



THE
CURSE
OF THE
DRAGON

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
ELIZA GAYLE

THE CURSE OF THE DRAGON

ELIZA GAYLE

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Also by Eliza Gayle

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ABOUT THE BOOK

The Curse of the Dragon

by

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Published by:

Gypsy Ink Books

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CHAPTER
ONE

Ian

Spring 1901

I circled the mountain, dipping low into the dense fog as I flapped my heavy wings, anger beating a rough path through my veins. When I'd left my home, it had not been for this purpose. But after a frustrating time in town, I needed the freedom of flight to clear my head.

My brother—my twin, actually—was on another rampage, and frankly, I was over his behavior. Our father, the dragon king, had announced my brother's engagement in front of everyone without talking to Isaac first. That had gone about as expected, as he tore through the skies in a fit of rage that obliterated the sun under a fiery glow of dragon fire.

I thought they were both fools. My brother for not expecting a chosen wife considering his role as next in line, and my father for thinking Isaac would simply go along with his plan to unite our clans with the coven of witches who'd been up our arse causing trouble for as long as I could remember. Witches and dragons simply did not mix. It was time we accepted that fact. To force my brother to marry one—well, that was likely to lead us to war for sure.

Personally, I thought my father gave the witches too much berth. Their continued disrespect towards his leadership had started to ripple down through the supernatural community, and it needed to be stopped. It was true they were quite

powerful, but did that compare to the power of a dragon? I had my doubts. Nonetheless, Father had struck a bargain, and now Isaac would have to deal with it.

Right then, something dark caught my eye, and I jerked around in time to see my twin dive back down to the ground, his big, black-scaled dragon landing with all the grace of an earthquake. He shook the ground, and I was certain that it would be felt all across the valley and into town. Flying had done little to assuage his anger, and I didn't feel much better about this situation either. On a sigh, I followed, taking a little more care to land without announcing myself as my bones smoothly shifted, giving way from the thick scales of my dragon to the smooth skin of my human form.

I stretched my limbs and took a deep breath, giving myself a moment to readjust to using legs to move around instead of wings.

Our father usually ruled this land with an iron fist. Much like Isaac, he did what he wanted, when he wanted. Until our mother intervened, and then he took some time to review things from her viewpoint. They had a unique partnership in that way. Maybe that would happen for Isaac. The right mate could counteract his temper and potentially assuage the beast that controlled him.

An Omega, perhaps.

Although, I knew that was wishful thinking. One of those had not been found in quite some time, and an arranged marriage was unlikely to produce one. Especially with a witch. I shuddered, thinking about it. I had no qualms with the witches directly, but their power unsettled me. While it was no match for dragon fire, they were clever and often sneaky, using spells against their enemies long before they could be seen. It was possible a war with them could take a toll on all shifterkind.

I quickly donned the clothes I'd left waiting and hurried after Isaac to check on him. I hesitated to ever admit it out loud, but my brother needed a keeper, and thus far that had turned out to be me. I hoped the woman who would be his mate was up to

that kind of responsibility, because I had no intention of being a third wheel in a marriage.

It was time to make my own way and live free of my brother's constraints.

I turned the corner into the gardens and saw no sign of him, other than the trail of ash and embers he'd left in his wake.

This was absolutely not a good sign. I picked up speed, hoping to catch up with him before he encountered anyone else. No one deserved my brother's wrath, but especially not today. Today was our mother's birthday, and there would be a big celebration this evening with all the clans attending as well as other invited guests.

My steps faltered. I supposed that meant the witches. My father had clearly chosen today for the big announcement in the hopes that my brother would not make a scene on Mother's special day, but he'd miscalculated the level of Isaac's selfishness once again. I hated to think ill of my twin, but one of these days I was going to get fed up with his bad behavior and lose *my* temper. Being older by three minutes did *not* make him stronger.

"Isaac!" I called out, hoping to catch him before anyone else.

I heard a grumbled response but couldn't quite make out the words. I did, however, realize he was in the kitchen stomping around.

Putting on speed, I entered the cavernous room and drew up short. My asshole of a brother stood in the middle of the room, naked as the day he was born, his skin filthy and smudged from the things he'd obviously burned, with a turkey leg in one hand and a cup in the other.

"You look downright savage, brother," I grumbled, circling the room in the opposite direction from him. "You could have at least put on clothes."

"Why? Have I hurt your tender eyes?"

Heat flared in my chest that I worked to keep under control. Losing my temper in the house would not be ideal. It had been

built big enough to hold a fully formed dragon, but anything inside would likely be ruined if either of us shifted.

“Because no one other than you wants to look at your flaccid cock.” Okay, so I couldn’t resist an insult or two. I could be civilized when the proper occasion warranted it, but I also carried a wild beast that didn’t always want to play nice with others. More than a little, actually.

Isaac laughed. “The women of this household, save Mother, would consider themselves lucky to feast upon my cock.”

I rolled my eyes at my brother’s vulgar turn of phrase. He lacked no amount of confidence, that was for sure. It was time to change the direction of this conversation away from the gutter.

“Speaking of. Have you forgotten that today is her birthday? We were supposed to make this day special for *her*.”

“Tell that to Father. If the asshole thinks I’m going to marry some witch for the sake of peace, he’s more insane than I am.”

It worried me when Isaac referred to himself as such. It came out like a joke, but on days like this, it did not seem funny at all. He’d pulled many stunts over the years that made everyone question his sanity. People may have said nothing to his face, but it wasn’t hard to hear the whispers behind his back. His attitude today did not bode well for my ability to turn his tantrum around in time for our guests’ arrival. However, being of sound mind did not seem to be a requirement for his place as successor to the throne.

Matrimony, however, was.

