.

Why was I stupid enough to put it on in the first place?

“I’m going to fix this,” he rasps next to my ear.

I want to believe him, I really do, but all I can do is let  
loose another hopeless sob.

CHAPTER  
**TWELVE**





## HEMINGWAY

Lake and Nico make themselves scarce as I hold a sobbing Dempsey in my arms. To say I feel helpless is an understatement. Some mate I am.

My dragon is beside himself, restless and uneasy deep within me. While trying to comfort Dempsey, my attention is torn in an attempt to keep the dragon at bay. It wants to torch everything in sight.

After a minute, Dempsey pushes away from me, his face flushed with emotion and wet from tears.

“You said she wasn’t going to tell me I was going to die, but she did, Hem. She did. You said she wouldn’t.” His fire weakens as he stumbles backward until he hits the counter.

The pleading in his eyes tugs at my chest until I’m so distraught, words won’t come. I can feel my scales on the back of my neck, my lower back, my stomach. I’m minutes from a full shift, which will not only destroy this store, but will likely horrify Dempsey.

My chest tight with desperation and fear, I manage to bolt from the store and run down the block as far as possible, taking big gulps of fresh air to soothe the dragon, but the further I get, the worse the feeling gets until I’m forced to duck down an alley to catch my breath.

The scales ripple across my arm as my fingers throb with the need to shift. I don’t know what else to do but attempt to negotiate.

“If you come out, we can’t go back to Dempsey,” I whisper to myself like a madman.

My warning does little to calm the rage inside me.

“We can’t make it right if you won’t calm down and let me handle it.”

*Mate. Protect. Destroy.*

“I agree, but we need to get ourselves under control.”

“Are you okay?”

I look up sharply then relax when I see Nico. “Fuck.”

“Lake is with Dempsey. Your mate is safe.”

Clutching my stomach, I lean against the brick building behind me. “He must be my mate, right? I wouldn’t have this reaction otherwise.”

Nico doesn’t speak but his expression more than answers my question.

“Fucking hell, Nico. I find my mate and then some stupid necklace is going to kill him?” A wild feeling rages inside of me. I want to take on my dragon form and raze this entire block to cinders just to feel like I’m doing *something*.

“No. That is not happening. You’re not alone in this, Hem.”

A shiver of foreboding runs down my spine. “What if we can’t? It’s not a rogue wolf or a deranged thief. We can’t even see it.”

“We’ll figure it out. Together.” He steps closer, putting his hand on my upper arm. “Dempsey is upset that you left. He thinks he made you mad when he yelled.”

“My dragon—” My voice cracks into an animalistic sound. “I barely kept him in.”

“I know, but he doesn’t. I think you need to tell him.”

“Tell him what? That I’m a dragon and he’s my mate?”

“Yes,” Nico says simply, with the kind of calm surety that only he can seem to pull off.

Shaking my head, I rub my forehead. “It’s not like it was with you and Lake. He’s afraid of me.”

Nico’s lips crack into a subtle smile. “Maybe your dragon eyes aren’t working so great lately. The way that man looks at you, it isn’t fear he’s feeling.”

I consider what Nico is saying as the thought of Dempsey crying in his shop and thinking I left him or that I'm mad at him claws at my chest. I have to get back to him. "I'll figure out how to tell him. First, we need to find out how to break this curse."

"We will."

We return to the store as quickly as possible to find Dempsey curled up like a ball on the floor and Lake wrapped around him. Lake gazes up and glares at me, and without saying a word, the scolding is felt. I mouth the word "Dragon" at him, and he mouths back, "Duh, tell him."

I nod. "Dempsey."

My mate lifts his head, his eyes heavy with sadness, then filling with relief. "You came back."

"Of course, I did. I'm so sorry."

Lake rises, brushes off his pants, and pats my arm as he joins Nico outside, leaving me and Dempsey alone. I offer my hand to Dempsey, and he takes it, standing unsteadily.

"I can explain."

Dempsey shakes his head. "Can you not right now? I just want to go home." His eyes move to the staircase on our left. "Um, your home. I can't be around this stuff right now."

"I understand." Even though it breaks my heart. He loves his stuff and now he's afraid of it. "Let's get you somewhere you feel safe."

He scoffs. "As long as this thing is around my neck that's not going to happen, but I doubt I could sleep here."

I follow him outside, waiting behind him as he sets the alarm and locks the shop. We're about to head back to the car when a man jogs up and reaches for Dempsey's arm.

In an instant, I grab the man and twist his arm behind his back until he yelps.

"Hemingway! That's my neighbor."

Reluctantly, I let him go. “Don’t run up on people like that.”

The man raises his hands in defense, stepping back slightly. “Sorry. I just wanted to make sure you were okay since your shop has been closed and I haven’t seen any activity.”

“No one lingering around or looking inside?” I ask.

“Just people who look like customers. Nothing sinister. Are you okay, Dempsey?”

Dempsey exhales slowly. “Yeah. Mostly. Steve, um, Hemingway is a bodyguard I hired.”

My dragon hisses deep within me, and I clear my throat to hide the noise. Dempsey gives me an odd look but continues talking to Steve.

“Someone broke in a few nights ago, and I think I’m being followed, so I’m staying—”

“Somewhere else,” I finish for him.

“Right. Somewhere else.”

Steve looks nervous and leans in to whisper to Dempsey, “Blink twice if you’re actually safe.”

I appreciate the sentiment that someone cares about Dempsey, so I pretend I didn’t hear it. Apparently, Dempsey must comply because Steve steps back and smiles.

“Well, you’ve got my number, and I’ll keep an eye on the place too.”

“Thanks, Steve.” Dempsey glares at me in a way that makes his silent request known.

“My apologies for roughing you up, Steve.”

He nods. “No harm done.”

As Steve leaves I walk over to the car to find Lake and Nico in the front seats, leaving the back for me and Dempsey, who also notices. He slides in, clasping his hands together in his lap and staring straight ahead.



Fear vibrates off of him, the chaotic thoughts racing around his brain nearly audible, and I can actually sense the panic clawing at his chest. Closing my eyes, I try a few deep inhale-exhales to keep the dragon under control, but it's becoming unbearable. I think I'll need to shift tonight when he's asleep.

"There it is again," Dempsey whispers, seemingly to no one since his gaze is now aimed out the window. "Like a campfire." He turns slowly to face me. "You have secrets. I guess we all do."

"I...um..." I frown, completely at a loss.

He smiles, but it's sad as he turns and looks out the window again. From the front, Lake twists in his seat and gives me a hard look. I know Nico and Lake are right, but I'm torn. Telling him could scare him off, but not telling him makes him think I'm hiding things from him.

My dragon is so close to the surface my skin feels tight on my frame. My back aches from holding my wings in. I squeeze my eyes shut, knowing the dragon is showing. Dempsey's seen them once. I owe him an explanation, but it needs to be done at the right time, not piled on top of the difficult information we received today.

So that's my plan, I guess. Get that damn necklace off him, destroy the curse, reveal myself to my mate, and pray to all the gods that he accepts me. If he doesn't, I don't know what the fuck I'll do.

When Nico pulls up in front of my home, Dempsey bolts from the car, walking quickly across the gravel.

"Fuck."

Nico grabs my arm before I can take off. "Lake and I will update the others and work with Dahlia on the amulet. You take care of Dempsey."

Nodding, I chase after my mate who is pacing at the front door. "It's unlocked, Dempsey."

He nods then goes inside, not waiting for me. When I enter, he's sitting on the bottom step with his head in his

hands, tugging at his hair.

“Dempsey?”

It feels like an eternity before he tilts his head up. “You think you have so long, you know? Forty or even fifty more years to accomplish all the things you want to do. There are so many things...” He closes his eyes. “I’m not ready to die, Hem. I don’t want to die.”

I hurry over and kneel before him, pulling his hands away from his face. “You are not going to die, Dempsey. No way. We will figure this out.”

“But I feel it.” He rubs his hand over his sternum. “It’s in there, twisting around my insides, trying to take over. How do I get it out?”

“We’ll find out, I promise. If it’s the last thing I do.”

Dempsey searches my eyes as he sniffs. His own eyes are red rimmed and swollen. With my thumbs I brush away a few errant tears, desperately holding back my desire to kiss him, hold him in my arms and never let him go.

“I believe you’ll try as hard as you can,” he whispers. “I just need to be prepared if you can’t fix it.”

“Not an option. Dempsey...” The words get stuck in my throat.

“What?”

“Um... You just...uh, you mean more to me than just a client. You’re special. The world needs you.” *I need you.*

His brow creases but then quickly softens. “You hardly know me.”

“I know what I need to know.”

He nods, looking down at our entwined hands before gazing up again and exhaling slowly. “I wish I knew more about you. Not the surface stuff, but the other things you’re obviously hiding.”

I open my mouth to speak, but he shakes his head.

“I know you have your reasons for not telling me. Maybe you’re protecting me. Or maybe you don’t know if you can trust me with your secrets yet. Maybe that’s the sticking point that keeps us in a professional relationship only.” He smiles. “And it’s fine, Hemingway. It’s okay. Someday you’ll be ready to tell me. I just hope it’s before we run out of time.”

“We’re not running out of time. We have more than you can even imagine. Trust me.”

“I do. Weirdly. I’ve never been able to be so much myself around another person. If this is my last experience, at least it was a good one.”

“Please stop thinking that way. The best thing we can both do is focus on solutions.” I clutch both of his arms. “I will not let you die. If I have to go to hell and get you back myself, I will.”

A slight smile, this one more believable than the others, pulls at his lips. “Right. Maybe I can just, um, sit in my pity party for tonight if I promise to pull myself together tomorrow?”

Then it hits me. How fragile a normal human’s life is. How swiftly it can be snuffed out, leaving only a memory of their energy and impact. He has every right to be terrified.

“Of course. When you’re here, you can feel anything you need to. This is your safe place.”

Dempsey nods as his eyes well with tears again. “I’m gonna go take a bath and go to bed early.”

“Do you want to eat?”

He shakes his head. “No.”

“If you need anything at all, just call for me. I’ll be there immediately.”

“I know.” He exhales slowly. “You need to rest too. We’re safe here.”

I nod as he stands and climbs the stairs slowly, as if each step is the hardest he’s ever taken. Once I hear the water in the

bathroom running, I scale the steps quickly and dive into my hoard room.

I barely get the door closed before my dragon takes over, tearing my clothes away as it rips through my skin, driving me to my knees with the intensity of it. My wings spring from my back, drawing a groan of pain from my lips that quickly turns to relief. The whole shift takes but a few seconds, and then I collapse on a pile of coins, burrowing my snout into them, and letting their coolness soothe the heat of my dragon body.

In this form, my thoughts are far more feral, more visceral. They are no longer impressions. Just the raw emotions and need for the man only a few doors away from me.

With my clawed hands, I play with a few coins. They once brought me so much joy, simply from picturing the look on my mate's face when he saw the hoard I'd made for us. Closing my eyes, I imagine bringing Dempsey in here, showing him the many years of work I put in, all for his happiness, hundreds of years before I even knew he existed.

The restlessness in me settles at the thought. I'll tell him soon. I have to. Then he'll know just how strong and powerful I am. He'll know that there is nothing, natural or supernatural, that could stop me from protecting him.

May the gods help the person who harms him.

## DEMPSEY

SINKING INTO THE HOT, sudsy water feels like heaven after what I've been through today. My limbs slowly relax while I try to calm my racing thoughts. The amulet around my neck feels like a noose now, but as I soak, the strange reactions since it entered my life come back to me.

I've seen hundreds if not thousands of interesting pieces of jewelry over the years, but something about this one stood out immediately. I recall the almost manic need to touch it, reading the engraved words that meant nothing to me etched into the side, the compulsive urge to put it on. It was like it became part of me to the point where I didn't remember I had

it on. I didn't even think to bring it up to Hem until Lake tried to take it from me. My reaction was out of character to say the least.

Now, I couldn't be more aware of it. Its weight feels like a stone trying to hold me down, and it's cold in contrast to my heated skin. I want to tear it off, take it out to the ocean and toss it so deep it will never be found again. I don't care what it might be worth. It's evil. I can feel it.

A shiver racks my body in spite of the heat surrounding me, and my thoughts shift to my bodyguard. As hard as it is to fathom, there's something about him that doesn't make sense. Something...not human. I wait for that thought to feel wrong and ridiculous, but a rightness settles in my chest. Hemingway is not human. At least, not entirely. There's no other explanation for the growls and purrs, the gold eyes, the smoky exhales, and unless I've lost my damn mind, I'm positive I saw scales on the back of his neck as he bolted from the store earlier.

It feels insane to even think, but if a necklace can be killing me then isn't it also possible that my bodyguard is something other than human?

All Lake would say is for me to trust him and give him time and that he would never hurt me. I instinctively know that's true. The way Hem looks at me sometimes... I shake my head. It's like a damn romance novel.

The fear I had that he was holding back emotionally, that I could never allow something romantic to bloom between us, is swiftly being replaced by...hope. It's hope I feel when he touches me and tingles float through me, hope when he fixes his gaze on me like I'm the most precious thing he's ever seen, hope when he told me how special I am to him. And it's hope that someone can see the real me and want it just the same. *Someone like him.*

After I've soaked so long my skin is pruned, I force myself out of the tub. I wanted to be alone with my thoughts, to try and process what Dahlia said earlier, but another part of

me is desperate to be near Hemingway again. His closeness soothes me.

I force myself to throw on a pair of sleep pants and climb into the luxurious bed. It's not nighttime, but I don't care. The world outside this house can wait until I'm ready to face it. There are too many things to deal with right now. This necklace, my store, the sexy man down the hall.

Exhaustion makes the decision easier as it pulls my eyes closed. A few hours of rest will do me some good.



WHEN I OPEN MY EYES, the sky beyond my window is dark, lit only slightly by the full moon. I stretch, feeling my muscles and joints groan from the movement, but in a good way. Something about this bed is so restorative, certainly better than my thrift store purchase back at my place.

Sitting up, I scratch my head and consider what to do now. A quick glance at my phone shows it's almost midnight. Damn. I wonder if Hem is awake. If he is, what will I say to him?

I flop back and stare up at the ceiling instead. I have no experience talking about my feelings with a man I like. Should I even be thinking like this when my life is on the line?

My chest tightens with fear and anxiety. What if I die? I'll have missed out on so much. There are so many experiences a man my age should have had but I never got around to. Panic takes over, drawing me from the bed and to the window, gazing up at the moon for something. I don't know what.

What would Oscar Wilde do in this situation? Would he stand at a window pining for the man of his dreams or would he seize the opportunity to live, truly live, just this once before it's all over?

A tiny seed of bravery begins to bloom deep within me, filling me, its branches and vines snaking through me until my

feet are walking me down the hall and straight into Hemingway's bedroom.

I find him sitting in his armchair, reading what appears to be an actual newspaper. He looks up immediately. "Dempsey. Are you alright?"

"I..." Now is my chance. All I have to do is tell him I want him to...to what? Touch me? Kiss me? Make love to me? Oh fuck. I didn't think this through.

"What's wrong?" Hemingway asks, suddenly standing before me, his hand gently resting on my shoulder. "Are you not feeling well?"

"You said I was more than a client to you. Did you mean that?"

Hemingway's eyes soften. "A thousand percent."

I nod, mentally clutching that seed of bravery. "I...um..." I close my eyes and exhale. When I open them, instead of using words, I simply launch myself into his arms and press our lips together.

Hemingway stumbles back as he wraps his arms around me. It seems to take him a moment to realize what's happening, but when he does, his lips soften against mine, his embrace tightens, and that sound I've grown to associate with him, that sweet, soft purr, vibrates through me.

I allow my fingers to crawl up the back of his neck, lingering there to feel smooth skin and no ripples at all before moving into the silky tresses of his hair. Hemingway's kiss devours me, as if he can steal my soul, and my body melts into his as he twists around until I'm on my back in his bed.

His scent of campfire, old books, and something earthy, like fresh dew on morning grass, wafts around me, enveloping my senses the way his body has the rest of me. I wrap my legs around his waist, moaning softly as his cock presses against mine. It's hardly shocking that it feels long and thick, but what is surprising is the desperate need clawing at me to see it. Touch it. Fuck, I want to taste it.

"Hem," I whisper against his hot lips. "Please."

“Anything,” he answers. “Anything you want. Always.”

A strange whimper escapes me as I rock against him, ignoring any shame over how needy I am. I want to come, and I want this man to take me there. I tug on the hem of his t-shirt and he rises, breaking the kiss for just a second to let me get it off.

With his naked flesh on display, I take a moment to run my hands over his firm pecs. A moment is all he gives me before he tugs my shirt off and claims my mouth again, rough and needy, like he can't fucking live without the taste of my lips. A helpless, desperate shiver rocks my entire body. *He wants me as badly as I want him.* I don't understand it, but I know it's true, right down to the core of my being.

My body aches to be closer, to be stuck like this with him forever. I'm positive I didn't know what true desire felt like until right this minute.

“Can I take your pants down?” he whispers.

I nod, hoping he isn't disappointed, but somehow, I don't think he could be. He gets them down and when he lowers his body to mine, he's naked too, his hot flesh nearly searing mine. He swallows my gasp before moving his kisses down my jaw to my neck, gently biting and sucking the skin there while I claw at his strong back.

I can't believe this is happening to me. The sexiest man in the world wants me. I'm flipped over like I weigh nothing, balancing on top of Hem.

“I need to see you,” he says, his eyes shimmering gold.

I nod, knowing he'll tell me what and why this is happening soon enough. Straddling his waist so our cocks rub together, I rock slowly back and forth, forcing my gaze down to see his monster compared to mine. Welp, good thing I'm not interested in topping, because yeah, there's no comparison there. My only concern is if my body can even take him.

Hemingway runs his hands over my hips, his eyes roaming my body from head to toe. “You are just as stunning as I imagined.”



I cup his face. “Your eyes...”

He closes them for just a second. “I can’t help it. Dempsey...”

“Shh.” I lean forward, pressing a soft kiss to his lips. “Make me come then tell me your secrets.”

Hemingway smiles then flips me over again so I’m on my back, his much larger body pressing me into the mattress. He attacks my mouth as our bodies rut together, generating enough heat and energy to power a small town. My cock is throbbing and leaking, so I buck my hips, desperate for release.

The weight and heat of Hemingway’s cock is like nothing I’ve ever felt, and my hole seems to throb with need while I imagine him sliding inside of me, owning me the way no one ever has.

“Gods of fire,” he whispers, his voice raspy and deeper than I’ve ever heard.

As I grip his arms, they seem to ripple under my touch, but when I look, it’s only skin. My sexy Clark Kent is coming undone before my eyes, his hair tousled, face flushed with exertion, eyes glowing with gold-dusted desire for me.

“Dempsey,” he whispers with a final thrust before thick, hot liquid fills the space between our bodies.

In my mind, he’s emptying out deep within me, claiming me as his forever. My body reacts to the image, joining him in such an intense release, I actually scream his name before relaxing into the mattress, spent and sticky.

Hemingway stays on top of me, breathing into the crook of my neck as I twist my fingers in his hair. We lie like that so long I shiver as my sweat cools.

Hemingway lifts his head, gazing down at me with pretty blue eyes again. “I was going to wait to tell you some things, but I think the time is now.”

“I’m all ears.”

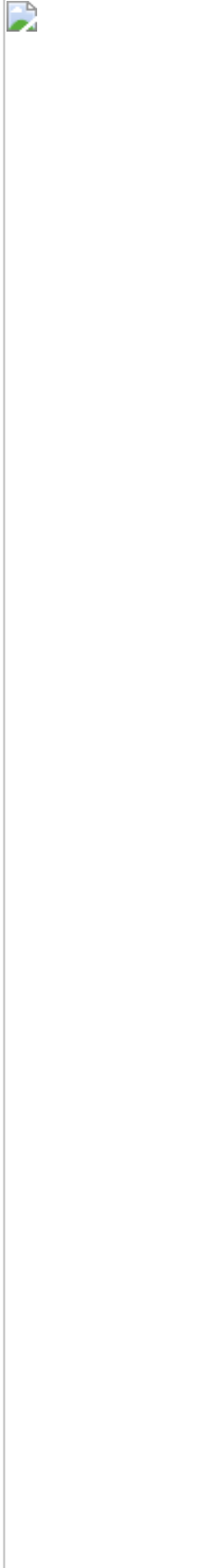
Fear and anxiety settle over his features, and something in me cries out to fix it, soothe it, make it go away.

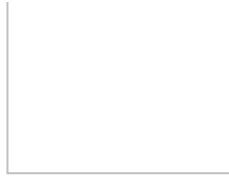
“I already know, Hem. Not the details, of course, but I know.”

“Know what?”

Swallowing hard, I pull myself upright. “You’re not human. So, tell me, what are you?”

CHAPTER  
**THIRTEEN**





## HEMINGWAY

**Y**ou're not human.

His words ring in my ears, making my heart beat so fast it makes me dizzy. Strangely enough, my dragon is calmer than ever, and I don't think it's only because the horny beast finally had the chance to mark our mate.

My gaze drifts down to Dempsey's belly where streaks of our combined release cling to his skin, his hand draped over his lap to hide his now soft cock. I grumble low in my throat and nudge his hand out of the way. He resists for a moment, his skin pinking that beautiful shade that I think is my new favorite. Then, he complies and lets his hand fall away. I lean down and drag my searing hot tongue over the head of his soft cock to gather a single stray droplet of cum that's still clinging there.

He gasps and squirms, grabbing my hair and first tugging me closer, then pushing me away as if he can't decide which he really wants. His spent cock twitches lazily and I hum at the sweet flavor of him on my tongue. I'm not sure I could even put a number on how many times in my thousands of years I've coaxed a man to feed me his release with nothing but my tongue, greedily swallowing every drop. The flavor is always pleasant, something that makes me buzz deep inside with lust and satisfaction. I shouldn't be surprised that I'm positive in an instant that Dempsey has ruined me for anyone else. I could sustain myself on nothing but the distinct *Dempsey* flavor of his cum for the rest of eternity. Perhaps I will...if he's amenable to it once he knows the truth.

I lick his belly clean too, not letting a single drop of his release go to waste. His muscles twitch and he fights back small bouts of laughter, wriggling under me until I'm satisfied that he won't spend the rest of the night sticky and uncomfortable.

“Hem,” he says my name softly, his grip on my hair gentling as he uses his fingers to scratch softly along my scalp like I’m his loyal lap dog. I can be if that’s what he desires. Well...a lap dragon, at any rate.

“*Mon bijou,*” I sigh the term of endearment with heaviness in my chest that this might be the only time I get to have him like this—in my bed, unguarded, *mine*. Once I tell him the truth, he might think I’ve lost my mind, he might run from me. Even if he believes me, there’s a chance he won’t want to tie his life to a dragon in the end.

My dragon is unconcerned about any of this, his confidence swelling inside my chest like a physical weight. He’s sure that fate wouldn’t give us a mate we couldn’t keep, and I hope like hell he’s right.

He may not be concerned about how Dempsey will react, but he *is* extremely worried about how thin and hollow our precious jewel looks. Has he been eating properly the past few days?

I get to my feet and go to my dresser on the other side of the room. I open the top drawer and pick out one of my t-shirts and a pair of boxer shorts, satisfaction already rumbling low in my belly, imagining Dempsey dressed in my loose-fitting clothing, my scent already starting to seep into his skin.

“I’m going to tell you everything you want to know, but first I’m going to feed you,” I tell him, crossing the bedroom again to hand him the items. I don’t bother to dress myself. I won’t get cold. If anything, it’s more comfortable to be nude.

Dempsey tugs the clothing on without argument, and then lets out a peal of laughter as I haul him into my arms. The sound does something to my insides, something warm and full that I can’t get enough of as he scrambles to wrap his arms and legs around me to steady himself. *As if I would drop him.*

“I’m not that hungry,” he argues, his stomach growling at the exact same moment.

I fix him with a pointed look as I carry him out of my bedroom and down the stairs. “You can pick at whatever I

make then.”

He huffs at my compromise but doesn't argue further, instead resting his head on my shoulder and relaxing against me as I carry him the rest of the way to the kitchen. When we get there, I set him on the island counter in the center of the room, not wanting to be far from him while I cook.

I can feel Dempsey's eyes on me while I open the refrigerator and consider what I have and what he might like. After a moment, I settle on putting together an array of finger foods: fruit, cheese, meat, and some fresh bread.

His gaze tracks my every movement as I gather the items I need and carry them to the counter where he's seated, swinging his legs in a carefree manner I know can only last so long. It's not only the weight of his gaze I can feel, but the tug of his energy as it flips between lust, curiosity, and fear.

Is this what Nico meant when he said he could feel Lake? The thread is weak, so thin it feels like it could snap with the least amount of pressure, but it's there. Can he feel it too? For a moment I'm almost sure he can when there's a prodding sensation along the bond, as if he's examining it himself, testing its fortitude and trying to figure out what exactly it is.

I focus on the rhythmic *thud, thud, thud* of my knife hitting the cutting board over and over, glancing at Dempsey out of the corner of my eye every few seconds as I pile a plate with plenty of choices to fill his belly.

“Are you a demon?” he asks, startling a laugh from me as I sweep a handful of summer sausage onto the plate to finish it.

“A *demon*?” I repeat his question, turning to him with a raised eyebrow. “Should I be offended by that?”

He cocks his head to one side, his eyes moving back and forth over my face, searching for answers that he won't find written there, as much as he might try. I drag the plate along the counter until it's right next to him, and then I step between his legs.

He spreads them a little wider, seemingly on instinct, and then closes them around my hips. I pluck a grape off of the

tray and bring it to his lips. He opens, his warm lips brushing against my fingertips as I place the fruit on his tongue. A pleased tremor runs through my body as he slowly starts to chew it, and I reach for another.

“A demon doesn’t seem that out there when I think of other alternatives,” he explains after eating a few pieces of fruit and a slice of cheese that I feed him one by one before licking his lips. “You smell like fire sometimes, and your eyes change colors. Plus, I’ve got this Devil necklace or whatever the fuck it is around my neck, so it’s not *that* weird.”

“Hm,” I hum at his list of observations. “I’m not a demon.” I take a slice of sausage for myself and then feed Dempsey a few.

In spite of his earlier protest, he eagerly takes every piece of food I offer him, making happy, satisfied sounds in the back of his throat as each one touches his tongue. My dragon purrs and my cock stirs again, pleasure like I’ve never known settling over me. I thought that filling my mate with my cock would be the greatest delight in life, and as I haven’t yet done that, it may still be. But I’m sure now that I underestimated just how deeply satisfying it would feel to simply *care for* my mate.

“You can tell me, Hem. At this point, the truth can’t be any crazier than everything else that’s going on.”

I nod. I’m sure he’s right. He can take it. If he couldn’t, he wouldn’t be fated for me. I have to trust that, no matter how terrifying it feels to stand on the edge of this precipice beside him and hope that he’ll jump with me.

“A little over two thousand years ago, in a tiny village in France, my brothers and I were hatched.” The words are thick as I force them through my throat, and Dempsey’s eyes go wide. “We were a clutch of five dragon whelps, little balls of scales and wings and uncontrollable flame, who wouldn’t know a human form for the first decade of our lives.”

