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ELENA KINCAID



*Bruised*  
FORCE

A DOWN IN FLAMES TALE

# BRUISED FORCE



ELENA KINCAID



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# CONTENTS

BLURB

TITLE

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Epilogue

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Also by Elena Kincaid:

## **Bruised Force: A Down in Flames Tale #3**

By: Elena Kincaid

When firefighter and dragon shifter Austin Baudin went and got himself roped into doing a calendar shoot for charity—half naked—he had no idea his feisty little witch would end up being the photographer. She gets under his skin like no one ever has, but she hides a dark secret, pushing him away at every turn. He vows that even his own demons won't stop him from uncovering the truth.

Holly Campbell isn't the heroine of her story—she's the villain! A mistake she made thirteen years ago is one she'll be paying for the rest of her life, and the one man she wants most is the one man she can't have. She'd do anything to fix what she had done.

A dark curse and a damaged past threaten to keep Holly and her hot-as-fire dragon shifter apart forever.

\*Get the other side to this story in *Virtue Saved* by C.D. Gorri.

*Once again, I dedicate this book to the wonderful TNTNYC readers who make this event amazingly awesome each year. I love getting to see all of your smiling faces and getting to chat with you.*

*To my collaborator, C.D. Gorri, it has been such a blast getting to create this beautiful supernatural world with you. And to Yelena, Julia, and Galina for their constant support. You ladies are amazing.*

**BRUISED FORCE**

**A Down in Flames Tale**

**BY: Elena Kincaid**

## PROLOGUE



The thumping bass of the nightclub poured out into the street. Holly giggled as she and her best friend Raina neared the front of the line. She'd never been to a club before, but Raina, who was a year older than Holly's sixteen years, had already snuck away to the city many times before. The two had become inseparable this past year, so it wasn't a stretch to convince both sets of parents that one was sleeping over at the other's house.

The bouncer was huge. At least six foot five, Holly surmised. His dark chocolate-colored arm muscles rippled as he held two driver's licenses in his large hand. With the slightest nod, he motioned a young couple to go in through the open door. Four college-aged girls were next, all dressed provocatively and wearing flirty smiles for the hunky bouncer. He didn't even bother to look at their IDs. He just waved them on through, turning his head to openly ogle them from behind until they disappeared through the open door.

Holly and Raina were next. It didn't matter that they were both underage or that neither of them actually had a driver's license, fake or otherwise. The bouncer would see what Holly and Raina wanted him to.



“Hi,” Raina said, handing him her and Holly’s high school IDs. She flicked her wavy brown locks behind her shoulder and whispered, “Incantare...vide.” Holly let loose her own energy to ripple around all three of them for an extra boost, just in case. If Raina was offended, she didn’t show it.

Raina was a water witch, but Holly knew not a very powerful one. She had observed Raina drawing on her power before, and though an enchantment spell like this one would be easy for Raina against a human, she didn’t want to take any chances. Holly, on the other hand, was quite powerful, more so than anyone other than her family knew. It was better that way since secrets of a witch’s family lineage belonged in the family. In fact, not even other witches could tell what element another witch drew from or how powerfully they did so unless they were told or saw a witch in action.

The bouncer looked at the “driver’s licenses,” then scanned both of their faces.

“You have pretty eyes,” Raina told him when they locked gazes.

That was it. They had him. His smirk was seductive.

“Thank you, sweetheart,” he said as he motioned them through. “I’ll see you on your way out,” he added, looking at Raina as she gave him a sexy little wink.

Holly envied her boldness and confidence, feeling quite lacking in both departments. Perhaps that was why she’d gravitated toward Raina this year. They really didn’t have all that much in common other than Holly wanting to break out of her shrinking violet shell and Raina needing a partner in crime for all the partying she liked to do.

“Sure thing,” Raina said over her shoulder.

Big, hot bouncer really did have pretty hazel eyes, and they twinkled mischievously, but she knew that Raina's compliment was empty. Raina looked down on everyone who wasn't a witch, especially humans. Not that she had ever outright stated her feeling of superiority to all other beings, but passing comments she would utter here and there made it clear.

Flashing lights greeted them as they stepped inside. Bodies swayed, jumped, or ground against other bodies on the dance floor located to the left of the entrance. To the right was a long U-shaped bar and some pub tables. Raina pulled Holly straight to the bar and ordered them two whiskey shots and two beers.

"What are you doing?" Holly asked Raina when she saw her hand her school ID to the bartender.

"*Paying,*" she said with a smile. Raina whispered some words in Latin to the bartender, who then dutifully swiped the ID in the credit card machine. The bartender handed Raina the blank receipt and then smiled widely at the generous "tip" Raina left her.

Holly's mouth gaped open. "Raina—"

"Oh, relax, Holls. How else were we going to pay for the drinks?" She clinked her shot glass against Holly's. "Don't worry. We'll get someone to buy us the next round. Besides, the bartender is gorgeous. She won't be hurting for tips tonight."

Despite Raina's reassurance, it still didn't sit well with Holly. Sneaking into a club was one thing. Stealing using magic was messed up on a karmic level. She'd gotten enough lectures from her parents, grandfather, and sometimes, even her older sister after getting caught in her candy-klepto phase. Still, she downed the shot, felt the familiar burn go down her

throat—this wasn't the first time she had had whiskey, thanks to Raina—and resigned herself not to order any more drinks unless they were actually being paid for.

What was done was done at this point. She'd have tomorrow to feel guilty and possibly find a good karmic cleanse. She took the initiative this time and clinked her beer bottle to Raina's. After they each took a few large swigs, Holly pulled Raina out onto the dance floor.

They squeezed into the packed dance floor and joined the rowdy crowd jumping, swaying, and arms flailing to Sean Paul's *Temperature*. Holly saw a cute guy come up behind Raina. Raina pushed back into him, then spun around to dance with him, leaving Holly to her own devices, or so she thought. Raina gave Holly a quick glance over her shoulder and juttied out her chin to indicate Holly should turn around. Before she had the chance, she felt a hard body press up against her. Hands snaked around her waist to pull her closer. Too bad the smell of the guy's cologne was so off-putting. Not to mention the fact he was saturated in it.

She turned around and put some distance between them in the process. It wasn't that the guy was bad looking. Though not very tall, he was nicely built, blonde, with I-get-laid-a-lot confidence gleaming in his brown eyes, and either I-have-money or I-pretend-to-have-money kind of brand name, crisp white t-shirt, and tight black jeans. It was the way he leered at her she didn't like... well, mainly at her ample cleavage spilling out over her sparkly black sequenced tank top. She came out tonight to have fun, to have her first experience at a nightclub, not be a notch on someone's bedpost.

*Like I'd ever give away my virginity to Mr. I-drowned-myself-in-Old Spice.*

Then he got grabby, making her uncomfortable. He stared at her chest as he tried to grind against her. *Eyes up here, buddy*, she wanted to say. Instead, she gave him a shove—a pointless one since it only seemed to egg him on.

Hot breath whispered in her ear. “Let’s go somewhere a little more private.”

She felt something hard against her stomach. *Ew! Is that his...*

Again, she shoved.

“Don’t be like that!”

If only he knew that he was mere seconds away from either being kicked in the nuts or hexed with some kind of fiery itch, he might have voluntarily removed himself from her presence. Before she could decide on her next course of action, however, he was removed by another force in the form of a tall—as tall as hot bouncer guy, at least—pissed-off man who could be the next star of all of her wet dreams. His full, pouty lips curled into a sneer as he easily manhandled the much smaller man away from her. The blonde sleaze widened his eyes in fear and quickly turned on his heel to disappear into the crowd on the dance floor.

Then the shaggy brunette turned his crystal-blue-eyed gaze on her. The hairs on her arms stood up a little as she sensed immense power emanating from him. *Shifter maybe?* There was something elemental in his aura, making her think he could also be a witch.

Long black lashes framed his striking eyes with a small beauty mark kissing the outer corner of his left eye. The nostrils of his small, thin nose flared as he looked down at her. For a moment, all she could do was stare at the face she was

sure could inspire paintings and statues that would immortalize him and maybe even a plethora of songs, all full of longing and heartbreak.

The music changed to a techno-steely beat with heavy bass, drowning out everyone except for the man in front of her. Heart thumping, breath hitching, she moved closer. His tight black shirt hugged every inch of his powerful muscular upper body. She wanted to trace the shape of his firm pecs with her fingers and maybe her tongue. She felt her cheeks flame at her mental image as she got up on her tiptoes to put her arms around his neck and whisper a “thank you” in his ear. At five foot seven, this man made her feel petite.

*Maybe he'll kiss me,* she thought with yearning anticipation when he slowly slid his hands up her arms to where her wrists crossed behind his neck.

He didn't kiss her.

Firmly grabbing her by the wrists, he removed her hands from around his neck. Then he bent to her ear, his nearness sending shivers down her spine.

“Do your parents know where you are, little girl?” He pulled back to look at her. His face was not made of the marble and stone she imagined his gorgeous statue would be fashioned from but pure angry steel.

*Little girl!*

Holly was taken aback. She felt like she was in a movie, and the current scene playing out was at someone's house party she'd crashed. The music was playing, everyone was dancing and having a good time, then suddenly you heard a screech. The DJ was no longer spinning, and everyone was dead-stopped, staring at the loser in the middle, who just did

something the popular kids would be laughing about the rest of the year. That's what his words felt like after his grand gesture of rescuing her, not to mention the whole locking gazes, time standing still, and all that other bullshit she obviously had delusions about. He may as well have poured a bucket of ice all over the moment she thought they were having.

"I'm not a little girl," she said defensively. Shifter or witch, she was sure he could hear her.

He cocked his head to the side, assessing her, then threw her a sardonic half-smile before bending down again.

"I'm not going to babysit you. Take your little friend and go home before you get hurt."

Before she had a chance to come up with some snarky retort, she was looking at his back as he walked away. Deflated, she couldn't help the *ick* she felt in her gut.

Raina tugged on her arm. "Rawr! Did you get his number?"

"No!" Holly crossed her arms. "He was a dick."

Raina gave his back another glance and shrugged. "Shame." Turning back to Holly, she said, "You'll be pleased. I found someone to buy us drinks. Real currency and all." She grabbed Holly's hand. "Come on. They're waiting for us by a table."

Several drinks, dances, and more unwanted advances later, Holly found herself needing a breather. "I'll be right back," she said to Raina, gesturing to the back where the bathrooms are.

"Want me to come with?"

Holly shook her head. “Nah. I’ll be okay.” Someone had to stay behind to entertain their newest “dates.” She had lost count of how many guys had bought them drinks tonight.

When she reached the back of the club, she noticed a door was slightly ajar, letting in fresh air, and decided she could use some instead of a bathroom. She smelled the cigarette smoke before she saw *him* leaning against the wall, eyes scrunched closed as if he were in pain, and a lit stogie hanging from his mouth. Once again, she found herself staring at him, but for a whole other reason this time. She recognized that look. Anger and embarrassment forgotten, she felt sorry for him for whatever demons he seemed to be battling at the moment.

Her first instinct was to go back inside and give him his privacy, but instead, not being able to help herself, she asked, “Are you okay?”

His eyes opened, smoke puffed out of his mouth, then he removed the dangling cigarette from between his lips and placed it between his thumb and forefinger. A silver metal object glinted in his other hand. Pushing off the brick wall he was leaning against, he took a few steps toward her, flicking ash from his cigarette along the way.

“Didn’t I tell you to go home?”

She huffed an irritated sound and crossed her arms. “You can’t *tell* me to do anything. Do you own this club or something?”

His brow arched in challenge, then he crossed his arms, mimicking her stance. “No, but I’m friends with one of the bouncers here.”

“So... what then? You’re just going to rat me out like some narc?”

“You’re a mouthy little thing, aren’t you?” He uncrossed his arms, took a long pull of smoke from his cigarette, and then flicked away the butt, looking almost... bored. He then began to toy with the metal object in his hand, which she now noticed was a lighter.

“You shouldn’t smoke, you know,” she said in the same petulant tone she’d been using with him.

He threw his head back and laughed.

“Fine. Go ahead and smoke your cancer stick, then.” Not that witches or other supernatural beings could be afflicted with human ailments.

Right. He was laughing at her.

“You should be more concerned with your own well-being,” he said, taking a few more steps toward her.

She stepped back, bumping into the wall near the open door.

“I can take care of myself.” She tipped her chin up in defiance.

“Because you’re not human.” It wasn’t a question. His nostrils flared. “I don’t smell any kind of shifter on you.”

*Ah, so he is a shifter.* From what she knew of them, they had an impeccable sense of smell, vision, and hearing, not to mention strength. The power emanating from this one was intense.

“You’re not human, either.”

He let out an exasperated breath. “What are you doing here?”

“I just came outside to get some fresh air. Free country.”



He shook his head. “I meant at this club.” Before she had the chance to answer, he continued, “Look at you. Playing dress up in grownup clothes. You can’t be more than fourteen.”

“Ugh!” The nerve of him. Telling a teenager they look younger than they are was an insult she equated with telling an adult they look older. She just got her long raven locks cut to just above her collarbone. She thought the new do made her look older. “I’m sixteen,” she spat. “Jerk.”

“Ouch.” He put his hand to his chest in mock offense. “You sure told me.” He was now almost right in front of her, that steely gaze from the dance floor aimed at her again. “Maybe you have some power, but you have no idea the kinds of predators that lurk, ready to take advantage of your overconfidence in thinking you’re the shit. And yes, to answer your earlier question, I will *rat you out*. Go home, kid. Wash that clown makeup off your face, and stop acting like a brat.” With that, he stepped away from her and went back inside the club.

It didn’t matter. She had no snarky retort to snipe at him, anyway. She was angry... so fucking angry to be spoken to that way, but also humiliated. She felt the burning everywhere—her cheeks, her throat, her gut. The confidence she had felt earlier, after the plethora of admirers and drink-buyers, wilted. She now felt like the little girl playing dress up he accused her of being.

*And wearing too much fucking makeup!*

She hadn’t even realized she’d balled her hands up into fists until she felt the sting of her nails digging into her skin.

“There you are,” Raina said as she stepped outside. “I was wondering where you— What happened? You look like you’re

about to cry.”

Like she'd give him the satisfaction of her tears.

“I'm fine,” she said, finally unclenching her fists.

“I just passed that guy in the hallway. The one you called a dick. Did he hurt you?”

Holly shook her head. “No.”

“But he upset you?”

She shrugged.

“And so... what?”

Again, Holly shrugged. “What do you mean ‘what?’”

“Holls, I've never seen you this upset. You're a fucking powerful-ass witch, and you're just going to let some douchebag hurt you?” Raina pursed her lips and shook her head. “No fucking way!”