This was absolutely not going to go well.

CHAPTER
TWO

Cordelia

“No. I will not do it.”

“You must. The deal has already been struck and promises were made. This will happen,” my mother hissed in response to my refusal to marry the mad dragon prince. That’s what many of the witches had taken to calling Prince Isaac Gunn Ferguson after he began displaying more and more erratic behavior over the years. One minute he behaved like a gentleman, and the next a monster. The rumors about him were truly terrifying.

“Why would Father make such a decision? Prince Isaac is a horrible person.” And that was putting it rather mildly from everything I’d heard. I hadn’t actually ever met the man, but his reputation definitely preceded him. “What if he decides to eat me?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Cordelia. They don’t eat people,” she sighed. “Your father made the agreement because tensions in the valley have been high and this isn’t the right time to go to war with the shifters. Think of all the bloodshed your marriage can prevent. Becoming a peacemaker for your coven is quite the high honor.”

I frowned down at her. That wasn’t how I saw it at all. “So I have to give up my freedom and chance at love for what? To placate a species we despise? That’s not fair. There must be another way.”

“That’s a little harsh, Cordelia. Even for you. If you aren’t willing to fulfill your coven duties without constant protest, then I’m afraid I have failed miserably as a parent *and* a high priestess. However, the agreement has been made and the union announced. I’m afraid you will have no choice but to go through with it, or you risk bringing the kind of dishonor on our family that could jeopardize our roles and our freedom.”

The volume of guilt my mother had just heaped on top of me weighed heavily on my shoulders. She was right. To refuse to cooperate with an order from the coven’s high priest would cause more trouble than any of us could bear. Especially if it was his own daughter doing the rebelling. I flopped down on the sofa where afternoon tea had just been served and proceeded to fill my cup with several cubes of sugar.

“Cordelia,” my mother warned. She didn’t need to elaborate. I could feel her scorn over what I chose to put in my mouth today as well as every other day. I had not been born with the kind genes my mother carried, the ones that would keep my figure svelte and pleasing to the eye. I was built more like my father and his side of the family. I towered over all the other women my age, and it was difficult to contain my curves in the traditional dresses I was expected to wear.

I dropped the last sugar cube I had intended to add to my tea back into the bowl with a loud sigh, knowing my tea would be as bitter as the future I had to face. “Does the prince even know what he is getting into with me? Or is he to be blindsided?” I asked, taking a short sip of tea while trying to keep my face from scrunching up in displeasure.

My mother’s head jerked to attention. “What is that supposed to mean? You are the equivalent of a highborn lady, the daughter of a High Priest and Priestess of the greatest coven this region has ever seen. There is no greater honor that we can bestow on him than offering your hand in marriage.”

I shook my head, frustration setting in. She knew exactly what I meant, and pretending that I did not fit the mold one would expect of a highborn lady would only hurt everyone in the long run. Not that my appearance had prevented potential

suitors from calling in the past. They just tended to be of the older or desperate for influence variety.

Coven or not, it seemed every being had one thing in common—their pursuit for more power.

It had been clear for quite some time that a true love match was not likely in my cards. Although the mystical signs weren't as cut and dried as one might expect. Many in the coven had read my palms, my aura, my cards, and every one had been less than clear. Except on one thing. True love for me did exist, but it would not come until after a terrible trial, and then the price of love would be quite high.

I had a hard time believing that had meant the dragon prince. I shook my head, reminding myself it wouldn't do to concern myself about love. I was more than capable of finding my own happiness without it.

“Never mind, Mother,” I said, trying to change the touchy subject. I wasn't permitted to talk down about myself, but it was okay for others to scold me whenever I made a slight deviation from what they considered acceptable behavior. Or when new clothes had to be made because I'd outgrown mine once again...

“We need to start making arrangements immediately. We will begin our travel to their castle in two days' time, and it will not be an easy trip.”

I sucked in a sharp breath. “Why so fast? Shouldn't we have time to prepare for an appropriate wedding? And why not have it here? They could come to us.” The anxiety of having only two more days in the only home I'd ever known did not feel good.

She narrowed her eyes at me, knowing full well I cared little about a formal anything. “He is the future king. His family will be making most of the preparations. Our focus will be on what you wear and packing your belongings for transport. Those should be your focus.”

My stomach bubbled with nerves. I had a mere forty-eight hours to make peace with this decision or craft some sort of

escape. That simply wasn't enough time. It would take that long just to say goodbye to my friends and family. If I didn't know better, I would assume this whole thing had been designed in a way that gave me and possibly my intended no time to make other arrangements.

I wasn't sure how I felt about that. Why would they want to rush the prince? Men did not have the same concerns that women did when it came to timing. Apparently, I had much to think about as well as prepare for. I only hoped that the prince was ready for a six-foot-tall woman with unruly dark hair that resembled a mop that also didn't style well, a body that looked more like a sweet dinner roll than a woman, and a practicing witch who wouldn't hesitate to use her low-level power if that's what it took to get her way.

No treasure hoarding, foul-mouthed, and bad-tempered dragon had a chance in hell against me.

What a joke.

CHAPTER
THREE

Ian

One week later, after the castle had undergone a magnificent transformation for the upcoming nuptials and everyone within miles was abuzz with the news that we were planning to unite the shifter and witch community once and for all, the arrival of our guest of honor was imminent.

“Where is your brother?” My father did not look pleased to discover that Isaac had yet to return after leaving the castle two days before to blow off steam. Not that anyone should have been surprised. My brother did as he damn well pleased, and if he didn’t get his way, he’d use his dragon half to express his outrage. And there was nothing else like a two-ton black dragon having a temper tantrum. Hellfire was a massive understatement.