I pause, giving Dempsey a chance to absorb what I’m telling him.

“Two *thousand* years?” he repeats weakly, as if *that’s* the shocking bit of information I’ve imparted.

“Give or take,” I answer. “There aren’t many of our kind, but we’re far from endangered. Even given the staggering rate of same sex pairings among dragons, we manage to keep our species afloat just fine. We mostly keep to ourselves, preferring the company of our close kin and the sanctity of our hoards over most everything else.” I continue rambling because I’m not sure I can take the silence of Dempsey’s stare.

“Dragons?” The word is barely above a whisper, and he seems incapable of doing much aside from echoing words I’ve used as he works to fit all of this new information into his previously limited world view.

I nod, reaching for another slice of cheese to feed him. He takes it just as obediently as he did before, which manages to settle a fraction of the anxiety building in my chest.

“In most ways I am no different than you are, mon bijou. I am made of flesh and bone. I have a heart that beats in the same way yours does.” I grasp his hand and place it against my chest so he can feel the wild thud of my fear as I lay myself bare before him.

“That’s French, right? What does it mean?” he asks, his tongue dragging slowly over his lips as he stares into my eyes, curiosity quickly overtaking the confusion and fear that was there only a moment ago.

“It’s a term of endearment. It means my precious, my jewel. It means that I have spent a lifetime amassing shiny, priceless items to appease my covetous dragon, but I would give them all away if you asked me to.”

His breath catches, and he tears his gaze away from mine. It’s too much, I can tell from the way he shuffles back an inch on the counter, his breath coming in trembling gasps.

I grasp his hips and tug him closer again, cupping his jaw gently in one hand. He doesn’t seem to realize that his hand is still lingering exactly where I placed it over my heart, his palm pressed firmly to my skin.



“This is...a lot,” he admits, confirming exactly what I can feel through our tenuous, barely formed bond.

“I’m sorry. Lake told me I should take things slowly. I don’t want to overwhelm you. You’re important to me. Perhaps we should leave it at that for the moment?” I suggest, and Dempsey nods.

“One thing at a time. Okay, so a dragon. Like, a *dragon* dragon?”

I chuckle. “Are there many kinds of dragons?” I ask teasingly.

“You tell me,” he says wryly. “I’m trying to wrap my head around this, okay? You look human. I figured a dragon would be a giant lizard, so forgive me for needing to clarify.”

I make another amused noise in my chest. “As I said, we only knew our dragon forms when we hatched. I think they’re safer than those of human children, unable to move or lift their heads for so long after birth. But we were able to walk and even breathe small amounts of fire almost immediately. We learned to fly not long after, and then eventually, we learned to take the forms that resemble humans.”

“But you can still turn into...?” He lets his question trail off, seeming at a loss for words, or maybe not trusting the words he knows at this point.

“A dragon?” I supply for him with a crooked grin.

He nods. “I didn’t know if it was wrong to put it that way. You’re a dragon regardless of which form you’re in, right?”

My heart gives a small flutter under his touch, and I breathe in slowly, reveling in the warm feeling his words fill me with. “Yes, I am a dragon no matter what form I’m in.” I’m not sure why his understanding of that feels so significant. I am not a human when I’m in this form and a dragon when I let my inner beast free, I am a dragon *always*.

I relax and let my skin ripple with incandescent blue scales from my knuckles all the way up to my biceps, and then down along my chest right where his hand rests. His eyes go wide all

over again, and I half expect him to yank his hand back, but instead, he presses it against me harder.

“Wow,” Dempsey whispers, and slowly strokes my scales.

## DEMPSEY

I DRAG my fingers over the warm, leathery scales that form in place of Hemingway’s skin. They shimmer under the kitchen lights with a dazzling beauty unlike anything I’ve ever seen. He moans, letting his head loll back as he leans harder into my touch and his breath comes a little faster.

I watch his reaction with curiosity, tracing the shape of each scale with the tip of my index finger, memorizing the smooth, solid feel of each one.

“What does it feel like?” I ask in a low tone, as if speaking too loudly would somehow shatter the sanctity of this moment.

“It feels incredible,” he rumbles that purring noise I’ve gotten so used to hearing him make. That thought strikes me. I’ve known him for such a short time and yet everything about this sweet, gorgeous, mysterious man—*dragon*—feels familiar. It feels as if somehow my heart knew him before the atoms that form my cells even belonged to me. “No one has ever touched my scales before. Not like this, anyway.”

He rumbles again, his entire chest vibrating and seeming to swell under my fingertips. “Is it hard to be like this? Half in one form, half in another?”

Hemingway nods. “My dragon...that’s how I think of him, as a distinct part of me even though we are truly one in the same, as you pointed out... He likes you. It’s difficult to convince him to only let you touch a little when he wants so much more.”

My head is swimming, still trying to make logical sense out of all of this. I’m not sure which part is the most unbelievable though, that the man I just got naked and rubbed up against is actually a *dragon* or that he *likes* me—plain, boring, bookworm *me*.

“You’re not,” he growls, his head snapping up again and his eyes flashing gold for a fraction of a second before his skin softens back into flesh under my touch.

“I’m not what?” I ask, searching for more signs of his true nature carved into the body that looks so human in this form. But there are no other hints, not when he’s in control and chooses to hide them.

“I could feel a heavy, sad feeling forming inside your chest when you looked at me. You were convincing yourself that you were lacking something compared to me, and you’re *not*.” His words are deep and firm, full of so much conviction that I think I actually believe him. Or at least I believe that *he* sees me that way, even if I can’t understand how or why.

“You can *feel* me? Is that a dragon thing?” I continue stroking his chest, noticing the warmth of it, the soft give of his flesh compared to the armor of his scales.

“No, it’s...” he stops himself and clears his throat. “Perhaps it’s a dragon thing,” he corrects himself.

I frown and cock my head curiously, but he doesn’t explain the slip further. He’s still holding back, at least a little. Perhaps he’s respecting what I said a few minutes ago about needing to process this one bit at a time.

I wiggle closer on the counter, wrapping my legs around him and hooking them behind his back while I reach for a piece of meat from the plate beside me. This time I’m the one to bring the food to *his* lips, holding it there for a half a beat while I wait for his lips to part, his eyes lingering on mine as I slip the food into his mouth. He snakes his tongue around it, and my fingers as well, sending a tendril of heat along my spine.

My breath catches and my cock twitches against the soft fabric of the underwear I’m wearing. *Hemingway’s underwear*. I’m sure the clothes are clean, but his distinct scent of campfire and books lingers on them and sets my heart beating faster again as fresh need settles low in my gut.

I can still feel the cool of the necklace against my chest and the inky black thing inside of me that I've been aware of since Dahlia hugged me earlier, but the fire in Hem's gaze mutes it all...for a little while at least.

"What else can you feel?" I ask, accepting the next bite of food he offers me.

"Mmm," he hums, leaning close to drag his nose along the curve of my throat. "I can feel...*desire*. I can't tell if it's yours or mine though. I want you so intensely, mon bijou, that it's hard to think of much else."

My cock swells again in spite of the orgasm we shared less than an hour ago.

"I have a secret to tell you too." I run my hands up his chest to loop them behind his neck again, and then tease the tips of my fingers up and down his spine just between his shoulder blades.

"You're a siren?" he guesses dryly, and I snort.

"Are they real?" I ask, distracted from my confession for a moment as the reality hits me that if *dragons* are real, so many other creatures must be too.

"Yes." His answer is so simple he almost seems bored by it as he continues to suck and nibble his way along my throat.

"What else is real?" I ask even while I tilt my neck to encourage more of his mouth.

"Most everything humans have stories for is real in one way or another."

"Vampires?" I gasp.

His answering laugh tickles my skin with its vibrations. "You've met one. Two, actually."

"Harem?" I guess, and he nods. "Holy shit," I breathe. "What's Lake? He has to be a fae prince or something, right?"

Hemingway laughs even harder this time. "He's human, but I'm going to tell him that you asked that."

I huff. “Bummer. I felt a little better for half a second thinking that at least it wouldn’t be fair to compare myself to his otherworldly glamor and beauty.”

“You have just as much of a shine as he does. More, even,” he insists, nipping gently at the edge of my jaw. “You don’t see how you glow from the inside out. Your physical appearance is breathtaking all on its own, and the way your passion and soul sparkle so brightly only makes you that much more spectacular.”

I squirm under his praise and the heat of his touch, but the urge to tell him how wrong he is dies on my tongue when he slides a hand between my legs and cups my thickening cock in his hand.

I let out a low whine and buck into his touch. “Who was the other vampire?”

“Your stylist, Kiko.”

“Kiko? Really?”

“Mmm,” he murmurs, nibbling at my skin.

Oh yeah, I was trying to tell him something before I got distracted by more paranormal talk.

“What is your secret?” Hemingway asks, seeming to sense my mental shift back to the original topic.

“I’ve never...” I lick my lips and try to hold myself still, resisting the urge to hump into the weight of his hand again as he carefully squeezes my cock, coaxing it to stiffen and throb all over again. “Been like *this* with anyone.”

“Like what, bijou?”

I tighten my legs around him again, the prominent shape of his arousal pressing against my inner thigh. “*This*,” I repeat somewhat breathlessly. “Naked, touching...*coming*.”

His hand stills against my erection. “You mean you’ve never been touched by anyone before you walked into my room and let me put my greedy hands all over you?”

I swallow hard and bob my head. “Yes,” I whisper, and a deep, guttural moan rumbles through Hemingway’s chest.

“Fuck,” he rasps, tugging his hand out from between us before using both to grip my ass roughly. He drags me all the way to the edge of the counter until his heavy, solid erection is pressed up against my cock with only the thin fabric of the underwear between us. “I’m sure it makes me a possessive beast, but I love that no one else has ever marked you or attempted to claim you as their own.”

His words send another spike of heady lust through me. “I’ve kissed some men, but it never went further,” I continue my confession. “In part because I lacked the social skills to seal the deal, but maybe more so because it never felt right with anyone...until now.”

He groans again, burying his face between my neck and my shoulder. I don’t speak the words that enter my mind next, the fact that I also wasn’t sure I would get another chance to experience this before I...

“No,” he growls, digging his fingers so hard into my ass cheeks that I’m sure they’ll leave bruises. He pulls back and I see his dragon shining clearly through his eyes again, gold in color and so intense it’s hard to breathe when he pins me with them. “I’ll happily find a thousand ways to make you soar with pleasure, but I won’t do it because you think you’ve run out of options and time.”

“Haven’t I though?” I ask in a small voice, the heat leaching out of the moment as the realization of everything crashes down on me again.

Hemingway may be a dragon, but he’s also my bodyguard, because someone is trying to kill me. And if they can’t manage it, apparently my own stupidity already got a head start. The necklace feels heavy and cold again as it shifts against my skin.

“No.” The word doesn’t even sound human this time when he says it again. “I told you before and I mean it from the depths of my soul and back. I will set this world and the next on fire if that’s what I have to do to protect you.”

I laugh softly and bring my hand up to run it along the prickly stubble of his jaw. “Silly dragon, not everything can be cured with fire.”

His gaze hardens and I can feel the flex of his jaw muscles as he sets his teeth stubbornly. “Then I’ll find another way. I swear to you that you’re going to walk away from this safe and whole.”

The logical side of my brain knows that all the bluster in the world won’t magically break whatever curse this damn locket put on me, but there’s so much conviction in his voice that I desperately want to believe him, so I nod.

“Can we go back to bed?” I ask.

“My bed?” he checks, clearly getting ready to argue if I give him an answer he doesn’t like.

I smile and lean close to rest my forehead against his. “Yes, your bed. I want to sleep late into the morning and then I want you to touch me again until I forget about all of this.”

“I can do that,” he says, kissing my forehead and then sliding my weight fully off the counter and into his arms so he can carry me back upstairs.

The bed smells like smoke, sweat, and cum when he lays me down. I want it to be a smell I get so used to that I associate it with Hemingway, with *home*. I want the things he makes me feel to be real even after all of this madness ends.

Is it an impossible wish? Maybe. But I wish it anyway as he wraps his arms around me, tugs me into the little spoon position, and tells me softly to get some sleep.

CHAPTER  
**FOURTEEN**







## HEMINGWAY

“**R**ise and shine, dragon boy.”

The soft voice in my ear startles me awake, and I flip over in bed to see Lake smiling at me. He puts his finger over his lips and nods his head toward the door. I check on Dempsey, still sleeping soundly, then slide out of bed. Lake has the decency to look away from my nudity, I’m sure for Nico’s benefit more than mine.

“How the hell did you get all the way into my bedroom without me hearing you?” I ask, tying my robe closed as I follow Lake down the stairs.

He shrugs. “Guess your dragon feels okay with me.”

“Hmm. What’s the reason for this early call? Did you find something?”

“Sort of. Dahlia has a hunch, but she needs to know if there are any inscriptions on the amulet. She expects there is. Dempsey told her he read something and then felt compelled to put the necklace on.”

“Okay. Then we need to wake up Dempsey.”

“Yeah, remember how he responded last time?” Lake tilts his head, still managing to look glamorous in a tracksuit with sleep-rumpled hair. “I thought it would be better to check it out while he sleeps.”

“Ah. Good point actually.”

“I’m full of them, Hem. Now. Here’s what we’ll do. You lift the amulet, and I’ll write down anything we find. Maybe he won’t notice if you touch him.”

“Fine.”

“And I’m not even going to bring up the fact that he’s in your bed,” Lake says with a teasing glint in his eye.

I narrow my eyes at him and let out a low growl. “You just did.”

“True,” he says unapologetically and then taps his chin. “Anyway, we gotta be sneaky to keep his defenses down.”

“Got it.”

“One more thing.” Lake scrunches his nose. “You won’t like this one as much.”

My jaw tenses. “What?”

“If for some reason he wakes up and resists, well, we should really do what we have to. The sooner we get it off him, the better.”

“It will kill him,” I growl, low and menacing.

“Relax, I don’t mean that we’ll take it off. I just meant that if he wakes up, you might have to hold him down a bit.”

“I don’t like it,” I mutter.

Lake nods. “We won’t hurt him, and we won’t take any unnecessary risks. But if he wakes up, he might be...upset. Just remember, it’s not really him. It’s whatever’s attached to that thing.”

Exhaling slowly, I gaze up the stairs. “Let’s get this over with.”

“I agree.” Lake pulls a small notepad and pen out of his pocket. “Let’s do this.”

We creep up the stairs and back to the bedroom where Dempsey lies in the same position. I’m caught off guard for a moment by his beauty—ruffled hair, plump lips, face relaxed and trusting.

“Don’t fuck this up, Lake,” I whisper.

“Not the plan.”

After a quick glance at my accomplice, I kneel and gently reach out for the necklace. Dempsey doesn’t even stir, helping my nerves to settle a bit. I lift the amulet, not seeing anything

on the back, but then my finger catches the engraving on the side.

Turning it over, I see the words. “Here it is,” I whisper.

“What does it say?”

“It’s not English. Arabic I think, but an old form of it.”

“Can you read Arabic?” Lake asks with more urgency.

“Give me a minute.” I study the script, reaching into my mental archives for the translation. “Bind. The first word is bind.”

“Bind. Got it.”

I skip the next word hoping it’ll come to me. “To thee. That’s the next part.”

“Bind to thee. Okay.”

“There’s a word or two between the last part I’m still thinking on.”

I run my finger over the final word, focusing on one letter at a time, but I’m interrupted by a startled Dempsey who bolts upright, gasping and grabbing the necklace from me.

“What are you doing?”

“Be calm, bijou. I just need—”

“No!” He practically flies out of the bed, backing into a corner. “Don’t touch it.”

“Dempsey,” Lake says in a syrupy-sweet voice that is oddly comforting, completely ignoring my mate’s naked body. “We’re helping you, remember? Dahlia wants to research those words on the amulet. Don’t you want to help?”

His eyes are wide, and with a rush of fear, I notice how the dark circles under them have deepened since earlier. Lake steps closer, but Dempsey reacts by yelling at him.

“Stop! If you take it...I’ll...die.” He turns to me. “I don’t want to die.”

“You’re not going to die, Dempsey.” I take a step toward him. “We won’t take it. Please just let me see the necklace.”

“I can’t.” His voice breaks. “It...it won’t let me.” He shakes his head. “I can’t.”

Lake looks at me. “You gotta hold him down, Hem.”

My dragon surges forward, pissed and ready to kill anyone who hurts our mate. My scales ripple and smoke billows from my mouth and nose. Dempsey wraps his arms around himself.

“It hurts.”

“What hurts?”

“Inside.”

I’m not standing here and watching him suffer. “Fuck this.”

I rush forward, swooping Dempsey into my arms. Lake hurries over, holding the amulet up for me to read it while Dempsey squirms and whimpers like he’s in pain.

When I focus on the inscription, a feeling of deep foreboding clenches my heart as the meaning becomes clear.

“Fuck.”

“What?” Lake asks.

“Eternal undeath.”

“The hell does that mean?”

“Fuck if I know.” I focus on Lake, trying to hold Dempsey to me as he thrashes. “Bind eternal undeath to thee. Tell Dahlia. I have to comfort my mate.”

“On it.”

Lake hurries out of the room while I take Dempsey to the only place that makes sense. My hoard room.

Refusing to set him down, I manage to get the key out of my dresser and make my way down the hall to the room. I unlock the door, slamming it shut behind us with my foot as I carry Dempsey to the bed.

I set him down but crawl in next to him, holding him close to me as he burrows his face into my chest. My dragon is

barely contained at this point, my skin covered in patches of scales while I do my best to hold back the rest of my shift.

Dempsey strokes the scales on my chest, and the action seems to calm him. His cries become tiny whimpers, and his thrashing slows to nothing as he sinks into my embrace. I kiss the top of his head, inhaling his scent as my dragon finally recedes, happy and content that his mate is calm and safe.

Dempsey's breathing slows, his heartbeat settling as he clings to me. I hold him back just as tightly, ensuring I'm not squeezing too much. After a few minutes, I realize he's asleep again, and the news makes me chuff with pride. He feels safe with me. He *knows* he is.

I pray to all the gods of fire that Dahlia finds out something soon, because if I have to burn this fucking world down to protect Dempsey, that's exactly what I'll do.

## DEMPSEY

WHY DO I feel like I've been on a week-long bender?

Peeling my eyes open feels almost impossible, like they're weighed down with concrete. My entire body is heavy, my mouth too dry. As my eyes focus, my surroundings don't make sense. Where am I?

I try to sit up but the room swirls around me, causing me to squeeze my eyes closed again.

"I'm right here, Dempsey."

Hemingway. His voice is a soothing balm for all my ailments. Opening my eyes again, I turn to face him. Worry mars his handsome features.

"Am I sick?"

"A little bit, I think."

I nod. "I feel sick or hungover. Off." Heat actually radiates from him, drawing me closer, and I lean into him. "Where are we?"

“My hoard room. Not the way I wanted to introduce you to it, but I had no choice.”

“I don’t remember anything. All I know is we had an amazing time and I was sleeping and so happy and then...” Flashes of memory hit me all at once, making my stomach turn.

“What?”

“A dream. This man.” I shake my head. “He has coppery skin and thick, curly black hair. I could only see his face—his eyes, dark and foreboding, gazing at me as if he could see into my soul.”

“Fuck,” Hem whispers.

“He told me to run. Not to trust you or anyone but him, but I knew that was wrong. I knew it.” I rub my forehead. “I tried to fight him off. I tried.” I glance around. “Then I woke up in here.”

“All the gods,” Hemingway says, his voice strained. “Lake and I tried to look at the necklace and you lost your shit. We had to hold you down and you struggled. Once I got it and read it to Lake, I brought you in here for safety. My dragon wanted out, badly.”

His explanation doesn’t feel real at all, but then again, neither does that man in my dreams. “But you found it?”

He nods, studying my face. “How do you know how to read archaic Arabic?”

“I don’t.”

“But the inscription...”

I lift the amulet and notice the characters engraved on the side. They make no sense to me. “I swear it was English. I can’t read Arabic. Can you?”

The look on his face is somber and I swear he actually pales in front of me. “I can, yes. When you read those words, you read them in English?”

I try to think back, but my memory is murky. It's very obvious the words are not English, so how did I know what it meant?

“What does it say?”

Hemingway purses his lips. “I'd rather not tell you.”

His answer annoys me. “Well, I'd rather not be wearing it, but here we are. I have a right to know what it says.”

He nods with a reluctant expression. “It says, ‘bind eternal undeath to thee.’”

My eyes widen. “Wha-what?” Scrubbing my hands over my face, I rack my brain for a memory. “I don't remember saying that. I don't remember any of it. I brought home everything from the auction and I remember finding it in the box. I thought it was weird because I was so wild for it and then somehow, I just...forgot it? It was in a small wooden case with a bronze latch.” I shake my head. “I can't remember anything after that. Or...it's more like it's fuzzy and doesn't feel real. When I think about putting it on, it feels like a scene from a movie I watched as a kid rather than something I did myself only a few weeks ago.”

“Somehow, that damn thing fucks with your memory. It influences your emotions.” His face reflects pure fear. “I think it's living off of you. Draining your energy for its own use.”

The words send daggers of fear and panic through me, and my eyes well with tears. “For what purpose?”

“That's what I hope Dahlia can help us with.”

I nod, but as the tears escape my eyes, Hemingway pulls me into his embrace. I rest my head on his shoulder, letting his warmth and strength wrap around me. The campfire smell of him permeates the space, and the panic slowly fades away. Somehow, he's going to fix this for me. I believe that.

After some time, I tilt my head up. “Show me your hoard.”

“We can see it another time. When things calm down.”

“No, Hem. I want to see it now. I want to know what's important to you.”

“Nothing but you.”

I cup his face, smiling. “Then why did you bring me here? Because it matters.”

“Because...” His jaw clenches and unclenches as his eyes flash momentarily gold.

“Are you holding back your dragon?”

He nods, his face tense.

“I’m not afraid of him.” I put my hand over his chest. “Not at all.”

His chest vibrates as a soft rumble pours out of him. Hemingway’s own expression morphs to one of awe and affection as the gold appears again. This close, I see how his pupil elongates and the skin around his eyes has the tiniest scales of deep blue, as if he’s wearing eyeliner.

“My dragon is fond of you,” Hemingway whispers.

“I can feel him inside of you. Can he hear me?”

Hemingway nods. “It’s hard to explain. He’s not separate from me, but in some ways, he feels like he is. He can hear you as well as I can. He can see you. He can *smell* you.”

I drag my hand over his chest, delighting in the way the skin ripples beneath my touch. “Is he big when you shift?”

“Huge.”

“I hope I see it sometime.”

“You will.” He exhales slowly. “This is where I keep all my treasures. I’ve been collecting them for thousands of years, from priceless art to rare gems to original print books to furniture. All for—” His words end abruptly as he clears his throat. “I can take care of you, Dempsey. You’ll never want for anything.”

“But what happens when I get old?”

Hemingway blanches. “Well...”

The sound of voices outside the door spills into our space.



“Dammit, Lake,” Hemingway mutters, climbing out of bed and stomping to the door.

The moment he’s away from me, the heaviness I felt upon waking returns, weighing me down as exhaustion washes over me. I guess I was distracted enough not to notice this horrible feeling for a few minutes.

I’d get out of bed, but I’m naked, and I’m pretty sure Hemingway doesn’t want his family to see me in that state, but as I glance around, I see an armchair with a throw over it. Grabbing it, I wrap the super soft, champagne-colored blanket around me like a tunic, tucking it in around my chest, and go to find the men whose voices I can hear through the house.

I find them gathered downstairs in the foyer, and instead of Lake, it’s the brother we saw in London. Arson, I think his name was, along with Nico standing by the open front door. Arson glances up and waves at me, drawing Hemingway’s gaze in my direction at the top of the stairs. His face immediately softens with affection. I’m still not sure how a guy like him is interested in me, but I’d be a damn fool to question it. I’d sooner give up my book collection than leave Hemingway. The force of that thought hits me square in the chest, nearly taking my breath away.

I walk down the stairs to join the two brothers, who both, rather noticeably, stop talking when I arrive.

“If this is about me, I should know.”

“I don’t know if it’s related,” Hemingway says, his voice tense and deep. “Arson heard through some contacts that there have been some strange occurrences happening around a certain tomb in Egypt.”

“What kind of strange occurrences?”

“Movement, unexplained noises,” Arson answers. “Just your run-of-the-mill curse shit.”

I narrow my eyes at Hemingway. “And you don’t think that’s related to me and this *Egyptian* amulet around my neck? Let me guess, the tomb is from the eighteenth dynasty.”

Arson smiles while Hemingway growls, answering my question without words. Even Nico huffs with amusement.

“Fucking hell,” I mutter. “Some shit is gonna wake up from its five-thousand-year-old grave, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, probably,” Arson says at the exact same time Hemingway answers, “Absolutely not.”

I cross my arms over my chest, giving them both a hard look. “Okay, well I’m not interested in *The Mummy* remake starring me. What is our next move?”

“Find out what Dahlia knows,” Hemingway answers. “Go from there.”

“Great.”

I turn and stomp up the stairs, and for some reason, instead of heading to my bedroom or even Hem’s, I return to the hoard room, finding a spot to sit among his stacks of books, the smell of yellowed pages and worn covers soothing my soul. If I’m going to die, this wouldn’t be such a bad room to do it in.

“You’re not going to die,” Hemingway says, appearing in the doorway.

“How did you know I was thinking that?”

“I just did.” He walks over and sits across from me. “Most of my books were given to me by the authors.”

My heart flutters in my chest. “You put the Dorian Gray quote in my pocket, didn’t you?”

He nods, looking somewhat shy.

“It was a beautiful gesture.” He glances up, holding my gaze with hope shining in his eyes. “Although, wooing me with books is hardly fair.”

“I’m not interested in fair. I would give you everything in this room to be yours.”

I swear I stop breathing for a moment. “Why? I don’t understand. I’m just...” I shrug. “Just a guy with an antique store.”

“You are so wrong.” He stands, crossing the space and returning with a handful of jewels, which he then drapes over me. Necklaces of gold, diamonds, emeralds, and sapphires, brilliant rings, gleaming bracelets. “Their beauty pales in comparison to you.”

“Hem...”

He lifts a book, placing it on my lap before leaning back and clutching a handful of gold coins. He piles it all in front of me, his eyes gleaming gold as the skin on his neck transforms into scales right in front of my eyes.

“You belong here, Dempsey. Surrounded by all my precious treasures.”

Reaching forward, I brush my fingers across his cheek, and his breath hitches as his dragon gazes back at me.

“Hey there, dragon,” I whisper. “Thank you for showing me all of this. It’s beautiful. You’ve done so well.”

A purring sound pours from Hemingway’s chest. I’m astounded, but on some level, I’m more comforted than I’ve ever been. This should feel odd, but nothing about Hemingway and his dragon feels foreign. Just the opposite. This feels like home.

“Dempsey...” Hemingway blinks, pushing the dragon back. “I have to tell you something.”