“I know what you're thinking, but you know as well as I do that there are consequences to revenge hexes... Karma, for one. Not to mention, it's dark magic, Raina. It's unpredictable, the way it works.”

“You can't see what you look like right now,” her friend said, placing her hands on Holly's shoulders. “I'd say *Karma* would understand.” Raina didn't wait for Holly's response before she continued with, “Now all we need is something of his.”

Raina began pacing. Holly could practically see the wheels spinning in her head. Meanwhile, harsh spoken words replayed in her mind over and over, on some kind of loop.

*Maybe you have some power*, he had said. He had no idea just how much.

At that moment, she knew exactly what to take. She'd call to it, draw it to her, and it would come. All she needed was to get a little closer.

"Let's go," she said to Raina.

When they got back inside, Holly searched him out and spotted the dickhead standing somewhere in the vicinity of the exit, talking to a bunch of other ridiculously large males. Perhaps one of them was the bouncer he had threatened to tattletale on her to. Not that it mattered now. She and Raina were leaving, and his proximity to the exit made it that much more convenient.

"I know what to take," she told Raina.

She got within a few feet. They locked gazes. The words came out of her in barely a whisper—a puff of air that wouldn't even sound like words, not even to shifter ears. She saw his disinterest at first, then his momentary widening of the eyes as he no doubt sensed a shift in the environment around him.

Then she was gone.

"Did you get it?" Raina asked when they got outside. She hadn't even glanced in the direction of the hot bouncer guy.

"I got it."

## CHAPTER 1



*T*hirteen years later...

Holly sat in her car, clutching the steering wheel. It had been several years since she had last seen her step-cousin. Not that she didn't like her; they just never had the opportunity of proximity to really get to know one another. Two towns over in upstate New York might as well be another planet when you're a kid.

Though Holly's Grandpa Charlie loved her grandmother fiercely and stayed married to her until she passed, it wasn't until he met Rose, Ivy's grandmother, that he finally found his true mate. The last time she had seen Ivy was when Rose threw a surprise birthday party for her grandfather a few years ago. This meeting, however, would be different from a simple family gathering. She was nervous. Feeling guilty by association, though in truth, she had no reason to be. Not in this instance, anyway. Now was definitely not the time to battle demons of her own making.

Finally, she managed to pry herself away from the safety of her vehicle and went into the little pub where her cousin had suggested they meet. It wasn't quite happy hour just yet, but the place was already starting to fill up.

She spotted her cousin seated in a booth in the far corner of the pub.

“It’s good to see you, Ivy,” Holly said when she reached her table.

Ivy stood and gave her a hug. “You too. It’s been too long.”

They sat across from one another in the booth, an awkward silence between them until Ivy finally spoke.

“I just want you to know I’m glad you called.” She placed a hand over Holly’s and gave it a quick squeeze. “I don’t blame you for anything.”

“I wanted to call sooner. I just...” *didn’t know what to say.*

“I thought about reaching out to you as well, but I thought I was the last person you’d want to hear from,” Ivy said sadly.

Holly shook her head. “I don’t blame you either, Ivy. Raina tried to kill you, and she killed your best friend—her true mate.” Holly nearly choked on the words with how unbelievable it all sounded when she actually said them aloud.

Holly had had no idea Ivy had moved to Manhattan earlier in the year or the reason why. The first she’d heard about it was after Raina had already been sentenced to death. The rest of the details followed via her grandfather filling her in. It turned out that Raina had used a poison of her own design to kill Ben, the mate who rejected her after she continued down her path of practicing dangerous dark magic. Holly had known Raina liked to dabble in it and figured it was perhaps Raina’s way of making up for what she believed were her inadequacies with her powers. What Holly couldn’t even begin to fathom about her former best friend was that such darkness had lived inside her. She would have succeeded in killing Ivy as well if

Ivy hadn't been a step ahead of her, searching for evidence that her best friend had been murdered by Raina.

"I keep thinking if only Raina and I hadn't lost touch... maybe I could have—"

"Don't do that to yourself, Holly," Ivy cut in. "*I* kept thinking if only I had followed my gut and butted into Ben's relationship. If only I had checked in on him sooner after their breakup. The *if-onlys* will pile up and suffocate you."

If only it was that easy to put those thoughts out of her mind.

Although she wondered what she could have said to Raina to steer her away from her destructive path. Was she any better than Raina? Holly may not be a murderer, but what she did all those years ago was unforgivable, and she'd be paying for it for the rest of her life.

The waiter came by to take their drink order, and they each ordered a beer.

"I can't be sorry that she's dead after everything she did." There was no harshness in her tone. "But I am sorry that you have to mourn the loss of someone who was your friend."

"Thank you." Holly let Ivy know she hadn't even been aware Raina had found her true mate, let alone that it was Ivy's best friend. If she had known anything was amiss between them, she would have intervened.

Ivy's brows shot up in surprise. "Why wouldn't she tell you she'd found a mate?"

*Maybe because she felt sorry for me. Because she knew I'd never have one.* Just like Holly had always downplayed how powerful she really was in front of Raina, but she couldn't say all this to Ivy. Not even her own family knew what she had

lost. Instead, she told Ivy what was as close to the truth as she could. A year older than Holly, Raina had graduated high school first and gone off to college. Holly went to college on the other side of the continent, and the two of them grew apart over the years, touching base infrequently. Holly had moved to Manhattan shortly after college and hadn't seen Raina until a few months ago when she showed up on her doorstep.

“She told me she wanted a seat on the Council,” Holly said. Raina had told her it was about time witches had a place on the Supernatural Council of New York City, or the SCNYC, as it was more commonly referred to. Ivy held that position now as a liaison.

“There was something off about Raina, though, when she came to see me. Maybe if I—”

“Don't,” Ivy interrupted. “You said yourself you hadn't seen her in years, and she kept you in the dark. Did she give you any indication she was up to something?”

The waiter brought their beers. “Can I get you anything else?”

“We're good for now,” Ivy said. “Thank you.”

“Raina only stopped by for a few minutes,” Holly told her. “She wanted me to know she had just moved here and hoped we would resume our friendship after she got settled in.”

Holly remembered acquiescing, though deep down, she associated their friendship with making the biggest mistake of her life. Raina was the only other person in the world who knew what happened and what it had cost Holly. She'd had no idea it would be the last time she would see Raina.

“I hope that you and I can be friends,” Ivy stated, compassion in her eyes. “I'll understand if you're not ready,

but—”

“I’d like that.” Though Holly had been living in the city for years, she didn’t have many friends, not close ones, anyway. She’d always kept everyone at a distance. Maybe it was time she tried living for once, not just existing. Her grandparents had been married in the human sense, not mated, and they were happy. Perhaps one day, Holly could be, too.

The two women clinked glasses.

“How’s Trina doing?” Ivy asked.

While Holly only moved a hundred miles or so away from her demons, her sister Caitrina decided to move to the other side of the planet to get away from hers. Other than that...

“She’s good. We Facetimed this morning.”

“How does she like living in Australia?”

“Oh, she loves it.” Her sister worked at an animal sanctuary and couldn’t stop gushing over all the kangaroos and koalas she got to hang out with every day. Trina definitely loved animals more than people. Most of the time, Holly couldn’t blame her.

“You must miss her.”

“I do, but I’m happy that she’s happy.”

Trina hadn’t been the same after her tour in the United States Supernatural Military Branch. The secret USSMB combined all branches of military and consisted of optional two-year, four-year, or six-year tours, depending on assignments.

Holly and Ivy caught up some more on the goings-on of their families until the pub really started to fill up, and a stupidly attractive man approached their table with a bright



smile aimed at Ivy. Golden brown hair, striking green eyes, and an adorable light spattering of freckles across his nose and upper cheeks.

Ivy stood to greet him. “How’d it go?” she asked as he put his arms around her and kissed her forehead.

“Slam dunk,” he replied, giving her a cheeky wink.

Turning to Holly, Ivy said, “Holly, this is my mate, Theo.”

Holly took his proffered hand and shook it. “So nice to finally meet you.” She’d heard about him from her grandfather, of course. He was a top-notch attorney, one of New York’s best. Ivy now worked at the firm he, his sister, and their mother owned.

“Likewise. Ivy’s told me a lot about you.” His smile was warm and genuine and not at all accusatory as she’d feared it would be. She definitely felt some relief.

Theo slid into the booth next to Ivy, and the three of them chatted for a bit.

“I should get going. I’m sure you two crazy kids want some alone time,” Holly said, when she finished her beer.

“Nonsense,” Ivy said, and Theo nodded in agreement. “Please stay. We have some friends meeting us. You’ll love them.”

Several pitchers of beer later, and Holly couldn’t have agreed more. Ivy and Theo’s friends, Dante and Daphne, another mated couple, and Daphne’s best friend Jessie, were a riot. They liked to take shifter and witch stereotypes and exaggerate them before debunking them. As Daphne, who also worked with Ivy and Theo, had put it, *bunking* them was way more fun.

Ivy gave as good as she got. “At least now I have a partner in crime,” she said, giving Holly a wink.

“Ooh, what about hexes?” Jessie asked. “I know several guys I’d like to see break out in boils.”

Holly stiffened. Ivy scrunched her brows together in concern for her and mouthed the words, *are you alright?*

Holly didn’t have to wonder what look Ivy must have seen on her face, but she waved it off as nothing. Instead, she kept her tone light.

“Better be careful with those. They tend to bite you in the ass.” She paused for dramatic effect. “Like literally.”

“What?” Jessie gasped.

Ivy just shook her head and pressed her lips together to suppress her smile. Theo cocked his head and furrowed his brows, as if trying to picture that actual scenario.

“Yeah, the boils may personify and chase you, each and every one of them, until they get a good bite of your ass,” Holly deadpanned.

Jessie’s jaw dropped, and Holly could no longer hold in her laughter at her aghast expression. The rest of the table burst out laughing—all but Jessie. She shoved Holly’s shoulder playfully.

“You’re an *ass*.” She turned to Ivy. “I like her.”

As rowdy as they all were, the pub got even rowdier when a group of firefighters from Ladder 1135—the all-dragon shifter firehouse of Manhattan—showed up. They took up the two large reserved tables not far from their booth, though a couple of seats remained empty.

Dante, who sat in a chair at the head of their booth, stood up. “Captain Kaponno, my man.” He and the even larger captain did that one arm half-handshake, half-bro hug.

“Dayum,” Jessie whispered in her ear. “Holy Goddesses of all that are dragon shifters. I think they only come in ridiculously extra-large sizes.”

Jessie wasn’t kidding. As tall and as beefy as the gorgeous men they were seated with were, these dragon shifters were even larger. And as quietly as Jessie thought she had whispered this fact to her, Captain Kaponno still heard her. He did a slow nod, biting down on his lower lip, and then waggled his eyebrows at her impishly suggestive. Jessie burst out laughing.

“Not a word of a lie,” the captain teased. “You should see how big my dragon is.”

The entire table burst out laughing, as well as the occupants of the captain’s tables. Jessie’s was a snort laugh, which caused her to laugh even harder.

Holly’s curiosity was definitely piqued at seeing the actual dragon... mostly. She had met plenty of shifters since living in the city, including some of the people she worked with—a witch-owned business that did not tolerate exclusivity—but she’d never actually seen a shifter in their animal form. Seeing a dragon in all its glory, so to speak, would probably be a thing of beauty.

Introductions were made, for her and Jessie’s benefit, anyway. The captain already knew everyone else. He was on the SCNYC together with Dante, Theo’s mom, and now Ivy. Holly could have sworn she saw a little spark between the dragon and wolf shifter before he went to rejoin his table.

A waitress came over to the captain's table to take their order.

"We're still waiting on two more," the captain informed her. "They're just parking. But we'll start off with a few pitchers."

The two men they were waiting on strolled in a few minutes later, and yep, they were also gigantic. The one she saw in profile with unruly dark brown hair had to be at least six foot five, and the redhead behind him was even taller. There was something familiar about the brown-haired one. Holly stared until he finally turned around. Their gazes locked, and he tilted his head ever so slightly, as if trying to place her.

Holly turned away abruptly.

"What's wrong?" Ivy asked.

"What? N-Nothing." Her cheeks flamed, and her heart skipped a beat.

"Do you know one of them?"

She gave a quick shake of her head, shrugged her shoulders, and pressed her lips together, probably looking like a jittery cartoon character. She chanced another quick peek at him and found him still staring, so she quickly turned away again. Older, impossibly even more attractive now that the boyishness had grown rugged. It was definitely *him*. The man responsible for thirteen years-worth of resentment. When she was being honest with herself, however, she knew the fault was her own.

*Of all the bars...*

So, now she knew what kind of shifter he was. No wonder she had sensed something elemental about him that night at the club. Dragons could breathe fire, after all. She willed

herself not to look at him the rest of the night, but there were a few unavoidable instances, like when the captain was speaking to their table. It would have been rude not to look over and *he*—Baudin, as she heard him addressed, assumedly by his last name—was sitting next to Captain Kaponno. She noticed the fine captain stealing glances at Jessie quite a few times. Holly dutifully listened—or at least appeared to be listening—nodding and laughing where appropriate, and concentrated really hard to make as little eye contact with Baudin as possible.

Although she found herself uncomfortable the rest of the night, she really was having a great time getting to know Ivy's friends and regretted having to be the first one to leave. She'd had a long day at work and with the emotional conversation she'd had with Ivy, coupled with a reminder of a time in her life she had wished so badly to forget. She was spent.

She made lunch plans with Ivy and accepted an invite to a girls' day with Ivy, Daphne, and Jessie. She said, "Nice meeting you," to Kaponno on her way out and an awkward pressing of the lips together acknowledgment to his table mates.

When she finally stepped outside to the cool brisk air, she let out a relieved breath. Maybe their paths wouldn't cross again, but she had a sinking feeling that would not be the case.

## CHAPTER 2



A few minutes later, the door to the pub opened behind her and out *he* stepped.

*Of course.*

Holly glanced up at him briefly before turning to her phone. *Stupid Uber.* It was still six minutes out. Not unusual for a Friday night, but tonight, she wished she hadn't consumed so much alcohol so she could drive herself home. She thought she'd be meeting Ivy for one drink. One drink turned into too many to count. Not that she was drunk, but the buzz was strong within her. She'd have to come back for her car tomorrow.

Baudin started to walk away, then suddenly stopped and doubled back to her. "I left my phone in the car," he said, lifting his hand and gesturing with his thumb pointing behind him. "I was just going to go get it, but I can give you a ride if you want." He stepped closer to her and held out his hand. "I'm Austin, by the way."