“I’m not his keeper.” I took a sip of the bourbon in my glass and grimaced. This was my father’s choice of drink, not mine. I hated this swill. I preferred aged whiskey or a good mug of ale.

“I would disagree. As his twin, you have a unique connection with Isaac that gives you an advantage over the rest of us. Your king relies on you to aid our future prince in every way possible, including making sure this wedding goes smoothly. That means do what it takes to get your brother back in line.”

I scoffed at that tidbit of insight, especially since nothing could be further from the truth. Isaac's feelings towards me often teetered between love and hate, with hate winning out a lot more often than love. Although it was often difficult to tell until he shared with me. Which usually meant a massive amount of fire damage.

"Isaac barely tolerates me, let alone confides in me. He prefers his own company. Alone. Half the time he'd rather cut off a wing than talk to anyone else." We both knew this to be true because when we were younglings, he'd done that very thing. Fortunately, the wing had grown back.

"Then use the other half of his time to get him to listen to reason."

Tired of this useless back and forth, I changed the subject. "What do we know about his betrothed?" I'd asked before, but little had been shared with me. For some reason, Isaac and I had been excluded from the peace negotiations this time around. "Is she excited for the wedding? Has anyone shared anything about her?"

My father shrugged. "I would assume she is thrilled. I mean, why wouldn't she be? How often does a woman get to marry an actual prince?"

My mother's laughter filled the room from the doorway. "For a clever king, you are quite full of yourself," She smiled wider. "If I had to guess, I'd bet she is scared out of her wits. What young woman in her right mind would want to marry a stranger? Let alone a dragon. Especially one with a reputation such as Isaac's. Which likely means we'll all have to be patient and give her some grace."

My father frowned. "Mad, my dear. You and I had an arranged marriage, and look at us."

She nodded and moved beside my father, who placed a quick kiss on her lips before he pulled her against his side. "I dare say that you and I got lucky. I'm afraid the same odds are not in Isaac's favor. Most women do not prefer brute force in their men."

“Is this your mother’s instinct talking, or have you seen something you have yet to share with the rest of us?”

Mother had the gift of sight. The ancient power of Tallan, gifted directly from the Goddess, that allowed her to see the future and a great many other things. Although not always at the most opportune moments.

“The Tallan has been quiet. I’ve been meditating all week in the hopes I could see something, but it has not happened. Despite that, my instinct tells me today is not going to go as planned. Call it mother’s intuition.”

“At this point, nothing would surprise me. Whatever happens today, we shall work through it as a family. Even Isaac can see reason when it’s important enough,” my father said, giving her another kiss that made me look away. My parents were true mates, an Alpha and his Omega. The unbreakable bond between them as palpable as the wind that blew through the trees.

While their relationship had started out as a true traditional arrangement, the story of their meeting had resulted in an immediate transformation. A story I had loved to listen to as a young boy. At least until I’d gotten old enough to understand how that transformation actually took place, and then I’d heard enough. I knew of no one who wanted those kinds of details about their parents’ sex life.

I harbored no false hope that I would one day find the same thing, but I didn’t discount the possibility either.

My mother had a gift when it came to people and what they needed. If anyone could help him see, it would be her.

“Isaac may be temperamental, but he knows his place. I trust he will rise to the occasion.” I spoke the words without believing one of them.

Fortunately, the sound of horses’ hooves and the squeak of a carriage wheel sounded from the front of the castle, announcing the arrival of our guest of honor.

“I hope you’re right,” she said before looking at me. The doubt in her words was as clear as the water in the river that ran

through our mountains. “I guess we should go greet the girl and try to explain why her fiancé could not be bothered to greet her.”

Something she would have to get used to, I thought while barely keeping the harsh words to myself.

“Ian, you’ll talk to her, right?”

The story of my life. Always making up for my brother’s shortcomings. Although I guess I should have been more grateful that it had not been I who had been forced into marrying a stranger...

Before I could answer, my parents swept through the room and out the front entry. Their assumption that I would fall in line and cooperate in any way grated on my nerves. Isaac wasn’t the only one capable of exploding. I might only be a spare to the heir, but I could feel something ticking down inside me. One day soon, I would no longer toe the line behind my brother.

Something was headed our way that could cause that very divide.

I took a deep breath before following them. “Is that her?” I heard my father say before I reached the door.

“Uhm...I guess so. I’ve never met her,” my mother answered.

I couldn’t quite pinpoint it, but there was something off in the tone of their words. They sounded so—

I stepped up beside them and drew short at the woman protruding from the door of the carriage. I couldn’t really say what I’d been expecting since I’d given it little thought beyond my brother’s reaction, but seeing her bent over with her rear end facing my direction while she fished something from the inside was definitely not it.

“Oh good gracious,” my mother said before she covered her mouth to stifle a snicker.

My father coughed, and that caught the attention of everyone in the driveway. Including the woman who seemed to be struggling with her bag.

“Oh for goodness’ sake. Ian, go and help the poor girl before she embarrasses herself.”

I rushed to the side of the carriage. “Do you need some assistance?” I asked, still somewhat mesmerized by her struggle. And the flare of her curved bottom still aimed in my direction.

“No, I’ve got it. Thank you, though,” she said, her body jerking backward and forward as she continued her plight. Every move threatened to topple her into my lap, causing an awareness I had no business having, tightening the front of my trousers.

“Cordelia!” the woman from the other side of the carriage shrieked when she caught sight of me standing behind her daughter, who remained bent over in front of me, her arse practically in my face now.

“What?!” she asked at the same time she finally got the piece of luggage free. The sudden move made her lose her balance and tumble from the carriage.