“If you’re about to tell me that you have a lover or you’re betrothed to some asshole in your kingdom or any other fairy tale shit that is going to take all of this away from me, don’t. I don’t want to know.”

“What? No. Nothing like that. It’s...” His brow furrows as he seems to struggle with the words. “It’s about the future.”

Smiling, I flip open the book in my lap. “I don’t want to talk about that. I don’t want to hope for something that might not happen.”

Hemingway growls, but I continue.

“I believe that you’re going to do everything you can, but we don’t know what the outcome is going to be. So, until then,

I just want to live in the moment. Can we do that, Hem?”

His expression falls, but he nods. “We can.”

Once we finally leave the hoard room, I find myself too tired for much of anything else, even though my mind is racing with scattered thoughts.

“I need to get back to my store,” I murmur as my eyes close and I sink into his wonderful bed.

Hemingway lies beside me, hovering, as he strokes my hair. “Okay.”

“And I want to look at more stuff in the hoard room.”

“Anytime.”

Nodding, I burrow my face into my pillow, the scent of smoke and earth lulling me to sleep once more.



THE NEXT TIME I open my eyes, the light in the room is dim and a figure in the corner startles me.

“Ooh, sorry, bestie. It’s just me. Lake.”

I sit up, exhaling slowly. “Hey.”

“How are you feeling?” He stands, approaching the bed slowly.

“Tired. So damn tired. What time is it?”

Lake sits at the foot of the bed, studying my face. “Three. Hemingway is downstairs making dinner for you.”

“He sent you to watch me?”

“No, not at all. You’re safe here. I wanted to see you.”

“Why?”

“To apologize for what we had to do earlier.”

“Oh. He didn’t tell you I can’t remember it?”

“He said it was murky, but I didn’t know if maybe it had come back yet.”

“Nope.” I stretch my arms above my head. “I’m worried, Lake. Something is off physically.”

Lake frowns. “I know, but Dahlia is all over it. She’s really good at what she does.”

“What if this is too much for her?”

“Then we’ll find another solution.” He puts his hand on my leg. “I swear on the House of Gucci, Hemingway is not going to let anything bad happen to his mate.” His eyes go wide, and his mouth forms a perfect O as soon as he finishes his sentence. “Uh, you know, the guy he likes.”

“Why did you say mate? What does that mean?”

“Nothing.”

“You are the worst liar, Lake. Tell me.”

He glances at the door. “Um, I’d rather not get on the dragon’s bad side.”

“I have a bad side too.”

“Yeah, but you’re not a ton of fire-breathing lizard. I should shut up and go.”

I grab his wrist before he can take off. “Lake.”

His face falls, but he nods. “Dragons...” He pauses, obviously considering his words. “Let me ask you this, Dempsey. Do you ever feel an unusually strong connection to Hemingway? Almost like you can sense his feelings and thoughts?”

“Um...”

“And have you noticed how attuned he is to yours? How when you physically touch, it’s not like anything you’ve ever experienced before. It almost feels like magic?”

“Well...um...”

“You don’t have to answer me. Just know that whatever is developing between you two is real and it’s powerful and it’s

forever. He won't let anything bad happen to you. He can't. It would destroy him."

"Are you saying..." *Am I his mate?* "Mate is more than just an exclusive dating arrangement, isn't it?"

"Oh, heck yeah."

"I see."

"But please don't tell him I told you. He needs to be the one to introduce you to it. He'll explain it a lot better."

"Is it...for sure?"

"I think you already know the answer to that." He slides off the bed. "Just trust him. Trust his instincts. He has your best interests at heart, I promise."

"Why hasn't he told me yet? He told me about the dragon."

"I'd guess he doesn't want to overwhelm you. It's a doozy when you find out all of it."

"You're Nico's mate?"

His smile beams. "I am."

I nod, wondering how it would feel to be as happy as Lake obviously is. "Thanks, Lake. I won't say anything."

"Good. Are we cool about the other stuff?"

"Yeah. I know you're just trying to help."

"I am. I'll see you soon, okay?"

"Okay."

Once he's gone, I throw on the t-shirt and boxers belonging to Hem, noticing how wearing his clothes is like chicken soup on a cold day. What Lake said is bouncing around my head like a tennis ball, but there's no denying the well of hope bubbling up inside me. Could I really be meant for Hemingway? Could he be mine for good?

I try to tug the offending necklace off, pushing through the discomfort in the pit of my stomach as I struggle with it. The

more I pull, the weaker I feel, so I give up, slouching in defeat. Seconds later, Hemingway appears in the doorway.

“Time to eat, mon bijou.”

I nod, pulling myself from the bed. Studying his face as I approach, I see it all so clearly now. His eyes shine with affection and fierce protection for me, his smile is only mine. When I reach him, I kiss his cheek.

“Thank you.”

“For?”

“Making me feel safe.”

He beams as heat pours off of him. “I always will, Dempsey. Always.”

CHAPTER  
**FIFTEEN**







## HEMINGWAY

**E**xhaustion is written all over my mate's face. He's done little other than sleep for days now, yet he still has dark circles under his eyes and a gaunt look to his face. His glasses are back in place, whatever had caused his super vision clearly having worn off. Worry and fear squeeze tightly around my heart as I drag my fingertips delicately along his cheek and pray he can't see the terror reflected in my eyes.

I *will* save Dempsey. I have to. The world is a brighter place with his beautiful soul in it. If he's gone, I will have to be gone too, and I'm not ready to consider that as an option.

"That bad, huh?" he asks with a weak laugh.

"What's that?"

"You're looking at me the way everyone looked at my Grandma after the doctors told us she wouldn't be around much longer." He grimaces at the growl that tears through my throat and puts a hand on my chest. "I know, I know, you're going to do everything you can to save me. I just..." Dempsey drops his gaze and closes his eyes, his expression so resigned I want to roar with rage. When he opens his eyes again, he forces a smile. "Hey, didn't you say there was food? I'm *starving*."

I'm sure he's changing the subject on purpose, but I'm helpless to deny him regardless. I scoop him up into my arms and he lets out that same musical laughter that's already imprinted itself deep inside my soul. I nuzzle his throat as he wraps his arms and legs around me and lets me carry him right back to bed.

"Wait here, I'll bring food up," I instruct.

He pushes his glasses up his nose and huffs. "I'm sick of being in bed. I've been sleeping or laying around for way too long. Can we go outside?"

I consider his request for a moment, weighing the risk of his unseen stalker finding a way onto the compound versus the good a little fresh air and sunshine might do him. “We can eat outside,” I agree after a moment of thought. “I know the perfect spot.”

He scrambles back off the bed with a grin. I turn around so my back is towards him and bend down. He takes the hint and hops onto my back. This way I can conserve his energy but keep my hands relatively free, not to mention I get the added bonus of enjoying the feeling of his small, warm body wrapped around me, his breath tickling my neck every time he exhales.

I take care not to jostle him too much as I carry him down the stairs, taking a quick detour into the living room to grab Lake’s favorite blanket off of my couch, passing it over my shoulder for Dempsey to hold on to. He laughs and clings to me as hard as he can while I use both hands to pack our lunch into containers to bring outside.

It’s such a small, silly moment, with his chest vibrating against my back, my own laughter bubbling up to join his as I fumble with a plastic container, and the messy pasta, that was an excellent idea when I made it but seems less logical for a picnic, my movements careful so I don’t make his job of hanging on any more difficult than it is. It doesn’t occur to me to set him down while I get our picnic ready, and it doesn’t seem to cross his mind either.

I’ve dreamed of having a fated mate all my own countless times throughout my long life. Even when I believed the idea was nothing but a fairy tale, I couldn’t help but wish for it when I felt lonely curled up in my hoard. But when I used to dream of it, of *him*, all I thought of was the heat, the passion, the drive to fuck him and claim him so no one else would ever think to touch my mate. My heart never thought to yearn for moments like this one. I’m not sure I would have even known *how* to want something like this until Dempsey came into my life and showed me.

I manage to get everything together eventually and loaded into a reusable grocery bag to carry outside.

“You have reusable grocery bags?” Dempsey asks, his voice laced with amusement as I slide the handle of the bag up to my wrist to let it dangle while I hold him up by the thighs again.

“Of course. Protecting the planet is everyone’s responsibility.”

“That’s weirdly wholesome for a rich, immortal dragon,” he muses, resting his chin on my shoulder as I carry him outside and head towards the woods that surround our houses. “Is it strange that I’ve been here such a short time, but it already feels like home?”

My heart swells and my dragon purrs happily at that. “This is your home now.”

He hums thoughtfully. “Your dragon is happy.”

Just like in the kitchen the other morning, I can feel a soft prodding along the connection that’s started to form between us, barely there yet somehow vital to the rest of my life.

“You can feel that?” I ask, and he nods, his chin bumping my shoulder with the movement.

I close my eyes while I walk, already knowing every rock and divot on the dirt path into the small forest so that even without my sight, I don’t slow or stumble. I take a deep breath and let my dragon grow inside of me, not enough to unleash him but enough to let him reach out invisibly towards Dempsey. He wraps himself around the warm, pulsing energy that emanates from our mate. There’s something else there too, something heavy and dark that doesn’t belong, but my dragon ignores it, drawing the light forward instead.

“Oh,” Dempsey gasps.

To anyone watching from the outside, it wouldn’t look like anything is happening, but the way my dragon wraps itself around his...what? Dempsey’s energy? His soul? Whatever it is, it’s *him* on the deepest, purest level and the touch feels more intimate than any physical one ever has. Heat blooms through my body, setting my heart thundering and smoke wisping from my nostrils with each exhale.

My heart and my mind are occupied with this unseen dance, but my body knows when we reach the clearing. I come to a stop on autopilot, reluctantly pulling my dragon back from soul grinding or whatever the fuck he was up to as I open my eyes again.

“We’re here,” I announce needlessly, finally letting Dempsey slide off my back.

“This is beautiful.” He looks around the small, private patch of woods where the tree cover is thin enough to bathe the ground with sunlight, allowing blue and purple wildflowers to grow with abandon.

He lays out the blanket and then lies down on top of it, off to one side so I have plenty of room to join him. I set the food down and spread out next to him on my back so we can look up at the nearly cloudless blue sky together.

With my dragon still so close to the surface, it’s easy to ride the waves of emotion that wash through Dempsey one at a time as we watch birds soar overhead and fuzzy bumble bees float past only inches above our faces. The sun warms my skin, tempting me to close my eyes again and drift away into a lovely afternoon nap. I’m only able to resist because I don’t want to miss a single second of this afternoon with my mate.

His fingertips find their way to the palm of my hand, and he absently draws shapes. A bird, a bee, a flower... It tickles at first and then takes on the same intimate feeling as my dragon wrapping itself around him.

“I would rather be happy than dignified,” he says, finally breaking our silence.

“Emily Bronte.” I recognize the quote immediately.

Dempsey nods, rolling onto his side to face me, still drawing pictures on my palm. A heart, an oval...

“I was just thinking about when we were in London. It feels like it was a lifetime ago, but it was only a couple of weeks,” he says softly, his voice faraway as he seems to get lost in memories. “It was so embarrassing to think about letting *you*, my gorgeous, strong, sexy bodyguard, give me a

piggyback ride. It's such a silly thing now to feel embarrassed by something like that. I think no matter what happens with all of this"—he uses his free hand to gesture to his chest, to the necklace—"it changed me."

I roll to face him, bringing my hand to his jaw and looking into his eyes. He looks as terrified as I feel, but also...at peace. Because he trusts me to save him? There are a million things I want to say; more vows to move the stars and the mountains to protect him if I have to, another round of reassurance that everything will be okay... But I think he's grown tired of hearing all of it and there's nothing new for me to say. So, instead of telling him what he already knows, I dip my head and claim his lips in a gentle kiss.

His lips taste of warmth and sunshine and *home* as I pour all of the unsaid things into the rhythm of my mouth against his and the way I wrap my arms around him to pull him closer. He kisses me back harder and deeper, an edge of desperation growing between us instantly as he sweeps his tongue into my mouth and rolls on top of me.

His cock is hard as granite against mine, thick and hot even through our clothes. Dempsey whimpers into my mouth and bucks his hips to grind his erection against mine. I dig my fingers into his hips and groan around the tangle of our tongues.

He wrenches his mouth away from mine and looks down at me, his hands braced on my chest, his eyes wild and his lips damp from the kiss.

"Make me forget for a little while?" he asks, and, as always, I'm helpless to deny him anything.

## DEMPSEY

THE LAST THING on my mind is the food I made Hemingway carry all the way out here. I could go the rest of my life without eating as far as I'm concerned, as long as he keeps pressing these searing hot kisses along my throat. I moan and

can't my hips to feel the hard length of his cock against mine again.

His smoke billows around us and I breathe it in deeply. It's not thick or irritating like regular smoke, it doesn't tickle my throat or clog my lungs. It's more like steam, opening up my sinuses and cleansing me from the inside out. I grab a handful of Hemingway's t-shirt in my hands and tug it up. His lips break free from my skin just long enough for me to get the shirt over his head before his face is buried against my collarbone again.

He drags his tongue along my flesh, and I gasp at the sharp, hot feeling that's like a brand. Hemingway's hands glide up my back, pushing my shirt up as they go and leaving every inch of his touch imprinted on my body. His skin ripples under my hands, shifting between soft flesh and the smooth, hard scales of his inner dragon.

My shirt joins his, tossed aside and forgotten as our mouths crash back together. None of this feels like my life, and I'm surprisingly okay with that. Lake's words about dragon mates dance through my mind and I can't help but wonder if some part of me knew to wait for Hemingway even before any other part of me knew he existed. Maybe something inside me didn't want to settle for being touched by anyone but him.

I rock my hips and pant into his mouth, my cock getting harder as heat pools deep in my belly and sparks along my skin in the wake of his touch. Is this part of his dragon powers? Can he set me on fire with nothing but a kiss? Maybe I can be like a phoenix, burned alive so I can come back better and stronger. It's a nice thought...

Hem growls and grunts against my lips as our tongues slide and tangle, both of us working together now to undo our pants. The pulsing, invisible energy of his dragon wraps itself around me again, my cock jerking and my heart taking off into a gallop at the same time. The horny urgency that's building inside of me doubles in a dizzying moment. I wonder if, somehow, I'm feeling *his* lust too.

I gasp out another desperate sound around his tongue, my cock spasming so hard I nearly come before I've even gotten my pants off. Hemingway moans, low and hungry, adding fuel to my theory that whatever this *thing* is that's growing between us, it means we can feel each other. Is this what Lake meant by us being mates?

I don't even know what it means, but I want it to be true. My luck so rarely works out that way though. Maybe this is just how sex *is* with a dragon. I'll have to enjoy the moment until I work up the courage to ask Hem about it one way or the other.

We manage to get our pants and underwear off, leaving us stark naked in the middle of a field of wildflowers with the sun shining down on us. Yup, this *definitely* isn't my life. But I'm not going to question whatever alternate universe I woke up in where I'm about to lose my virginity to a dragon.

Hemingway rolls me onto my back, hovering over me with his weight carefully balanced on his arms so he won't crush me. Except, I *want* him to crush me. I want to feel his big, heavy body pressing me into the Earth as he fucks me like both our lives depend on it.

I arch up against him, desperate to feel more of him. I drag him back into a kiss and our cocks align again, bare this time, hot and dripping.

"Tell me what you want, *bijou*, and I'll give it to you," he vows, his words rumbling against the edge of my jaw before he carefully nips at me—sharp enough that I'm sure it will leave a faint bruise, but not hard enough as far as I'm concerned. I want his bruises and marks all over me. I want him to own every inch of my body.

"I want *you*," I pant, thrusting up to meet his cock with mine again, groping at his shoulders and biceps and back, anywhere I can find to sink my fingers in for just a few seconds to ground myself.

"You have me." His words wash over me the same way his smoke did, filling me up and cleansing my soul.

“Inside of me,” I manage to choke out around the desperation that’s clawing at my throat and clouding my mind. “I want you *inside of me*.”

He groans and his eyes flash that vibrant shade of gold that steals my breath and lights me up. Hemingway reaches between us, wrapping his hand around his own cock and giving it a few slow strokes, his gaze fixed on me the entire time.

“I didn’t pack any supplies, but dragons can’t catch or transmit human diseases.”

I nod and lick my lips. “You can’t get me pregnant either, right? Like, I’m not going to lay an egg in a couple of weeks or anything if we don’t use a condom?”

His eyes slip back to their usual color, and he barks out a laugh. “No, *bijou*, I can’t get you pregnant unless you have a womb you haven’t told me about.”

“Nope, womb-less,” I assure him.

More laughter rumbles through his chest, vibrating against my palms where they’re pressed to his back. “And, lucky for both of us, my natural lubrication should be more than enough to make you nice and slick for me.”

He demonstrates by sliding the hand he was just using to stroke himself down my cock, coating me in a generous amount of his precum. My cock twitches heavily at the slippery, hot feeling of his hand moving up and down my shaft for a few strokes, slow and even the same way he was touching himself a minute ago. I whine when he stops, and his only response is an unapologetic chuckle.

Hemingway drags his hand down, over my balls, tight and aching for release, and slips two fingers between my ass cheeks. My eyelids flutter closed as he drags the slippery tips of his fingers over the rim of my hole. I clench instinctively even as heat tingles through nerve endings I wasn’t aware of until this moment.

“Breathe,” he says gently, leaning in to press a soft kiss to the shell of my ear as he tenderly strokes his fingers over my



pucker, not pushing or rushing, simply coaxing more and more nerve endings to wake up and tingle.

I do as he says, dragging in deep breaths and focusing on the incredible warmth that spreads slowly with every touch. When I start to moan, he adds just a little pressure, drawing circles with his fingers around my hole, still not making any attempt to push inside before I'm relaxed and ready.

The precum on his fingers smears slick around my hole, adding to the heat of the sensation until I'm rocking my hips again and my breath is coming out in impatient little gasps. Hemingway draws one finger back and brings it forward with a sharp tap against my pucker. The feeling reverberates through me, making my hole and my balls clench violently and my cock spill precum onto my belly.

“Oh fuck. Please, Hem. *Please.*” I claw at his chest, wrapping one leg around his hips in an attempt to pull him closer. His long, thick cock bumps against the inside of my thigh, making my muscles and my insides quiver.

His mouth finds mine and I open easily for his tongue to claim mine, my lips soft and slack for him just like the rest of me. I'm his to do what he wants with. His deep moan of pleasure thunders through me, almost distracting enough that I don't feel the sting of his finger finally slipping inside of me until he's up to his second knuckle.

My breath catches and I clench hard around the intrusion. Hemingway holds his finger still inside of me, kissing me deeper until I drag in a trembling gasp and relax around him. My reward is more of his tongue, more of his finger moving inside of me, and more of his dragon blanketing me like sunshine warming my skin.

The sharp stretch fades quickly into an aching need for *more*. More fingers, more *everything*. As if he can sense the shift inside of me, he eases his finger out, gathers more of the dripping strands of precum off of my thigh where his cock has been resting, and then fills me again, with two this time.

We start the dance all over—kissing, gasping, clenching, and finally the relentless throbbing deep inside of me to have

more of Hemingway.

“I’m ready,” I rasp, not entirely sure if it’s true but unwilling to wait another second to have all of him.

He eases his fingers out again and braces his hands on either side of my head, gazing down at me. His eyes are heavy with a smoldering heat and longing, and about a million other emotions that I can’t name but I’m sure match everything that’s raging inside of me right now.

My glasses are steamed with the warmth rising off of my skin, but I don’t want to take them off and miss seeing a single second of this. I reach up and run my hand over the rough stubble on his cheek, and Hemingway turns his head just enough to press a kiss to my palm.

“You were so worth the wait, bijou,” he murmurs.

Deep down I know he doesn’t mean the past couple of weeks. He means his impossibly long lifetime. His words burrow into my chest, and I add them to little personal hoard of my own I’ve started building. A hoard full of moments and memories of all the ways he’s making me fall in love with him.

The broad head of his cock nudges against my hole and I lift my hips to meet him as he thrusts inside of me in one dizzying motion. A strangled sound bursts from my lips, my entire body flushing all at once as he stretches me too much and not enough all at once. The hot sensation of pain and pleasure tangles together inside of me, making it impossible to know if I want to push him off me or flip him over and ride his cock harder.

Hemingway drops down onto his elbows to bring his lips next to my ear again. “I have you.” The deep baritone of his voice soothes the electricity jolting wildly through my body. “Breathe,” he instructs again, and as if my entire body is now wired to obey his every command, my chest rises as I draw in a deep breath. “Again,” he murmurs, and I do.

Slowly, one breath at a time, I start to relax, the pain giving way to a pleasure nestled in my gut and quickly spreading

outward to fill the rest of my body, until every inch of my skin feels over sensitive.

“More,” I moan, and his laughter rumbles between us.

He eases out and then fills me again. His cock drags heavily inside of me, against the relaxed rim of my hole, over my prostate...

My eyes roll back, and another pleased groan falls from my lips. He moves inside me, rocking in a slow rhythm as if we have the rest of eternity to lie here, making love in a meadow. I would beg him for just that if I thought it were at all possible. I would sell off all of my prized possessions, give him my heart on a silver platter if he asked me for it, anything to keep this... To keep *him*.

“Hemingway,” I gasp, burying my face in the crook of his throat as he fucks me slow and deep, stoking the building flames inside of me. “Hemingway,” I moan his name again.

It’s impossible to separate the physical feeling of his hands and mouth, of his hot, sweat-slicked skin and thick cock from the way his dragon is weaving itself around unseen parts of me. I can feel the faint, murky pulse of the *thing* that’s inside of me, but it feels muted as all of the parts that are really me reach out for his dragon.

My muscles start to quiver, and his thrusts become harder while his rhythm remains stubbornly slow and even. Deep grunts echo from his throat, his skin more scales than flesh, shifting and rippling under my lips as I kiss any inch of him I can reach. His cock swells inside of me and mine does too, smearing streaks of my precum against his belly with every one of his thrusts.

The feeling builds so slowly that I cry out with surprise when it finally washes over me like a tidal wave, my back arching and my hole clenching as my balls draw up tight and my cock starts to pulse, painting him with my release.

Hemingway roars and snaps his hips in a few more jarring thrusts before I can feel his cock throbbing inside of me, matching the pulses of my inner muscles tugging and

fluttering around him as my own orgasm goes on and on and *on*.

My fingers and toes are all numb by the time aftershocks have stopped ricocheting through me and I manage to drag in a deep breath again. Both of us are drenched in sweat, my cum smeared on our skin. Hemingway looks down at me again, his cock starting to soften inside me as he continues to twitch with lazy thrusts.

“I love you, Dempsey.”

My heart jolts. The words should terrify me. No one has *ever* said them to me, and I thought I was perfectly fine with that until this moment. I thought I didn’t need them, but I was so very wrong.

Is it too fast? Maybe. But if there’s anything I’ve learned in the last couple of weeks, it’s that life doesn’t always wait around for you to take things slowly.

“I love you,” I murmur, bringing my lips to his in a kiss that’s just as slow as our unending orgasms were.

There’s no hurry for the rest of the afternoon either. Hemingway eventually rolls off of me and we let the gentle breeze cool the sweat from our bare skin as we enjoy the mess of eating pasta with our fingers since silverware didn’t seem to make it into the bag. We laugh and we kiss, and we pretend for a little while that the entire world is right here in the meadow. No curses, no necklaces, nothing but the two of us.

“You look better,” he says, brushing his fingertips over my cheek.

“I feel better.” It’s not a lie for his benefit. The exhaustion that’s been plaguing me for days has finally lessened. I feel like myself again. “It must be your magic dragon cock,” I tease, and he grins.

“Hmm, just to be safe, we should make sure you get a daily dose until we figure this whole thing out,” he says solemnly before playfully nipping at my bare shoulder.

“Better make it twice a day.” I grin. “You can’t be too careful with these things.”

CHAPTER  
**SIXTEEN**





## HEMINGWAY

Gazing at Dempsey as he rattles on about some of his favorite treasures, my heart feels too big for my chest. I never knew happiness on this level could exist. It's as if I found a part of me I had no idea was missing.

He seems to notice my gaze and pauses mid-sentence. "What? Do I have sauce on my face?"

"No. You have beauty and freckles and happiness on your face."

His cheeks blush sweetly as he reaches up to brush his fingers across my stubble. "You don't seem real sometimes. I'm almost afraid I'm actually in some kind of weird, amazing dream, and when I wake up, I'll find out I just imagined you."

Leaning down, I press a kiss to his nose. "I'm real. I'll tell you a story."

"Please."

"Once upon a time, there was a little dragon who loved words and books and poetry. No matter how many other beautiful things he saw in his life, he always felt called by the worlds inside of books. As the dragon grew into a man, he wished for the romantic worlds he read about. He pined for a lover of his own, but the longer he went without it, the less he believed it would come."

Dempsey nods, smiling at me.

"He had given up, the poor dragon. Convinced a love like the kind he wanted didn't exist in real life. Then, one day, he gazed into the sweetest eyes he'd ever seen before, and he knew." I clasp Dempsey's hand to my heart. "He just knew."

"You waited a long time."

"I waited for you, Dempsey. After this is over, and it will be, I promise to give you a life a thousand times better than

one in any book.”

“I’m not sure I’m...adequate enough.”

“Don’t ever say that. You’re perfect for me. There isn’t a single detail or molecule I would change. I promise to do my best for you.”

Dempsey’s face flushes with emotion as he nods. “It’s a lot, but it’s wonderful.”

“It is. I want to tell you something that only my family knows.”

“Okay.”

“Hemingway is my chosen name. We live so long that we often refresh our identities.”

“Oh. Right.”

“I liked the name when I first heard it, but my birth name will always be in my heart.”

Dempsey’s eyes widen with curiosity as he nods.

“Evri. My name is Evri.”

“That’s so beautiful. Does anyone call you that?”

“My parents. My brothers in a heated moment. You can.” Uttering the words sends shivers through me. “It’s intimate to me. Special. As my beloved, you can use my name.”

“I’m honored.” He smiles. “Evri.”

Scooping him into my arms, I claim his lips once more, sinking into our shared love. I waited more than a thousand years for this man, and he was absolutely worth it.



JUST AS WE FINISH DINNER, my phone buzzes. I grab it to see a text from Lord.

LORD: Family meeting. My place in ten minutes please.

I ROLL MY EYES. I was really hoping to spend the evening washing my mate and worshiping his body, but duty calls.

“We’ve been summoned to Lord’s for a family meeting.”

“Oh.” He scrunches his nose. “Will you be gone long?”

“What? Oh. You’re coming with me.”

“But it’s...” His words trail off. “You don’t want me out of your sight. Got it.”

“Yes, but also, you’re with me now. You’re part of my family.”

Dempsey scoots back in his chair abruptly, fanning his face. “Crap.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t want to cry.”

“Did I say something wrong?”

“No, you big, gorgeous hunk. I don’t think you could.” He wipes at his eyes. “I’m just overwhelmed, but in a good way. I’m so used to men who...” He shakes his head.

“Who do what?”