*Look at him. All politeness now.* His voice was deeper, a lovely baritone, and less harsh than she remembered. Those damn eyes of his were exactly how she remembered, though. Translucent blue crystals, framed by thick lashes and a little

beauty mark at one of the outer corners. *Damn him! He only got hotter.*

He looked expectantly at her—an eyebrow raised. Holly realized she had remained silent and held her hands at her sides for longer than proper etiquette would normally allow. She took his hand and shook it briefly.

“Holly.” A light tingling sensation shot through her hand after she pulled it away.

“So?”

Right. He had asked if she wanted a ride home.

“Really? You don’t mind?” Her voice was pure sugar. “I live all the way out on Long Island. That’d be great.”

He opened his mouth to speak, then shut it quickly, looking a bit stunned. Holly bit the inside of her cheek, trying not to laugh at his shocked expression.

“I’m just kidding,” she said, putting him out of his misery. “I live nearby and already called an Uber. Thanks, though.” She looked down at her phone. *How the fuck is it seven minutes away now!* Meanwhile, Austin hadn’t moved. She looked up at him again.

He wore an amused smirk. “Have we met before?”

*Yes. And you were horrible to me.* “No.”

“You just look familiar.”

“You don’t.” Holly gave a nonchalant one-shoulder shrug. She wasn’t sure what was worse at this point—him remembering or forgetting how he had humiliated her. *Nope. Definitely worse if he remembered.* It wasn’t exactly something she ever wanted to rehash.

“Well, it was nice meeting you, Austin,” she said, perhaps a bit too dismissively.

He nodded, taking the hint. “Nice meeting you, too, Holly.” Then he was walking away from her.

She had to mentally chide herself for liking the way he said her name... and the way he walked... and the back of him. She liked it all way too much for her liking.

Naturally, he was back within two minutes, his phone in hand, and she had five minutes left to wait. She threw him a sheepish smile.

“Still here.” *This isn't awkward at all.*

He smiled back, a big toothy grin. Her heart may have thumped just a little. She hadn't seen a genuine smile from him the last time they'd met.

“Um. I think the driver had to reroute,” she said, attempting to abate the awkward silence.

“I'll wait with you.”

She sighed. “Look at you all chivalrous. I think I'll be okay. I've got my witchy powers,”—she wiggled her fingers on her free hand for emphasis—“to keep me safe.”

“What can say? I'm a chivalrous guy.” His smile turned roguish. “And I find you amusing.”

“Oh really? I amuse you?” *What's happening?* Were they actually flirting? Her cheeks felt hot, and her traitorous face seemed to want to grin. “I'll be sure to come up with some more comedic skits for next time.”

They were standing too close. “I think that's for you,” Austin said, jutting his chin out in the direction behind her.



Holly looked at the car and then down at her phone. Yep. Black Toyota with the correct license plate.

Austin surprised her again by walking her to the car and opening the door for her. “I sure hope there’s a next time.” This was immediately followed by another breathtaking mischievous grin. Before he shut the door, he leaned in and said, “Oh, and Holly?”

“Mhm?”

“I would have driven you to Long Island.”

She sent up a silent prayer to the elemental goddesses.

*Please don't let him be one of the twelve firefighters I'm photographing on Monday.*

## CHAPTER 3



“*W*hy the fuck did I agree to this?” Austin grumbled.

“Suck it up, buttercup,” Kapono chided, then clapped him on the back. “It’s for a good cause.”

He wasn’t arguing with that.

“Do we have to be dressed like this?” He was shirtless, clad only in pants and boots from his bunker gear. There were a few props nearby—axes, hoses, and some helmets.

*What the fuck kinda poses are they going to make me do with those?*

“Your shirtless bodies are what’s going to sell a lot of these calendars,” came a soft feminine voice behind him. He recognized the owner immediately. She had been on constant replay in his mind all weekend.

“Holly, so good to see you again, doll face,” Kapono greeted. He walked right up to her and lifted her off her feet in a tight hug, making Austin bristle. “You must be *the* Ms. Campbell I’ve been hearing so much about. The one with the magic eye and magic lens.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere,” Holly stated playfully. She was beaming at his captain.

“What are you growling at, Baudin?”

He hadn't realized he was. Probably because as much as he loved Kapono like a brother, there was a part of him that wanted to maim him for continuing to have his hand on Holly. On Friday, he had been drawn to her in an almost visceral way. He'd never had that reaction to anyone. There was also something familiar about her that he couldn't quite place, something niggling at the back of his mind as if they had met before. At first, he had thought she seemed disinterested, but he hadn't missed her little heart flutter, the hitch in her breath, or the way she had stared at his lips when she had been seated in the Uber.

“Oh, it's probably at me,” Holly stated with a dismissive wave of her hand. “I bring out all kinds of ire in him.”

*What an odd thing to say.*

A fun banter, a little flirting, as far as he was concerned, was all that had been exchanged between them. He wondered where that came from.

“Really?” Kapono asked, eyebrows raised.

“I'm growling at my outfit,” Austin deflected.

He wanted to beat his chest and growl when Kapono asked for a private word with her. They stepped far enough away and spoke low, so shifter ears would not eavesdrop on their conversation.

Holly threw her head back and laughed at something Kapono said.

“I knew it,” Austin managed to hear her say.

She then took out her phone and typed something. A few seconds later, she showed Kapono her phone, he took out his,

and *what the ever-loving-fuck*, he typed something in *his* phone. *Her fucking phone number?*

“Wow!” came Colin’s voice beside him. “Lucky son of a bitch.” He jutted his chin out to where Holly and the captain were standing. “She’s a babe. Too bad her assistant is a bit of a bumbling idiot. He keeps knocking things over.”

“You think he’s asking her out?” Austin pretty much tuned out the rest of what Colin had said. He was more focused on the sick twisting in his gut at the moment.

“Wouldn’t you? She’s hot.”

Holly was more than hot. She was downright gorgeous with silky waves of raven hair down her back, big blue eyes that crinkled in the corners when she had gotten all cheeky with him the other night. Her full lips had beckoned for him to taste, to bite. She was fairly tall, yet deliciously petite compared to him. He had imagined, on more than one occasion this weekend, about wrapping her long legs around him. Though her body may have been reacting to him, she seemed quite aloof.

“You don’t think she’s a bit standoffish?” Austin asked.

Colin’s eyes shot up in surprise. “Nah, she’s a sweetheart. Some of the guys and I talked to her earlier. She’s got some great ideas.”

Perhaps she was just standoffish with him. He had some time today to figure her out.

Kapono and Holly returned, and she was all business.

“We’re going to do the solo shots first.” She went over to get her camera. Her assistant came up behind her, nearly knocking her over when she started to take a step back.

“Ryder!” She gave an exasperated huff. “I need you over there.” She pointed to the left of the big backdrop in the center of the warehouse. She instructed him to take photos of the background and to give her a wide berth as she moved around. Apparently, the guy was new. Also very apparent, was the little pup was completely into her, making moony eyes at her when she wasn’t looking.

“Mr. January, you’re up.”

Kapono strutted over to the background as if he was the goddamned king of the world, a goofy grin plastered on his face.

“I got her number, Jones,” he whispered to his lieutenant, aka, Mr. September.

Austin had the sudden urge to shift and fly her out of there. What the hell was wrong with him? He barely knew her. Stomping on his jealousy, he’d decided to pack that away for later. Colin had been right about Holly having some great ideas. The background had been rigged to shoot flames up behind Kapono. The flames would go up, then safely ebb. The cavalry was here to contain it.

“Awesome, Jared.” She said, clicking away on her camera.

So, they were on a first-name basis now?

“Give me a smolder.” She moved this way and that with the utmost grace, then she got closer to *Jared* and got down on her knees.

*Fuck!* He probably was not the only one sporting a hard on.

*Boom!* Fire shot up from behind, forming a cloud over her and the captain. While two of his buddies controlled it from the sidelines, Holly kept snapping away, eventually lying on

her back while Kapono posed from above. When she got what she needed, she got up and walked toward Austin, then looked at him expectantly when she reached him.

“What’s up?”

“I need the axe.”

“Oh, right.” He had been blocking the prop table. He moved out of her way.

Instead of reaching for the axe, she surprised him.

“You wanna see?” Without waiting for a response, she got closer to him and showed him some of the photos on her camera. “Pretty cool, huh?” She was beaming, the first genuine smile that was aimed at him.

“You’re very talented,” he said, and he meant it. Kapono looked fearless and a force to be reckoned with as the voluminous fire cloud hung over him.

“Thank you.” A shy smile this time, and cheeks suddenly tinted with the loveliest shade of pink. She took an axe from the table and handed it to him. “You’re up, Mr. February.”

Austin started to walk to the spot already vacated by Kapono but stopped midway. He wanted it out of the way. He turned back to her.

“So, you and the captain, huh? I heard him say he got your number.”

She tilted her head in confusion for a moment before a sly smile formed on her face. “I think you’ll have to ask the captain that.”

She started to walk away from him, but he gently touched her arm.

“I’m just looking out for him.”

Her sly smile immediately morphed into a tightened jaw. “What’s that’s supposed to mean?”

*Fuck!* He offended her. “That didn’t come out right.”

“Nothing out of your mouth does,” she snapped.

Apparently, he’d hit a nerve. She walked toward the backdrop, and he dutifully followed.

Positioning him the way she wanted, her hands touching his bare skin, he could hear the rapid beat of her heart. Their eyes met while her hand was still on his shoulder.

“No,” she said a little hoarsely. “I gave him my friend Jessie’s number. She was at the pub on Friday.”

The invisible weight pressing on his chest lifted.

Holly cleared her throat and stepped back, camera in hand.

“When the fire shoots up around you, you’ll take a step through it. Hold the axe like you’re about to swing.”

He nodded, his eyes transfixed on the woman in front of him. She wore tight blue jeans and a white button-down shirt with several of the top buttons open, revealing a black tank top underneath. The flush on her cheeks spread to the visible skin on her chest.

“Um... can you pull your pants down just a little?” she asked, her voice husky.

He’d happily strip naked if she asked. He complied with her request, revealing a bit of his V, and Holly nodded, satisfied. She paused for a beat too long, biting her bottom lip. He thanked the bagginess of his pants for hiding what she was doing to him.

A little ogling aside, he mentally cheered knowing she hadn't reacted to the captain this way or any of the other guys, for that matter.

The *boom* came again, and she instructed him to step forward. He imagined it would appear as if he walked through fire, which is something he and the other firefighters could in fact do.

Another *boom*, then a sudden crash. Austin froze. Somewhere in the distance he heard Holly chastise her assistant, the words sounding as if spoken underwater, his mind no longer at the warehouse.

\* \* \*

*HELICOPTER BLADES WHIPPED around him as he tried to force his body to move. The paralytic specifically designed to be used against shifters was coursing through him and his team. If he could just shift, the dragon part of him would burn it all way. He was close.*

*Two years, he and his dragon unit spent on this mission to infiltrate the bastards selling this stuff on the black market. His team had swarmed in on the perpetrating hyena shifters holed up in a cave and decimated them. Unbeknownst to them, the leader had already gotten away.*

*They didn't even see it coming. The bomb inside the cave exploded. The force of the explosion wouldn't kill them, but the poison released in the gas surely would without a shift. That nasty paralytic infused in the gas prevented a shift.*

*Austin had been the farthest away from the blast, so paralysis had not yet set in. He dragged his team members one*



*by one out of the cave until his body locked and he fell to the ground. All but one member remained unaccounted for.*

*“Fowler,” he yelled.*

*Nothing. He lay on his back, angry. He would not fucking die this way. The leader looked down on him from his helicopter, a smug smile on his face. Austin snapped. Not fully paralyzed he forced a shift. His black dragon, twice the size of the bastard’s helicopter, roared his rage. He let loose his fire on his team, the healing properties of which would soon force their shift.*

*The hyena’s smug smile faded.*

*Austin ascended. When he reached the helicopter, he pulled the bastard out with his large claws and tore him in two. He then swatted the helicopter out of the sky in a fiery blaze into the ocean, cases upon cases of the paralytic destroyed with it.*

*It was Austin’s turn to be smug until a horrifying realization dawned on him. He turned tail and flew back into the cave, releasing his fire as soon as he reached Fowler.*

*He was too late.*

*They gave him a fucking medal.*

*They gave a medal to a twenty two-year old arrogant little shit.*

*If he had just gone into the cave first...*

*\* \* \**

*“AUSTIN?”*

Austin snapped back to the present, confused by his surroundings for a moment. Holly was staring at him, compassion in her eyes, why he didn't know, but for some reason, it made him angry.

“Maybe you need to get another assistant,” he barked at Holly. “One that doesn't knock everything over at a professional photo shoot.” *Fuck!* Maybe her disdain for him was preemptive, as if somehow, she could sense he was a gruff bastard at times.

He was about to apologize when she quietly said, “You're done for now.” She averted her gaze and called out for Mr. March.

He'd apologize to her later and make sure to pull Ryder aside and apologize to him as well. The poor kid looked frightened of him. Like he could blame the young wolf for being clumsy around Holly. Most of the guys here were already half in love with her. As he watched her from the sidelines, she exuded such passion for her work. It wasn't just a job to her—something he could relate to. Being a firefighter wasn't just a job to him either—it was a calling and perhaps a saving grace.

There was a break after Mr. December and before the group photos.

She was scrolling on her phone when he approached her.

“I'm sorry, Holly. For earlier. I shouldn't have snapped at you.”

She put her phone away and stood. “Apology accepted,” she said, though she gave him a sad smile.

“Maybe I could make it up to you? Are you free for dinner?”

She hesitated before answering. “I don’t think... I mean, I can’t...”

He decided to put her out of her misery. Whatever sexual tension there was during his shoot was just that.

“It’s fine. No worries.”

“I should go set up for the group photo.”

After Holly stepped away, he heard snickering from the wolf pup, clearly reveling in his rejection.

Yeah, he’d be getting his apology... never.

## CHAPTER 4



*H*is first day off in three days, and Austin had to do a reshoot. There had been a glitch, apparently with some of his photos—*only* his photos.

“I’m so sorry to have to drag you in here on your day off, Firefighter Baudin,” Melanie, the owner of *Charmed, I’m Sure Photography* said. A petite southern transplant with cat eyeglasses, she led him into a room with plushy couches, avalanched with fluffy pillows.

“It’s no trouble,” he lied. Yet, if he was being honest with himself, he wanted to see Holly again. “Please call me Austin.”

“I just don’t know what happened.” Melanie’s eyes widened as she placed her hand to her chest. “Holly is usually such a professional. But I can assure you that we will still make the deadline for the calendar.”