Before her bottom hit the ground, I dove forward and caught her around the waist and hauled her upright. Right up the front of my body. And for one sinful moment, all I could think about was how incredible she felt in my hands. There were soft curves upon soft curves, and my mind couldn’t help picturing what they might look like unclothed. Or feel pressed against me...

“What the—?” she said, through a long curtain of black-as-night curly hair that currently shrouded most of her face. That moment of seeing but not seeing only lasted a second, but the desire to brush the hair out of her face and get my first look at her rose swift and sharp. Her hands, however, came up and pushed it out of the way and away from her face, beating me to it.

Our gazes met, and for a moment it felt like time stood still. She wasn’t at all what I had expected, and yet, she was so much more. Her skin was the color of warmth and smoothly unblemished, as if it had never seen the sun. Her nose a small silhouette but slightly disproportionate to the rest of her larger-

than-life features. Her cheeks were a slash of bright pink from either embarrassment or surprise, but it was the green gold color of her eyes that drew me in and made it impossible to look away. They were nearly the identical color to my own, right down to the changing flecks as the setting sun danced across her face.

“Oh,” she said on a pant. “I’m—I’m so—darn it. Are you—oh boy.” She dropped the bag, picked up the edges of her deep-blue skirt, and then dipped down into a curtsy on shaky legs. “Your Highness.”

And for the first time in my life, I experienced a glimpse of what it must be like for Isaac. To not care about anything because everything was given to him. No matter what it was. Anger and hatred swelled fierce inside me in a flash, and for the first time in my life, I believed I hated my brother enough to kill him. Because this creature—this woman—was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen in my life, and she belonged to him.

CHAPTER
FOUR

Cordelia

My legs shook as I waited for the prince to acknowledge me. If he didn't do so soon, I was going to fall on my face—again. Although at least in this position, he didn't have to see the effect his touch had had on me and I didn't have to see the certain disappointment in his too-sharp gaze.

The fleeting glimpse I'd gotten of his face before my common sense had kicked in and I'd remembered how I was supposed to greet him—ridiculous, by the way—had taken my breath away. Dark hair that looked as wild and free as I'd expected for a man who turned into a dragon. Something that, I had to admit—despite the fear it inspired—I hoped to see soon. It sounded like nothing I'd ever seen, and I was curious to experience it for sure.

Green eyes that in that fleeting moment looked almost molten. Seriously? Did they actually glow? Or was that simply the glint of the sunlight reflecting? And his lips. Goodness, but his were pure perfection. Full and pillowy while perfectly proportioned against a square, masculine jaw. The description I had received of him had not mentioned nearly enough about his striking good looks.

Maybe if he could get past this initial meeting, and my appearance, we could find a way to make the best of this. He certainly wouldn't be hard to look at. I stifled a giggle at that

and reminded myself that my girlish, carefree days were over. Here I would have responsibilities. Although what they would be, I wasn't clear on.

They held royal titles, but the kingdom in which they ruled seemed vague at best. There were only a few other clans of supernaturals that did not include the witches.

I had so many questions...

"I'm not—" Before he could finish what he'd been about to say, a loud crash sounded and the ground beneath my feet shook violently, causing me to lose my balance. And for the second time in a matter of minutes, I found his hard hands latched on to the bare soft flesh of my forearms and goose bumps erupting across my skin. The heat of which poured into me in a sinuous glide. Goodness gracious but that was almost enough to make me lose my mind.

"What was that?" I asked, pulling myself from his grasp before I committed a true sin and pulled him closer.

"I apologize in advance," he said, his brow pulled tight with concern. Without further explanation, he turned away, and I followed the direction of his gaze. A shot of fear arrowed through my heart, as well as an adrenalin surge at what I saw before me. A giant black dragon standing on the front lawn, his gaze assessing us with what looked like a snarl.

I took a step back, feeling an uncontrollable urge to put more space between me and him. Did dragons snarl?

This one seemed to.

"Isaac," the man in front of me called. "This is not the way to greet your future bride."

I blinked looking between the man and the dragon before it finally dawned on me the mistake I had made.

"Your brother's right," an older man growled from the front door. "Leave and come back when you are properly prepared to greet your fiancée."

I swallowed thickly, confusion clouding my thoughts. What in the world was going on?

The light around the black dragon shimmered in a myriad of color, and in an instant he changed. The dragon disappeared, and a naked man who looked identical to the one in front of me appeared. Only this one did not have a stitch of clothing on him, and it was impossible not to notice the stacks of imposing muscles that covered his frame. Or the massive—

“Isaac!” the woman I assumed was the queen scolded. “That is not what your father meant, and you know it.”

He shrugged and sauntered closer, forcing me to look away. I’d seen naked men before, but this one, there was something decidedly off and it felt far from natural.

“What is this?” he asked, his gaze raking up and down my body like I was a piece of meat at the market. The brutal scowl on his face had me taking a step back. “This had better not be the woman I am supposed to marry. She looks like a damned horse. I’m not marrying her.”

I sucked in a breath at the unexpected blow. I should have been prepared. I thought I was. But his sharp and cruel words sliced deep, nonetheless.

“Isaac!” all three of the others yelled in unison.

He growled in response, a sneer crossing his face. He’d yet to turn away from me, and I was finding it difficult not to stare in return, despite the state of his nakedness. He’d called me a horse, and it was taking all of my control not to tell him exactly what I thought of him in response. I was used to insults, but I’d long passed the days where I simply accepted them.

Only, when I opened my mouth to tell him what I thought, I heard the sharp warning Lettie whispered behind me. “Cordelia Dawn. Don’t you dare!”

“Look at her.” The naked prince waved his hands in front of me. “Do you actually think she is fitting enough to be my queen? I’ve seen whores prettier than her. Maybe I should marry one of them.”