“Didn’t take me seriously. Didn’t see me as a long-term option. They didn’t even put in the effort to get me into bed. I underestimated how amazing it would be to feel wanted and accepted and like I belong.”

Against my wishes, a puff of smoke leaves my nose. My dragon is pissed. Dempsey seems to notice, reaching his hand out to place it on my chest.

“It’s okay now though. All those misses were just so I’d be ready for you. Nothing ever worked out because I was already yours, wasn’t I, sweet dragon?”



The beast inside me immediately calms, purring with satisfaction.

*Mate. Mine.*

I nod, exhaling. “Yes. Already mine.”

Dempsey smiles. “We should get over there. Don’t want to keep the family waiting.”

“Let’s go.”

We exit my house, holding hands and walking the short distance to Lord’s. Valentino comes out from his place, jogging across the grassy courtyard in the center of our homes. He salutes us, beating us to my brother’s.

Inside, everyone, including Arson, is waiting in the study. Lake is pacing and muttering under his breath while Nico is a vision of barely contained rage, with scales erupting on his arms as he tries to soothe his mate.

“Whoa,” Valentino says. “What’s wrong?”

Lake swings around to face my brother. “What’s wrong? I’ll tell you what’s wrong! I had a gorgeous, very tasteful, and extremely *exclusive* wedding planned. It was going to be intimate and perfect.” He stomps his heeled foot. “But Daddy Dearest just informed me that he’s gone and invited a shit ton of his fake friends without my approval.”

“Oh shit,” Arson says.

“And what’s worse,” Lake continues, “my mother invited a bunch of her snobby society ladies. This is the exact opposite of what I wanted.” His voice is shrill now, but Nico is worthless in calming him.

“Lake,” Dempsey says in his soft voice. “Take a deep breath.”

“You don’t understand. This is my only wedding. Ever.” His eyes well with tears and Nico explodes with a roar that shakes the windows, stomping out of the room before the inevitable shift happens.

“I’ll deal with Nico,” Valentino says, rushing after him.

“Get him outside,” Lord yells.

“Okay,” Dempsey says. “It’s not ideal, but I have a thought.”

Lake pops his bottom lip, quietly stomping his foot like a toddler on the verge of a full-on tantrum. “I’m listening.”

“What if this is a good thing? You’ll have all the publicity and pictures and stuff that the media want and then you and Nico and anyone else you want to invite can have a private event somewhere secret that no one knows about. Far away from prying eyes and sneaky photographers.”

Lake stops bouncing with petulance. “Go on.”

“Once they think you’re already married they won’t pay any attention anymore. Then from there, you can go off on a relaxing honeymoon. Let your parents handle the drama for the big event. You show up and look pretty but save the special moments for the smaller ceremony. Don’t even tell your folks.”

“That’s genius,” Lake whispers. “Nico! Dempsey is a genius.” Lake rushes out of the room, leaving the rest of us wondering what just happened.

“Glad I stopped browsing for a hook up for this,” Arson says, already leaving the room. “Tell me when and where. I’ll be there.”

Lord is staring at Dempsey in awe. “You have a way with Lake.”

“I understand him. We don’t seem similar on the surface, but I know where he’s coming from. He’s waited his whole life for this, and he wants it to be special. Not a circus.”

My stomach flutters at the very idea of marrying Dempsey. I don’t need it, not with the bonding rut, but if he wants it, he can have it. Anything he wants. His eyes shift to mine as if he can hear my thoughts, and his smile grows.

“Well,” Lord says. “I still want to discuss security if we’re to have a large event now. Perhaps after Lake and Nico have time to decide on their next steps.”

“It doesn’t matter what we do for security,” I say. “Dempsey will be with me at all times. He’s safe.”

Lord searches my eyes, and I know that he knows when his eyes widen briefly. “I see. Good. Very good.”

“Call us if you need us.”

Dempsey waves over his shoulder as we leave. Valentino passes us on the way out. “Cover your eyes. They’re making out in the courtyard.”

I just laugh as I lead my mate back home. Those words play back in my mind for a few seconds. Mate. Home. This man is my life now.

All I have to do is make sure no one and *nothing* takes him away from me.

## DEMPSEY

“I’M NOT SURE ABOUT THIS,” Hemingway says from his position beside me in the back seat.

Lake, much calmer than he was yesterday, twists around to face us. “It’s fine, Hem. Dahlia is good people, and she’s got a plan.”

“Why does it have to be at the shop?”

“I’m glad it is,” I say. “I want to see the place.”

Hem huffs but squeezes my hand. “Fine.”

When Nico pulls to a stop in front of my shop, a little pang of nostalgia hits me. This store was my life until just a few weeks ago. A life that consisted of inanimate objects, a few quirky customers, and books. It seems like a lifetime ago since Hemingway busted into my world.

“Are you sad?” Hemingway lifts my hand to his lips and kisses. “We can leave.”

“No.” I shake my head. “No, I’m fine. Just pondering things.”

“You’re sure?”

“I would tell you otherwise. I promise I’m fine.

“Okay.”

Dahlia walks around the corner, appearing on the sidewalk in front of us. I’m starting to wonder if she’s more than just a psychic, but something about her feels trustworthy so I get out of the car and greet her.

She smiles, white teeth behind black lipstick. She waves at all of us before putting her hand against the window of my store. Then she nods. “We’re good.”

I quirk an eyebrow but no one else bats an eye so I just unlock the door and wait as everyone files in.

“I wanted to be here,” Dahlia says. “There’s a lot of energy here.”

“Good or bad?” Lake asks.

“Neutral.” Her heavily made-up eyes shift around the space. “Mostly.”

I look at Hemingway, whose only reaction is to hook his arm around my waist.

“Did you find anything out about the engraving?” Lake asks.

“I did. We’re going to try something I think might work to break the um...”

“Curse,” I supply. “I know it’s a curse. I just want it off of me as soon as possible.”

Dahlia steps closer, lifting her chin to study my face. “You look better than when I last saw you. Maybe the effects are slowing or losing steam.”

“No,” Hemingway says. “They’re not. We found a temporary solution.”

“Ooh,” Dahlia says with a smile. “What?”

Hemingway growls and even though I’m slightly embarrassed I answer her. “It seems that sex with Hemingway restores my energy.”

I expect Lake or Nico to react, but both stay noticeably silent.

“Oh,” Dahlia says. “Interesting. You must have a unique bond.”

Hem huffs a tendril of smoke, making me smile. There are worse things than everyone knowing that someone as amazing as he is wants me.

“Can we get on with the spell?” he asks.

I pull my head back. “Spell?”

Lake scrunches his nose, glaring at Hemingway. “Okay, Dempsey, boo, Dahlia here is a witch. A very powerful one. She has access to resources none of us do.”

“A witch.” I nod. “I have a feeling she’s not the kind of witch I’m used to.”

Dahlia laughs. “I can assure you I’m not. Are you ready? It won’t hurt.”

“It better not,” Hem grunts.

“He’s—”

“Protective?” Dahlia finishes. “I’ve heard. Do you have a room you can lie down in?”

“Yes.”

I lead them through the store and upstairs to my abandoned apartment. It smells musty since the door has been shut but no one seems bothered by it other than me. I lie on my bed and watch Dahlia as she reaches into the pockets of her overalls and pulls out several objects.

“This is obsidian.” She shows us a shiny black stone. “It’s for protection. It will block any psychic attacks so this thing we can’t see can’t harm you.”

“Okay.”

She places the stone over my heart. Next, she opens a satchel and begins to smudge the contents on my forehead. She hands Lake a black candle and asks him to light it while

she opens a vial of something that definitely does not smell good.

Dahlia glances at everyone. “Guys, form a circle as best you can around Dempsey.”

Hemingway, Nico, and Lake hold hands, surrounding my bed with Dahlia on it between my legs. She dips her fingers into the vial and flicks the liquid over me, chanting some words and rocking back and forth.

The more she speaks, the heavier I feel, like something is weighing me down on the inside. Dahlia narrows her eyes, leaning closer to me, flicking more liquid at me and chanting louder. My insides tighten in response, the way apprehension feels when you fear something you can't see.

Dahlia grabs more powder from the satchel, sprinkling it over me, and my body reacts, thrashing without me consciously doing anything. Cold air swirls around me, as if I'm standing outside on a wintery day.

“Witch,” Hemingway growls. “Do not hurt him.”

“Shh.” She glares at Hem. “He's not hurt. Let me focus.”

I meet Hem's concerned eyes and force a smile, sending him my thoughts that I'm okay, hoping somehow he understands them since talking seems like too much effort right now.

As he holds my gaze, warmth invades my body, pushing back the cold and the tightness, and Dahlia gasps, turning her head toward Hemingway.

“Whatever you're doing, keep doing it.”

Hemingway nods, and my body relaxes into the mattress. I smile as the most amazing sensation of comfort and love washes over me. Unfortunately, it's short lived.

“Ungh,” I cry out, clawing at my chest. “Get it off.”

Dahlia reaches for the necklace but pulls her hand back as if she's been burned. “Dammit.”

She puts both hands on my chest, and as her eyes close and she rocks side to side, I can feel something moving around inside me. Something foreign and just...*wrong*.

Dahlia opens her eyes slowly, sitting back on her heels. "I'm sorry, Dempsey. I have to keep researching."

"Fuck." Hemingway knocks over a tower of books perched on a small table, and before I know it, Nico has him by the waist and out of my room.

Lake perches on the edge of my bed and rubs my forehead. "Hemingway is okay. He just needs to cool off."

Dahlia is pacing my small room. "It's not responding to a normal demon banishment, so it's not that."

"Good news," Lake says, trying to help.

"Bad news," Dahlia says. "I don't know what the fuck that thing is."

"The inscription didn't help?" I ask, trying to stay calm.

"I have a friend who's dedicated to Isis looking into it. I'm hoping she might be able to figure it out. It's not in any of my grimoires."

I sit up, fighting back tears. "I need to get rid of it. I don't want to die. I just found Hem and—"

"You're not going to die," Dahlia and Lake say at the same time.

"You don't know that."

"Listen, Dempsey," Lake says. "If it can't be fixed in other ways, Hemingway can fix it a different way probably, but it requires..." He frowns. "It's not up to me to explain but suffice to say it's a big deal."

"More mate stuff?"

He nods. "Trust us. We're going to do everything and anything we have to. You know Hemingway won't go down without a fight. He's like vintage Chanel."

"I have no idea what that reference means."

Lake smiles. “He won’t let you down.”

That doesn’t explain anything, but okay.

Nico and Hemingway return. Everyone else leaves the room as Hemingway rushes to my side and gathers me in his arms.

“I’m sorry I left.”

“I get it now. It’s okay. You’d ruin the store if you changed.”

“Yes.” Cupping my face, he searches my eyes. “You’re going to be okay. If it’s the last thing I do, I will fix this.”

“Promise me it won’t be the last thing you do. I want a future. I want to read books together and make love in a field of wildflowers. I want to meet your dragon face to face. I want my happily ever after.”

“You’ll have it. I swear on a thousand lifetimes, you will get everything you want.”

I bury my face in his chest, inhaling his sweet, smoky scent. The closer he is, the stronger I feel, the tightness in my chest receding with each stroke of his hand on my back.

“I love you, Dempsey, and when I love, I do it with everything I’ve got. You are my entire world, and I’m not letting you go. Ever.”

The rest of my stress seems to drain away. “Why do I feel so good when you touch me?”

“Because I was made for you. Just you, my sweet bookworm.”

I laugh softly. “I think I like bijou better.”

Hemingway kisses my forehead. “You got it.”



CHAPTER  
**SEVENTEEN**





## HEMINGWAY

I watch Dempsey closely as we head back down the steps from his apartment into Timeless Treasures where everyone else is still waiting for us. He seems...calm. My dragon prods at the growing bond between us, searching for any sign that our mate is simply putting on a brave face, but everything about his energy seems completely at ease.

It's the last thing I expected after the failed exorcism, or whatever the fuck that just was, and it's damn sure worlds away from what I'm feeling right now. But I'm grateful for whatever Lake said to bring him so much peace.

"Ready to head back home? I have a masseuse and an esthetician scheduled to come over and give me a full in-home spa treatment this afternoon. You game?" Lake asks Dempsey, waggling his eyebrows and smiling in a way that's too big to be genuine. He may have had the right words for my bijou, but he's not feeling confident about Dempsey's fate right now.

A growl threatens to rip from my throat, but Nico beats me to it. Although, his is for an entirely different reason. My brother narrows his eyes and huffs out a puff of smoke as he drags his mate close.

Lake is completely unconcerned about the entire show of it, giggling and rolling his eyes. "Silly, possessive dragon," he scolds, although it's obvious he doesn't mind at all. "They're professionals."

"I don't like anyone else touching you," Nico rumbles.

"I know, but the last time I asked you to give me a massage and facial..." He doesn't even get to finish his sentence before Dempsey is sputtering a laugh and blushing. "So, what do you say, Demps?"

"Um...sure. I've never had a massage or a facial before."

Lake squeals and claps his hands. “You’re going to *love* it.”

“Did Dahlia leave already?” I ask, glancing around and realizing that the witch vanished at some point without me noticing.

“Before you came back down, she told us she was going to go home and consult a potion book for a recipe she wants to try. She’ll call in a day or so,” Nico informs me, and I nod.

A day or two—I suppose it can wait that long. Although, Dempsey is already looking more tired and gaunt again after today’s activities. This afternoon calls for some downtime in the hoard, I think. Nico may have been the one to say it, but I don’t love the idea of a stranger putting their hands all over my mate either. Perhaps I’ll feel better if I get him nice and marked up with my scent first.

My dragon rumbles happily in my chest at that solution, and I slip my hand into Dempsey’s.

“Oh, hold on,” he says, tugging back when I start to walk towards the door. “You two go on ahead for a minute.” Nico and Lake both look skeptical at the idea of leaving without us. “There’s a place two stores down that makes gorgeous custom shoes,” Dempsey tempts, and Lake’s eyes light up.

I bite back laughter at how easily he learned exactly how to distract Lake, and gods know that wherever Lake wants to go, Nico will follow. The two of them leave and I bring our joined hands to my lips to kiss Dempsey’s knuckles.

“Need a few minutes alone, *bijou*?” I ask.

“Kind of. It’s probably silly, but I was just thinking about how I might not be back here again for a little while and I really hate the idea of leaving some of my things, my books mostly, completely unprotected. Or, no, it’s not so much about *protecting* them.” He bites his lip and looks longingly over at the door that leads to his most private little library of rare books.

I kiss his hand again. “I understand. Would you like to bring them to the house and keep them in my hoard?”

A breath whooshes out of him, and he smiles again. “Could I?”

“Of course. Show me which ones you want to bring with you, and I’ll help you carry them. And we can come back another day to get the rest if you wish.”

He nods and then ducks his head. “Do you think I’ll ever be able to open the shop back up? I mean...after all this blows over...”

I cup his chin and tilt his face back up towards mine. “Yes,” I say firmly. “You’ll have everything that makes your heart sing, no matter what I have to do to give it to you.”

He searches my eyes for a moment and then nods. “Thank you.”

I lean in and brush a kiss over his lips. “You don’t have to thank me.”

He unlocks the door, and it creaks open. The smell of old books is immediate, but not a speck of dust dances in the air as we step inside. He has kept the room immaculate, and the books safe. My heart surges for what has to be the millionth time at just how perfectly fate chose my mate.

Dempsey starts pulling books off the shelves and handing them to me until I have a tower of them in my arms.

“Oh shoot, that’s more than I meant to grab,” he says.

I chuckle from behind the stack of books that’s nearly over my head. “Why don’t I put these in the SUV, and I’ll be right back for more?”

“You don’t mind? I can just take these for now and come back later.” The reluctance is clear in his voice.

“No, pick out some more and I’ll be right back,” I assure him, carefully carrying the stack I have back out through the door.

If it weren’t for my dragon strength, I’m sure I’d be weighed down, but as it is, the only challenge is my lack of ability to see around the books. Luckily, we parked directly out front, so I don’t have far to go.

I'm as careful as I would be with any of my own books as I place them gently one by one into the trunk, stacking them in a way that won't have them flying about back here while I drive home. My dragon purrs in my chest the whole time. There's something intimate about Dempsey wanting to combine his hoard with mine. It feels like a promise of a future together, and in the face of the rest of the uncertainty swirling around us, I latch on to that hope.

## DEMPSEY

FROM MY BOOK ROOM, I hear the bell over the door jingle.

"I only have a couple more, I promise," I call out to Hemingway, forcing myself to only add two more to my new tower of books before calling it good for now.

He doesn't respond, but I can hear the heavy footsteps inside my shop, so I leave the books stacked on the table and peek my head back out of the room. "Hem, I..."

My breath catches and my heart speeds up immediately when I see that the person in the shop *isn't* my dragon. His back is to me, long, dark hair cascading down his shoulders as he faces my jewelry case.

"I'm sorry, we're closed," I call out, refusing to let him hear the nervous edge in my voice. The door was unlocked, so it's not crazy that someone might wander in to shop in the middle of the day. He doesn't move or acknowledge me for several seconds, so I clear my throat and try again. "Excuse me, sir? We're not open right now."

He turns around slowly and my pulse thunders in my ears, but I'm not sure why.

He's striking, with sharp cheekbones, dark copper skin, and deep brown eyes. His hair is a mass of dark curls that looks windswept and styled at the same time somehow. His eyes dart around my shop in an unsettling manner before landing on me.

Ice fills my veins and I realize why I reacted so strongly. I've seen this man before. Not in person, but in at least a dozen dreams in the past few weeks. Watching me, haunting me, *stalking* me.

“Hello. I'm looking for something.” He has an accent I can't place, and his tone is curt, like he's biting each word off as he finishes it.

The prickling feeling on the back of my neck gets worse, and I take an instinctive step backward away from the man, my chest heaving with rapid breaths. My back meets the wall while I keep my smile etched in place in spite of the quiver of nerves now taking up the pit of my stomach.

“Of course. What can I help you find? I have a unique assortment of antiques that you won't find anywhere else, from rare jewelry to exquisitely restored furniture. I even have the largest collection of antique, restored books in the country.” I wave my hand towards the locked case behind the register that's climate controlled to protect the pages of my books from undue wear, humidity, and sunlight.

The man continues closer, his eyes fixed on me in a way that feels like a physical weight. I swallow and my nervous smile widens until my cheeks hurt. The locket against my skin heats until it feels like it's scorching my chest and sizzling against the fabric of my t-shirt. It feels like it's beating, *pulsing* as if it has a heartbeat of its own.

The man stops a few inches from me, his eyes dropping to the gold chain around my neck, an unsettling smile twisting on his lips. I swallow hard again and dart my tongue out to wet my parched lips.

“I—”

“Can I help you?” The deep, rumbling voice echoes through my store like thunder during a summer storm, terrifying and comforting at the same time. My insides vibrate like windows rattling, and my breath lodges in my throat. *Hemingway.*

I want to look past the man with the crazy eyes and nightmare inducing grin to call out to Hemingway, but my gaze feels trapped. I'm frozen in place, unable to move a single muscle, not even the simple twitch of my eyes. Is it a product of my animal brain, an ancient remnant of a defense mechanism, telling me that if I stay *very* still perhaps this predator will make a meal of someone else instead?

The clomp of heavy footsteps moves across the weathered wood floors until a large hand appears on the man's shoulder. His unnerving smile finally slips, and he blinks as if he's coming out of a trance of his own. He shrugs off the grip of my dragon and cocks his head one last time at me, studying me as if he's committing every detail to memory. For what reason, I don't even want to begin to wonder.

The man finally jerks his eyes away from me, spins on his heel, and marches out without so much as looking at Hemingway.

I let out a trembling breath, my knees quaking violently. They give way and I sway on my feet. Hemingway catches me and scoops me into his arms before I can collapse. I press my face into his neck and let out a choked sob, more tremors racking my body.

"Who was that? Did he hurt you?" he growls, his voice barely human, his own body shaking, no doubt with the effort of holding his dragon back.

"It was *him*," I whisper.

"Him *who*?"

"I don't know. I just know that he was here for the necklace. I would happily have let him have it. He can keep the damn thing," I cry against his warm skin.

"I know," he says soothingly, running a hand up and down my back. I can feel his muscles flex as he turns to look over his shoulder in the direction that the man left.

My insides feel all jumbled up and I cling to my dragon as hard as I can until I've cried myself out and my nerves have settled. Hemingway doesn't complain, he just holds me and

murmurs soothing words into my ear until I no longer feel like I'm about to come apart at the seams.

"Let's go home. The rest of the books can wait," I say with a sniffle once I'm sure I'll be able to stand on my own two feet again.

He nods and lets me wiggle my way out of his arms and back onto solid ground. I dash my hand over my cheeks to clear away the tears that weren't soaked up by Hemingway's shirt, and I glance around the shop. I know he didn't take anything, that he only came for *one* thing, but my instinct tells me to check anyway. Hemingway stays glued to my side as I make my way over to the jewelry case.

Everything seems to be in place except...

"The ring is gone," I say, tapping on the glass to point at the empty spot where I'm sure I put the antique ring the last time we stopped in.

I reach into my pocket for the keys and Hemingway squeezes my other hand. "He didn't take the ring, bijou."

"It's gone," I say again, opening the case with a frown.

He reaches into his own pocket and holds out an open hand, the ring in question resting safely in his palm.

"You stole the ring from the case? How? Why? If you wanted it, you could have asked."

Hemingway rumbles a laugh. "Actually, *you* stole the ring."

I cock my head. "What do you mean?"

"That's not entirely accurate, but whoever might have bought it wouldn't have had it rightfully. It was mine. It came from my hoard," he explains.

I scrunch my eyebrows together, trying to follow what he's telling me. "You put it in my pocket in London?"

"I did." He holds it out farther, waiting for me to take it from him. On instinct, I slip it out of his hand and back onto my finger.



“Why?” I push my glasses back up my nose when they start to slide and ponder the strangeness of the situation. I know he put the notes in my pockets, but we had only known each other twenty-four hours at most when I found the ring. He would have had to get it out of his hoard when he went home *right* after meeting me and bring it to London to put in my pocket.

An uncharacteristically sheepish look comes over his expression. “At the time, I didn’t know why. I didn’t do it consciously, it was...instinct.”

“Your dragon wanted you to do it?” Some of Lake’s hints about dragon mates dance through my mind. “Am I...” I step closer because I’m shaking again, but this time it’s a completely different kind of fear racking me. Maybe I’ve read the entire situation wrong. Maybe I’m so excited to have the attention of someone like Hemingway that I’m reading too much into everything. But I have to know. I don’t know why, but I do. “Am I your mate?”

His arms go around me immediately, his eyes flashing that golden color I’ve started falling in love with. “You know I’m going to have to strangle Lake for stealing my thunder, don’t you?”

A trembling chuckle rattles through my throat and I grab onto the front of his shirt, bunching the material in my fists. “Is that a yes?”

He dips his head and nuzzles his nose against mine. “Yes, bijou, you’re my fated mate. My dragon knew it before I was ready to accept it, and that’s why I had to give you a piece of my hoard. I wanted to mark you, to claim you in some way, but I didn’t want to get slapped again.”

I sputter another laugh, remembering the uncharacteristic boldness that came over me the day we met. “Don’t be mad at Lake. He didn’t really tell me. He thought I already knew, and he just mentioned it. I don’t know what it really means though. Is being your mate like the dragon way of saying you’re committed? Or are we going to have to revisit the whole egg laying conversation?”

Hemingway booms out a laugh, his chest vibrating with it. “I promise, you’re not going to lay any eggs, no matter how many times I fuck you. A fated mate is...”

The bell over the door jingles again and we both tense. A loud, menacing growl tears from his throat as he spins to face whoever just walked in, pushing me behind him in one fluid motion.

“Whoa, we come in peace,” Nico reassures him quickly.

I peek my head around my hulking bodyguard slash lover slash *fated mate*, whatever the fuck that means, to see Nico and Lake standing in the doorway again. It takes my heart several seconds to slow to a normal rhythm again.

“What happened?” Lake asks with a frown.

“I’ll tell you in the car on the way home,” Hemingway answers, his voice still low and dangerous, his dragon clearly still close to the surface.

“Alright. Great tip on that shop by the way. I ordered some custom leather pumps that are going to look *incredible*,” Lake says cheerfully, his voice managing to calm the anxiety still zinging through me.

“Oh.” I remember the other reason I sent them away earlier, and I turn back to the jewelry case, still hanging open, forgotten during my discussion with Hem. The item I have in mind is on the middle shelf where it’s been for the past three years, waiting for someone to come in and fall in love with it.

I pluck it out of the case carefully, and then lock it up again before skirting around Hemingway, still in a protective stance in front of me. The sapphires and aged silver twinkle in the light as I carry it over to Lake, feeling a little shy as I offer it to him.

His gaze falls on it and he gasps. “Oh, my Gucci, that is incredible.” There’s a reverence in his voice that you might expect when someone is meeting the Queen for the first time.

“I want you to have it. It can be your ‘something old’ and ‘something blue’ for your wedding,” I tell him. He reaches out

and runs a delicate finger over the intricate design of the tiara. “It’s from the 1500s, made in England.”

“You can’t just *give* this to me. I’ll pay you,” Lake offers.

“It’s a wedding present,” I insist, letting him take the tiara from my hands.

“Thank you. It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever laid eyes on aside from Nico’s cock.” Lake snuffles, and I blush hot again while Nico shoots his brother a cocky grin and Hemingway groans behind me.

“Hemingway’s cock is pretty incredible too,” I murmur, and Lake’s smile widens.

“It must be a family trait. I’d make a crass comment about the other brothers, but I’m about to be a married man, so I suppose I should behave.”

Nico growls again, and Lake and I both laugh.

Hemingway corrals us all back out to the car and climbs in to sit in the back with me again on the way home. When we get there, he carries all my books up to the hoard room and I close and lock the doors behind us. I take a deep breath, letting a feeling of peace and safety wash over me like it always does when I’m locked away in here with my dragon... With my *mate*.

He sets my books down next to one of the library ladders so I can sort them all later, then joins me on my favorite reading couch, both of us wordlessly stripping out of our clothes. There’s nothing charged about the moment, just the quiet flutter of fabric as we undress. His cock isn’t hard and neither is mine, and something about that is even more intimate than being naked when we’re both horny and desperate.

Hemingway crawls onto the couch next to me, wrapping his arms and legs around me so the heat of his bare skin seeps into mine. He nuzzles his face into the crook of my neck, and I hold my hand up in the sunlight to look at the ring that’s back in place on my finger.

“What’s a fated mate?” I ask the question that he didn’t get to answer earlier.

“Humans have their gods, and we have our own. Most of us believe strongly in the Fates.” His warm breath flutters against my skin as he talks.

“Like, the three sisters weaving on their loom of life?”

“If you like,” he answers with a chuckle. “It’s more intangible, in my opinion, but I’m sure some believe in that version as well. The way I see it, there’s energy inside us and all around us, and whatever that unseen energy is...sometimes it guides things or binds things. It nudges things where they’re meant to be.”