Another woman, a feline shifter of some sort, entered the room carrying a tray of coffee and assorted cookies and pastries, placing them on the ottoman in front of him. She smiled seductively at him before she left the room. Not that he was conceited, but he was definitely not unaware of the effect he had on women. There was currently only one person who piqued *his* interest, though, and she was nowhere in sight.

“You really didn’t need to go to all this trouble,” Austin lied again. He was hungry, and the pastries looked amazing. Least they could do is feed him... and bring him Holly.

Melanie gave a wave of her hand just as he heard a bell jingle over the door from the entrance. He scented Holly before she entered the room carrying a few bags. Neither one of them greeted the other, but their gazes lingered.

“Holly, a word with you first,” Melanie said. Turning to Austin, she added, “We won’t be but a moment.”

The two women stepped inside an office and closed the door. He shamelessly eavesdropped as Holly’s boss lectured her on the importance of this job. Austin knew they were doing this for free, though it would garner great publicity for them.

“This account is a big deal, Holly.”

“I know. I’m sorry. It won’t happen again. I promise we can still make the deadline.”

“And you are positive there are no issues with the other photos.”

“Yes, they’re perfect.”

Holly and Melanie came back into the room, Holly still holding the bags.

“Some props,” she began, then she paused, worrying her bottom lip. “Melanie, perhaps Austin would feel more comfortable if one of the other photographers finished up his session.”

“No,” Austin and Melanie said at the same time, and the two women both glanced in Austin’s direction.

“I’m already comfortable with Holly,” Austin quickly added. Not a lie, per se, this time. More like a half truth. She seemed to want to shut him down at every turn, yet her body language spoke a different tune. The scent of her arousal during their photo shoot was undeniable and like the sweetest ambrosia. He had wanted to wrap her up in his arms and breathe her in.

“It’s settled then.” Melanie clapped her hands together, then added, “A different photographer won’t have the same look and feel as the rest of the photos.” She clapped again.

Austin was led away to a room to change in the same pants and boots from his bunker gear. He had no desire to walk around the studio shirtless, so he kept his t-shirt on until it was necessary for him to remove it. When he was done changing, he went off in search of Holly.

The door to her office was open. She was standing by her desk, bent over her laptop. Not wanting to simply barge in, he knocked on the entryway.

She looked up at him. “I’ll be ready for you in five minutes.”

Austin suppressed a smile. He didn’t think now was the time for inappropriate jokes.

“Take your time.” He didn’t mind so long as it meant being near her.

“Um. I’ve got some ideas how we can make it work without the actual fire.”

Now, he did step inside and walked over to stand beside her, using the excuse of wanting to see what she was looking at on her screen. Really, he just wanted to be near her.

“Ryder got some really good background shots I could use for your new ones.” Even Holly seemed surprised that the fumbling wolf actually had some talent.

“Here,” she beckoned, “see?” She then showed him how she tested out blending a background shot with “Mr. December” and it looked really cool.

He told her as much. So, he had to ask, “Why is it that only my photos had issues?”

“I... they...” She waved a hand to brush off his question.

Her eyes widened at his huge-ass grin.

“If you wanted to see me again, all you had to do was ask.”

Sudden hands on hips and pursed lips, Holly did not look happy with him.

*Uh oh!*

“Don’t flatter yourself.”

“What then?” He asked. She was definitely lying about something.

“Well, I certainly wouldn’t mess with my career or Melanie’s business simply because *I wanted to see you again*. I’d put on my big girl pants and ask you out.”

“I’d be okay with that.” *A man could hope.*

She rolled her eyes.

“Stop deflecting and answer the question, Holly.”

“Can’t you just let this go?”

Her almost pleading tone confused him. He shook his head. He was definitely not letting it go.

She breathed out a heavy sigh, punched a few keys on her laptop, and brought up his photos. It took him a minute to realize what he was looking at. There was no glitch. The effect she had wanted of him looking like he was walking through fire was captured. She clicked through dozens of photos of him and in all of them, every single one, he had that same dead look in his eye.

His flashbacks hadn't happened in a while and less and less frequently with each passing year after counseling. Every now and again, though, he'd still get lost in a past he couldn't change.

"I didn't think you needed anyone to see that," she said, barely above a whisper.

She covered for him. He wasn't sure what to say.

"My sister served two tours." She looked at him, not with pity, but with compassion. "I know that look. It's not easy what you do, but you do it anyway."

"You got in trouble for me."

Shrugging, she closed out of the images on her laptop, then walked toward the door.

"Whenever you're ready."

He followed her to the back, still shocked at what she did for him. *What a fucking sweetheart!*

A green screen-like background was set up for the photo shoot. He threw off his shirt to the side as soon as she asked him to step in front of it. He silently said a thanks to whoever decided there'd be no assistant today. It was just the two of them. After what she did for him, he was going to give her the best fucking photo shoot ever, no grumbling included.



Without being prompted, he lowered his pants a little, earning a sexy grin from Holly.

“No music?” he asked. Now that he thought about it, there was no music back at the warehouse a few days ago.

“I like to listen to the sounds around me. Helps me concentrate.” She held up a few props. A red plush heart, some fake flowers, and a stuffed dragon. He threw his head back and laughed at that last one. “Thought we’d improvise being that you’re Mr. February and we can’t use fire.”

“Who says?” He asked her to toss him the heart. He did a small shift, just in his hands, and with completely controlled flames, set an outline of the heart on fire. The half man, half dragon hands, a mixture of fingers and claws, were hidden beneath the flames.

Holly positively beamed at him. She then told him which way to maneuver the heart and began snapping away. She had no fear of the flames, complete trust in her eyes. Austin couldn’t help revel in the sparks that surged between them. The way she bit down on her bottom lip when she got close to him, the way she touched an arm, a shoulder, tilted his chin, made him want to take her right there in the studio and whoever walked in be damned.

He wanted her so badly.

When they were done, Holly went to Melanie’s office to show her the results. He heard the woman *ooing* and *aahing* as he changed back into jeans and a t-shirt. Before long, every employee was there behind the desk, ogling his photos. He saw some of them fanning themselves as he walked by. He decided to hide in Holly’s office until they were done.

“You’re a hit,” she said, strolling back into her office and closing the door behind her.

“I just stood there and looked pretty.” He gave her a wink. “You did all the work.”

The sound of Holly’s soft giggle sent warmth to the middle of his chest.

“I wonder if you ever actually think before you say those things, or you just say them on purpose.”

“What did I say? It’s not my fault you have a dirty mind.” He stood. They were only inches apart. “But I like it.” When she didn’t move away from him, he lifted his hand and cupped her cheek. “Thank you, Holly. For what you did for me.”

When she still didn’t move, he closed the distance between them and kissed her. Softly at first, just lips tasting each other for the first time. Then he wanted more. Pulling her to him, he threaded one hand in her hair, his other hand on her back, and deepened their kiss. She moaned into his mouth when his tongue slid in to touch hers.

Her scent was all around him. He couldn’t get enough of the taste of her as their tongues entwined. She wrapped her arms around his neck, needing more of him as well, both of them panting heavily.

And then abruptly, she pulled away.

“I can’t.” She sounded breathless.

He needed a moment to catch his breath as well and to process the fact that, once again, the signals she was sending him were mixed.

“What am I missing here, Holly?”

She closed her eyes and slowly shook her head.

He didn't like the distance, so he came closer but didn't touch her.

"Is there someone else?"

"No," she breathed.

"Then what is it?"

Silence.

"Look, I'm not being arrogant here. I know there's something between us. I can feel it." He took it as a win that she didn't deny it. "Tell me you didn't feel something just now." When she still didn't answer, he tilted her chin up so that she would look at him. "Tell me, honestly, that you don't feel something for me."

"I can't."

He touched his forehead to hers, and she pulled away from him again. She looked like she was struggling with something, seemingly at war with herself.

"Holly, I haven't been able to stop thinking about you. From the moment we met, I felt drawn to y—"

"No, you didn't," she interrupted.

"I'll just wait for you to explain to me how *I* feel." He was getting frustrated.

Wordlessly, she went around to the front of her desk and took something out of the top drawer. She came back around and placed it in front of him on the desk. A silver lighter. He recognized it immediately—an eagle in flight in the front, a little dent in the corner, an etching in the back shaped like lightning. It had been over a decade since he'd lost it or rather had it stolen from him one night by a raven-haired Sabrina, the Teenage—

“That was you? *You* stole my lighter?”

He looked at Holly, her deep blue eyes mirroring the hurt and sadness he saw in a young girl he had berated all those years ago. That’s why she had looked so familiar to him.

“God, Holly. I’m so sorry.” He reached out to touch her, but this time she not only pulled away, she walked around to put a desk between them. “I was such a miserable bastard back then.” She was about to speak, but he held up a hand to stop her. “It’s not an excuse, just an explanation. I was angry all the time, always lashing out. You were in my crosshairs. I’m so sorry.”

“How long had it been since you’d been back from your tour?” she asked knowingly.

“A month.” He’d gone into counseling and joined the fire academy shortly after that.

She nodded in understanding.

He didn’t want to be let off the hook so easily, and some parts were still hazy.

“Please tell me what I said to you so I can properly apologize.”

“It was a long time ago, Austin. I don’t want to rehash it. It was humiliating enough the first time.”

*Humiliating?* He shut his eyes. Yes, now he remembered her anger at him as well.

“You were the cutest guy I had ever seen, and you came to my rescue. I didn’t need it, but you didn’t know that. It was like a scene from a romance novel. I thought you wanted to dance with me.”

He remembered seeing an underage girl on the dance floor, trying to get away from a creep who had been pawing women against their will all night. It took everything in him not to pulverize the human male right then and there.

“You rejected me, of course,” she went on. “Rightfully so. I was underage, after all.”

When he opened his eyes, he saw unshed tears pooling in hers. She worried her bottom lip and fidgeted with her hands, cracking a line right in the center of his heart in the process.

“And you were right about me being dressed way too provocatively and hanging out at a club I had no business being in at my age.”

*Fuuck!* He remembered something along the lines of telling her she wore clown makeup, then calling her a little girl, and telling her to go home.

“Can you ever forgive me?”

“I forgive you, Austin.” She paused for a beat. “But...”

He’d heard it in her voice that there would be a *but* a coming. He waited patiently as she collected her thoughts.

“I was just a kid. You have no idea how your words affected me. And that night I...” She shook her head. “I can’t.”

He wouldn’t push for more. He wanted nothing more than to comfort her, to wrap her up in his arms again and shield her from all the bad things in the world—except it was he who hurt her. He concluded the only comfort she needed right now would come with his absence.

“I wish I could go back and undo it.”

“If only,” was her reply.

Putting the lighter in his pocket, he walked to the door, hesitating when he opened it. He feared there would be nothing he could do to fix this. When he finally willed himself to move and was nearly out of the studio, he heard sniffing coming from Holly's office. That's when his heart, no longer just a crack in the middle, shattered into pieces.

## CHAPTER 5



“*W*e’ve got another one. Stop there,” Austin called out.

They’d just finished putting out one fire and were headed back to the station when he saw the smoke coming from the back alley of the Stripe Club. Yet another shifter-owned business with nuisance fires. This one took out the back alley exit by the time they got there and put it out. The owner, Konstantin Petrov, was grateful for the minimal damage. Not too shabby of him either for offering all the guys free drinks for the foreseeable future.

“No accelerant,” the captain began. “No real starting point, no scent of anyone recently being here, no rigs to set off timers, just like all the other ones.” He shook his head.

That made a total of eight shifter-owned businesses now. It started with two last week and escalated this week.

“You think these are just pranks?” O’Donnell chimed in. “Some kids being punks?”

“Maybe,” the captain said. “Or someone may be testing out the waters for something bigger.”

“They know what they’re doing,” Austin said. “And they know how to mask their scent.”

Just then, he thought he saw someone out of the corner of his eye. “Be right back. I thought I saw something.” He rounded the corner and saw a man briskly walking away.

“Hold it right there,” Austin yelled.

The guy ignored him, and Austin sprinted after him. When he rounded another corner to the front entrance of the club, the guy was already across the street. Austin froze in place when the suspect turned around.

“Fowler?”

It couldn't be. Lance Fowler was dead—dead because Austin went after the hyena and didn't get back to him in time. The image of Fowler's dead body—flat on his back, hands curled in, eyes frozen open, and skin cold as ice—would be forever etched into his memory.

Austin turned to the sound of another fire truck headed their way. When he turned back, the Lance doppelgänger was gone. He ran across the street and around the block and found nothing.

“Baudin!” the captain called out to him when he reentered the back alley. “Anything?”

“No, sir.” He must have imagined it, he thought. Someone resembling Fowler triggered a flashback. “The guy was gone by the time I reached the front. No sign of him. Only saw his back briefly.” That was a better explanation than telling his captain he saw a dead guy.

“Let's get some patrols going.” He called it in. “Possible suspect on foot.”

Austin definitely needed to get his head back in the game, pronto. Someone was targeting shifters, or their businesses at least, and he wanted to know why. More importantly, he



wanted to stop whoever was doing this before someone actually got hurt. Dragon shifters may be impervious to fire, but other shifters were not.

Neither were witches.

The idea of anything happening to her... he couldn't even go there. Then another thought occurred to him. Was someone trying to mess with *him*?

When they got back to the fire station, Kapono ordered him to get some sleep. "You look like shit, man!"

"Thanks." He felt like it. He'd barely slept since last week, unable to stop thinking about Holly and how they had left things. When he did manage to fall asleep, he dreamed of her, their kiss, and taking it further. Her scent had been all around him, her face in ecstasy as he pleased her. Those nights were pleasant, only to wake up to bitter disappointment. Other nights, the dreams would morph into the two of them at a nightclub, only she was present-day Holly in those dreams. She'd look at him with such heartbreaking sadness, then just walk away.

Why had he been such a bastard to her? She had said that she'd forgiven him with sincerity in her voice, but would she be able to move past that night, to give them a shot without thinking back to the past? He wasn't so sure.

The next day brought another fire, a big one this time on the first floor of a warehouse. Two firetrucks carrying six firefighters in each came to the scene and a few police cars from the all-shifter 135 precinct. The place was engulfed in flames, unsteady. Something definitely went *boom* inside.

If human police officers and firefighters had joined them on the scene, they would have definitely suspected the

supernatural. Instead of hosing the place from the outside, the firefighters walked right in through the flames carrying their hoses and putting out the fires from the inside. They were dressed in full fireproof gear, mostly for show.

Austin inhaled. “Three shifters,” he called out, pointing to a room further in. “Alive, I think, but I smell blood.”

Austin, hose in hand, and Colin O’Donnell ran to the back.

“Propane.”