My face flamed hot as I tried to straighten my spine and not give in to the fear and loathing that his words created. I’d been

well aware my entire life that I didn't meet the expectations set by my perfect and powerful parents. They were beautiful and exceptional in ways that I could never be. However, this was even more of a nightmare than I'd expected.

I'd never met someone quite this blunt. I was used to pointed looks and uttered whispers behind my back. Not...not this.

"Shut up!" the man in front of me hissed. Now that the prince had moved closer, I could see the remarkable resemblance. It was so striking they could almost be—

"Watch yourself, little brother. The last forty-eight hours did little to assuage my mood. If it's a fight you're spoiling for, I'm more than ready to accommodate you."

The same shimmer of light that had overcome the prince when he'd shifted back to his human form appeared around what I had to assume was his twin. The resemblance was too striking, despite the foul nature of the prince. His words were ugly, but unfortunately the rest of him was not. He was built like a God. They both were.

"If you don't watch your mouth, it is I who will accommodate you."

"Ian!" the woman gasped. "What has gotten into you?"

The cruel prince began to laugh. "It would appear my brother has finally grown a spine. I wondered when or if that might ever come to be. Although I do fear his loyalties are misplaced in this case. This homely woman cannot possibly be what you intend to fight about."

The man partially blocking me from the prince looked ready to explode. The light shimmering around him glowed red, and I feared he would transform right in front of me.

The king stepped forward and between the two brothers. "There will be no fighting or anything else resembling a fight. Nor do I wish to see any more of your dragons this day. We have a special guest, and I expect both of you to behave in front of her henceforth."

Was he talking about me? I almost looked around to see if he was referring to someone else, because right now I felt like an

unwanted interloper, not a special guest.

“As long as you don’t actually expect me to marry her, then everything will be fine.”

I tried not to wince at his cruel tone and failed.

“I’m warning you,” the one named Ian seethed. I could see his anger building in the magical aura that surrounded him, and it wasn’t a good sign that he would actually follow his rules. The color of his skin even seemed to change. Was that red? Did that mean he was a red dragon instead of black like his brother?

“Ian, seriously. What has gotten into you?” the queen asked, her tone shrill and surprised.

He rounded on her, his words surprisingly forceful. “Me? Please tell me you are not serious right now. He’s insulted the girl. His bride-to-be. I’ve seen you kill men for less.” He nearly spat his last words, and each one punctuated into me like a dagger. All my worst fears were unfolding before my eyes.

The queen opened her mouth to say something, looked over at me, and then shut it again. I had a strange feeling she didn’t disagree at all with her older son’s assessment of his supposed future bride. I clearly wasn’t good enough for any of them, but least of all her precious prince of a son.

My shoulders sagged. It was to be expected. I did not conform to current society protocols. To put it bluntly, my appearance appalled them.

Except maybe Ian...who had turned back to face me, his eyes full of wonder.

His reaction I didn’t understand at all.

CHAPTER
FIVE

Ian

I knew my family didn't have a clue about what had happened, but that didn't give them the right to act without basic decency. Especially Mother. Since when did she judge someone so harshly as she had this woman?

Cordelia, her companion had called her. The name rolled around in my head like a silk ribbon caressing down my body, soft and luxurious. That brief touch of my hand on her waist, even through layers of clothing, had jolted through me and awakened the sleeping dragon. His response had been immediate and insistent. Even now, I was barely holding him back. My skin still prickled with the urge to shift.

He wanted to get closer to her. And was ready to do battle to take up that position if that's what it took.

"I think it's time we start over." My mother brushed past me with a glare that warned me I would pay later for my insolence. I doubted very much she had the same issues with my brother and his actions. That bastard could shit in her precious garden and she would call it fucking fertilizer.

"I'm so sorry for that, dear," she said as she approached Cordelia. "Are you okay? You really must excuse my sons. They are *both* brutes. I have tried to instill them with manners, but taming a beast is no easy feat." She shot *me* a glare at that and not Isaac, making it clear who she blamed.

“Unfortunately, it is a dragon thing that you will come to know very well.”

“No, she won’t,” Isaac interjected. “I am serious about my stance, Mother. I have already rejected her as a mate, and that is my final word on the matter.”

I turned to snarl at him, until our father interrupted.

“Son,” our father started, but a giant roar from Isaac interrupted him. We all turned to find Isaac’s dragon had taken control and emerged once again. Fire erupted from him in a fierce blast of anger that luckily missed all of us, but the heat of the emotions behind it blasted each and every one of us.

Arsehole.

From the corner of my eye, I noticed Cordelia take a couple of steps away until her back hit the side of her carriage. Her escort also did not look happy, although she had not moved.

“I’m sorry,” I said to her, turning to catch her gaze. “I have no true excuse for this outburst.”

“I think we should leave,” Cordelia seethed, looking angry and still a bit shaken over this turn of events. Not that I blamed her. She’d been placed into an impossible situation by her family and mine, and my dragon and I were about to make it worse.

My mother rushed forward. “Nonsense. You’ve traveled a long way and arrived just in time for dinner. Isaac will return when he has shaken off the hold of the dragon, and then cooler heads will prevail. He has had a rough time lately and still isn’t thinking straight. I am confident that this turn of events has nothing at all to do with you and everything to do with the foul mood he has been in all week.”

Listening to my mother make excuses for my twin made me want to escape too. Only, I wouldn’t do so without *her*. Cordelia. I had half a mind to just grab her and go. It wouldn’t exactly be kidnapping. At least not once I explained the situation later, after everything between us was settled...