“Hmm,” I hum, closing my eyes and instinctively feeling for the heavy, comforting pull of his dragon beside me. “I like that. So, the Fates or the guiding energy, whatever it is, it gives you a mate?”

“That’s the simplified version. We thought it was a fairy tale for so long, but then Nico met Lake and it was undeniable that it was so much more than lust or even love. It’s...deep and eternal. It’s unbreakable.”

My breath catches and I shift closer to him, exhilarated and terrified at the same time that Hemingway might be implying that he feels that way about little ol’ me.

“I’m still not entirely sure I understand it all,” I confess.

“It’s...hard to explain.” He sighs. “All I can tell you is how it feels. The second my dragon caught your scent, it knew you were meant to be ours. And the more I got to know you, the more my heart agreed. You were made for me, Dempsey, and I was made for you. If you’ll let me, when the time is right, we can bond, and when that happens, our lives and our souls are tied together for eternity. If you die, I die. And as long as I live, so will you.”

“But you’re going to live for thousands of years, aren’t you?” I ask, my head spinning.

“Yes, and so will you. You won’t age, and you’ll be stronger and healthier than you’ve ever been.”

“Will I be a dragon too?” I try to imagine what it would feel like to explode into a giant, scaly beast from time to time.

“No, you’ll still be you. You’ll just be tied to a dragon for the rest of this life and whatever comes after.”

“Okay,” I say easily.

Hemingway presses a kiss to my bare shoulder. “It’s a big commitment, *bijou*. Think about it for a while, okay?”

I want to argue, but he’s right, it’s a huge commitment. I nod and roll onto my side to face him, resting my forehead against his and putting my hand over his chest so I can feel his heartbeat against my palm.

“I could read *so* many books if I lived for thousands of years,” I muse, and more amusement vibrates in his chest.

“How do you think I’ve managed to collect so many?”

“Mmm,” I hum again, closing my eyes and imagining it. “We could spend a million lazy afternoons just like this, wrapped up in each other, reading passages from our favorite books and then making love until we’re too exhausted to go on any longer.”

One of those rumbly dragon purrs moves through his chest and out through his lips. “You just described paradise, as far as I’m concerned.”

I smile and press a kiss against his warm, smoky lips. “Want to start right now?” I give his bottom lip a teasing nip, and his cock starts to swell between us. He groans and I chuckle. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

I wiggle out of his grasp to slide down his body until I’m face to, well, *cock* with his thick, heavy erection. I lick my lips and wrap my hand around him to stroke him, rolling his foreskin back and then pressing a kiss to the already slicked head. Even his precum has a slightly smoky flavor that I could happily live on for the rest of my life.

I open my mouth to take him in, licking and sucking him eagerly as his fingers tangle in my hair and scales ripple along his thighs. I wonder if he’s had trouble hiding his dragon with

his past lovers, and then quickly reject the thought. He has trouble staying in control with me because his dragon is as desperate for me as the rest of him is.

Hemingway loves me and he wants me forever. And forever to a dragon is no joke.

The warm feeling that fills my chest is almost enough to choke me, and for a moment, it eclipses the black, heavy intruder that's been weighing me down since I put the damn necklace on.

I'm Hemingway's fated mate, but I think even if fate hadn't decided for him, he would have chosen me anyway.

My dragon moans and trembles under my sloppy, inexperienced licks, rocking his hips and murmuring praise until he spills on my tongue with a flood of cum.

We tumble to the floor and he returns the favor, sucking my cock like it's his last meal. The orgasm he draws from me almost feels like it could kill me, and what a way to go.

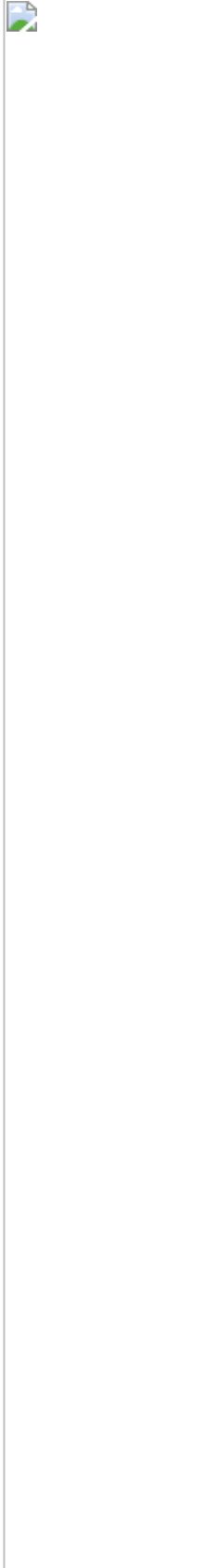
That's how we spend the rest of the afternoon, making love on the couch and the floor, and any other surface we can find inside our hoard, then reading to each other out loud, our sweaty, sticky skin clinging together.

If Lake comes by to get me for the massage, I don't know about it.

There will be other massages. This afternoon is just for me and Hemingway. And, hopefully, it's only the first of a million or so.

Hopefully.

CHAPTER  
**EIGHTEEN**





## HEMINGWAY

Pacing the back room of the hotel, I scan every worker that passes, my senses on hyperalert to any potential danger. It's been a few weeks since the incident at Dempsey's store, and unusually quiet, which only stokes my concern. It doesn't help that the energy here is absolutely chaotic. When Lake said his parents had invited their friends, he should have specified that included everyone in the fucking state.

For the last thirty minutes, people have been streaming in. Besides me and Nico, my other brothers are attending to security checks, which is reasonable at a high-profile wedding, thankfully. None of the guests find it odd. Dempsey is in the bridal dressing room with Lake, the only place I would allow him to be without me since Dahlia is with them too.

Nico stands directly across from me, a statue of calm, but I know better. That stoic stance is a façade.

"Are you excited?" I ask to break the tension.

"Do I look excited?"

I huff a laugh. "Hardly. This is a good day though."

"It's human nonsense. It's not at all what Lake wanted. Obviously, I don't need a civil ceremony to make him mine. He already is."

"Fair, but he's probably a nervous wreck, so try to look happy for his benefit. You look like you're attending a funeral."

Nico blows out a breath tinged with smoke. "Good advice. Thank you."

Nodding, I try a smile.

"Have you made Dempsey yours yet?"



“Not completely, but he knows now. Once all this mess is over, I hope to share the bonding ritual with him.”

Nico nods.

“What’s it like?”

My brother’s expression melts upon hearing my question, morphing into a version I have never seen with my own eyes. His smile is genuine and relaxed, his eyes gleaming.

“It is the most incredible moment you will ever experience. It is the peak of existence. I have purpose now. To fill that man’s life with so much happiness he can barely stand it. I am happy for you, Evri.”

His words cause my throat to clog with emotion. After clearing my throat, I chuckle. “I can’t believe it happened for me. I had hoped when you told us about Lake, but I convinced myself that maybe you just got lucky, or fate shined upon you. To have my own mate is beyond my wildest dreams. Especially one so suited for me.”

“That is what fate does. On the surface, Lake does not seem like an ideal match, but at his core, he could not be more perfect for me, nor I for him.”

I nod as my chest swells with joy.

The door behind me opens and Dahlia steps out, smiling. “Time to go up front, boys. Lake and Dempsey are ready.”

“I don’t get to see him?” Nico asks.

“Of course not.” She waves her hand in a shooing motion. “Up front with you.”

I frown. “I’m not leaving Dempsey alone.”

“He’s not alone, Hem. I’m here,” the witch says. She puts her hand on my arm, sending warmth through me that calms my nerves. “He’s safe. I won’t let anything happen to him.”

Oddly enough, I trust her, so I nod, pushing Nico to the front of the ballroom. Lake, in all his fabulousness, decided not to be walked down the aisle by his father, instead he’ll

follow Dempsey as his man of honor. I will walk with Nico and greet the remainder of our brothers up front.

The lobby is full of security detail checking out each passing guest, but my fear comes from a much deeper place. No mortal security team will be able to stop something they can't see.

“He is safe here,” Nico says, picking up on my fear.

I nod, forcing a smile to my face as two ushers open the ballroom doors. I gasp softly as Nico stumbles. The massive ballroom is packed to the hilt.

“Fuck,” I mutter.

“For the love of fire, it's a fucking circus,” Nico grits out.

“Yeah. Well, we better walk. Everyone is staring at us.”

Nico exhales slowly, then neutralizes his expression as we begin our walk to the front. The room is lavishly decorated in cream with soft blue accents. Classical music plays, something I've never heard before, and all five million guests turn to watch us. Seriously, there must be five hundred people here. Maybe more.

My eyes catch our parents, sitting up front and smiling proudly. I nudge Nico's arm and his smile grows with pure affection. This should be a happy day. What are the odds that Dempsey's stalker would show up at a highly attended wedding? Unlikely. I need to just relax and enjoy the moment. It's not like I ever thought I'd be at a wedding for any brother of mine, least of all Nico. No, least of all Valentino, but Nico is definitely in second place.

As we take our spots around the female officiant, the ballroom doors open again and Dahlia steps through, a vision in black silk and organza, approved by Lake. She's subtly smiling, spreading rose petals as she walks, but something is off about her energy. Her gaze meets mine and the hair on the back of my neck stands up. She senses something.

My eyes move through the crowd of elegantly dressed guests, but no one stands out as a threat. I look across to Lord, who nods, picking up on my concern.

I turn to look down the aisle just as Dempsey comes through. He's wearing a beautifully tailored cream suit that has an actual train on the back of it. His hair is styled like a member of the Rat Pack, and if I didn't already think he was the most handsome man on the planet, this look would seal the deal.

My heart flutters in my chest and my dragon pushes closer to the surface, purring at the sight of our stunning mate. Dempsey's cheeks flush pink as he gets closer to me, his smile absolutely breathtaking. It takes every ounce of restraint in me not to pull him into my arms and kiss him breathless.

He stands across from me, inches away, yet his scent envelopes me. The love and affection he feels for me tugs along the bond, and I wonder if he feels what I do. That man is the love of my life.

The music changes and the guests rise to greet Lake. He enters with dramatic flair, stepping out from a group of men holding feathers. He's wearing a tuxedo-style ball gown in ivory, shimmering with crystals. The tiara on his head is a nice touch.

Nico's dragon rumbles with delight, and Nico squeezes my hand hard to hold back his shift.

"He's stunning, Nico," I whisper. "That's your mate."

Nico's face is strained with emotion, a state I've never seen him in. His chest puffs with pride, and I can only imagine what his dragon is going through right now.

Lake smiles, his gaze completely focused on my brother, and for a moment, the room is silent, absorbing the obvious love between the two of them. If Lake's father thought this was too soon, I imagine he's eating those words right now.

As Lake joins Nico, Dempsey watches them with a wistful expression, and I decide right now that if he wants a circus for a wedding, he can have it. He can have anything he wants. I'd package the sun in a box if he asked.

The officiant smiles at them both. "Dearly beloved..."

## DEMPSEY

FOR A FEW MINUTES, everything in the world is right and perfect. The man who has quickly become my closest friend is marrying the man of his dreams. The man of mine is gazing at me like I hung the moon and wrote his favorite book.

All morning, my life felt like a dream of decadence and sugar and love. Granted, Lake is bordering on bridezilla status, but after Dahlia made him a “special” tea, he calmed down considerably. His event has me thinking about my own for the first time in my adult life. Do I want to have an actual wedding? Maybe. I have to admit the love between Lake and Nico fills the room with goodness and light. It would be nice to have that for myself.

And just like that, the peace shatters when the officiant utters those words that I think should be stricken from all weddings, “If anyone here objects to this union—”

The doors of the ballroom fly open as a bright light floods the space. The guests turn to look. It’s him. The man from my store. He zeroes in on me, and something about his gaze has me stunned, unable to move. The necklace around my neck feels like a noose, tingling and heating my skin.

Empty chairs in the back fly through the air as the man barrels down the aisle toward me while panicked guests scream and try to flee the room.

“I think the fuck not!”

Lake’s voice pierces through the chaos, drawing my attention to him. I realize I’m able to move, but by the time I turn to search for Hemingway, I find the group of brothers removing their suits at lightning speed.

Lake is by my side in an instant, wrapping his arms around me. “This is going to blow your mind.”

“Wha—”

My words stop in my throat when right before my eyes, Hemingway drops to his knees, his back rippling with scales

before two magnificent wings of deep blue sprout from his shoulder blades. I stumble back into Lake and Dahlia's clutches as my man shifts rapidly into his dragon form. He turns his head slightly, and those gold eyes send love and safety through me like a blanket.

To see him like this leaves me awestruck. All human elements of him are gone, replaced by a huge beast.

The brothers, in dragon form, are the most spectacular thing I have ever seen. They roar and tear through the ballroom towards our intruder, and as Dahlia holds me close, Lake stomps toward the man, completely unafraid.

"Listen here, you psycho, stalker freak," Lake shouts as Nico and the others corner the man. "You are not going to ruin my day. Do you know how much planning went into this?"

Nico growls but Lake gives zero fucks, hitting the man in the chest with his bouquet. "You picked the wrong grooms to fuck with, mister. Tear him up, boys."

Hemingway launches forward with a room-shaking roar, clawing at the man, who seems to disappear into thin air, but reappears closer to me. Dahlia extends her hand toward him, vibrating both of us with something I can't see but which seems to hold the man off until Hemingway gets him in his clutches. Lake stomps forward, slapping the man across the face before Nico, I assume, grabs him around the waist with a huge paw and pulls him away.

The man glares. "You have no idea what you're up against. Your dragon can do nothing to stop me."

Then he's gone again, a tendril of mist the only proof he was ever here.

Dahlia exhales, still holding on to me so tightly I can hardly breathe while the dragons turn and race from the building, shaking the room. I imagine in an effort to see if they can find the man. Trembling to my core, I sit on the steps beside me, trying to calm my racing heart.

"Fuck," Lake says. "The media is outside. What if they saw the dragons?"

Dahlia rubs his arm. “Don’t worry, Lake. I’ll handle that.” She walks down the steps and into the main area while Lake sits next to me.

“I’m sorry, Lake.”

“What are you sorry for, boo?”

“I ruined your day. He came here for me.”

“You ruined nothing. That asshole did. Well, he tried. Everything will be fine.”

I turn to look at him in disbelief, the tears I’ve been holding back falling freely. “How is everything going to be fine? He disappeared, Lake. The dragons can’t catch him.”

“Shh, Demps.” Lake smiles, rubbing my back. “You underestimate us. Those dragons have been around for thousands of years. Do you really think this will be the thing they can’t handle? With you as Hem’s mate? Not a chance. You’d have a higher chance of Balenciaga having a ninety percent off sale.”

“What?”

“My point is, we’ll figure it out. Together. As a family.”

“Family?”

“Of course, boo. We’re all family. You’re one of us and we don’t let one of us suffer.”

I nod, brushing my tears away. Hemingway’s parents enter the room, rushing toward us. Both of them smile at me, their glances curious and lingering, and I wonder what they know about me.

They look like they stepped out of a fifties movie, elegant and coiffed in retro clothing. His mother could give Marilyn Monroe a run for her money.

“The boys will be back shortly,” Hem’s father says, his voice thick and French, as he gathers suits from the floor.

“We’ll help them dress,” his mother says. Her voice is softer but definitely just as French.

“What about the media?” Lake asks.

“Dahlia is handling it,” Hem’s mother answers. She turns to me. “Hemingway is just fine.” Her smile is warm, her voice soft and sweet. “I hope we’ll get to know each other soon.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“No.” She laughs softly. “I am Camille.”

“Victor,” his father says.

“Pleasure to meet you both. I’m sorry for all of this.”

“We’re just happy our sons are here to help,” Camille says. “Don’t worry, *mon fils*. Everything will be fine.”

Did she just call me her son?

Lake rubs my arms as the parents leave and Dahlia returns. “They didn’t find him, but they’ll be back in a few minutes,” she says, waving her hands around and moving furniture back into place.

“How is she doing that?”

“Magic,” Lake answers with a wink.

“But...” I pause, shaking my head. If dragons exist, I guess magic can be real.

Lake’s parents come in a few minutes later, glancing around the space as if seeing it for the first time. Lake greets them.

“Why are you out here?” his mother asks. “You don’t want the groom to see you.”

“I’m going back. I just wanted to make sure everything looked good.”

He smiles at me and Dahlia and slips out the side door. It takes me a moment to stand up and get my bearings as guests start to pour in again as if nothing happened. Dahlia takes my hand, leading me out of the room.

“I feel like I’m dreaming.”

Dahlia smiles. “Memory spell. I cast it while everyone was waiting in the lobby. They don’t remember a thing. The media

has no recordings of the event. Poof.”

“That’s...incredible. I admit I had no idea things like this were possible.”

She nods. “That’s how we like it. You’re an insider now though.”

In the back room, Hemingway rushes toward me, back in human form and decked out in his cream tuxedo. He pulls me into his arms, nearly crushing me.

“Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine, Hem. A little shaken up, but physically fine. You didn’t find him?”

“No.” He steps back but keeps his hands on my shoulders. “I can’t believe that guy’s audacity. How did he even know where to find you?”

“The necklace, Hem. It’s probably some kind of beacon. I want it off of me.”

“I know. Just keep trusting me. We’ll figure it out in the safest way possible for you.” He cups my face. “I love you, Dempsey. I’ve never loved anyone more. I will not rest until you are safe.”

“I know.”

He kisses me hard, erasing the stress of what just happened. When he releases me, he smiles in a way that melts my heart.

“When we get home, we’ll go straight to our hoard room.”

“*Our* hoard room?”

“What’s mine is yours. My things, my treasure, my heart. It’s all yours, mon bijou.” He brushes my remaining tears away. “By the way, you look so good I want to eat you.”

“Figuratively, right?”

Hemingway laughs. “Figuratively.”

“Well...” I look over my shoulder. “You look so hot I want to ride you until dawn.”



Hemingway moans softly, his eyes flashing gold. “You’re on.”

I rub his arm. “I don’t know if this is the right way to say it, but your dragon is...so beautiful. Magnificent.”

Hemingway’s eyes soften. “Not how I wanted you to see him for the first time, but I’m glad you did.”

“So am I. I’ll see him again though, right? Alone.”

“You bet.”

The wedding proceeds without a hitch this time, after Lake demanded to strike the offending words from the ceremony, and as Nico and Lake kiss, the room erupts in applause. Lake turns to face us, the happiest smile I’ve ever seen on his face as Nico swoops him up and carries him from the room.

“Ten bucks Lake is getting banged before the reception,” Valentino muses as Arson chuckles.

“Not taking that bet,” Arson says.

Lord rolls his eyes and strides from the room while Hem and I linger behind. He wraps his arms around my waist, gazing into my eyes. He doesn’t have to say anything—I can feel his emotions like a tiny string inside me, wrapped around my heart.

“You feel it too, don’t you?” he asks.

I nod. “What is it?”

“Our bond. It will only strengthen. You are part of me, Dempsey, and I am part of you. I hate that this is happening to you, but I am overjoyed that fate granted me this most cherished blessing.”

I cup his face, marveling at how handsome he is and how much he loves me. “You make me feel like...” I shrug. “Better than a pile of treasured books.”

“That good, huh?”

“That good.”

He kisses me softly. “Let’s go join the party.”

CHAPTER  
**NINETEEN**





## HEMINGWAY

Dempsey is lounging in the living room, his socked feet hanging over one arm of the couch as he spreads out with a book. On the surface, the scene is so peaceful that I'm tempted to join him. I could coax him to lift his head and make space for me to take a seat, and then we could spend the rest of the afternoon absorbed in our own books, my fingers carding absently through his hair while he rests his head on my lap.

A wistful sigh sticks in my throat.

Perhaps if Dahlia's next idea pans out today, Dempsey and I will be able to do exactly that for the rest of the weekend. Hope and worry fill my chest in equal measure, tightening until it's difficult to draw in a breath. It takes me longer than it should to realize that those feelings aren't solely my own.

I lean over the back of the couch and run a finger lightly along my mate's soft cheek. His eyes are unfocused, staring ahead at the words on the page without seeing them. He closes his eyes briefly at my touch and then lowers the book to look up at me.

"Whatever spell or potion she's on her way over with might work," I tell him.

"Maybe," he says, but he doesn't sound convinced, and his energy remains heavy with doubt. "It just seems like it would be too easy to drink some concoction she stirred up in a cauldron and, *poof*, suddenly everything is fine."

I snort a laugh. "Magic doesn't really care if a solution feels earned or not. And I would say that the past few weeks have been anything but easy on you."

The bags under Dempsey's eyes are as dark as ever, his skin waxy and his cheeks hollower than I've seen them. Even making love two, sometimes three times a day since Lake's

wedding, it seems like whatever this thing is doing to him is only getting worse. If there was a way to reach inside of him and eviscerate it myself without causing him any harm, I would do it in a heartbeat.

“I guess.” He sighs, marking his spot with the scrap of paper he’s using as a bookmark and setting his book down on the coffee table.

There’s fear and uncertainty dancing in his eyes in spite of his soft smile as he reaches up to run his fingers over my cheeks, my nose, and finally my lips. It’s like he’s trying to memorize every inch of my face. A shiver of longing races along my skin, the urge to sweep my mate into my arms and make love to him for a third time this morning is almost unbearable. If it weren’t for the approaching sound of a motorcycle carrying the scent of our helpful witch, I would do just that. Perhaps a round of celebratory sex after this damn curse is broken instead.

I pucker my lips to kiss his fingertips and then stand up straight.

“Our guest is here. Do you want Lake to be here for this?”

Footsteps echo behind me and my hackles raise immediately at the unexpected intrusion.

“Of *course* he wants his bestie here,” Lake scoffs, sauntering into the living room with Nico right behind him.

“Oh good, I was worried the two of you wouldn’t make yourselves at home and simply walk in here whenever the mood struck,” I deadpan.

“No worries there, boo.” Lake smirks and pats my chest as he passes, claiming the spot where Dempsey’s head was just resting as my mate sits up and smooths out his wrinkled clothing with his hands.

The doorbell rings a moment later, so I leave the three of them and go to let Dahlia in. She’s dressed all in leather today, with a cherry red motorcycle helmet the same color as the Yamaha parked at the foot of the stairs tucked under one arm. Her purple and silver hair catches a breeze that comes out of

nowhere and I can't help but wonder if she's somehow using magic to do that for effect.

She smirks, and I step aside to wave her in.

“Thanks for meeting us here this time.” After the stalking incident at the shop and Lake's wedding, the last thing I want to do is parade him out in public again before we figure out a way to resolve this.

The man left no trace at the wedding—no scent, no way to track him. It's as if he's a ghost and there's no fucking way to stop him from appearing at will to harm my mate. I grit my teeth at that thought and slam the door behind her harder than I intend to. Dahlia doesn't flinch, just sets her helmet down and shrugs off her leather jacket to reveal a black tank top underneath, a pair of tattooed angel wings visible on the exposed skin of her back. Her boots click on the tile as she follows the voices to the living room, leaving me to trail behind.

“How do you always look so fabulous?” Lake asks when Dahlia enters the living room.

“Magic.” She winks and flips her long hair over her shoulder. “But I'm not here for flattery, I'm here for this.” She reaches into her pocket and pulls out a small vial with a swirling, glowing pink liquid inside.

Dempsey's eyes go wide. “Whoa.”

“Unfortunately, it won't taste as good as it looks.” She passes the vial to him with an apologetic expression.

Dempsey takes it and I notice a slight tremble in his fingers. I round the couch and scoop him into my arms like I desperately wanted to a few minutes ago, then lower myself into the seat with my mate on my lap.

“Take it quick like a shot of cheap tequila. It'll be over so fast you won't even notice it,” Lake advises.

Dempsey nods and unscrews the top, bringing the vial close and sniffing it first. His nose wrinkles and then he closes his eyes and tilts his head back, downing it in a single gulp. He sputters and coughs, and I rub soothing circles on his back, all

of our eyes on him as we wait to see if it worked. I'm not sure what to expect if it did. Will he cough out a cloud of black smoke? Will the necklace shatter into a million pieces? Maybe it won't be anything obvious at all.

Nico stands up and disappears for a moment, returning with a glass of water that he offers to Dempsey. I give him an appreciative look and hold my mate a little tighter, waiting for the coughing fit to pass. My dragon cautiously rises to the surface, pressing against Dempsey's energy and immediately feeling the unwelcome presence. It's still there, still clinging to his light, just as dense and immovable as it's been for weeks.

"It didn't work." The words are a twisted growl in my throat.

"You don't know that yet. Wait for Dempsey to tell us how he feels," Lake argues, and I level him with a look.

"It didn't work," I repeat, getting to my feet with him still in my arms.

Dempsey drags in several deep breaths, wrapping his arms and legs around me and burying his face in the crook of my neck.

"It didn't work," he confirms, his voice muffled but loud enough to send a ripple of disappointment through the room.

"Fuck. I really thought I had it with that one." Dahlia grimaces.

"Okay, so what's next?" Lake asks. "Whip up another potion, hit him with some ancient spell." There's an edge of desperation in his voice that's more unsettling than I want it to be.

Dahlia hesitates and then sighs. "I'm out of standard attacks for this thing," she admits. "Whatever is attached to that necklace, to *Dempsey*, isn't your average magic gunk. I think the best option is to go to the source."

Dempsey squirms in my arms, forcing me to put him down. I growl, not liking the idea of being even an inch away from him right now, but I comply.

## DEMPSEY

THE UNWELCOME PRESENCE inside of me feels heavier than ever. Maybe it's pissed off that we're trying to get rid of it. You'd think the damn thing would take a hint and fuck right off, but apparently not. I rub my chest absently, looking around at the solemn faces in the room and trying not to let my sweating palms and thundering pulse get the best of me.

I clear my throat.

“The source?” I ask. “Like, go to Egypt and see if we can find anyone who knows how and why this thing was made?”

Dahlia nods. “I've been hunting for anything matching this necklace in my grimoires and history texts and I've come up short so far. But there's no way something this powerful exists without anyone knowing where it came from.”

“Who gives a fuck about the history of the damn thing? I just want a way to get it the hell off of him.” Hemingway's voice is deep and ominous, his skin rippling with scales as he trembles, trying hold his dragon in.

“What do you think I've been doing?” she shoots back. “If nothing is working, then we need a more specific weapon to wield against it.”

Hemingway rubs a hand over his face and lets out a frustrated roar. “Fine, then let's go to fucking Egypt. Nico, call to get the plane fueled up and the pilot ready to go.”

Nico grunts in response. Lake looks conflicted, glancing between me and his retreating dragon. I wave him away.

“Go. I'm fine,” I lie.

“As much as I'd love to drop everything and join you leaving this afternoon, there are some things that just aren't set aside that easily,” Dahlia says once Nico and Lake are gone. “I have a friend in Cairo though, and I'm sure he'll be able to pick up where I've left off with things. I'll give him a call and send you his information.”

Hemingway grunts, doing a perfect impression of his grumpy brother.

“Thanks, Dahlia,” I mutter, feeling detached, like I’m floating outside of my own body, completely numb.

She moves closer to me in just a few long strides, taking my face between her hands and then kissing my forehead. Hemingway lets out a possessive growl, and, in spite of the heaviness of this afternoon, laughter bubbles past my lips.