Austin also smelled it and yelled it back to the captain. It was chaos, beams falling, flames bursting, popping noises. He heard growling coming from the room the shifters were trapped in and broke apart a wall to get inside. He doused some of the flames, but the place could blow any second. A dark-haired shifter—smelled like a bear—cradled an unconscious blonde female in one arm. He was naked, his clothes shredded, indicating he had just shifted, desperation and pleading shone in his eyes. Another shifter lay dead with his head torn off. It wasn’t hard to read this scenario. Headless must have messed with the woman, who was clearly the bear’s mate.

Austin signaled for him to run to him. “Move it or lose it, Teddy,” he growled.

Teddy hustled, but another burst of flame exploded behind him.

“Fucking hell.” Austin ripped off his mask. He breathed in deeply, inhaling some of the nearby smoke and flames, clearing a path as the others worked outside the room. Austin then made sure the shifters were safe. Their wounds would be tended to once they were cleared by shifter EMTs.

He rejoined Colin in the room the shifters were held in. They needed the body as evidence.

“Does he look familiar to you?” O’Donnell asked.

“Holy shit. Isn’t that Evgeny Ivanovich, son of the former bratva boss?”

“Yep. Gone and messed with the wrong shifter.”

“And his mate,” Austin finished. Mates were sacred. It was a code all shifters and every member of the supernatural lived and died by.

After the fire was out, they worked on cleaning up all traces of shifter activity. Someone from the 135 and Captain Kaponov took a brief statement from Eduardo Valens, the grizzly bear shifter. Premeditated arson by headless Ivanovich, who had been obsessed with Valens’ mate Alina Petrova.

“She’s actually the sister of the owner of the Stripe Club,” the captain said. “Poor girl was kidnapped before by that damned bratva. Evgeny had been released on some technicality.”

Austin had found evidence that the bastard had rigged the room to blow. He then shot her and Valens.

After a night like this, Austin would have loved to have someone to go home to. He imagined only one woman, her bright eyes and cheeky smile flashing in his mind. He wanted to hold her tight and be thankful she was safe in his arms.

## CHAPTER 6



It had been two weeks since she last saw Austin. Two weeks since they shared a kiss that seared her lips and branded some part inside her. She kept trying to convince herself that not seeing him again was for the best, but the ache in her heart didn't seem to want to let her. That and the fact that seeing him tonight would be unavoidable. Not showing up to a charity dinner to benefit the families of the USSMB who lost their lives would be bad for business, especially given that she was the photographer of the calendar, which proceeds would go to the families. Melanie would probably fire her ass.

Holly was glad she and Ivy had made good on their promise to get together for lunch last week and again today for a spa day with Daphne and Jessie. Jessie would be attending the dinner tonight as well on the arm of one Captain Kapono.

“You don't seem that excited, Holly,” Jessie remarked. “You're telling me that not one of the hot firefighters you photographed revved up your engine?”

The four of them had finished with their massages and were seated in pedicure chairs—two on each side, across from each other.

Holly smiled sadly. “Maybe one.”

“Spill,” Jessie demanded.

In keeping with the promise she had made to herself about being more open and letting people in, she confided in the girls about what happened between her and Austin thirteen years ago and after the last photoshoot. She left out some of the finer details, like stealing lighters and Austin’s PTSD, and for Ivy’s sake, she didn’t mention that Raina had been the friend who snuck into the club with her.

“Wow. I would have punched him if I ever saw him again,” Jessie said.

Daphne nodded. “She would have.”

“No one’s punching anyone,” Ivy said. “So, how did you leave things off?”

“I guess we really didn’t.” She was upset. He left. “And we haven’t spoken since.”

“But the kiss was hot, right?” Jessie asked, waggling her eyebrows.

At Holly’s blush, they all started laughing. Kissing Austin had been better than any fantasy she could have come up with. It had been the culmination of her desire after their heated photoshoot.

“Based on what you told us,” Ivey began, “you both seem to really like each other. And you said you forgave him, right? Just talk to him.”

Talking to him might prove unavoidable tonight, considering they’d be seated at the same table. At least she’d have Jessie for moral support.

Several hours later, manicured and pedicured, primped and styled, Holly found herself staring into a bathroom mirror at

the catering hall where the dinner was being held. She had made a beeline for the restroom as soon as she arrived, nerves warring inside. She patted some cold water on the back of her neck and took a few deep calming breaths.

For starters, her work had never been on display like this before. She'd been a professional photographer for six years, a photographer for hire, with some of her work displayed in various studios she had worked for as a freelancer before coming on full time with Melanie. This, however, was bigger than anything she'd ever done. Her photos would be displayed tonight as if they were in an art gallery, making her feel on display as well.

Then there was the matter of seeing Austin again. Time did nothing but make her want him more. He'd looked horrified when he realized who she was. She could practically see into his mind as it played recall with the events from that night, and he looked truly penitent. She had meant it when she said that she forgave him, but what could they be to each other besides temporary?

His fate was not her own.

Jessie sauntered into the bathroom a few minutes later.

“There you are. You look amazing.”

“Thanks, Jessie. So do you.”

Holly may have gone the extra mile to look nice tonight. She'd actually gotten the dress last minute and had been planning on wearing a different dress entirely. When she'd gone to look for shoes and spotted the floor-length, maroon, mesh sequined dress with the long slit, she knew she had to have it. The spaghetti strap top revealed just enough classy cleavage. Completing the look, her hair was pulled back into a

long silky ponytail with a matching sparkly comb tucked into her hair.

She and Jessie exited the bathroom together. In the hallway that led to the grand dining room, she found the walls lined with the photographs she had taken, most of which ended up in the calendar. The rest were a bonus for display. One, in particular, was both in the calendar and would be prominently displayed at the studio after tonight. She thought back to taking that shot—the twelve firefighters all lined up together in front of a firetruck. While Holly had to take a quick call from Melanie, one of the guys—six-foot-six, red-headed Colin O’Donnell, aka Mr. May—was holding up a hose and decided to spray the other guys with it. Then Mr. December, in retaliation, went and got a hose, too, and all-out chaos ensued.

“Gotta call you right back,” she had told Melanie, an idea suddenly striking. She had surreptitiously picked up her camera and started photographing. After a while, she threw herself into the melee, the result of which was pure magic. This wasn’t some pandering for the camera. It was a beautiful camaraderie, and she captured the complete essence of it. Even Austin had come back to himself by then. Of course, she also didn’t mind the visual of water droplets sliding down twelve muscular torsos.

“So, what do you want us to do, dollface?” Kaponno had asked after the hose fight had died down.

“Nothing. You’re all done,” she had said to his wide-eyed expression.

“This is so freakin’ hot,” Jessie said, snapping Holly back to the present. She was looking at Mr. January when she spoke, of course—Kaponno.

They both moved on to Mr. February. Holly felt a thump in her chest. His seductive smirk in the photo was breath-stealing as he held the burning heart a few inches from his chest. Add to that the fire background she superimposed, and he looked like a mischievous God of fire. Jessie moved on to Mr. March while Holly lingered behind.

“You look absolutely stunning.”

Feeling his warm breath behind her, she involuntarily shut her eyes at his nearness. A thump turned into an embarrassing hammer. Opening her eyes, she turned around to face him. Clad in a simple, elegant black tuxedo, with a crisp white shirt, and solid black tie, he didn't smile, his gaze intense.

“You don't look so bad.” This time she got that sexy smirk, she liked to pretend he reserved only for her.

“You're nervous.”

Of course, she was nervous. She felt her cheeks stain red from embarrassment. Her heart was doing crazy somersaults in her chest, and he, with his shifter hearing, heard every rapid beat.

Austin lifted his hand as if to touch her, then quickly withdrew it.

“Don't be,” he said. “People have been raving about your photographs.”

That wasn't the current reason for her nerves, but she'd go with it.

“And its subjects, I'm sure.” In her peripheral vision, she saw a few people fanning themselves over by the group shot.

After another beat of staring, Austin asked if she was going inside. It hit her hard how much she had missed him



these last two weeks, having barely even known him.

“I’ll be a moment.” She needed time to catch her breath and to calm that damn yammering.

Before he turned to go, he threw her another devilish smirk. “See, we ended up in Long Island together, after all.”

And there went her traitorous heart again. He remembered.

Jessie was back at her side as soon as Austin walked away.

“Man, is it hot in here,” she said, fanning herself.

“Let’s go!” Holly said, shaking her head and looping her arm through Jessie’s.

When they entered the grand hall, they both waived to Captain Kapon, who was at the front of the room near the stage talking to the charity organizers. He and Jessie had arrived together. Holly had gotten a ride from Melanie and her husband. Everyone from the studio was in attendance tonight.

“Who’s that? I smell cougar.”

Holly followed Jessie’s line of site to where Stella, another photographer, was standing and talking to Austin. She remembered her fawning all over him back at the studio two weeks ago, and she did so now shamelessly.

“Cougar? She’s thirty,” Holly replied incredulously. “Barely a year older than me.”

Jessie threw her head back and laughed. “I meant as in *shifter*.”

“Oh, right. Duh!” *Shifter sense of smell*. “She’s a photographer I work with.” Stella would be sitting at the same table as her, along with Melanie and her husband, Austin,

Jessie, Captain Kapon, and three other firefighters, two of whom had dates.

Seeing Stella with her hand on Austin's arm, standing way too close, made Holly see red with a tinge of green. She was surprised by her reaction. The desire to remove Stella's hand from him was almost primal. Unfortunately, it looked like Holly would have to put up with seeing the two of them like that all night. Austin had hung his jacket on the back of a chair, and Stella was standing right next to the unoccupied chair to the right of him. Mr. December was already sitting to the left of Austin with his date.

Jessie had plans of her own, it seemed.

"Oh, my goodness, excuse me." Jessie fanned herself dramatically as she squeezed in between where Austin and Stella were standing and sat down in the empty seat next to Austin's.

"Are you alright?" Holly and Austin asked at the same time.

"Fine. Fine." She waved them off. "I think I forgot to eat today with all the excitement." She slid over one chair and pulled Holly closer to her. "Be a dear and sit next to me." She patted the now vacated seat near Austin and put on a fake pout. "I don't know anyone here besides you and Jared."

Before Holly even had a chance to respond, she was pulled into the chair. She didn't know whether to kill her new friend or treat her to another spa day. More likely, the latter.

Stella slinked away to go sit near Melanie, wearing a sour look. Meanwhile, Austin sat down, and Holly could tell he was trying to fight a smile.

Definitely the spa day.

Captain Kaponno was by Jessie's side in a flash.

"What happened? Are you okay?"

"Totally fine." Jessie's face was a picture of mock innocence.

"You haven't eaten anything today?"

"Well, not since lunch."

Now it was Holly's turn to fight a smile. Jessie was a character, and Holly liked the girl more and more.

"You freakin' had me worried, Jess. You looked like you were about to pass out." He pulled out his chair and sat down, taking her hand in his, then whispered in her ear. It was low, but not low enough for Holly to miss the word 'spanking.'

"Don't threaten me with a good time, Kaponno."

Suddenly, Jessie and Austin both tilted their bodies back a little to where they were facing each other behind Holly. She wondered what that was all about. Then Jessie and her captain were back in their own little bubble.

"It wouldn't have mattered where you sat tonight," Austin whispered in her ear. "I'd only be looking at you."

*Oh, my!*

Tapping on the microphone interrupted their second staring contest of the night. Fire Chief William Pevzner made the opening speech. It was a touching tribute to the families who lost loved ones, having lost a few himself. This cause was near and dear to his heart. More than a few firefighters had served, including Captain Kaponno, who he praised for being such a great leader.

The charity organizer spoke next, thanking people for donations. Holly felt a flush in her cheeks when the organizer mentioned her and asked everyone in attendance to give Holly a round of applause. The firefighters in the photos got an even bigger round of applause, along with whistles and a loud “Yeah, baby!” She saw Austin beaming at her and couldn’t help returning his smile.

He leaned in close. “Will you dance with me later?”

“Yes,” she breathed. She had wanted to dance with him since the first night they met.

Several speeches, a few courses, and two glasses of champagne later, Holly found herself once again in Austin’s arms. His hand splayed on the small of her back, one of hers on his arm, their joined hands, arms outstretched, were held just above the height of her shoulder while they swayed to a modern rendition of *Fly Me to the Moon*. She had the sudden urge to lay her head on his chest and be wrapped up in him but held back.

When she looked up at him, his gaze was intense, filled with longing and desire to match her own. There went her butterflies, fluttering all over, not a care in the world. Why did it have to feel so right being in his arms like this? Wanting him with an intensity she had never felt before?

“I love it when you blush,” he whispered, lingering by her ear.

He touched his forehead to hers and left it there until the song ended. Holding her hand, he led her back to her seat, with a promise of another dance before he excused himself to go fulfill his obligations this evening. He and the other eleven featured firefighters were posing for photos with tonight’s benefactors. Holly was relieved the catering hall’s in-house

photographers would be taking those, and she wouldn't have to witness Austin being groped or lusted after.

She needed a breather anyway after their dance and a trip to the bathroom. There was another occupant in the stalls when she got there. When she was finished, she went over to the sink to wash her hands and heard the stall behind her open, revealing Stella in the mirror.

"I'm going to ask Austin to dance," she announced without preamble.

Holly turned around and casually leaned against the sink, crossing her arms.

"What are you doing, Stella?"

"I have no idea what you mean." Stella's faux innocent expression said otherwise.

"I *mean*, we're not in high school. Don't be that girl." At Stella's silence, Holly continued. "I'm not competing with you here." The smirk Stella wore faltered a little. "And I wouldn't want to be put in a position where I had to compete for someone's attention, anyway."

Stella crossed her arms, too. "So, are you two a thing?"

Holly sighed. "To be honest, I don't know what we are, and you and I,"—she uncrossed her hands to gesture between them—"aren't exactly friends for me to confide in you. I'm not trying to be petty here, but he told me I was the only one he'd be looking at tonight, so that should tell you something."

Stella straightened, smirk completely gone.

*Come on, Stella, follow the grownup code, not the childish one.*

“The gigantic redhead sitting next to Melanie’s husband, Mr. May, isn’t here with anyone.” Holly turned back around to wash her hands. Glancing up in the mirror, Holly could see that she’d piqued Stella’s interest. “His name is Colin.” Holly took one of the neatly folded napkins on the counter and turned back around. “Just an FYI.” With that, she dried her hands, tossed the napkin, and then exited the bathroom.

She saw Austin walking toward her.

“How’s the photoshoot going?” she asked him when he reached her.

“Nowhere near as good as the one we had.” Austin actually blushed this time. He then looked down at his feet for a bit and nervously ran a hand through his hair. “Can we talk in private?”

Holly’s heart did that stuttering thing again. “Okay.”