“Your son, the prince, made his position perfectly clear. I won’t stay where I am not wanted.” Her words were strong, and they pulled me back from the cliff’s edge I’d been about to

dive from. But we were only feet apart, and at this distance I could still feel the heat of her embarrassment and smell her shame. If I thought I would get away with it, I'd grab her hand and pull her to my side. I was appalled at my brother's behavior, but more than that, I wanted to soothe her and then take her somewhere to make her mine.

Mine. Where exactly had that come from, and why?

This turn of events could not be good. My parents were focused on a peace treaty with the witches, and Isaac insulting them by refusing to marry this girl wasn't going to end well.

Honestly, I thought he was crazy. She was the most unique and beautiful creature I'd ever laid eyes on. Everything that made her different from every other woman society liked to throw our way made her perfect. Her curves alone were enough to make all my blood race south to my cock. A thought I should try to keep out of my head if I didn't want to embarrass her any further.

And the wild mane of curly black hair that she wore around her shoulders instead of pinned back made me think she would be a challenge to tame. She was also the first woman I'd seen this season without some silly hat atop her head. Not that I had any room for complaint. I'd fallen victim on more than one occasion, including tonight, and had to confine myself in stiff formal attire in the form of many layers. Fashion dictated status, and even as a race of superior shifters, we were not immune to the trappings of human society at times like these.

"Trust me," Mother said, walking between me and the object of my desire. "Everything will be fine in one or two days' time. He is an alpha who will one day be king and as such has a great deal of important pressures on his mind. He will return, take his place by your side, and all will be forgotten. In the meantime, you can get acquainted with your new home and start to settle in."

Mother shifted away in time for me to catch the rise of Cordelia's left brow, her skepticism clearly written across her face. As I bit back a smile, I braced myself for whatever words she spoke next.

But it was her companion who chose to speak up first. “Thank you for your kind offer. As we are exhausted and famished from our trip, we look forward to settling in, as you say. Don’t we, Cordelia?”

Cordelia shifted towards her escort, but her gaze collided with mine first. Her dark-brown eyes were as expressive and exquisite as the rest of her. It was plain to see she did not want to be here a moment longer than she had to, but either good breeding or pure stubborn pride made her stand up straight and tighten her spine. She was taller than average, and at this height our gazes were almost level, other than the few inches I had over hers.

To me, it was obvious there was nothing at all about her that would appeal to my brother. His vanity and surly attitude meant most women were not good enough for him. Or maybe that’s what I’d hoped in light of the magic weaving its way around my heart the longer I stood and stared.

I forced myself to break contact before this got too awkward, and I turned to her escort and smiled. I’d obviously failed at hiding my interest, because everyone was now staring directly at me.

“Uhh...I guess so,” she mumbled quietly, drawing the attention back to her as she stood fiddling with the bag in her hand. Her sudden bout of shyness pulled at the protector in me a lot harder than I expected.

“Good. It’s settled, then,” Mother interjected. “Ian can show you to your rooms and help you with any of your bags, and then after you’ve had a moment to freshen up, he can escort you to dinner.”

I could see where Mother and the pointed look she aimed in my direction thought my taking Cordelia might be construed as some point of punishment, but she couldn’t be more wrong. I wanted to spend as much time with her as I could in case Isaac did actually come to his wits and decide to try and marry the girl.

Bile rose in my throat at the thought, as did the heat of uncontrolled rage. The idea of Isaac even getting near her

again was enough to make me want to bite his head off and drink his blood.

Mine.

I reared back at that. While I could be as violent as any other dragon, I didn't usually think about killing my own brother.

Something primal and unstoppable was happening, and I had a feeling life was about to get far more complicated.

CHAPTER
SIX

Cordelia

“Lettie!” I whispered harshly the moment the door closed behind Ian. “What in the world are you doing? Being rejected by the prince was my one way out. We should be on our way home right now, not making preparations to share a meal with these heathens. What is wrong with you?”

“Don’t be a child,” she spat back. “We won’t be deterred that easily. And I think we both know the greater good is a little more important than your bruised ego. You are strong enough to handle a little bad behavior.”

A little? Was she mad? And what was—

“Deterred from what?” I asked in an even lower whisper. Shifters were well known to have exceptional hearing, and if Ian was waiting outside our door for our return, he’d likely hear every word of our conversation. And sadly, I did not have enough magic in me to cast a strong enough silencing spell against his kind.

“That’s nothing at all for you to worry your head about. It’s coven business. You have one job now, and that’s to get that prince to marry you.”

I didn’t know what it being nothing for me to worry about was supposed to mean, but the familiar sting of being reminded that I lived at the bottom of the pecking order hurt. I was sick and tired of being treated as less than everyone else. As the

daughter of the high priest and priestess, I should have been respected. But when my magic had failed to emerge as anything worth their time, I'd been relegated to an afterthought.

Until now.

Of course, my appearance didn't help. While I ignored most of the gossip about me amongst the coven members, I still heard more than my fair share. It was gross and exaggerated. I was practically six feet tall. What did they expect? Skin and bones? That was not realistic at all.

"Last I checked, I am still a part of the coven. I have a right to know about its business, especially if it concerns me." I didn't understand what was going on, but the prickling under my skin made it more than clear it was something important. And I'd been left out.

"Not for long." Lettie smirked. "When you marry the dragon prince, you will belong to him. The coven will cut ties."

I balked at her words. The idea that I would belong to anyone sounded absurd, least of all belong to a dragon. Witches were not bound to familiars or anything else. It was the other way around.

Of course, it also came down to power, and with mine weaker than most, I would be completely vulnerable to all supernaturals.

"We should leave," I insisted. "Before that beast of a man returns. Did you see the look in his eyes? He's more likely to kill me than wed me."

She shrugged. "Then I guess it's up to you to change his mind, because we are not leaving."