“Silly dragon.”

“Silly dragon, indeed,” Dahlia agrees. “You are strong, Dempsey. I can feel your energy and your spirit glowing as bright as the sun. There’s a way to beat this thing, we just need to find it.” Her words are encouraging, but the darkness clouding her eyes fills in the ones she leaves unsaid. We just need to find a way to beat this...*before it’s too late.*

I swallow hard and give a shaky jerk of my head. “We’ll figure it out,” I lie through my teeth a second time and then Hemingway and I walk Dahlia to the door.

She roars off on her motorcycle and I watch her go, mesmerized for several seconds by the freedom in her speed. A motorcycle wouldn’t suit me—they terrify me, actually. But I wonder if it would be offensive to ask Hemingway if I could ride him in his dragon form.

I smile at the thought and then close the door.

“We should pack.” My voice still sounds cool and detached even to my own ears, and Hemingway’s frown says he’s not buying any of it.

“I want to catch the dead-eyed, copper-skinned man and wrap my hands around his throat until I squeeze every ounce of information I can out of him,” he rumbles, and I chuckle again.

“Let’s call that plan B,” I suggest.

I trudge up the stairs with his footsteps and his presence looming heavily beside me. I’m sure Nico and Lake will be back any minute to let us know that the plane is waiting for us,



and I'm well aware that time is of the essence, but instead of going straight to the bedroom to pack a few days' worth of clothes, I catch myself heading for the hoard room.

Hemingway doesn't say anything or try to redirect me, he simply picks up his pace and unlocks the door when we reach it. When I hear the click of the lock being turned back into place behind me, I drag in a deep breath and soak in the peace of my favorite room.

"I always wanted a library like this," I say wistfully, letting my feet carry me to the nearest bookcase so I can run my fingers along the spines.

"I knew that before I even knew who you were," Hemingway says, and my heart flutters. In seconds he's right behind me again, the strong presence of his dragon pressing up against me invisibly, the warmth of his skin wrapping around me and calming my racing heart to a slower thump. "I'll give you anything, bijou. Always."

It's not the first time he's said those words, but they burrow inside of me all the same, filling me up and reminding me what I have waiting for me once the nightmare part of this is over. Once this fucking thing inside of me is gone, I can ask him to make me his. I can ask Hemingway to mate me, to mark me, to claim me... Whatever it is that he has to do so we have a million forever's together, that's what I want.

But what if there is no after? My next exhale is more of a shudder. I'm trying to stay positive, but there's no guarantee about how this will all turn out. For that reason alone, I shouldn't ask him to mate with me just yet. He said that once we do, his life is tied to mine. If I die, he'll die, and I can't imagine a world without Hemingway's brilliance and sweetness in it.

But it's the only shred of hope I have to hold on to right now, and the thought of waiting is like a shard under my skin.

"I want to do the bonding ritual," I blurt.

Hemingway stills. Not just his body, but the air around him, his dragon, all of him. It's like the atoms around us are

frozen in place for several of the longest seconds of my life while I count my heartbeats and wait for his answer.

“Not yet,” he answers, barely above a whisper. “If I thought you were asking because you were desperate to be with me, I would make you mine before the next breath could leave your lungs. But I’m worried that you’re only asking right now because you think there won’t be a later, and I can’t—” He breaks off and shakes his head.

“No.” I turn towards him and put a hand on his chest to feel the rapid, steady beat of his heart. “I shouldn’t be asking now. It’s selfish and I know it. If we can’t find answers in Egypt then you’ll be in just as much danger as I am, right?”

His eyes flash gold and I can tell he wants to argue, to reassure me that the answers will all be there. But neither of us knows that for sure.

“Whether we bond or not, if you die, I will too.”

Another shiver rocks my body at the thought of anything happening to him. “Fine, then for just a second, let’s pretend that none of that matters. If there was no curse and it was just us, right here, right now, and I told you that I was ready, would you make me yours?”

A deep sound rumbles through his throat and he moves closer to me at lightning speed, wrapping his arms around me again and pulling me against his chest. “You’re already mine. But yes, I would claim you in every way possible.”

I tilt my head back so I can look up into his eyes, reaching up to run my fingers along the stubble of his jaw again. “Then do it. I want this, Evri. Please?”

I can feel the moment he gives in, the tension inside of him unraveling and his dragon rising to the surface.

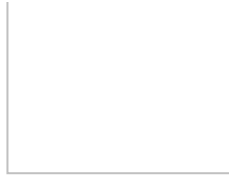
“You’re sure?” he asks, and I push up onto my toes so I can reach his mouth, brushing my lips over his and reveling in the electric shock that never seems to fade no matter how many times we kiss.

“I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.” There isn’t an ounce of trembling or dishonesty in my voice this

time. "Claim me."

CHAPTER  
**TWENTY**





## HEMINGWAY

I mmediately, my skin ripples with scales, my dragon purring and rising to see our beautiful mate. I can't think of a moment when I've looked at Dempsey and not felt breathless, but right now, with my dragon so close to the surface and my blood rushing in my ears with the words *mate* and *mine* thundering through my mind, I look at him with the sharper gaze of my dragon eyes. Every inch of his skin looks smoother than silk, begging to be stroked and kissed, the blush in his cheeks a shade of pink that warms me to my core. He's beyond stunning. He's perfect. *He's mine.*

His lips are damp and parted as he stares at me, waiting for my response. As if I could deny him anything. Sweet, silly human.

Without words, I scoop him off his feet and carry him to the bed. It's covered with priceless gems and coins of gold and silver. Some clatter noisily to the floor, others clank together as they skitter closer, drawn into the dip his weight on the bed creates as I lay him amongst the treasures. My chest fills with love and pride so acute it chokes me.

I've spent a lifetime collecting rare, priceless items, but it didn't occur to me until this moment that they were never for me, they were for him. I crawl onto the bed to hover over him, and Dempsey scoops up a handful of jewels, marveling at them. They catch the light so beautifully, but I can't be bothered to look anywhere but the love and certainty that's smoldering in his eyes.

"These are so beautiful," he purrs, and my dragon rumbles happily in my chest again.

"They're yours. Anything you want. Everything." My voice catches in my throat and my mate looks up at me like he's truly seeing me in a way no one else ever has.

“Thank you, my dragon. You’ve done so well preparing for me.”

His words rock me. My cock that was swelling before, fills completely, rock hard, throbbing, *ready*. “Yes,” is all I can manage.

“It took a long time, didn’t it?” Dempsey smiles, spilling the handful of treasure back onto the bed and reaching for me. He slips a hand under my shirt, dragging his delicate fingers along my hot skin. “But you didn’t mind. You knew I would come someday.”

I nod and groan, giving in and ghosting my fingertips over the warm skin of his cheek.

It’s as if he’s pulling his words straight from a script that my brain wrote decades ago for this precise moment, even when I thought it would never come.

Dempsey’s wandering hand makes its way up to my chest. He presses his palm flat over the center where I’m sure he can feel the hard, thundering beat of my heart. The shape of his hand sears my skin as if he’s branding me, claiming me in his own way without even meaning to. A surge of light and warmth rush through the tenuous connection between us, dragging a gasp from my throat as my mate smiles up at me again.

“I feel it already,” he says, as if hearing my thoughts. “I’ve felt it since the first time we kissed. I just thought it was a dragon thing until Lake mentioned the whole fated mates thing. It’s still hard to believe any of this is real. I’m going to be okay, Evri, I know I am. Do you know how I know?”

“How?” I rasp, desperate for an ounce of the confidence I can see shimmering in his eyes now. He’s really not afraid anymore.

“It was all part of the plan. Fate made us for each other, and now here we are.” He tugs on the chain of the necklace, pulling it out from his shirt. “This stupid necklace was part of the plan to help you find me, which means there has to be a

way to break the curse. Fate didn't bring us together just to let us die."

Smoke tendrils billow around us, escaping my nose and mouth as I gaze at this stunning man in awe. So brave, so perfect. *Mine, mine, mine.*

"We're so close, sweet dragon. So close to eternity." Dempsey arches his back and looks at me with a feral need this time, his breaths coming faster. The sunshine feeling that was permeating our connection moments ago shifts to something hotter and more desperate, the embers of desire flaring into a full-on inferno in the space of a few short seconds.

"Eternity was in our lips and eyes." I murmur a line from Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Dempsey groans as if I just uttered the filthiest words known to man.

"That's right, dragon. Speak pretty words to me forever. Promise?" my mate asks breathlessly.

His fingers curl against my chest and he thrusts his hard cock up to meet mine. Pleasure rolls through me like fire spreading through a dry forest. Insatiable, unstoppable. My cock jerks and my throat burns with the flames that are creeping up from my belly.

*Claim, claim, claim.*

"Promise," I rumble, reaching down to peel his shirt off. Every movement feels exaggerated and momentous, weighted with the gravity of what we're about to do.

Every speck of soft, pale skin I expose sends fresh ripples of desire and impatience through me. Dempsey's mouth finds mine. The lazy tangle of our tongues belies the urgency in our hands as we undress each other. Every dash of my fingers along his skin is like steel on flint, lighting sparks that threaten to consume us both at any moment.

I kiss my way from his lips to his jaw, then down his throat, leaving his skin glowing pink with rushing blood and small claiming bites. Dempsey's breath catches with sweet

little gasps that I could get drunk on. When my mouth returns to his, I feed him deep, aching moans that vibrate around his tongue.

When our clothes have all been carelessly flung away, Dempsey arches under me again as if he can't bear a single breath of space between our bodies.

“As a young man, I used to fantasize about what bonding with a mate would be like, but my pitiful imagination didn't even come close,” I murmur, running one hand along the bare skin of his thigh, my pulse thumping in my chest and in my eager, dripping cock.

“I stopped imagining my dream man years ago,” Dempsey says, tugging at my heart with his words. “But I'm glad now. Reality is so much better.”

I claim his lips again, pressing him into the mattress as I release all my love and desire into him through our bond. I push away the thought that in mere minutes, this man will be mine for eternity. If I focus too much on that, I'll blow the moment I enter him.

“How does bonding work?” he asks, and I chuckle. It didn't occur to him to find out before we were here, naked and aching for each other. There's something impossibly charming about that. “Are you going to bite me, or...?”

I lean in and nip at the throbbing pulse in his throat again, and he gasps. “I'll certainly bite you,” I tease.

I've memorized the ritual, replaying it a million times in my mind during my youth. It amused me when Nico had to call our father to ask when he was ready to bond with Lake. I'm sure he was the only one of us who never bothered to dream of this, no matter how hopeless it felt. It was a constant ache when I was a young dragon so, so long ago. I tortured my dragon, riling him up and then leaving him disappointed when each new love dissolved into the ether.

*This* though—my mate panting and desperate under me, begging to be claimed—this is real.



I blow out a relaxing breath, no longer holding my dragon back. I know my shift won't happen in this state. My dragon is just as aware as I am of the magnitude of this moment, but that doesn't stop the scales from popping through my skin or my back tingling from holding back my wings.

"Do you want to know what will happen, bijou?" I ask, realizing I didn't actually answer his question.

He licks his lips and shakes his head. "No. I trust you. Make me yours already."

"You are stunning. So beautiful." I drag my nose along his soft cheek, then my tongue, leaving a trail of sizzling heat that cools quickly and without harm to my precious human.

He blushes, but instead of deflecting my compliment he smiles. "I feel beautiful." My dragon chuffs, pushing forward again. "There you are, sweet boy," Dempsey says. "Such pretty eyes. Such a magnificent beast. All mine too. All for me."

"Yes," I growl as scales pop across my chest.

"What a pretty color," Dempsey says, stroking my skin. "Soft too. I can't wait to cuddle with you, dragon. All tucked in and warm against your body."

"Fuck," I moan as more scales appear on my arms and thighs. My cock jerks and swells, thick and heavy and ready to claim my mate.

"I need you inside of me, Hem. *Please* tell me that's part of the bonding." Dempsey grinds his cock against mine, his eyes rolling back with pleasure as the hot, dripping slick of my precum coats his erection.

"Oh yes, bijou. Making you tremble with pleasure and call out my name until you are hoarse from it is most certainly part of it," I purr next to his ear, nipping at his earlobe and reveling in the way he gasps and shivers underneath me.

Impatience blazes between us. I lunge toward him, kissing his neck as our hard, leaking cocks grind together. Dempsey claws at my back, bucking his hips to meet my thrusts, then

lifting his legs to wrap them around me. The weight of his body is a heaven all its own. Pure fucking bliss.

I wanted this moment to last, to take my time and savor every second, but it's becoming clear that isn't going to happen. Reaching between us, my fingers search until they find his hole. Dempsey moans as I ghost the tips of my fingers along his rim, finding it soft and relaxed for me. This morning I fucked him with my tongue so slowly that he cursed me violently over and over, until he finally came without so much as a finger on his cock, his cum spurting like a fountain over his chest where it mixed with his sweat.

My cock pulses at the memory of licking him clean after and the boneless way he had lain sprawled in my bed for nearly an hour after, in an orgasm-drunk daze that I was able to feel through our growing connection.

I pull back just long enough to drag two fingers over the slippery head of my cock before returning them to his hole. I slide a finger in, grinning at the wild, hungry noise that tears from my perfect mate's throat. He spreads his legs wider, giving me all the space I need. For a moment, I'm so overcome with raging desire that it's hard to think straight. I want to feel his inner muscles grip and pulse around me as I fuck an orgasm out of him, and I want to claim him, to imprint myself on his soul and vice versa. Another thing to thank fate for—I don't have to choose between the two undeniable needs that burn inside of me.

I slip my finger back out and line my cock up against his warm, soft hole. My breath punches out of my lungs as I fill him in a single thrust.

“Oh fuck, Evri,” Dempsey whispers. “So full. So...” He loses his words before I can find out what else he feels aside from full.

That's okay, I don't need his words to know.

Our bond pulses between us, throbbing with every clench of his balls and tingle that ripples along his stretched hole. I can feel it all, and I close my eyes for a moment to focus on the way he makes *me* feel. I pull all my attention to the way he

clenches around me, tight and hot, the minute flutter of his insides as I gently rock my hips. I send every one of those feelings through our bond and Dempsey cries out, his cock twitching against my belly, slicking me with a dribble of his own precum.

He thrashes and digs his fingers into my muscles, imprinting himself on my skin in a way I wish was as permanent as our bond will be.

I pull out and thrust in deep again, pressing my face into the crook of his neck and breathing him in as I find a pace that makes him pant and mutter incoherent pleas. His ass clenches around my girth, squeezing mercilessly as he rocks against me. Sliding my hands under his back, I lift him so he's straddling my lap, my cock going even deeper than before.

Dempsey's eyes widen as his fingers tangle in my hair. Our bodies move together in a new rhythm, slower, but deeper now. Moans rattle from both of us as I hold him like this, fucking into him slowly, holding his loving gaze. Dempsey's mouth is open, his warm breath fanning across my face, and my dragon surges within me.

This is it. It's time to claim him.

## DEMPSEY

FOR THE LOVE OF BOOKS, what is happening right now? As many times as we've made love, it's never felt like this. It's as if our bodies are merging. My head spins with the inability to tell his feelings from mine, his breath from mine. Every bead of sweat, every twitching muscle, every whimper and deep pulse that shudders through us, they're all the same. His and mine, mine and his. *Ours*.

It's nearly impossible to form a coherent thought other than *more* and *mine*. But even those thoughts can't be assigned. Are they Hemingway's? Are they mine? Does it even matter anymore?

I swivel my hips, gasping each time his cock grazes against my prostate, mesmerized by the feeling of fucking and

being fucked at the same time. He feels like an inferno, his skin nearly vibrating with heat that's threatening to consume us both.

Hemingway's eyes shimmer gold and I'm lost for a fraction of a second, unable to do anything but stare into them, completely stunned by how in love I am with this man...with this dragon.

I don't know how I know, but I do. Time seems to slow to a crawl and crystalize around us as he leans in, his eyes fixed on my mouth as its open on another moan. *This is it.*

I can't wait the agonizing seconds it's taking him to close the space between our mouths, so I don't. I tangle my fingers in his hair and slam my mouth to his. Hemingway breathes into me, and I can feel the swell of smoke as it fills my lungs, the lick of flames as they raze their way down my throat.

The urge to fight it, to panic or break away lasts less than a single breath before I relax into it, accepting his dragon's gift. His fire consumes me, the flames licking at my insides until I'm sure I'm nothing but cinder. Surprisingly, there's no pain, no irritation. The smoke in my lungs is cleansing, and his flames feel like rebirth. He's burning away all the dead, useless things inside of me so I can be reborn stronger, better, *his*. I close my eyes and let the feeling of peace and a sense of belonging unlike anything I've ever felt before consume me.

Hemingway's grip on me tightens as fire envelopes us. The bond inside me tightens and swirls as his wraps around me, entwining us together for all eternity. My eyes fill with tears from the experience. It's so tangible it leaves me breathless. When the blazing inferno of our growing bond reaches that dark, foreign thing inside of me, I tremble, waiting to see what will happen. It didn't occur to me that it might get in the way of our bond, but what if this can't be finished until I'm only me again?

I barely have time to worry before the fire rages on, consuming the blackness without pause. All of the tight things inside of me unravel in an instant and a silent sob racks my body. I'm free. I'm better than free—I'm bonded to Evri.

The fire retreats from inside of me and he breaks the kiss. When I blink the tears away and focus on his face, dragon eyes gaze back at me, filled with love and longing and joy. Everything in his expression is just as wrecked and reborn as I feel. Flames dance in the air around us while our focus zeroes in on our bodies again with a new urgency. He grunts and thrusts, filling me over and over in the midst of his fire, safe and protected from the rest of the world. Nothing can hurt me here.

*Nothing ever will.*

His voice fills my mind instead of my ears, and as my body reaches release, I cry out his name, his real name, tears spilling down my face.

The heat building in the pit of my stomach has nothing to do with his fire and everything to do with the way his fingers dig into my skin and that spot he manages to hit with every roll of his hips. Hemingway flips me onto my back again, bracing his hands on the bed as he fucks into me like a man possessed, like he can't get enough of me and never will. It's perfect since I won't ever get enough of him either.

I gasp and pant, my head spinning with too much pleasure. How can someone survive anything feeling this fucking perfect? It seems impossible, but somehow, I do. It builds and builds, more unpredictable than the flames that continue to lick at the air around us.

Just when I think I'll burst apart at the seams from it, a moan punches from my lungs and pleasure like I've never felt washes over me. It's as if a lifetime of stored orgasms releases at once, racking my body with wave after wave, simultaneously and then one after another, going on and on until tears run freely down my cheeks and the weight of my dragon is the only thing tethering me to the earth. I bury my face in the crook of Hem's neck, riding the crest of it all as my emotions pour out of me and are absorbed by his fire one more time.

Hemingway emits a growl and my body clenches around his cock in response. My eyes grow wide as his cock thickens

inside of me, stretching me impossibly wider, tugging hard at my rim with every thrust. My hole is oversensitive from the orgasm that still won't seem to end, but there's no pain from the renewed stretch. It's almost...relief.

“What is that?” I gasp.

“Knot,” Hemingway groans, grinding himself deeper and harder into me. “Fuck, that's good.” I can feel every languid pulse of his answering orgasm, filling me with rope after rope of his cum, marking me from the inside out.

“A...what?”

Hemingway's brow creases with pleasure, his face a mask of pure lust and awe. “It's for you. Because of you.” He moans again, nuzzling my jaw and holding me tighter, his hips continuing to twitch and jerk with his own unending pleasure. “All the gods, this is incredible.”

I nod, riding it out, feeling every part of Hemingway fill every part of me. My body, heart, and soul are completely bonded to him now. We writhe against each other, bumping our mouths in kisses we're too shaken to follow through on, our bodies dripping with sweat and trembling.

When our bodies calm, sagging against each other, and the fire around us dies down, the necklace around my neck grows cold, drawing my attention to it.

“Hem?”

Hemingway opens his eyes, and they go wide as he stares at my neck. He reaches up, pulling gently on the item, and it simply releases, shattering into several pieces as if it was made of ice.

“It's off! Oh my god, Hemingway. It's off.” My heart clenches and relief floods me.

Still stunned, he nods. “Our bond broke it.”

“I felt it,” I tell him, reaching up to feel around my neck in disbelief that the offending artifact is truly gone. “I can't believe it.”

Hemingway finally smiles, blinking glassy eyes. “Well fuck. I wish we’d known that sooner.”

I laugh. “At least we did it. You saved me.”

He presses his lips to mine in a syrupy slow kiss, his cock still locked inside of me by his knot, keeping the fire in my belly from truly dying or my cock from completely softening. Our joy is short lived as Hemingway jerks out of the kiss and looks at the necklace. It glows an eerie green color and shudders on his palm. I gasp as it pieces itself back together again right before our eyes.

“Well, shit,” he mutters. “Do you feel anything?” He eyes me with concern, and I shake my head.

“No, it’s gone from in here.” I put a hand to my chest and close my eyes just to be sure. There isn’t so much as a tendril of the blackness, only my heart and Hemingway’s, and the glowing golden bond that’s solid and tangible, even if it’s only inside of us.

“Good,” he grunts. “I guess we need to figure something else out to trash this thing completely and keep it from latching on to anyone else though.”

I stroke his chest, considering the situation. “I think we still need to go to Egypt.”

Hemingway nods and makes a move to get up. I gasp at the sharp tug of his knot still firmly locked inside of me. He groans with a deep sound of pleasure.

“I’m not sure how long this is supposed to last, but I don’t think we’re going anywhere just yet.”

I moan and roll my hips, my eyelids fluttering. “Good. Make me come again, mate.”

Hemingway grins. “With pleasure.”

CHAPTER  
**TWENTY-ONE**







## HEMINGWAY

In the dim light of the plane cabin, I drag my fingers through Dempsey's hair and watch his eyelids flutter as he dreams. The soft snores of three other dragons and Nico's fiery little mate create a white noise nearly louder than the engine itself.

I should be sleeping too. Dempsey and I spent two days locked in a mating rut, unable to tear ourselves away from each other long enough to do anything but nap for an hour or two or have a quick snack. As soon as it passed, I called my brothers to tell them it was time to go to Egypt.

The necklace feels heavy in my pocket, but at least Dempsey is safe from it now. I would be just as happy to open the emergency exit window right now and drop the damn thing into the ocean as we fly over if I thought he would stand for it. He's right though, we can't let it attach itself to anyone else. It came into our lives for a reason, and we need to see this thing burn in hell.

I try to force my eyes closed. I don't know what we'll encounter when we get to Cairo, but I'm sure I'll need my energy for it. I can't seem to stop staring at my mate though. My heart feels so light, my dragon more content than he's ever been. I don't want to be on a plane, I want to be at home in bed with my mate.

*Soon.*

Once we settle this shit, Dempsey and I can spend a year locked away in the hoard if we want. I'll happily breathe fire at anyone who dares to disturb us.

His eyelids flutter again and open this time. His gaze is cloudy for a moment while his sleep-fogged brain tries to figure out where he is. I stroke my fingers through his hair again and a slow smile spreads over his lips. He doesn't say a

word, but he unbuckles and crawls out of his seat and onto my lap. The familiar weight of his body grounds me in exactly the way I need, taking the manic edge off of my happiness. He curls up and settles his head on my chest, his breathing evening out again within minutes, letting me know he's fallen back asleep.

I sneak a hand under his shirt to rest it on his back, the warmth of his skin and the steady rise and fall of his breaths lulling me slowly to sleep as well.

“Look, look, look.”

It's Lake's voice that startles me awake sometime later. The first thing I notice is that Dempsey's weight is gone. I growl and reach out blindly before my eyes are even open. Valentino's irritating chuckle taunts me as I get my bearings, opening my eyes and seeking out my mate. He's on the other side of the small jet, sitting beside Lake and looking out the window.

A relieved breath unravels from my chest once I see him, happy and whole, nearly within arm's reach. Tino laughs again and I narrow my eyes, blowing a puff of smoke in his direction as a *fuck you*.

“Ignore him. He'll understand what it's like once he finds his mate,” Nico says with an uncharacteristic calm about him.

Valentino snorts and Lord makes an unhappy sound from his own seat behind mine. The only one of us missing is Arson, and he's supposed to meet us when we land.

“I think fate has better shit to do than force a mate on me.”

Nico shrugs like he couldn't possibly give less of a shit one way or the other, but that only seems to annoy our brother more.

“I don't know, Tino. We thought fated mates were rare, but what are the odds that both of us would be blessed? Maybe it's not as rare as we thought, and maybe it's time for all of us.” It's a wish more than anything as I speak the words. I want my brothers to have the joy that Nico and I do.

Valentino might think he doesn't want a mate, but I know deep down that's not true. He's always used sex as a way to avoid intimacy, but I think that's only because he's afraid of how desperately he doesn't want to be alone.

"Hope is a dangerous thing," Lord murmurs quietly.

I twist myself to look over the back of my seat at my eldest brother. I don't have anything to offer him but a reassuring smile, so that's all I do. His lips twitch in a grateful expression that doesn't quite reach his eyes. I wish I could promise him that his mate is out there somewhere just waiting for him, but I can't. But if he's afraid to hope, I can certainly do that for him.

"Evri, come look at the pyramids." Dempsey waves me over.

I stand up, my joints and muscles creaking from sleeping in the plane seat. When I reach him, I scoop him into my arms and then sit down in his seat with him on my lap. I lean in to look out the window at the landscape below. There are miles of desert bordered by a dense city, three towering pyramids right on the edge between the two.

"It looks incredible." I stroke his arm absently as I enjoy the view with him. While I do, an idea of how to spend a romantic evening once we wrap all of this up forms in my mind and I smile.

"We should have our wedding here," Lake says, turning quickly towards Nico.

"You already had a wedding," Valentino points out.

I swear I can *feel* Lake's eyes rolling, even with my only view being the back of his head.

"That was for my parents. We agreed to have a small ceremony somewhere special. How amazing would it be to do it in the desert?"

"Anything you want, treasure," Nico promises, and Lake squeals.

"This is going to be amazing. I have to start planning as soon as we land."

Dempsey shakes with silent laughter, and I trade a look with him, thanking fate for not giving me a diva mate like Lake. Nico can keep his little bridezilla; my bookworm is perfect for me.

## DEMPSEY

ARSON IS WAITING for us on the tarmac when we get off the plane, perched on the hood of a large SUV, similar to the ones that sit in the driveways back at the dragon compound. He flashes a wide smile and hops down.

He's wearing a gray suit with a teal button-up underneath, all of his clothes slightly mussed and wrinkled like he's been in them for days. There's a few days' worth of stubble on his cheeks and chin as well, and I wonder what he was up to before Hemingway called him yesterday.

"A family reunion in Cairo. This is a new one," he says cheerfully, looping an arm around Lord when we all draw close and wrestling the most uptight brother into a headlock. Lord growls and Arson cackles as they scuffle.

"Surely this won't end in scales and fire breath," Lake mutters sarcastically.

Arson gives Lord a noogie, messing up his neatly coiffed hair, and another deep growl rumbles from the older brother.