He took her hand and led her farther down the hall into a smaller unoccupied dining room that was currently under construction. There were a few covered tables scattered throughout, and the chairs were on the sides of the room. In the corner were a ladder, paint cans, various brushes, and tarps. Austin found the light switch, then closed the door behind him.

“Holly, I know—”

She had no idea what came over her. Perhaps it was the culmination of two weeks’ worth of longing and being so close to him on the dance floor. Or how damn handsome he looked in his elegant tux and the way, even though his hair was styled, there were still traces of unruliness. She launched herself at him and kissed him hard on the mouth.

Without thought, he kissed her back just as fiercely, lifting her to straddle him and backing her against the wall. He moaned into her mouth, a sound of desperation to match her own. He moved from her mouth to kissing her jaw to her neck, eliciting a groan from her. Then he delivered kisses to the tops of her breasts exposed by her dress.

“I love this dress he said against her.

“Uh huh.” She *really* loved it at the moment.

He went back to kissing her mouth, then cupped her backside with one hand while snaking his other hand under her dress. He let loose a throaty growl, as he moved her panties aside and slid one thick finger inside of her, finding her wet for him.

“It’s okay,” she whispered against his lips. Neither of their kind carried diseases and also had the added benefit of being intuitive of when they could conceive.

She undid his belt, and he did the rest to free himself, then he entered her, filling her completely. She released a combination of a gasp and a moan. He stilled, letting her acclimate to his size.

Staring contest number three tonight. Goddesses, he felt good. She wanted more and apparently, so did he. His lips came crashing down on hers again, then he started to really move. Hard and fast, he stroked in and out of her, the sounds of their loud moans filling the room.

She held on to him tightly as he thrust up into her, alternating between feverishly kissing and him devouring her neck. She was close. Panting and moaning, she reveled in the desperate growling noises coming from her dragon.

*Her dragon?*

Before she had time to ponder that thought, her world exploded. Thankfully, the music in the main dining hall was loud. She came hard, screaming out Austin's name as tiny stars exploded behind her eyes. He followed quickly after, reverently calling out her name as well.

They stayed like that, joined together, foreheads touching. He kissed her lips sweetly, then whispered against them.

“Mate.”



## CHAPTER 7



“No!” She must have misheard him. She felt the bile rise up into her throat. “No,” she repeated. “Put me down.” She pushed against his chest.

He complied, releasing her. She tried to ignore the hurt and confusion she saw written across Austin’s face as she ran from the room. She ducked inside the bathroom, practically gasping for air. She couldn’t possibly be his mate.

Then why was everything within her screaming that it was true?

“Anyone but him,” she said aloud. She was grateful there was no one in the bathroom. She went inside a stall to clean herself up, not bothering to lock it. Moments later, she heard the bathroom door open. She stepped out of the stall in time to see Austin locking the door.

He looked desperate. “Did I hurt you?”

She couldn’t speak yet, so she just shook her head and walked over to the sink to wash her hands.

“Holly... please talk to me. What happened back there? Why did you run away from me?”

She steeled herself for what she was about to do. Now was not the time to fall apart. She’d have plenty of time for that

later—a lifetime.

She turned off the faucet and dried her hands before turning around to face him.

“I’m not your mate, Austin. I have no idea why you said that back there, but it’s not true.”

“You can’t tell me that you didn’t feel it, too. I was right there with you.” He took a step toward her, but she held up her hand to stop him.

“It was just sex, Austin.” The look he wore now was pure hurt. She plastered a fake smile. “Really good sex.” She twisted the knife deep into her own heart. “But that’s all it was. I’m sorry if you thought it meant something more.”

He shook his head in disbelief, so she delivered the final blow.

“I can’t possibly have a shifter for a mate. My mate is going to be a witch.” Her words came out harshly, but at least that last part was partially true. She had only *thought* he would be a witch—some faceless someone she had encountered in her hometown before she was even old enough to sense him—which is exactly why she moved away. How wrong she was.

“Now you’re just being deliberately cruel.” Austin was angry. He moved closer to her. “What is this? Are you trying to make us even or something?”

“We’ll never be even.” Her thus far cool and emotionless tone wavered. Even she heard the sadness in her voice.

Austin looked like she had just slapped him in the face. He didn’t follow her as she left the bathroom.

*He deserves so much better than this.*

When she entered the main dining hall, she spotted Jessie dancing with her captain. She also saw Melanie and her husband along with Stella and Mr. May out there on the dance floor. She grabbed her purse, did a quick wave to the rest of the table, the occupants busy in conversation, and left. When she was in the cab, she texted Jessie and Melanie to quickly let them know she wasn't feeling well and that she took a cab home.

Melanie texted back for her to feel better. Jessie texted back with several eggplant emoji's, probably thinking she had left with Austin. She prepared herself for a text or phone call from Jessie when she realized Austin was still at the party, but neither text nor phone call came, making her wonder if Austin may have gone home, too.

An expensive cab ride home later, Holly finally let loose everything she'd bottled up this evening, including the contents of what she had eaten. It was hours before she finally cried herself to sleep, the full weight of what she had lost sitting like an anvil on her chest.

The next morning—or afternoon—her head was pounding. She thanked the Goddess that Melanie decided the studio would be closed on Saturday. Holly could cry and wallow and not have to put on a brave face until Monday. She checked her phone, which she dropped in the living room the night before, and saw she had a missed call from an unknown number, followed by a text from the same unknown number, letting her know it was Austin.

She ignored him. She continued to ignore him the next two times he called, after which, she didn't hear from him. It only made her cry harder. Jessie had texted her on Sunday afternoon. She ignored that as well.

She couldn't ignore the banging on the door, however. Jessie stomped right in when Holly opened the door.

“What’s going on, Holly? You look like shite.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“You know, I thought it was weird that Austin called Jared yesterday asking if he had your phone number after we both thought you left together.”

“We didn’t.”

“No shit! Then Jared calls me today on his break and asks me if I knew why Austin was so miserable— Oh, Holly, what is it?”

Jessie walked over to her and pulled her into a hug. The guilt inside was killing Holly, and she started bawling.

“I said horrible things to him after he told me I’m his mate.”

“Oh my God! You two are mates! Why were you horrible? What did you say?”

They went over to the couch and sat down.

“That I didn’t want a shifter for a mate.” She cried harder, then added, “I didn’t mean it.”

“Then why would you say such a thing?”

Holly shook her head. “I can’t.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong here, Holly, but you don’t strike me as some elitist prig or vengeful harpy wanting to get back at someone for being nasty to you thirteen years ago.”

Again, Holly shook her head. “He wasn’t getting it... that I can’t have a mate, so I wanted to say something that would make him hate me.”

“You’re telling me, the way you two stared at each all googly-boogly eyed on that dance floor wasn’t the real thing?” Jessie huffed. “That you don’t want him that way?”

“There is no one else in the world I’d want to be my mate, and at the same time, I wish it was anyone but him.” She took away Austin’s mate, too.

“Holly, back up for a sec.” Jessie tilted her head in confusion. “What the fuck do you mean you *can’t* have a mate?”

“It’s my punishment,” she finally confessed. Inadvertently, it was Austin’s, too.

Jessie’s eyes widened in horror.

“Please don’t say anything,” she pleaded. “It will only make things worse for him.” Perhaps, if he thought less of her, at least he’d be able to move on. As much as the knife twisted harder at the thought of that, he deserved a chance at happiness.

“I won’t,” she promised. Jessie hugged her again, and Holly was grateful she didn’t push for more details.

Jessie stayed a while to comfort her friend. Wine was involved, with a few tubs of ice cream, followed by another restless night for Holly.

Mondays, as they usually are, are unavoidable, but at least Holly was learning a new skill. Maybe she’d even write a book and call it *How to Put On Your Best Fake Smile and Pretend That You Didn’t Just Hurt The Man You’re Falling In Love With; There I Said It; Now the World Sucks Even More And I’m Dead Inside, But I Pretend I’m Not*.

Bestseller right there.

Having a ton of work to do, also known as editing, makes the day fly by, at least. Holly was on autopilot and continued to be on her drive home. When she pulled into the garage of her building and parked, she allowed herself to release and spent nearly twenty minutes crying in the car before going back on autopilot. She wondered if this was to be her life now, switching her emotions on and off as needed to fit acceptable social norms.

Entering the lobby, she went to get her mail and saw a box on the floor addressed to her. Grumbling internally that, once again, the package was left out in the open instead of the building's access lockers, she picked up the heavy box. Her camera equipment, which she had forgotten she had ordered, wasn't exactly cheap. Box in hand, she headed for the elevator. She thought about how she hadn't heard from Austin, which she had to keep reminding herself was for the best. It would be better for her heart—and his—if he felt what she did, that they never saw each other again.

Only he didn't get that memo.

A hand shot out to stop the elevator doors from closing, and Austin stepped inside. Her heart reacted. Her mind told it to shut up.

“What are you doing here, Austin?”

His tired eyes widened at the sight of her, making her remember the cryfest she'd just had. She realized he was seeing her with red, puffy, probably blood-shot eyes and a red nose that felt all swollen.

He took the heavy box from her in one arm and pulled her close with the other. She let him. She then let him follow her inside her apartment. After he put down the box and she

closed the door, she let him hold her again, tucking her head under his chin.

He cleared his throat. “I tried to convince myself that if I saw you again, I would realize that you were right, and I was mistaken. That you weren’t my mate and that fate would not be so cruel as to give me a mate who rejected me.”

Holly stiffened. Fate wasn’t being cruel. It was being just. To her, anyway.

He let go of her, then took something out of his pocket. He then held out his hand, closed in a fist. Unfurling it, he said, “I stole something from you.” He smiled sadly as he revealed the sparkly maroon comb she wore in her hair on Friday night. “It fell out of your hair when we were...” He waved his hand, letting the sentence hang in the air, and she felt a blush creeping in.

It truly was the wildest, most amazing sex of her life until she ruined it. She cast her eyes down. What a colossal mess she made.

“It didn’t work,” he said. “Look at me, Holly. You owe me that much.”

She looked up at him. The pain was there, but she also saw determination.

“You *are* my mate. Mine. And I think you know it.”

She felt her lip quiver. She couldn’t lie to him again, so she nodded. “That doesn’t change things. We can’t be together.”

His brows furrowed together. “Are you in some kind of trouble?”

She turned away from him. “I did something... bad.”

He came up behind her and put his arms around her. “Whatever it is, you can tell me. I can help—”

“No! You can’t. There’s nothing you can do.” She took a deep stuttering breath. “Please, just go.”

“I’ll go,” he said into her hair, “but I’m going to get to the bottom of this. I promise you that.” He kissed her head, then with a click of her door, he was gone.

She heard a noise behind her, thinking maybe he’d come back. She barely had the chance to turn around before she felt the sharp blow to her head, then her world went black.



## CHAPTER 8



Austin was almost to the elevator when he heard a loud thump coming from Holly's apartment. Heart racing, he ran back and threw her door open.

"Holly?" he called out. No answer. Her scent was nearby, but he couldn't smell anyone else. Then he felt the sharp claws digging into his neck, choking him, his body, for some reason, unable to react. Involuntarily, his eyes shut.

Austin felt weightless, drifting in and out of consciousness. He was floating, no, more like he was being carried. Slowly his surroundings began to take shape. Claws were wrapped around his center. He forced his eyes open to see water speeding by below him. Looking over to the right, he saw Holly being carried in the other clawed hand. She was out cold. He was confused as to why his body wouldn't cooperate with him.

The next time he awoke, he found himself on the sand, propped up against a large rock, his legs outstretched in front of him, his head facing to his left, and his body still paralyzed as it had been all those years ago from the shifter paralytic. He assessed his surroundings again. He smelled the ocean behind him and spotted a backpack on the sand next to him, opened, a

flannel shirt sticking out of it. Farther down, he saw an opening to a cave.

“Look familiar?” Came a voice from somewhere to his right. The speaker grabbed his head with both hands and turned it to face front, putting him face to face with a crouching Lieutenant Lance Fowler. “This is where you killed me.” He pointed to the opening of the cave. “Right in there?”

“Killed you? That’s an odd choice of words, given that you’re right here in front of me. How are you still alive?” Austin’s voice was hoarse, but at least he had it back. Soon, he’d be able to shift, then he and Fowler would really have it out.

Fowler’s response was a maniacal laugh. “Am I, though? Is this alive?”

Austin inhaled, confusion setting in. He couldn’t scent him, but the paralytic couldn’t be affecting his sense of smell since he could smell the ocean and Holly.

“Oh God! Holly! If you hurt her, I swear I’ll—”

Fowler stood up and moved aside, revealing Holly. She was in the center of a ring of fire. She was moaning a little, sounding like she was coming to.

“The witch... she’s your mate, yes?” Fowler didn’t wait for a response. “I heard you talking earlier. She’s very beautiful.”

“Where am I?” He saw her sit up and rub the back of her head. Then they locked gazes. “Austin?”

“It’s going to be okay, sweetheart.”

Fowler gave another maniacal laugh. “*It’s going to be okay, sweetheart,*” he mimicked.

Holly's eyes widened at the sight of Fowler and the flames surrounding her rose higher.

"Don't hurt her," Austin pleaded. "Please. It's me you're really after." Austin decided to follow his hunch. "That's why you started setting those fires a few weeks ago. To get my attention?" He hadn't been seeing things, after all. It was Fowler he saw after the fire at the Stripe Club.

"I got it, didn't I? You're a pretty big deal now, huh? With your fancy career, fancy life." Fowler sneered in disgust.

Holly stood up, and the flames danced closer to her, rising to where she was almost engulfed by them. Austin's panic set in even more as he struggled in vain to shift.

"Austin, why is he here?"

"Forgive my rudeness," Fowler said, all politeness now. "We haven't been properly introduced. I'm Lieutenant Lance Fowler. I really don't have anything against you, ma'am. Holly. Truly. But you see, I never got a chance to find out if I had a mate."

"I'm sorry," Holly said. He heard sincere sympathy in her voice. "But why are you still here?"

Austin was confused by her phrasing, realizing it was the second time she had asked why he was there.

"BECAUSE I DON'T HAVE ANYWHERE ELSE TO BE!" Fowler snapped. He had a crazed look in his eye.

"You introduced yourself as lieutenant. You served with Austin?" Holly asked him gently, seemingly unfazed by his outburst. At his nod, she continued. "What did you do to him?"

“It’s just a little paralytic,” he replied with a way too saccharine smile.

“I destroyed it all.” The USSMB had continued to monitor for any traces of the serum and had since found nothing.

Fowler held up his hands and shifted them into claws.

“It’s in me. So is the poison,” he said proudly before shifting his claws back into hands.