I eyed her warily. Lettie and I weren't exactly friends, but I had thought there was at least a little respect between us. Could I have read her all wrong? Was there something about this arrangement I was missing?

"You expect me to just—"

“Do as you’re told,” she hissed, finishing my sentence for me. “Stop arguing with me, and do whatever you can to fix your appearance before that other man knocks on our door. Have some pride in yourself for once, and make yourself presentable. If you put forth more effort, you might have a chance.”

Her words didn’t just sting. They dug into me with the force of a sharp blade slicing through muscle and bone. Not once had she ever spoken to me like this, and it hurt. I had to fight against the burn of tears at the backs of my eyes at this turn of events. After all these years, I should have expected it... She wasn’t the first to treat me this way, and she certainly wouldn’t be the last. I turned away and crossed to a nearby basin, where I poured enough water to cleanse my face and pat it dry. That gave me a moment to catch my breath and allow the betrayal of her words to dissipate.

I studied my reflection in the mirror. Despite having reached the age of spinsterhood, my skin was still smooth and unlined, and while my eyes weren’t pure golden in color like my parents, the muddied green of mine didn’t seem necessarily odd or out of place. My lips were full and slightly parted, adding to the somewhat wild look on my face. But it was my unruly hair that ruined everything. It never did what I wanted it too, and it never failed to give me the look of a wildling.

Something I’d be all too happy to embrace if I had the power to go with it.

I reached for the pins that I’d used to try to hold my hair in place for the trip and began the arduous process of once again twisting it into something that resembled an acceptable style. So what if I never met the expectations of proper society? We were witches. Our coven was more powerful than any other supernatural hoped to be. Which made it all the more surprising that my family had given in to this peace treaty with the king.

Although, I had to admit, the appearance of the black dragon had shaken me. A fire-breathing monster had more than enough capability to inflict life-altering damage. Maybe there

was more to them than I'd thought, and maybe we had underestimated them.

Lettie sighed, approaching me. "Let me."

When I started to protest, she ignored me and yanked the pins from my fingers.

"Why are you being so mean?" I asked. My confidence had already taken a hit when the jerk of a prince rejected me, but Lettie acting like it was somehow my fault made little sense.

She didn't bother to answer, and as she stabbed the little pins into my hair, my mind wandered towards the other important thing that had happened. Ian. I let his name roll across my tongue, savoring it. I had not come here to cause trouble or find love. And yet, I couldn't stop thinking of him and his touch or the kindness in his eyes. While he looked almost identical to his brother, there had been stark differences between the two. First being that Ian had not made me feel as afraid as his brother. But when he'd touched me...

A shiver worked down my spine just thinking about it. Goose bumps prickled across my skin, and the small hairs at the back of my neck stood on end. I'd never had a reaction quite like that before, and I wasn't sure what it meant. I only knew that I needed to see him again. Whatever had sparked between us made me curious to know more.

I only hoped I didn't lean too close to the fire. I was already in enough trouble.

"Are we almost done?" I asked Lettie, impatience pushing at my will to sit still. "We probably shouldn't keep them waiting much longer."

"I thought you didn't want to stay?" She smirked at me in the mirror.

"I don't. But you have given me no choice, and now I feel obligated not to appear rude." She narrowed her eyes, and I could read the skepticism in them. I didn't know what she was thinking, but as long as she didn't figure out my intent, then I'd be fine.

She jabbed one more pin in my hair, poking roughly at my scalp. “If that doesn’t hold this mess, then I don’t know what will.”

To my surprise, she’d done a pretty good job of getting my curls under control. The dress I’d chosen to travel in was a deep-blue color that complimented well with my golden skin. It was also the nicest dress in my repertoire, so I didn’t want to change quite yet. There were a wide variety of hats in my bags that would go well with this, but we were indoors and a hat would be most inappropriate.

However...

I stood and crossed to the bags still sitting just inside the door. Rummaging around inside, I finally found what I was looking for and pulled it carefully free. The colorful feather from one of the wild peacocks that roamed our land would match perfectly with the dress and give it a little extra flair. I returned to the mirror and stabbed the end into the back of my hair until I was relatively certain it would stay in place, and then I examined my appearance once more.

It was about the best I could do and twice as much effort as I normally bothered with. While the prince had already made his intentions clear, that didn’t mean I had to look as beaten down as I felt. Lettie may have been right about us needing to stay a while longer. To return home rejected by the prince would show everyone that they were right about me and my inability to represent my coven. If I didn’t get married, I would never live it down.

My stomach twisted with the impossible decision before me. Where I’d previously been desperate to find a way out, I was now trapped with having to make it work.

But there was still the matter of Ian...

I turned to Lettie with my lips compressed tight to hide my grimace. “I’m ready to go.” And we needed to get out of this room before I freaked out over what I was about to do.

She nodded and turned as a knock sounded on our door. She yanked it open and greeted Ian with a curt nod. “We’re ready,”

she said before he could ask.

But he wasn't paying any attention to her. His gaze raked over me from head to toe before his eyes met mine. They glowed a molten gold, and I wasn't sure how to take that. If I didn't know better, I would say he looked interested. Very interested. "Very good," he said without taking his gaze from mine. "Shall we go, then?"

I swallowed thickly at his words. I didn't understand why my stomach swooped or why heat suddenly built in my core. But I did want to go with him, more than anything else, although to where I wasn't sure. Anywhere, maybe. Somewhere we could be alone...

It was then I realized just how much trouble I was in. I desperately wanted the wrong prince...

CHAPTER
SEVEN

Ian

Mother had seated us directly across from each other, and no matter how hard I tried, I could not tear my gaze away from her. Her presence...her scent...her everything filled the room and blinded me to anything else. I'd been careful not to touch her again, despite how rude that might have been considered as I escorted her to the dining room.