"Let him be, Arson. You know Lord will burst into flames if you undermine his sense of superiority." Valentino comes up behind Arson and lifts him up, forcing him to let go of Lord.

"You used to be more fun," Arson complains, squirming out of Valentino's hold.

Lord fixes his hair and straightens his own suit, and then glares at the rambunctious brother. "You're lucky I don't want to hurt you, runt."

Arson huffs out a cloud of smoke and holds up two middle fingers. Then, he reaches into his pocket to pull out a key to the SUV and tosses it up into the air.

“Someone else can drive.” He turns and walks around the car to climb in the backseat while the other four brothers watch the keys descend. Nico’s the fastest, darting out to catch them before anyone else can.

We all toss our small bags into the trunk and then pile in as well. The sun is sweltering, glaring off of the tarmac, making my skin stick to the leather seat as I slide into the SUV. As Nico navigates out of the airfield, towards the main city of Cairo where we rented hotel rooms, I lean back in my seat and revel in the fact that I’m in Egypt. I have a long list of places I want to see once we get the rest of this mess sorted out.

“Know any vampire antique collectors around these parts?” I ask Hemingway playfully. He arches an eyebrow at me, and I can feel his teasing answer without any words needing to be spoken. *What do you think?*

I smile and press into him, just wanting to feel more of him physically. I wonder if there will ever be a time when I don’t feel this burning urge to always be touching him? I hope not. A few thousand years of constantly having my hands all over him doesn’t seem nearly long enough.

When we reach the hotel, we check in to our own rooms and all part ways to get settled. It’s striking to realize how recently Hemingway and I were in London, complete strangers with a connection that terrified me as much as it excited me. Now, he carries both our bags and brushes an absent kiss to my neck after he checks our room to make sure it’s safe.

I follow him in and take a seat on the edge of the bed, feeling both tired and energized being so far from home and in a city I’ve always dreamed of visiting.

“I’m going to call Dahlia. I want to meet with this contact of hers as soon as possible,” Hemingway says, pulling his phone out of his pocket and toeing his shoes off to join me on the bed.

“Sounds good to me,” I agree, kissing him and then getting back to my feet. “I’m going to hop in the shower. Why don’t you join me when you’re done on the phone.” I waggle my eyebrows at him and strip my shirt over my head.

His gaze heats and he lets out a low growl, his fingers tightening around the phone that's already pressed to his ear and ringing. I laugh and shimmy out of my pants and underwear next, leaving them in a heap by the bed as I saunter into the attached bathroom, feeling his eyes on me the entire way.

The bathroom is roomy and absolutely beautiful. I don't even want to know how much this hotel room cost. I suppose I should get used to stuff like this now that we're mated. I snort and shake my head. I can't even imagine what that hungry boy in secondhand clothes would think if I told him this is where he would end up. I doubt I would have believed it back then. I hardly believe it now.

I crank on the shower and lean against the sink while I wait for it to heat up. The door creaks open and Hemingway slips in just as steam is starting to fill the room. He's just as naked as I am, his cock half hard.

He rakes his gaze over me and growls. I let out a peal of laughter as he wraps his arms around me and hauls me against his body, nipping at my throat and jaw as he carries me into the shower.

"I love that sound," he murmurs against my ear when he sets me down.

"What sound?" I run my hands over his chest as it gets slick from the hot water cascading over both of us.

"Your laugh." He catches my lips with his and draws me in for a languid kiss.

My cock gets hard, but my body is aching after the two days we spent fucking until we collapsed. Hemingway seems to sense it, keeping the kiss sweet and then reaching for the complimentary bodywash to fill his palm. I moan happily as he runs his soapy hands over my body, massaging my tight muscles and washing away the grime of travel.

"I love you so much, bijou." He's said the words a hundred times over the past couple of weeks, and I can feel them every second, flowing through our bond. But they make my breath

catch anyway. How did I get so lucky? “I’m the lucky one,” he argues with my unspoken words.

I huff out another laugh and kiss the edge of his jaw. “I love you too, dragon.”

We take our time, whispering sweet things to each other and enjoying the heat and seclusion of the shower. When we finally get out, Hemingway stands dripping while he grabs a towel to dry me off first. I kiss the tip of his nose and let him. I return the favor as soon as he’s satisfied that I’m dry.

“So, what’s the plan?” I ask when we’re both dressed in fresh clothes.

“Dahlia gave me the address of her friend. His name is Shakir, and she says he’s expecting us.”

“Alright, let’s do this. And if he doesn’t have any answers, I vote you go full dragon mode, and we fly over a volcano to drop this thing in.”

“*Lord of the Rings* style, I like it.” He nods.

“Exactly.” I smile.

“We’ll call that Plan B.”

CHAPTER  
**TWENTY-TWO**







## HEMINGWAY

The streets of Cairo are just as dusty and chaotic as I remember, only now they have cars and trucks in place of carriages and camels.

“It’s really been that long,” Lord says as he walks beside me, clearly picking up on my thoughts.

“You’d think I’d want to come here more, but I already picked through their rare books before they were rare.”

Lake sputters a cough, waving a handkerchief in front of his face. “Was it less dusty back then?”

“Ten times dustier,” Nico answers with a chuckle.

“I knew I shouldn’t have worn white,” he pouts.

“We’ll get you squeaky clean later,” Nico purrs, gazing at his mate with pure heat in his eyes.

“Gag,” Valentino says, rolling his eyes.

“You know, the more you yuck on our yum, the more the universe is gonna fuck you up with a mate so undeniable, it’ll bring you to your knees,” Lake says with a sweet smile on his face. Sweet, but with just enough edge to make it dangerous.

“Pfft,” Valentino replies. “I don’t get on my knees for anyone.”

“Famous last words,” Nico says.

“Gentlemen,” Dempsey says, stopping in his tracks and turning to face everyone. “As much fun as this is, I’m about to lose my ever-loving mind, so can we keep the banter to a minimum until the curse is solved?”

Lord fights an amused grin as I pull Dempsey into my arms and kiss his neck. “We’re almost there.”

Surprisingly, my brothers and Lake comply without even arguing as I lead Dempsey down the street to our intended destination. Like an *Indiana Jones* movie, we enter what looks like a street market, with large fabric canopies in bright colors blocking the sun. Vendors line the walkway with stalls, but the path to Shakir is easily found.

At the end of a long walkway is a tent in red and orange fabric. That's what we were told to look for.

"I think this is it."

Dempsey grips my hand. "Why am I nervous?"

"It's reasonable that you are. The necklace may be off but there's more to do. Are you ready to go in?"

Dempsey shakes his shoulders out and releases a slow breath. "Let's do this."

Holding hands, we step into the tent, followed by my brothers and Lake. The space is filled with the smoke and scent of incense—something spicy and mysterious. Around us are tables full of jars and boxes, books, and tarot card decks. Traditional Arabic music wafts through the space.

"You call him Dr. Jones, doll," Lake whispers, referring to *The Temple of Doom* movie.

"What?" Nico asks as Dempsey actually chuckles.

"Good one, Lake."

I'm too focused on my mate's safety to laugh. A curtain swoops open and a tiny man steps out, his smile brighter than the sun.

"Oh. Visitors." He narrows his eyes, still smiling. "Dahlia's friends."

"How did you..." Dempsey shakes his head. "Never mind. You must be Shakir?"

"The very same, my good man." His accent is a unique blend of British and Egyptian. "You are the necklace bearer."

"Not anymore," I say, holding the necklace out to Shakir. It's wrapped in cloth to protect it and us, but even through the

material, the green glow is visible.

Shakir steps closer, eyes trained on the item in my hand. “Very interesting. Will you unwrap it please?”

I carefully fold the fabric back, showing the necklace to Shakir. He exhales slowly, nodding his head when he sees it.

“I had a feeling about what it might be based on Dahlia’s description of it. I understand you were not able to let others touch it or see it much while you wore it?”

Dempsey nods. “It had some kind of power over me.”

“You are not wrong. It would have drained your life force had you not gotten it off. But how? No one can remove it without a powerful spell.”

Dempsey’s eyes shift nervously to me, but as I open my mouth to speak, Lake pushes forward.

“Hi, Mr. Shakir.”

“Shakir is my first name.”

“Okay. Great. I’m Lake. Long, really long story short, Demps and Hem have a super strong connection, and it broke the spell.”

“Ah.”

I nod in agreement. Lake really does come in handy, doesn’t he?

“Fortunate,” Shakir says. “Come to the back with me. I will show you something.”

We all follow him through the tent and enter through the opening he came out of. There we find a round table big enough for four people with a thick book open on it. Candles burn around the space, which seems like a fire hazard, but what do I know.

“Here,” Shakir says, tapping his finger on an open page. The book itself is worn and aged, clearly well used. “Magic users know that playing with black magic is dangerous. Even if you are given what you seek, there is always a catch.”

Dempsey steps closer so I do too, both of us peering at the page with a drawing of the amulet on it.

“Thousands of years ago,” Shakir continues. “A man learned this lesson the hard way. He suffered. He was desperate to provide for his family and willing to do anything for them.” Shakir steps back from the table, gazing ahead as if viewing a scene invisible to us.

“He came upon a spellcaster. She held immense power and ability. He came to see her seeking a magical solution to his troubles. She refused him, giving him only a few coins. When she turned her back, he foolishly pocketed the amulet.”

“Oh fuck,” Lake says. “He stole it?”

“He did.” Shakir focuses on Lake so intently Nico pulls his mate into his arms. “Her name was Anun-khet, and she was angry. She hunted the man that night, casting a spell that tied his soul to the amulet for all of eternity.”

“I have a feeling it gets really bad after this,” Dempsey says.

Shakir nods, shifting his dark, intense eyes to my mate. I sense no malice in him though, so I remain calm. “Correct. Anun-khet then flung the amulet across the earth, forcing the man to search for it. You see, the curse can only be broken if the amulet is in his possession. Or so we thought until you showed up.”

“So, he wants to destroy it?” Dempsey asks.

“Most likely. The problem is, whoever puts it on, it attaches to them, so the man cannot retrieve it until that person dies. He has been in this loop for millennia.”

“Wait,” Valentino says. “If it causes eternal life, how do other people die?”

Shakir laughs in a way that feels like sandpaper across my skin. “That is the rub, good man. The spell is such that it will slowly drain the person wearing it that it is not meant for.”

“Damn,” Valentino says. “Anun-khet was pissed.”

“Indeed, she was. It is tied to one man and one man alone. He cannot die until it is in his possession again, and even then, he will need a spellcaster powerful enough to break the curse.” He tilts his head, gazing at Dempsey. “At least that’s how it was supposed to work. No one has successfully removed the necklace, so you are special indeed. I would very much like to see how this ends.”

“How do we do that?” I ask, my voice gruff and urgent to my own ears. “How do we find him?”

“He is here,” Shakir says, doing that gazing off thing again. “Yes.” He nods. “He has come to Egypt for help.” Shakir turns abruptly and walks to a shelf with what looks like a bowl of sand sitting on it. He takes the item and places it on the table. “Give me a moment please.”

We all fall silent, watching the interesting little man as he drags his fingers through the sand. His clothing is just as colorful as his tent, and though Dahlia described him as one of the most powerful mages in the world, his energy and aura are comforting. If this works, I’ll owe Dahlia a fat diamond.

“He is in Ezbet El Haggana. It is an *ashwaiyyat* northeast of here.”

“A what now?” Lake asks.

“A slum,” Dempsey answers. “That’s the word for slum, basically.”

Shakir nods. “Yes. He is there and unwell. I can lead you to him. My services may be needed to break this curse once and for all.”

“Let’s go then,” I say, pulling Dempsey into my arms. “We’re so close now, bijou. So close.”

He nods, but I see the fear dancing in his eyes. He doesn’t have to speak to tell me what he’s afraid of. I push a wave of love and comfort through our bond, smiling when I see it hit him. His face relaxes and he graces me with a tiny smile.

“If this doesn’t work, we’ll find a volcano, right?” Dempsey asks.

Shakir hears him and touches his arm. “This will work. You have me now.”

Dempsey nods. “I’m ready.”

## DEMPSEY

IS THIS REAL LIFE? Somehow, I’m inside my own adventure movie, riding through the congested streets of Cairo with a man who drives like a villain out of said adventure movie.

I grip the seat on one side and Hemingway on the other, hoping this expedition doesn’t end with me splattered across the street. Hemingway, obviously sensing my nerves, squeezes my hand. I feel the tug of his dragon soothing me on the inside, which is completely remarkable, insane, and the most amazing thing ever.

“We should go to Alexandria before we leave,” Valentino says. “We haven’t been there since Cleo was running things.”

Lord clears his throat, giving my brother a dirty look that pierces through the dust flying around us. Valentino cringes, scrunching his face in apology.

“No need to hide from me,” Shakir yells over the street noise as his rickety jeep flies past traffic. “I am well aware of your nature.”

“Is that so?” Lord asks.

“Oh yes. I have never met a dragon, much less several. I am more acquainted with the wolves and vampires. They are so needy, those bloodsuckers.”

Lake giggles. “Why?”

Shakir glances over his shoulder, turning back and swerving just in time to avoid a man crossing the street with a cart of oranges.

“All they want is a spell for this, a spell for that. First, they wanted the ability to be in the daylight, then to eat mortal food, and so on and so on. They are not happy with the way eternity made them.”

“Do you blame them?” Lake asks. “I mean eternal life is great and all, but living only at night and surviving on blood when donuts exist?”

“Fair point, my friend,” Shakir says happily. “I give them the spells. I do not mind.” He glances at Lord. “Anyway, I am intrigued by your presence here. Perhaps I could get a scale or two for my collection?”

“Absolutely not,” Lord says, his face twisted in disgust. “You will not be performing spells with our blood.”

Shakir frowns. “I should ask the blond diva.”

“He’s not a dragon,” I say, then turn to Lake. “You’re not, right? Bonding doesn’t do that?”

Lake laughs softly, dragging his hand through his hair. “Sadly no. Wouldn’t I be fabulous though?”

“Not a dragon, but your blood is special now too, thanks to the bond you share,” Shakir says. “A bond strong enough to break an ancient curse.” He gives us a knowing smirk.

“Wow,” I murmur.

“We’ll pay you with anything else you need,” Hemingway offers.

“I need nothing from you. I do this for Dahlia, and to be the one who kills this curse. They will speak my name for eternity. I will never die. Not really.”

We leave the busy street onto a dirt one. People of all ages line the sides of the road, sitting amongst trash and discarded car parts. It smells like rotting food and body odor, worse than the homeless section of town back home, and my heart hurts for the people who watch us with interest as we pass.

On cue, the sun catches the ruby ring on my finger, and I find myself burying my hand in Hemingway’s lap. It’s not that I feel unsafe. It’s just so tacky to flaunt wealth amongst the poor.

Shakir’s driving slows as the road narrows, and he comes to an abrupt stop as a man steps out from a building.

“For the love of fire, Arson,” Lord growls. “Why ambush us?”

“Didn’t mean to,” he says casually, slipping into the open back seat next to Nico. “Caught your scent and was chasing you to catch up. No one answered their phones.”

Shakir stares at Arson for a moment before continuing.

“Hey,” Arson says, reaching across his brother and Lake to pat my thigh. “Almost over.”

“I hope so.”

Shakir stops in front of a dilapidated building, lifting his hand into the air as if he can feel something in the air the rest of us can’t, then he turns in his seat and fixes his eyes directly on me.

“He is in there. I will enter first, you behind me to draw him out of hiding.”

“No,” Hemingway says.

“Your mate is not in danger here,” Shakir says. “I could topple this village with a flick of my hand and a sentence. No one can harm him right now.”

“He’s telling the truth, Hem,” Arson says. “I asked around. People are terrified of his power and told me I better be expected or I’m a fool.”

Hemingway studies the small, friendly man with this new information.

“Totally get it,” Lake says. “You’re like a Pomeranian. So cute and fluffy but will tear you up. Amirite?”

Shakir simply smiles and slides out of the jeep. We follow him down a dark alley, all pausing when he stops in front of an opening. The stench coming through is stomach turning. Shakir grips my wrist.

“Stay slightly behind me. You are safe.”

I nod, swallowing hard and glancing at Hem quickly before I step inside. As expected, it’s dark inside even though



the sun is shining above us. The floors are nothing but dirt and debris, a former kitchen crumbles in the corner.

As we step further inside, the smell becomes stronger, and Lake physically gags.

“Oh, gods of Versace. What is that smell?”

Shakir pauses, turning sharply to face a dark corner. I try to focus on what he sees, noticing after several seconds the huddled body there. We step closer, even though I’m surprised my legs move at this point.

My breathing fills the silence around us, and then the warmest, softest feeling spreads through me, and I know Hemingway is responsible. I exhale slowly and square my shoulders. I’m ready to be done with this.

“What is your name?” Shakir asks the man.

“Amsu,” comes the answer, the voice raspy and weak. “Please help, oh powerful one.”

Something about his voice makes me uneasy, like listening to the pained cries of a wounded animal.

Shakir lifts his free hand and produces a ball of light bright enough to illuminate the space. I gasp when I see Amsu for the first time. It’s definitely the man from the shop and the wedding, but he looks...wrong.

“What is happening to him?” I ask as Hemingway leans close to me.

“I am dying,” Amsu says. “Finally. Three thousand, three hundred and ten years, four months, six days, and...” He pauses, coughing. “Seventeen hours.”

“Oh my god,” I say, clutching Hemingway’s hand.

“How?” Amsu asks, pulling back his cloak to fully reveal his face. It’s filled with holes, exposing the bone. The copper color of his skin is grayish now, like ash. A chunk of his jaw crumbles to his lap. “How did you break the curse?”

“B-b-bond,” I answer. “Dragon bond.”

Amsu nods, the light in his eyes fading in front of our eyes. “Where—” His voice cracks, and Shakir steps forward, holding the necklace. Amsu cringes. “Please help.”

Shakir nods. “I will help.”

He sets the necklace down in front of the dying—crumbling?—man before holding his hands out. He begins to chant words that have no meaning to me, so I assume it is an ancient language no longer spoken.

As he speaks, the necklace dims, rattling until the pieces of it break again and turn to ash, exactly as Amsu does.

“You will go to your afterlife now,” Shakir says in English. “I cannot help you there.”

Amsu tries to smile as his lips crack. “I have suffered so long. Anything else will be a paradise.” His eyes settle on me. “You saved me. *Alf shukr.*”

I nod. “*Rihlat silmia.*”

“What did you say?” Lake asks.

“He thanked me. I said, ‘peaceful journey’ back.”

“Aww.”

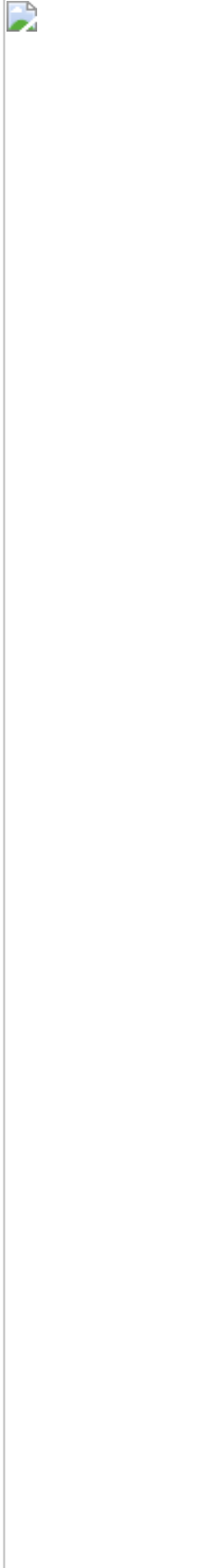
The man slowly crumbles before us, his voice whispering prayers to gods no longer worshiped as he prepares to face the afterlife he was meant to find a long time ago. The necklace sizzles into nothing, leaving only a mark on the cloth where it was.

Within seconds, a peace settles over me like nothing I’ve ever felt before. My chest swells with joy and relief, and I turn to Hemingway, jumping into his arms and wrapping myself around his body. He holds me close, burying his nose in the crook of my neck.

“Wonderful,” Shakir announces. “I was prepared for a battle and got a funeral instead. Better, yes?”

I laugh, lifting my head. “Much better.”

CHAPTER  
**TWENTY-THREE**





## DEMPSEY

I blink awake with that heavy, groggy feeling of having slept far too long. But for the first time in weeks, I feel fully rested. There were no nightmares, only dreams of Hemingway's strong arms around me, and considering the way my dragon has his heavy body draped over mine as he snores loudly, I don't think that was much of a dream at all.

I laugh and attempt to wiggle one arm free. He growls and tightens his arms, tucking his face against the back of my neck and curling his entire body more firmly around mine. My heart flutters and my skin heats at the feeling of his thick, hard arousal pressed to my ass.

All that crazy curse business is finally put to rest and there's nothing standing in the way of my forever with Hemingway. That thought is like a helium balloon inside my chest, filling me up until I'm sure I could burst wide open from the joy of it.

Hemingway makes a happy rumbling sound in his sleep. Can he feel my joy through our bond even when he's in a dreamland of his own?

"Mine," he murmurs, his voice impossibly deep, distorted. *It's his dragon.*

I snuggle further into him and close my eyes to send a wave of love through our bond. He purrs again and I smile. I thought I was happy before all of this. I thought my antique shop was enough, even if I went to bed lonely at night. I was so wrong.

"You never have to be lonely again," he says softly, his voice back to its normal tenor but gravelly from slumber.

"I know." The certainty of it feels like a superpower all its own, like I could breathe fire or fly. I chuckle at my thoughts. I

suppose I'll have to leave the fire and flight to my dragon. It's enough to know I'll get to be right by his side for it all.

"What time is it?" he asks.

I wiggle a little again and he loosens his grip enough for me to slip my arm free and grab my glasses off the nightstand. There's no clock on the nightstand though. It takes a moment of searching for me to spot bits of plastic scattered over the floor near the wall, and a sleep-hazed memory comes to me. The alarm went off at some point and rather than figure out how to turn it off, he had simply ripped it from the wall and thrown it.

"No clue," I tell him, a yawn working its way out of me. "It's dark out though, so either very late or very early."

He snorts. "You were very tired."

I roll onto my back, and he drags his fingertips over my cheek, his eyes open and his hair mussed. He looks so cute and deceptively vulnerable like this. I scoot close enough to rest my forehead against his, our noses bumping.

"I think my body knew I could finally relax again. I feel incredible now. Not the fake kind of incredible that the necklace made me feel, just the regular kind. I feel like Dempsey."

Hemingway tilts his head to bring his lips to mine in a soft kiss. "Perfect, I'm a big fan of feeling Dempsey." He gropes my ass with a teasing grin.

I laugh and put a leg over his hips to get as close as possible, a hot sigh fluttering past my lips when his hard cock meets mine.

"This is nice," I murmur, rocking my hips and carding my fingers through his hair.

"Just nice?" he growls, and another peal of laughter vibrates in my chest.

"It's incredible."

He bares his teeth in another playful snarl, grabbing my thigh and rolling me onto my back so he can hover over me.

He claims my lips again in a deeper kiss this time, grinding our cocks together harder and drawing a gasp from me.

“I’ve got two options to offer you, *bijou*,” he says, pulling back from the kiss and bracing his hands on the pillow.

I arch up to rub against him again, digging my fingers into his strong biceps. “Yes,” I answer, and this time it’s his deep amusement that rumbles between us.

“Option one is we stay here and do this.” He drags his fingers along my bare chest, *slowly* down my belly towards my cock, stopping just before he reaches it.

I whine. “Yes, that one,” I choose immediately.

“Option two,” he goes on, ignoring my eager cock to trace his finger around my belly button. “I take you out to the desert and we go flying.”

I still beneath him, my mind off of my dick now. “Flying?” I repeat to make sure I heard him right.

Hemingway grins and nods. “I’ll shift to full dragon form and fly you over the pyramids. Would you like that?”

Would I like that? My brain is saying *hell yes*, but my cock is still pretty sure that staying here and fucking all night and day is the better choice. Another whine tightens in my throat.

Hemingway leans close to press his lips against my vibrating Adam’s apple.

“Can we still do this after?” I ask, reaching for his hot, throbbing erection and moaning as soon as I wrap my fingers around it. He lets his head fall forward, making a strangled, horny sound of his own.

“We can do this for the rest of time, love,” he assures me.

I reluctantly release his erection. “Okay, flying and then sex after,” I decide.

“I was hoping that would be your decision.” He kisses my forehead and rolls off me.

I miss his weight immediately, but the thought of flying over the pyramids on the back of a freaking *dragon* is too

incredible to pass up.

“Wait, what if someone sees you?” I ask as I throw the covers back and slide out of bed to get dressed.

“It’s dark enough that it’s unlikely. And if someone does... Humans believe what they want to believe. They choose not to see us because their lives are simpler that way. If they see, they explain it away as a trick of the light or their own imagination.”

I pull a pair of jeans and a polo out of my bag, along with a pair of underwear. My cock calms down while I get dressed, purposefully keeping my back to Hemingway so I won’t end up just staring at him and deciding to stay in bed after all.

I spin the ring on my finger to straighten it, a surge of love fluttering in my chest as I look at it again. It’s a lovely ring, but that’s not what has my heart beating out an uneven rhythm as I stare at it. It’s a reminder that Hemingway chose me before I even knew it. When he gave it back to me at the store, I slipped it onto the ring finger on my left hand without a second thought, but now I’m wondering if it belongs there. We’re mated, but it’s not as if Hemingway proposed.

Do dragons even have weddings usually? Nico did for Lake, but does it *mean* anything to them? Does it mean anything to me? Hm, I’ll have to puzzle over that question for a while. I leave the ring in place on that finger anyway. Proposal or not, wedding or no wedding, I’m committed to Hemingway, and he’s committed to me. That’s what the ring means.

I slip my hands into my jean pockets out of habit and find a slip of paper. I pull it out and unfold it, feeling the warmth of Hemingway’s body and the tug of our bond as he approaches me from behind to wrap his arms around me again.

“Soul meets soul on lovers’ lips,” he says, echoing the exact words that are scrawled on the paper. He kisses the side of my neck to punctuate his point.

“*Prometheus Bound*,” I guess, and he nods to confirm that I have the correct book. “Thank you, dragon. I hoard all of

these words in my heart.” I hold the paper against my chest for a moment and then fold it carefully to put it away.

“I think there’s a little dragon in you, bijou.”

“Not yet, but there definitely will be later,” I joke, and he barks out a laugh.

We leave the dark quiet of our room behind and head out to the desert in the rented SUV. Hemingway seems to have a spot in mind, navigating out to the middle of nowhere and then turning the car off to get out.

We’re far enough from the city that the only light now is from the blanket of stars overhead and the full moon. I lean against the car and stare up in awe while Hemingway undresses, folding each item of clothing and placing them all back in the front seat. Once he’s completely bare, I turn my attention towards him.

“Can I watch, or should I look away?” It all happened so fast at the wedding I didn’t really have time to pay attention. Is it gruesome? Painful? Scaly skin is one thing, but it’s hard to fathom his entire body being reshaped into something completely different.

“You can watch if you like. It won’t take long.”