“Poison? You don’t want to do this,” Holly pleaded. “You were a good man.”

That crazed look returned.

“And your boyfriend here took everything from me. Now, I’m going to take everything away from him. He’s going to watch you die, then he’ll join you.”

“And then what?” Holly asked, still calm and collected.

The flames were moving so close to her now. Austin felt sick. Any moment, they would lick her skin, and he’d have to watch her in agony as she burned alive—Fowler’s sick twist on burning a witch at the stake.

“Revenge won’t bring you any peace. Believe me. I know.”

“What do you know of my pain?” Fowler yelled.

Austin cried out as Fowler sent the flames to their final push, touching Holly’s skin. Now he wanted to die. He wouldn’t shift. He’d let the poison consume him—

Wait. She wasn’t screaming.

To both his and Fowler’s shock and surprise, she walked through the fire completely unscathed. In fact, it seemed as if she was actually in complete control of it. She spread her

hands, elbows pulled in, palms up, and the flames, now behind her, followed as she took a few steps closer.

Fowler's eyes widened in fear.

"Austin, do you have something that belongs to him?" she asked calmly.

"Why?"

"He's not alive," she explained. "He's a corporeal spirit who has latched on to you within a few miles radius through an object of some sort. Their sense of being gets all twisted up inside the longer they stay."

No wonder he had no scent and could disappear into thin air like vapor.

The fire behind Holly split in two, then he saw red and blue flames come out of her palms, and like wisps of silk, her flames combined with Fowler's. Her right hand shot out, throwing one side of the flames at Fowler, holding him in place. She turned to Austin, and with her other hand, instead of her flames holding him in place, he felt a pulling sensation. Her flames were pulling the paralytic and the poison out of him. Within minutes, he was able to move again.

He remembered the lighter in his back pocket. He took it out and tossed it on the sand closer to Holly. "I won that off him in a poker game," Austin told her. "I cheated," he added sheepishly. The bastard had been cheating all night, so Austin thought it would be fair play.

Holly's eyes widened in horror, and her face turned ashen white.

"Th-That's not yours?"

Austin shook his head.

“You said he’s been starting fires for the past few weeks?”

“No one got hurt,” Austin reassured her. “Just some property damage.” She seemed to be drawing the same conclusion. The fires started when he got the lighter back. “Don’t blame yourself, sweetheart. You didn’t know the lighter was haunted when you took it.”

She said nothing. Meanwhile, her hold on Fowler never wavered, and the fire she used to pull the toxins out of Austin, she now focused on the lighter.

“I have to destroy it,” she told him.

“Do it.”

Holly chanted in Latin, repeating the same phrase over and over while her fire simultaneously burned through Fowler and the lighter. His Latin was rusty, but he thought her words translated to something like ‘spirits being free and debts being paid.’ She chanted, and her fire burned until there was nothing left to burn.

Her fire went out, and she fell to her knees. Austin was there in a flash, folding her into his arms.

“A fire witch, huh?” he said into her hair as he rocked her back and forth. “You’re alright.” He marveled at the sheer power of her. He’d heard of fire witches before and their ability to control fire, but she was something else, like a dragon, not only able to wield it, but it was as if it was a part of her.

“What happened to him?”

“He’s at peace now,” she assured him.

Austin stood up, taking Holly with him. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Where is here?” she asked.

“Pretty much the middle of nowhere.”

Before she had the chance to ask how they would get home, Austin put some distance between them.

“Don’t be afraid.”

He cracked his neck and his shoulders, reveling in how good he felt after being so powerless to transform into his second skin. It took mere seconds to transform from man to dragon, shredding all of his clothes in the process. Fowler must have planned ahead with the backpack.

He approached Holly slowly, not wanting to frightened her, but he couldn’t find a trace of fear anywhere on her face.

“Beautiful,” she whispered. He saw wonder in her eyes as she took him in, spiky-horned tail, and all. She stretched her hand out to him, and he nuzzled it playfully, eliciting an excited squeal from her. “Oh, my, what big teeth you have. Did you just roll your eyes? Dragons roll their eyes?”

He nudged her again, happy to see her being playful with him again, snarky comments and all.

“So, what do I do here?” she asked. “Do I just jump on and ride you like Bastian did with Falkor?”

He chuffed, his dragon form version of laughter. He could think of other ways for her to ride him, but now was not the time. He went around her and grabbed her from behind with one of his claws. Her surprised scream turned into a *woo-hoo* when they were airborne. Even though they had both just been through an ordeal, he didn’t think he ever enjoyed flying more. Having his mate with him, seeing her experience flying like this for the first time was a memory he’d cherish. He had meant it when he told her he would figure out what she was

hiding. There was no way he wasn't ending up with this woman.

They flew over water, and water turned to land, then houses and skyscrapers, the view as though from a plane in the night sky. He flew them to one of the many safehouses dragon shifters had around the city. They were places where a dragon could land discretely and go unnoticed by the human population, given that a dragon sighting might cause all sorts of panic. He didn't miss the way her eyes had scanned his naked body when he shifted back into a man. They hadn't exactly gotten to take their time exploring during their last encounter. After he found some clothes and borrowed a vehicle, he drove her home. He'd asked if she would come home with him or if she wanted him to stay with her, but she remained stubbornly adamant about them not being together.

He could sense she was ready to bolt as soon as he pulled up in front of her building, so he took her hand in his, lacing their fingers.

"I'm not saying goodbye to you."

She surprised him by leaning in and giving him a soft lingering kiss on his lips.

"Goodnight, Austin."

\* \* \*

HOLLY'S PHONE was still in the side pocket of her jeans, surprisingly undamaged given the fact that she had been kidnapped by an evil spirit and flown across to who knows where in his evil spirit dragon form. She waited for Austin to pull away before she called an Uber.



Ten minutes later, she arrived at her destination. She knew it was late, but she needed to talk to them tonight. She had called ahead from the car.

Ivy opened the door. “Are you all right?”

“Not really. I need your help.”

## CHAPTER 9



Austin had just finished giving his expert witness testimony on the warehouse fire involving the now-dead and headless Ivanovich when he was called in for another matter. More specifically, the nuisance fires. How the hell was he going to explain that the fires were caused by a dead guy who had been haunting his lighter and that now both he and the lighter had been destroyed? Spirits coming back from the dead and haunting objects were not on the list of things he thought possible. What he didn't expect to walk in on was Holly in front of the Council with Theo Jensen by her side and Ivy Spencer-Jensen sitting in as a member of the Council. Holly didn't even glance his way as he entered the room.

These types of meetings were run similarly to court proceedings in that an accused person was allowed to have representation. It was less formal than court, however. Members of the Council jumped in to ask questions at any time instead of opposing counsel, and having a friend or family member on the Council was also permitted. He wondered why the hell Holly was at a proceeding about a bunch of nuisance fires.

“First, I'd like to make a statement.” Theo Jensen began. “As you will hear from Ms. Campbell's account, she and Raina Hill were friends.”

Austin recognized that name. It was the woman who tried to kill Ivy and also killed her own mate. News of that had spread through the shifter community. He'd had no idea Holly knew her.

"I ask that that fact not prejudice this Council against my client. They were teenagers when they were friends and had barely seen each other in years. Ms. Campbell had no knowledge Ms. Hill even had a mate and no knowledge there was any connection to Ivy Spencer-Jensen, my mate, who sits here on the Council with you today."

"I can attest to that," Ivy said. "As this Council is aware, Holly Campbell is my cousin through marriage. Her grandfather is my grandmother's true mate." She went on to explain that Holly had learned about what Raina had done through her grandfather after the fact and that there was enough evidence to support Holly's ignorance of all of Raina's crimes.

"So, as you see," Jensen continued, "My client should not be judged here today by the actions of another simply because they had been childhood friends."

"Why mention her at all then?" one of the Council members asked.

"Because Raina Hill does have a connection to why this meeting is taking place."

"This meeting is taking place because of your client's connection to the recent rise in fires in this city," another Council member stated. "But it is noted that Raina Hill's crimes will not be held against Ms. Campbell."

Austin wondered what the hell Holly was thinking. She had nothing to do with those fires.

“Thank you. Although I will add that *connection* to the fires is a bit of a stretch,” Jensen said. “I want to state two more things before my client gives her account.”

“Proceed.”

“The first is, although Raina Hill’s name will come up, Miss Campbell wants it known that she is taking full responsibility for the matter at hand. And the second is the reason I chose to represent her. I believe in Miss Campbell’s innocence, even though she doesn’t.”

*Even though she doesn’t?*

Holly was then asked to tell the Council what she knew of the unsolved fires.

“I used dark magic,” she began. “I hexed an object I thought belonged to Firefighter Austin Baudin.”

*What the hell?* That’s why she stole his damn lighter—to curse it?

“In actuality, it belonged to a friend Austin Baudin served with in the military who had died.”

“But you did not know this, correct?” Theo asked her.

Holly nodded before she continued. “I went home that night and placed a revenge hex on the lighter.” She explained that unlike simple or small hexes, which wore off quickly, and did not require an object, revenge hexes tended to rebound on the hexer, but if worded just right, to let fate choose the punishment, the hexer could potentially avoid consequences if karma deemed it so. The punishment was chosen, but clearly on the wrong person—in the form of forcing a soul that had been at peace to be made corporeal again, confused, stuck, unable to move on.

Austin recalled that the corporeal spirit had only been a shadow of the man he once knew, nothing like the happy-go-lucky character he once was.

“What does Raina Hill have to do with any of this?” a Council member asked.

Austin didn't bother to look at them anymore; they all just fused together. He was paying more attention to the pieces of the puzzle that was Holly Campbell as they were starting to come together.

Theo Jensen held up a finger. “Let's get to that, shall we? Holly, how old were you when you placed the hex on the lighter?”

“Sixteen.”

Now, Austin looked at the Council members. For the first time since this meeting started, he saw compassion in their eyes because they, like him, had just realized where this was going. Holly was not a criminal. She wanted to punish herself for something foolish she did when she was just a kid. Something she did because he humiliated a young teenage girl.

*Fuck!* He hated himself right now, wishing she had really hexed him.

Her words made sense now. *We'll never be even.* She wasn't talking about him. She was talking about herself. *I did something bad.* She had felt guilty all these years, thinking she had put a hex on *him*. Hope bloomed in his chest. They could put all this behind them.

Holly continued with her story. Raina liked to study dark magic and owned several books, which Holly thought were harmless since she did not have the power to actually activate

the hexes, but Holly explained that she could. She was a powerful fire witch.

Austin had seen firsthand just how powerful she was, then he recalled having had a glimpse of it when she was sixteen. He had been confused by the momentary shift in the air as Holly had passed him on the way to the exit all those years ago. It felt familiar. Now he understood why. She had used the element of fire to call for an object that makes fire.

“Why did you hex Firefighter Baudin,” Theo asked.

*Good. Tell them what I said to you.*

Holly smiled sadly. “Because I was a bratty teenager who snuck into a nightclub with Raina. Firefighter Baudin was a man in his twenties who refused the advances of a minor. He threatened to have us kicked out if we didn’t leave. I got angry.”

Austin couldn’t take it anymore. “Tell them what I said to you.” He willed for her to look at him, but even then, she remained obstinate in her avoidance.

“Firefighter Baudin, please sit down,” a Council member said. “You’ll have your chance to speak. Another outburst and we will have no choice but to remove you.”

Austin had no choice but to comply. Tearing him from this room right now would be unbearable. He’d tell the Council himself that he was cruel to her, that her actions, no matter how misguided, weren’t holy unprovoked.

“What happened the next day?” Theo prompted.

“I felt guilty for what I had done.”

“Why?”

“Because, as I said, revenge hexes are unpredictable, vile, which is why we are taught not to use them. I couldn’t be sure if he would break out into a rash for a day or lose a limb. No matter what he said to me, he didn’t deserve that. I had no right to cast a punishment like that on someone.”

He could see the tears pooling in her eyes, but she held them back.

“So, what did you do?”

“I removed the hex.”

“You can do that?”

She explained how she performed a karmic cleanse—a few ingredients mixed in a bowl, some magic words, her elemental power, and the image of Austin in her mind.

“Only, I know now, there was never a hex put on him in the first place.”

“Right. It was Lieutenant Lance Fowler you accidentally cursed.”

She explained that you only needed an object to curse someone, not to remove it, so the lighter was not needed for the removal spell.

“A failsafe, if you will, since hexed objects can sometimes be destroyed in the process.”

“If this curse occurred thirteen years ago, why did the fires only begin recently?” a Council member asked.

“It must be because I gave the lighter back to Firefighter Baudin. Since I thought I had removed the hex, I thought it was just a lighter again.” She explained that when she possessed the lighter, the spirit had no connection to her, nothing of his former life to latch onto. Thirteen years of

displacement drove the spirit mad. “He had also been tethered to my hometown until very recently. I had buried the lighter in the backyard of my childhood home. When I ran into Austin again, I wanted to give back what I stole.” She then ended with a brief account of what happened when the spirit of Lance Fowler kidnapped her and Austin and how she had set the spirit free.

“Have you ever hexed anyone again after that night, Miss Campbell?”

“No,” Holly said, shaking her head.

Theo addressed the Council. “Esteemed members, I ask you to consider the fact that no one was injured in the nuisance fires, that Miss Campbell was only a minor at the time she cast that unfortunate hex, that she realized and tried to rectify her mistake almost immediately, that she chose to come forward and take responsibility here today for the consequences of her actions...”

Austin tuned the rest out. He could see the compassion on the Council member’s faces. He had no doubt she would be absolved. Maybe then—

“I haven’t finished,” Holly said, interrupting Theo.

Theo looked at her in surprise, as did the members of the Council. “Holly, I think they have everything they need to make their decision.”

“Maybe *they* have everything.” She took a deep stuttering breath. “In order to do such a powerful hex removal, Karma requires payment. It doesn’t matter that I failed to remove the hex. I still cast it, dabbled in something that was unpredictable and unforgiving. It demanded a price. And I paid it.” She finally looked at Austin, releasing the tears she’d been holding



back. “If I ever bond with my true mate, we’ll both die. I’m so sorry, Austin.”

## CHAPTER 10



Gasps rang around the room at her revelation. She could feel Theo's shocked gaze on her. Ivy's, too. Though she had told them that Austin was her mate, she had left out the part about the whole dying thing. Austin deserved to know the whole truth first, and she was done keeping it from him. He needed to finally know the extent of what she had done. Perhaps, now he could move on and find some happiness.

Austin shot up out of his seat. She thought he would storm out of the room, but instead, he was in front of her, folding her in his arms as she cried. She heard some rustling in the room as everyone shuffled out, leaving them alone.

"I didn't know you were my mate or the price I'd have to pay," she sniffled. "You don't deserve this."