I lick my lips and nod, staring in fascination as he stretches his arms over his head and groans. At first, it just seems like he’s getting a good, deep stretch, but then I notice the way his muscles are pulling and starting to swell, the ripple moving along his skin as every part of him seems to expand. And then, it happens all at once. He lets out a roar that starts out almost human and ends anything but. His body explodes in size and in the place of the human shape I’m used to, sits a massive dragon. It’s the second time I’ve seen him in this form, but it feels like the first. Everything was such a blur the last time. This is just us, and I have all the time in the world to appreciate the incredible beauty of him.

His silver and blue scales shimmer in the moonlight, his wings flexing. He turns his familiar gold eyes on me and a startled laugh bursts past my lips.



“Holy shit, you’re *really* a dragon.” He levels me with a look and even though he doesn’t have any eyebrows right now, I swear I can see him hitching one at me. I chuckle again. “I *know* you’re a dragon, it’s just... This is wild. Can I pet you? Would that be a rude thing to do?”

He rumbles that deep, familiar sound that I always hear coming from his chest, but this time it’s fuller, louder, unrestrained. “You can do anything you like to me, mate.” His voice isn’t his, but it is. The same but different. Familiar and new at the same time.

I come around the front of the SUV, closing the distance between us and outstretching my hand. Hemingway...Evri—I’m not sure what to call him in this form—bumps his huge snout against my palm and I gasp again.

“Wow,” I murmur, running my hand over his smooth scales. They feel soft as silk yet hard as armor, and they warm under my touch.

“Get on,” he rumbles, jerking his head.

“How do I...?” I eye his looming body, trying to figure out the best way to climb onto a dragon’s back.

I put my hands on him right in front of his wings and search for something to grab on to. He doesn’t make me ponder the issue for long before he curves his long neck around and uses his snout to boost me up. I scramble onto his back and take a second to wiggle around until I’m in a comfortable position.

“If we’re going to do this often, I need to get some handles or a saddle for up here,” I shout to him. He growls playfully again and then cuts off my laughter by spreading his wings and lifting off the ground in a jolting motion. “Oh shit,” I gasp, falling forward to hold on as best I can.

It takes some time to get used to the gentle lunge of his body that happens with every flap of his wings, not to mention the fact that I can look down and see the ground below with nothing to break my fall. My stomach jolts with nerves and my dragon immediately sends a wave of reassurance through our

bond. He wouldn't let me fall. I could jump off of him right now and he would catch me before I could ever hit the ground.

That thought is freeing—it's exhilarating. I loosen my grip a little and crane my neck to see the view below. It's miles and miles and miles of desert stretched out in every direction. Once he can tell that I'm comfortable and not going to puke, Hemingway starts to have some fun with the flight, swooping and dipping, catching the wind and soaring with his wings outstretched. I get up the confidence to let go with my hands all together, spreading them out on either side of myself just like his wings, and I tilt my face into the wind that washes over me.

*I'm flying.*

As promised, he soars in the direction of the pyramids, circling them and then flying low so I can get a once-in-a-lifetime view. I imprint every moment of our flight into my mind, the wind in my hair, the view I wish I had the skill to paint later, and the irrevocable feeling of love and connection that flows between us every second.

I fell in love with books because they were a window into a life I would never have. They were an escape from the life I *did* have. I never dared to dream that I could have a love like this, a life full of adventure and experiences I didn't even think to wish for. I'll hoard my favorite words in my heart just like I promised Hemingway, but I want to hoard this too. I want to be filled to bursting with moments exactly like this.

## HEMINGWAY

I FLY around the desert until I can feel Dempsey's body growing tired, and then I circle back to an oasis I spotted only half a mile from where I left the SUV. I glide towards the ground, extending my legs to brace for a smooth landing right beside a rare green patch of trees, shrubbery, and the occasional flower growing around a small lake.

My mate slides off of my back, his knees trembling momentarily as he gets his bearings back on the ground. Once

I'm sure he can stand on his own without leaning against me, I pull my energy inward and draw my towering body back into its smaller shape. Shifting into my dragon form carries some pain, but it's the good kind—it's a relief. Folding myself into my human shape feels like wiggling my way into a tight space, but it comes with advantages of its own.

As soon as I have human arms again, I reach for Dempsey, pulling him against my bare body and grinning at him as I drag my fingers along his soft cheek.

“Did you enjoy yourself, bijou?”

“It was the most amazing thing I've experienced in my entire life.” His eyes are shining with joy.

The sky overhead is slowly turning from dark blue to a soft pink as the sun starts to peek over the horizon, so I guide my mate to a soft patch of earth right beside the water.

He eyes the water warily. “What if a crocodile slithers out of there to eat us?”

“I'll eat him first,” I deadpan. I'm not concerned. I can't smell anything lurking.

I pull him down on top of me and pick up where we left off in bed this morning, claiming his lips in a deep, hungry kiss. Adrenaline from flying is coursing through my veins, settling in my cock in a rush of heat and longing. Dempsey is feeling the same thrill, the pulse of it beating strongly through our bond and in his cock as he flexes his hips to grind it against mine.

Our tongues tangle as we both grope to rid him of his clothes, a desperate fever settling over us. We're free of the necklace, of the curse, and of anything else that could threaten to come between us. We're bonded, and if he wants, I'll give him a wedding too. I'll give him anything and everything his heart desires for the rest of our long, long lives.

My cock is slick with my precum by the time he tosses away the last scrap of his clothing and sinks down onto it. His legs are braced on either side of me, his hands against my chest as he throws his head back and rides my cock with utter

abandon. I can't look away from the breathtaking sight of him completely bare on top of me, his skin flawless in the hazy morning light, his muscles flexing and rippling with every swivel and thrust of his hips. His cock bounces freely and I dig my fingers into his thighs, setting my mind on the hopeless task of not coming too soon.

His inner muscles squeeze and tug around my cock, and through our bond I can feel every unbridled sensation that flows through him, from the way my cock drags over his prostate over and over to the ocean of his love for me.

I wrap my arms around him and pull him close so I can taste his lips again. He greedily laps up the tendril of smoke that billows from my mouth as soon as our lips meet. Dempsey moans as our tongues tangle and I grasp at every inch of his bare skin, not wanting to leave a single speck of him untouched.

"I love you so much, Evri." His voice quivers and his words end on another pleased groan as he fucks himself faster on my cock.

In this new position with our mouths sliding against each other, his erection drags over my abs with every thrust, sticky drips of his precum clinging to my skin.

"And I love you, bijou. I love every inch of you inside and out, and I will until the sun burns out and the earth withers away. Longer than that. Always."

A shudder racks him as I choke out the words that I plan to whisper to him every night and every morning for the next few thousand years. Dempsey's cheeks flush and his thighs start to tremble, his inner muscles constricting tightly around me before he lets out a cry and they start to pulse. His hot, thick cum splatters against my belly and I grab onto his ass cheeks to fuck into him deeper, chasing my own release.

I throw my head back and roar as I fall over the edge, my knot swelling to tug at Dempsey's hole, locking me inside as I fill him with pulse after pulse of my cum.

His arms give way and he falls fully onto me, gasping and panting, his hips still twitching with the aftershocks of his orgasm as he buries his face in the crook of my throat. My knot keeps him right where I want him long after both of our orgasms fade. I stroke my hands lazily up and down his sweat-slicked spine and we talk about a million places we want to visit together, all the books we want to read, and all the mornings we plan to waste doing nothing but making each other come over and over.

The sky grows lighter overhead with every passing minute, but there isn't a hint of impatience in either of us. We don't have anywhere to be except wherever we want. Eventually we'll go home, I'll help Dempsey re-open his shop, and we'll find a semblance of a routine, but for now, this is all we need.

CHAPTER  
**TWENTY-FOUR**





## HEMINGWAY

Sitting across from my brothers at a café, indulging in coffee and the best pastries I've had outside of France as my mate, happy and safe, chats with Lake about yet another wedding, I realize for the first time in a long time, I am content. Not just happy. No. This is bigger than that. It's soul deep, permeating my entire existence.

Dempsey's fingers brush softly across my thigh, almost involuntarily, soothing my dragon on a level I didn't know was possible. Except for the soft purrs, the occasional chuff, and sporadic push to the surface to lay eyes on our beautiful mate, he is restful. To say mating is life-changing is an understatement.

"I'm just gonna say what apparently no one else is willing to," Valentino says after chewing the Um Ali pastry he just popped in his mouth. Everyone stops chattering while Nico narrows his eyes at our brother. "Lake, you are not the getting-married-in-an-ancient-desert kind of guy. I don't care how intimate or fancy the tent is, it doesn't fit your vibe at all. Just saying."

Lake pulls his head back, clutching the non-existent pearls around his neck. "What do you mean?"

Lord, Arson, and I all look at Nico for a reaction, and instead of rage, I see relief.

"Anyone care to back me up?" Valentino asks.

"Well..." Dempsey begins, gazing nervously at Nico. "Tino does have a point."

Lake releases an exaggerated gasp. "*Et tu, Brute?*"

"I finally understand a reference," Nico says, then clears his throat when he gets eye daggers from his mate.

“Why exactly am I not an ancient desert guy, Valentino? Please enlighten me.”

“Sure,” he says, placing his coffee on the table. “Look, man, you’re about as glamorous as they come. I think you could swing a posh beach, but Egypt? It was 1930 when this place was considered high society. It’s great, don’t get me wrong. I dig it here.”

Arson chuckles. “Dig. Get it?”

“No,” Lord answers.

“Archeology.”

“Focus,” I whisper, quieting my brothers.

Lake slouches in his seat. “I thought it sounded neat. You don’t like the idea either, Demps?”

“Honestly? Not really.”

“Hmm.” Lake tosses his hair. “Fine. I’m open to suggestions. Do share with the class. What kind of man am I?”

Nico shifts uncomfortably in his seat, clearly torn between defending his mate and supporting a non-Egyptian wedding.

“You said you wanted intimate and special,” Dempsey says. “Right?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, well there are plenty of other destinations if that’s what you want.”

“Like Monte Carlo,” Valentino offers with a full mouth. “Posh.”

Lake scrunches his nose in distaste. “Not a fan. Give me something else.”

Dempsey glances at me with a soft smile that sends the butterflies in my stomach into flight. “You can totally say no, but what about the compound?”

“Huh?” Lake asks.

“The courtyard is gorgeous. I can see it now. An arch entwined with all your favorite flowers, a silk runner in ivory,



a few rows of chairs, beautifully decorated. Off to the side, a small orchestra plays. Before you, a glorious sun setting through the trees, casting the perfect glow on your love.”

No one says a word, and it almost seems as if the world has stopped. Lake’s pinched expression softens. “Demps, that’s beautiful. Are you sure it’s not what you want?”

Dempsey turns to me and smiles. “I’m sure. It’s not my style, but it is yours.”

“You’re right.” Lake waves his hands over his eyes. “Shit. You made a girl cry.”

“I should get some credit for bringing it up.” Valentino pouts.

“Shut up,” we all say at the same time.



TWO MONTHS AFTER LEAVING EGYPT, I tear open a box of auction items in the backroom of Timeless Treasures, while Dempsey helps a few customers upfront.

I smile as I lift each quirky item from the box. I’ve learned Dempsey has an eye for the rare and interesting more than the desirable items, but I find it charming. Lake has been diligently working on a new website for the store, rebranding it as a place for the discerning collector, and business is already up fifteen percent.

A few minutes later, Dempsey appears in the doorway while I try to make sense of a wooden puzzle cube from the early American settlers.

“Hey, sexy dragon.”

“Hello, stunning mate. Did they buy something?”

“They did. That creepy New Orleans voodoo doll.”

“Good riddance.”

Dempsey laughs. “Definitely.” He walks closer, leaning on the table across from me, with an unusual smile on his face.

“What are you up to?”

“I’ve been thinking of something since we got back from Egypt, and I think I’m ready to tell you about it.”

I set the cube down. “You have my complete attention.”

Dempsey smiles. “Okay, um, so obviously my perspective on things has shifted, word choice completely intentional.”

I chuckle. “Go on.”

“The future I had planned before, which was really nothing, is different now.”

“Yes.”

“I don’t want to spend my days tooling around this dusty shop. I want to spend them with you, creating memories and embarking on adventures. I want to see my favorite places through your eyes, and experience all your favorites.”

I am shocked. “You want to give up the store?”

“No. I couldn’t. It would be like, I don’t know, abandoning a kid or a pet.”

I nod, waiting for him to explain.

“Well, when I met with Lake a few times about my website, he was just sitting in the client room. It’s cramped.”

“Yes.”

“Of course, there are plenty of rooms that could be converted to an office on the compound, but...” He pauses as his cheeks turn pink and he shoves his glasses up his nose.

The combination is distracting enough that I almost forget what we’re discussing. Will my body ever not react to him?

*No.*

I laugh at the clear impression my dragon sends.

“What?” Dempsey asks.

“Sorry. I just find you so compelling.”

He laughs shyly. “Anyway. What would you think about converting my apartment?”

“I don’t follow.”

“Obviously I don’t live there anymore and never will again.”

“Obviously.”

“Lake told me that Lord has expressed some concerns about having clients come to the compound to meet in person since the cases have been more...tenuous.”

I nod, as understanding starts to sink in. “Ah.”

“So I thought, what if we convert my apartment to an office slash meeting space? It’s not huge, but Lake and anyone else could work from here on client facing days. It’s a neutral place, and if confidentiality is required, there’s a back entrance.”

“Uh huh,” I murmur as I envision it.

“Other times, Lake can work from home if he wants to. He’d be happy here. His favorite coffee shop is only a block away, and his preferred shopping district is less than five miles.”

“And who would run the store?”

“I was thinking of hiring a manager. Dahlia, to be exact.”

“Dahlia? The witch. Why her?”

“Well, first of all, she’s a total vibe, as Lake would say.”

I chuckle at that. “She is.”

“And of course, Lake has intel on her from his research. It sounds like she could use some stable employment. Being a powerful spellcaster isn’t exactly consistent income.”

I take a minute to play it all out in my mind, and the more I do, the more it feels right.

“Dahlia.”

“She’s important to me,” Dempsey says, choking up a bit. “Because of her efforts, we were led to a solution, had an amazing experience flying over pyramids, and broke a centuries-old curse, saving at least one life and who knows

how many more. She won't take your diamonds. Maybe she'll accept a job offer."

I nod, still thinking.

"I mean, if you think it's dumb or Lord wouldn't like—"

"It's perfect. Genius, in fact. We should tell them right away. Of course, you know you'll have to let Lake be in charge of decorating."

"That's a given." He closes the distance between us, sliding his arms around my waist. "Of course, it means we can't enjoy any more afternoon delights up there."

"I guess I'll have to save it all up for home."

Dempsey sighs happily. "I can't believe this is my life. You're my man." He rubs his chin against my jaw. "When I first saw you, I thought you looked like Clark Kent."

I smile, nodding.

"It turned out to be such a fitting comparison. You really are Superman."

"Perhaps, but I have no interest in saving the world. I would destroy it if it pleased you. I would burn it down to protect you. I would fly us to the moon if I had to."

"Doubt thou the stars are fire; Doubt that the sun doth move; Doubt truth to be a liar; But never doubt I love."

"Shakespeare never sounded more beautiful than spoken by your lips."

"I have another idea."

"Tell me?"

"Why don't we close the shop early and properly say goodbye to my former bedroom?"

I scoop him off his feet as he laughs. "You are full of brilliant ideas today."

DEMPSEY

“AM I INSANE? Lake asks, staring into the mirror on his vanity and brushing blush on his cheeks.

“Is that rhetorical?” I ask, sitting on a bench nearby. In less than an hour, we’ll be walking down the aisle for the second time, and just like round one, Lake is close to unbearable.

“Demps, boo. Why did I agree to a second wedding?”

“Agree to? Wasn’t it your idea?”

“Details.”

I laugh softly. “Just enjoy it this time. There’s no paparazzi, certainly won’t be any immortal stalkers around, and you can just bask in it this time.”

“I hear you, but tell it to my perfection streak.”

“Dahlia added a ward around the property. We’re in our own private bubble.”

“Thank you.” Lake exhales slowly, twisting in his seat to face me. “I knew the moment I met you we were going to be fast friends.”

“How did you know that? On the surface, we couldn’t be more different.”

“That’s what I like about you. I don’t need another me. I need you. You see the world differently than I do, and even though we have an age gap, I feel like that’s been good for me. You’re helping me mature.” He tilts his head back, blinking quickly. “Dammit. I’m gonna cry.”

Standing, I approach him and squeeze his shoulder. “And you help me let loose and have fun. I’m glad we met.”

He smiles, checking his makeup in the mirror for a moment before twisting around to face me. “I can’t tell you how many times I reflected on how me and Nico met. I had this terrible stalker. A wolf.”

I nod, having heard bits and pieces of it before, but never pushed. He’ll tell me when he wants to.

“At the time, when I agreed to a bodyguard, I thought it was the worst thing ever.” He smiles. “But it was Nico. I

thought I was rich before, but it turns out I was just privileged. Now I know what true wealth is, and it has nothing to do with money and everything to do with love.”

I squeeze his hand. “Isn’t it amazing to know what it feels like to be so loved they would literally die for you?”

Lake nods. “You know, Fate’s game is on point. Who knows how long she might have taken to get you two to connect, but you put that necklace on and she was like, okay, now. It had to be Fate. Did you know it wasn’t even Hemingway’s turn on the rotation? It was Arson’s, but he was off doing whatever it is Arson does.”

“What? Really?”

“Yep. He was super pissed because of that book thingy in London.” Lake smiles. “But if you could have seen his face when he came back from meeting you. His dragon knew what his heart was too afraid to admit. Fate did her job.”

Now my own eyes are welling up. “Well, damn. That’s so romantic. Even though I almost died, it was worth it.”

“You didn’t almost die, Demps. Hemingway would have forced a bond before he let you die. Now it’s time for you to realize something. This is your family. All of us. And this bond, both figuratively and literally, is stronger than blood. It’s stronger than the rays of a thousand suns. It’s stronger than the seam on an Oscar de la Renta gown.”

“That strong, huh?”

“That strong. We might be a motley little crew, but we’re yours.”

“I couldn’t be happier about that.”

An hour later, I take my place at the entrance to the courtyard. This time, I’m wearing a black Dolce and Gabbana suit that fits so tightly, I feel like I might as well be nude. It has leather and buckles in various places, and when Lake saw it, he declared it “exquisite.” I’m holding a bouquet of red and cream roses, and I even gave in and let Lake put some very light makeup on me in the form of mascara, gloss, and a

smudge of eyeshadow to “highlight those stunning orbs of yours.”

With a confidence borrowed from Lake, I smile as the guests twist in their seats to watch me. Dahlia is behind me, resuming her role as flower witch. She was delighted to accept the store manager position, and in just two weeks, she made massive improvements to my layout and inventory management. It was a damn good move.

In the audience are a smattering of some of Lake’s friends—real ones, as he calls them—the dragon parents, Shakir and a friend of his he brought from Egypt, and that’s it. As we discussed, he hired a small orchestra to play music, including a harpist. Everything is beautiful and dreamy, and perfectly suited to Lake.

After procrastinating the inevitable, I force my eyes to meet my dragon’s, and as I expected, my heart pounds a little harder in my chest. He’s wearing a tux like mine, but to say we fill it out differently is a huge understatement.

Hemingway’s muscles stretch the material to its limits, and even from here, I can make out the impressive bulge between his legs, a part of his body I’ve become extremely familiar with over the past few months.

Months.

Sometimes I can’t believe that even just six months ago, I didn’t know Hemingway existed. Now he’s the center of my universe. He is the sun that I orbit.

His face lights up as I get closer, his eyes flashing gold and blue as the man and the dragon vie for position. I take my spot across from him as Shakir joins us at the altar. Somehow, Lake worked his magic to get the man to perform this ceremony since they are already civilly married. He seems excited to take on the task. Brave man. If he screws up, we’ll all have to calm the bridezilla again.

Nico is just as stoic as he was at the first wedding, gazing passively as Dahlia, who insisted on wearing the same dress she wore before, spreads rose petals along the runner. As she

takes her seat, the music changes, and Lake once again makes his entrance.

He's wearing a custom gown in ivory with black and red embellished jewels along the hems and sleeves. It's form fitting, but on the back is a long chiffon train—all details I know from Lake's non-stop discussion of it. I'd never seen a man in a dress until meeting him, but I gotta say, the man wears it well. He looks like an angel.

Nico sees him, and the smile on his face is so beautiful, even the most jaded person would believe in love upon seeing it.

When I shift my gaze up, Hemingway is watching me. I feel his tug on our bond, sending love and desire and promises of forever flowing through me. I already told him a wedding isn't something I need or want. Unlike Lake, the spotlight isn't something I seek, and knowing the commitment Hemingway made through our bond is more than enough.

Once Lake is at the altar, the music stops, and all eyes are on Shakir.

"Dearly beloved," Shakir says in his grand and unusual accent. "We are gathered here today to..."

I miss the rest of his words as Lake huffs and guests giggle.

"Where did you get that wording?" Lake hisses to Shakir.

"Arson wrote it down for me," Shakir answers, eyes wide and innocent. "He said it is common in the US. Is it wrong?"

Nico and Lake turn in unison to the offender sitting in the front row. Arson is nearly falling out of his chair with laughter while Nico growls and smoke tendrils rise from his ears. Lake, obviously realizing that his mate is going to shift and tear his brother-in-law apart, flashes a sweet smile as he whispers something to Nico that settles the dragon.

"So sorry, Shakir. Arson played a little joke and provided you with the lyrics to an iconic song by Prince, may he rest in peace."



Shakir tsks and wags a finger at Arson, who has since been scolded by Lord.

“It is okay,” Shakir says. “I have a backup. I translated words from my country for you. Is that acceptable, Lake?”

Lake nods, smoothing his gown unnecessarily. “Please.”

Shakir clears his throat and begins again. “Dear beloveds, you have been summoned to witness the beauty of love demonstrated by these two men. I am pleased to officiate such a union.

“I met Lake and his mate—”

“Husband,” Lake loudly whispers.

“Err, husband,” Shakir corrects. “When they came to Egypt to resolve—”

Hemingway clears his throat with a slight glare.

“To see the pyramids, of course,” Shakir says, nervously chuckling and tugging at his collar. “Let us just talk about the love, yes?”

Lake narrows his eyes, and I know bridezilla is simmering just under the surface.

Shakir pulls a small piece of paper from his pocket and clears his throat. “Love,” he says, pausing to smile. “It is an emotion difficult to define, unable to be detected by science, impossible to understand until it is yours. I will tell you though, good people, it can be seen and felt when it is strong. When I met Lake and Nico, their love was as tangible as the ground beneath my feet. It was palpable, beautiful, and strong.”

Lake’s face relaxes as he gazes at Nico.

“You are here to witness this love because you have played a meaningful role in the lives of these two men. Gaze upon it, friends. Let it guide you to seek the same, whether through new, yet to be discovered love, or through renewed commitment to your partner. Let it serve as an example of what love can be. Let it inspire you to create, to aspire, and most of all, to embody, for what is life without love?”

I hear Hemingway's mother sniff from the audience and glance over to see their father comforting her.

"Love," Shakir continues. "In all its forms. Friendship, family, chosen or blood, and romance, it is the very thing that our souls eternally seek, and when it is found, as it is with Nico and Lake and all of you here today, there is peace."

I feel Hemingway's gaze on me and do my best to send my love for him through our bond. He presses his hand to his heart to show me he feels it. Right now, the emotion in me is so intense, I feel like it is our wedding.

"With that, my friends, I give the floor to Nico and Lake to exchange vows."

Technically, I can hear the men promising things to each other for all of eternity—literally—but I'm thinking of what Hem did for me, and how he shows his love. I guess Lake was right. Fate really was on point.

Soon enough, Lake and Nico are kissing and walking down the aisle again. Hemingway moves behind me, wrapping his arm around my waist and nuzzling my neck.

"Want to ditch the first part of the reception for a little quality time in the hoard room?"

I mock gasp. "Good sir. And muss the makeup Lake spent an hour applying to my face this morning?"

"Yep." Twisting me around, he holds me close. "I felt your love and emotions the whole time. It was more beautiful than any literature in existence."

"Okay, romantic dragon." I smile, leaning in to kiss him, but he turns his head sharply towards the woods behind us.

Just as suddenly, Lord, Arson, and Valentino surround us.

"What's happening?" I ask as Hemingway moves into a protective stance.

Arson narrows his eyes, clutching Lord's wrist. "Yeah, what is that scent?"

Lord wrinkles his nose and looks at his brother with interest. "It smells like a wolf to me."

"Me too," Valentino says.

"Absolutely," Hemingway confirms, taking a deep sniff with his nose in the air. "What do you smell, Arson?"

"Not a wolf. Or maybe..." He shakes his head. "It's gone." He rubs his forehead. "It's gone, right?"

Lord lifts his face, sniffing. "Yes."

"I'll go check the perimeter," Valentino offers.

"I'll go with you," Dahlia says, who was apparently lingering nearby. "Double check my ward."

"Great."

The two take off, but when I turn and look at Arson, he looks as if he's seen a ghost. The normal happy, easygoing man is tense, his face pale and eyes alarmed. He's still clutching Lord's arm, too.

"Are you okay, Arson?" I ask.

My question seems to snap him out of whatever was bothering him, and he nods, his huge smile back on his face. "Yeah. Totally."

He struts off, but I don't miss the visual exchange between Lord and Hem. Lord turns to follow Arson.

"Something happened, didn't it?"

Hemingway nods. "Yes. A wolf near the compound is concerning, but whatever Arson got a whiff of was very different from what the rest of us experienced."

"Should we be worried?"

"No." He smiles. "Valentino is on it." He bends his knees and scoops me into his arms, bridal style. "You and I have a date in the hoard room. Whatever Tino finds can be dealt with later. Right now, my dragon needs to feast."

"He's an insatiable beast."

"Only for you, mon bijou. Always."

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# ABOUT K.M. NEUHOLD

K.M. Neuhold is a complete romance junkie. Bisexual and polyamorous, she often describes herself as being in love with love. She loves to write stories full of bearded, cinnamon roll men who get super swoony HEAs. Her philosophy is there's so much angst and sadness for LGBT characters in media, all she wants is to give them the happiest happily ever afters she can with little angst, tons of humor, and SO MUCH STEAM. K.M. fully admits to her tendencies of making sure every side character has a full backstory that will likely always lead to every book turning into a series or spin-off. When she's not writing she's a lion tamer, an astronaut, and a superhero...just kidding, she's likely watching Netflix and snuggling with her husky while her amazing husband brings her coffee.

# ABOUT MIA MONROE

Mia is a USA Today Bestselling author of queer paranormal and contemporary romance. She's obsessed with vampires, mermaids, and tattoos, all of which make regular appearances in her books. She's fluent in sarcasm, addicted to caffeine, and easily amused by memes. She may or may not be a witch.

Her books are low to mid-angst, high heat, and celebrate the many ways people of all types can fall in love- even the paranormal kind. After all, love is love.

## A WORD FROM MIA

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