"Look at me," he said, cupping her face in his hands. "Neither do you. We'll fix this." He guided her to sit down and poured her a glass of water before sitting down next to her. "Why are you shaking your head?"

"I had it all wrong. After I did the removal spell, I had a dream. My ancestral family tree was whispering to me, warning me of the price I had to pay. 'You have crossed paths with him,' it said. 'He will be where you live.' I saw—they

weren't exactly concrete images, more like feelings flashing quickly—love, laughter, happiness. It was showing me I had a mate, showing me feelings of a bond that would click into place. 'And then you will both die,' it said." She explained that she hadn't even considered the possibility that she had met her mate at the club that night, let alone that it would be him. She thought her mate lived in town, so she moved away as soon as she could, figuring it would be easier if they had never met.

And it would have been because this was torture.

"All this time, I thought the price I was paying was for a hex removal from the lighter and that the punishment doled out to me was too harsh. It wasn't until I realized the lighter wasn't yours that everything clicked into place. The removal spell didn't work because there was no hex on you. My hex backfired onto me. I brought someone back from the dead, and the punishment called for two lives."

"To be miserable apart or die if we're together," Austin finished. "We'll find a way to fix this. I'm not giving up on us, Holly."

"How can you even stand to look at me after what I did to you?"

He cupped her face in his hands. "We all make mistakes, baby. You owned up to yours. You tried to undo it, knowing it would cost you." He kissed her nose. "Me? I got a medal for my fucking mistake."

Austin told her about the day Lance Fowler died.

"If the hyena shifter had gotten away, who knows how many people would have died?"

“That’s what I keep trying to tell myself,” Austin replied sadly. “It doesn’t help.” He paused briefly. “Can we just try to put the past behind us, and let’s figure this out together?”

There was nothing Holly wanted more. She promised him they’d be making decisions about where to go from here together from this point on and felt a small relief that she wouldn’t be shouldering the burden alone.

He took her home and walked her to the door.

“Don’t go,” she said.

She led him to her bedroom. As soon as they both stepped inside, they wasted no time stripping each other of their clothing, kissing and touching along the way. When they were both naked, Austin lifted her to straddle him and carried her to the bed, laying her down in the center with him following on top of her. They took their time exploring, reveling in the skin-to-skin contact.

“I didn’t get the chance to taste you last time,” he said against her neck.

He kissed a path down to the center of her chest, massaging her breasts, moaning against her skin as he went. He had Holly completely worked up when he began taking turns licking and sucking on her nipples, flicking them with his tongue. She ground her hips up against him, wanting, needing more of him, but he just continued to torture her with his mouth.

“Austin... please.”

He just chuckled and continued on, delivering open-mouthed kisses down each side of her rib cage. Who knew rib cages could be so sensitive? He scooted off the bed and pulled her to him by her legs until her ass was at the edge, then

pushed her knees apart. He looked at her center with such intensity, she was surprised she didn't burst into flames. Her body was on fire.

He toyed with her lips, then with the pad of his thumb, he circled her wetness around her clit, and her hips shot off the bed. He dropped down to his knees, then buried his face between her legs, skimming his nose down her slit and inhaling.

He let out a low primal growl. "You smell so good." His warm tongue lapped at her, over and over, up and down the same path his nose had skimmed, then he sucked on her clit. She thrashed her head from side to side. Adding two fingers to her core, he gently but firmly pressed on her lower belly and circled her clit with his tongue as his fingers massaged her walls.

Her orgasm was so close. She begged and pleaded. He sucked her clit hard into his mouth, and she screamed. He released his hold on her stomach, but his mouth remained on her as spasm after spasm wracked her body.

Austin stood to his full height, his hard length straining toward her. She remembered how full she was when he was inside her and couldn't wait to feel that again. Goddess, he was beautiful. All hard muscle, right down to his powerful legs. She decided that she needed a taste, too. Their gazes locked, his eyes hooded. She licked her lips, then sat on her haunches, coming face to face with his erection.

Taking him firmly in her hand, she decided to tease him a bit first, stroking him, licking just the tip of the head. She flicked the underside with her tongue as she began to stroke faster. He threaded his hands in her hair as she pulled him closer and took him deeper into her mouth. The sound of his

moans turned her on even more. She took him deeper and stroked the excess faster until he pulled out of her.

Without a word, he lifted her, her legs coming out from under her, then she was on her back, Austin on top of her, kissing her passionately. Gone was the slowness. He entered her and thrust hard and fast as her hips rose up to meet him. The headboard banged against the wall. If Holly was on the receiving end of stares from her neighbors tomorrow, she'd know why. The walls were shaking, and she and Austin were unabashedly loud.

She said something incoherent to him in between kissing, and he said something equally incoherent back to her, but it sounded amazing. Their mouths crashed together, then she was coming, calling out his name, coherently this time, over and over until he was falling after her. She couldn't think, couldn't understand the gravity of the situation when she saw his canines drop. His eyes widened in horror, then he rolled off of her.

She looked over at him. He was on his back, panting heavily, one arm thrown over his eyes.

“Fuck. I almost...”

What had almost happened just now really hit her, and the weight of sadness resurfaced. It wasn't his fault.

“Every instinct in me wants to bond with you, too. We can't live like this, with a sword dangling over us.”

“We'll try harder.” He rolled to his side to face her.

She mirrored him. “You know I'm right.” He remained obstinate, but she needed to say the rest... so that they could both hear it. “We can try to be together without the mating bond, but eventually, my punishment will catch up to us. There

is no loophole for consequences, Austin.” She didn’t need to finish the rest. The punishment was death, and neither of them would risk it for the other.

“You and I will always belong to each other. There’s nothing, not even a damn curse, that can change that.” He pulled her close and held her until they both fell asleep.

When she awoke the next morning, she was alone.

## CHAPTER 11



“*Y*ou have no idea how much I appreciate this, Ivy, and everything else you and Theo have done for me, but I have done so much research over the years, including this elemental spell,” Holly began sadly. “Did you read the fine print at the bottom? The one that talks about a major requirement?”

“Yes. I did.” Ivy looked confused.

“Even about the deserving part?” The Council may have let her off the hook, but that didn’t mean Karma did. When Ivy put her hands on her hips and raised an eyebrow, Holly let out an exasperated sigh and continued. “I brought someone back from the dead using dark magic, that and using dark magic to kill are the worst things you can do. The universe tends not to be so forgiving.”

“You did that unintentionally and have set things right. Not once did I hear you say you didn’t deserve your punishment. You never whined or wallowed or made yourself out to be the victim. You took your punishment without question. You are a good person, Holly, and you deserve forgiveness. Austin deserves his happiness, too. Let’s let Karma decide for herself, shall we?”



The next day, Holly was overwhelmed by the amount of support she received from the witch community. They were gathered by her family's ancestral tree. Ivy, Poppy, and Rose represented their strong family line of wind. Holly's parents and grandfather stood in for fire. They'd been nothing but supportive and compassionate since she'd finally told them what she did. Three more powerful witches from town stood in for water and another three for earth. Together they formed four points, with Holly kneeling in the center.

They respectfully put out a request to the universe for Holly's forgiveness and, by default, an innocent's—Austin. They chanted for a new judgment, “judicas de novo et da veniam,” as they called upon their respective powers. Heavy rain pummeled the ground inside the four-point while fire rose and swirled around her in a vortex as wind joined in, followed by the dirt.

Fire, wind, water, and earth rose higher, circled faster until she was almost completely engulfed by it. A few inches closer and the elements would swallow her. Then nothing else existed inside the circle but her and the elements swirling silently around her. She then heard hushed whisperings. The universe was speaking to her. Deliberating. She did not need to use words. It heard her thoughts, went deep inside her heart, then down to her very soul.

“You are forgiven,” it whispered.

Even quicker than they appeared, the elements dispersed, leaving Holly to collapse on the ground.

\* \* \*

AUSTIN PACED BACK and forth in his living room. It had been four excruciating days since he'd last seen Holly. The night he almost made the fatal mistake of biting her, he had stayed with her until the sun began to rise. It hurt so bad to leave her, but as much as he wanted to, he could not deny that Holly had been right. The instinct to mark her was so strong inside. Even if he could control it, he worried Holly might be right about the second part, too. That fate would not let them circumvent the punishment and would eventually end up killing them both. He couldn't take that chance with her life.

He had called her the next day just to check on her. The sadness in her voice mirrored his own, twisting his gut inside out. How the hell was he ever going to move on from her? He loved her. He would never stop loving her, never stop feeling as though she belonged to him and he to her. How could he possibly ever move on to be with someone else, knowing she was out there and that she was his true mate?

He'd told her he'd give her space, that he'd try to move on, not meaning a single word. He'd be damned if he didn't try to find a way to break her fucking curse. She had surprised him, though, by calling him yesterday.

"I'm going to try something," she had said, giving him hope for the first time. She didn't go into specifics. "I'll call you either way when it's done." The line went quiet after that. He'd thought she'd hung up, but then she spoke again, a quiver in her voice. "Austin?"

"Yeah? I'm still here."

"I love you."

"I love you, too, Holly. So much, sweetheart." It was the first time they said it.

He hadn't heard from her since. He tried calling, but her cell went straight to voicemail, and his texts were undelivered. Now, panic was setting in that something had gone terribly wrong, that whatever it was she tried had backfired again, and something had happened to her.

A soft knock at the door forced him to stow his panic for the moment. It was Holly, grinning up at him. She launched herself into his arms, straddling him, and kissed him hard on the mouth.

"It worked," she announced against his lips, then she continued kissing him.

He hugged her tightly. Moved on to kissing each cheek, her nose, her forehead, her eyelids.

"I'm never letting you go."

After a few moments more. "No offense, sweetheart, but what is that smell?" She smelled like burned wood.

"Oh!" she pulled back a little and sniffed her hair. "Elemental residue. Things got a little messy out there."

"But you're alright?"

"Other than passing out and faceplanting into the dirt..." At his look of horror, she cupped his cheeks. "I'm good. It's not every day one gets a pow-wow with the universe, so to speak. What's a few minutes' dirt nap compared to that? I came straight here after." She sniffed her hair again. "I need a shower."

"I can work with up against the wall again," he said, waggling his eyebrows suggestively. He then maneuvered her into a fireman's hold to her delightful squeal and carried her to the bathroom.

He washed her hair, then scrubbed her body, lingering on her breasts. They were a thing of beauty—ample and round with dusty rose-colored nipples. He plucked them in tandem while he used his knee to rub against her pussy. Holly in the throes of ecstasy made his dick even harder.

“Is it my turn to wash you now?” she asked, mischief twinkling in her eyes. She took him firmly in hand and stroked up and down his shaft.

“Later. After I get you nice and dirty again.” He tossed the washcloth aside and lifted her to straddle him. “Put me inside you,” he ordered. “This is going to be fast and hard.”

“Yes,” she answered, her voice laced with desire. She lined him up with her entrance and pushed down as he thrust up. “Ah!”

He delivered on his promise of fast and hard. He needed her right now, more than air, more than fire.

“More.” She fisted her hand in his hair. “Harder.”

She needed him, too. Setting a ferocious pace, he tightened his hold around her, shielding her head from the tiled wall with his hand. He breathed into her neck, felt the lengthening of his teeth. This time he did not hold back—he bit her. The coppery taste of her blood filled his mouth, then the warmth traveled down his throat. He felt their mating bond click into place as his orgasm ripped through him. Holly screamed his name and came in a fit of spasms.

After they both came down a little from her high, he gazed into her eyes, seeing her anew as his bonded mate. She placed her hand on his chest and whispered a few words. He felt energy surge into place, an extra bond between them.

Their union was so strong, even the whole damn universe couldn't tear them apart.

## EPILOGUE



“*W*here are you taking me?” Holly asked.

It had been a blissful three weeks since he'd mated with her. They still had a lot of time to make up for and some new memories to make. He also wanted to replace a particularly bad one.

Holly took in her surroundings when they arrived outside of their destination.

“Are we... is this...”

“Yes,” he answered.

He'd brought her to the nightclub they first met in thirteen years ago.

She hesitated. “But why, Austin?”

“To give you a night I couldn't back then.”

Holly smiled, emotion thick in her gaze. He took her by the hand and led her inside. They went to the bar first and ordered drinks.

“Paying with real money. That's a good start.” Holly explained that Raina had used an enchantment spell to make the bartender think it was a real credit card.

“This will have a good ending,” he promised.

“I’ll hold you to that.”

After their drinks, instead of leading her to the dance floor, he took her to the back. Again, she hesitated until he tugged on her hand.

“I just wanted to do this.” He backed her up against the brick wall and devoured her mouth.

“What is it with us and walls?” she asked breathlessly when they pulled apart from their kiss.

He had to laugh at that. “It’s like Paris. We’ll always have walls.”

They both cracked up, then Holly’s face became serious.

“Thank you for this. I didn’t even know I needed it.”

“Me, either.” He cupped her cheek and leaned in to kiss her sweetly on the lips. “Ready to go shake your booty?”

Again, she laughed. “One question first.”

“Shoot.”

“Why do dragons need lighters?”

He threw his back and laughed. “Well, I think it would look kinda weird to humans if we suddenly transformed our hands into claws and fire came out. Let’s go, you.”

They alternated the rest of the night dancing and visiting the bar, sometimes just for water. He got to show her a damn good time on the dance floor. He’d, of course, much rather have danced to slow songs with her. Sadly, tonight’s DJ kept churning out fast beats. With his nightclub days coming back to him, though, he’d give *Magic Mike* a run for his money.

“You’ve got some moves, Baudin!”

So did she. Damn, could she move those hips.

“I’m going to ravage you later if you keep moving like that.”

“Promises, promises.”

“And what will you promise me, sweetheart?”

She got all serious again.

“Forever.”

He nodded.

“I’ll take that.” He no longer cared that it was a fast song. Time might as well have stood still for all he cared. He leaned in.

“You stole something from me,” he whispered in her ear. “My heart.”

THE END

LOOK for the other side to this story in C.D. Gorri’s *Virtue Saved* and get to know more about sexy bear shifter Eduardo Valens.

<https://www.cdgorri.com/books/virtue-saved>



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elena Kincaid is an award-winning and best-selling author. She writes Paranormal and Contemporary Romance with alpha males who stop at nothing to protect their women, heroines who are anything but damsels in distress, and stories where the only love worth fighting for is the forever kind of love.

She was born in Ukraine and raised in New York, where she currently lives with her daughter. Her desk is constantly cluttered with journals, sticky notes, and torn-out pieces of paper full of ideas. When not working, Elena loves to spend time with her family, travel the globe, curl up with a good book, and binge her favorite shows.

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