While she'd prepared for dinner, I'd had enough time to consider what was going on and why my dragon was about to crawl out of my skin to get to her.

Mine.

The dragon had a one-track mind, and it was pretty damned obvious now what he wanted. That primal part of me had sensed something the human half couldn't. Its mate. And possibly not just any mate, but an Omega. The one being destined for him. But was that even possible? I'd never heard of an omega witch before.

But it was damn near impossible to deny the pull to her or the need coursing through my veins. Not to mention the dragon still trying to crawl out of my skin. That alone nearly convinced me. It had been decades since I'd failed to control that part of me. So the arrival of *my* Omega made sense. Which, if that was true, meant we were both in a heap of trouble.

Isaac may have rejected her, but if Mother and Father had their way, he would marry her anyway. They seemed pretty determined when it came to working out a peace treaty between the witches. While my brother and I were both Alphas, our father was *the* Alpha. He ultimately made all of the decisions, and with enough pressure and magical influence, he could make either one of us do as we were told.

Unless we renounced him as our Alpha and struck out on our own.

I pushed that idea out of my mind. There was no reason to go down that road—yet.

How was this even possible? That was the dumbest question I'd had so far. Fate was a fickle thing, and there were no guarantees whether it would be friend or foe. Although to alter it would be nearly impossible. And then there was the notion of whether she would be affected in ways that I'd yet to encounter.

Despite the consequences of my actions, I done little to hide my interest in her. And based on the red flush of her gorgeous skin and the way her gaze kept darting back to mine whenever she thought no one was looking, she was experiencing some of the same phenomenon I was.

So how much time did we have before everyone else realized what was happening? Or, more importantly, what would we do when the lure of a true mate connection would overwhelm us both and the dragon would emerge to fight for her? I could already sense her distress. There were tales about the many ways a connection between and Alpha and his Omega could manifest, and the true nature of the dragon meant he would do anything to protect his mate. *Anything*.

“Ian,” my mother called from her end of the table, pulling me abruptly from my thoughts. “Why are you being so quiet? It’s not polite to ignore our guests.”

Considering I had not taken my eyes off our newcomer since she emerged from her private quarters, I would hardly say I'd ignored her. I just wasn't sure I could trust what might come out of my mouth. If Mother thought silence was inappropriate,

what would she say when I grabbed the poor girl's hand and dragged her from the room?

If she truly was my mate, then stealing her from Isaac and kidnapping her was well within my rights. Another thought I couldn't seem to shake free from.

"I'm enjoying the meal and the company," I said through clenched teeth.

Cordelia's eyes filled with equal parts fear and surprise. The dragon was too close to the surface, which had made my voice harsher than I would have liked.

"Are you ill?" she asked.

I finally tore my gaze from Cordelia and faced my mother, who met me with a smirk and a fucking sparkle in her eye. Did she—?

Son of a...

"No, Mother. I am not ill. Just enjoying the company, as I said."

Her eyes got brighter, and I could see that indeed I had been right. My mother was up to something. And if I had to hazard a guess, I'd say she knew a lot more than she was even letting on, with her barely disguised glances that moved back and forth between me and Cordelia.

"Hmmp," she said before setting her sights on Cordelia. "And you, dear, is everything okay? Do you not care for duck? I notice you've hardly touched your food. Shall I ask the cook to prepare something more to your liking?"

Cordelia nearly choked, her cheeks flaming red. "On no, please don't. The food is delicious." As if to emphasize her words, she speared some meat and a wedge of potato onto her fork and quickly put them in her mouth. She'd moved so fast, it was difficult not to laugh at how awkward she looked. It was the cutest damned thing I'd seen in a long time.

"Maybe after dinner, Ian can show you around the estate. If you are going to marry my son, you'll want to get acquainted

with the house and grounds as quickly as possible. Sometimes just finding your way around can become taxing.”

Cordelia choked, her eyes going wide. Her mouth was still full, and she was trying to quickly swallow so she could respond.

“I’m sure there is plenty of time for that,” I said, hoping to draw some of the attention away from her. “But I am happy to give a tour if you wish. Lettie, would you like to join us?”

Cordelia’s companion shook her head forcefully. “No. I’m quite tired from our trip. I plan to retire early and get plenty of sleep tonight. I suspect we have a busy few days ahead of us.”

“Of course, dear,” Mother interrupted before I could respond. “If you’d like me to go ahead and send someone up to draw your bath or unpack your belongings, they could get started now and have everything ready.”

“No!” Lettie answered sharply enough that we all turned to look at her. She cleared her throat and cast her eyes down. “I mean no, that won’t be necessary. I’m more than capable of taking care of my own things.”

My mother frowned, and she didn’t look happy with Lettie’s response. “Very well, then,” she started. “Ian, I guess the grounds will have to wait until tomorrow during the more appropriate daylight hours. But I’m sure a tour of the house would be fine. Is that permissible, Lettie?”

The woman nodded. “Of course.”

With that settled, my mother turned her attention back to my father and asked him something I didn’t pay attention to. While I didn’t like the idea that she was trying to manipulate something, I couldn’t hate her methods too much when I now had something to look forward to. Probably more than I should.

Although, whether she realized it or not, she was playing with fire. I would be alone with Cordelia. It would be the perfect time to discuss what was happening between us before it got out of control. I didn’t intend to scare her off, but she deserved to know what might happen.

I only hoped that I could control myself. This draw I had toward the woman across from me seemed to be growing stronger by the minute. I had a real concern that my dragon and I were about to lock horns, and I couldn't guarantee I could hold him back.

The shit was about to hit the fan.

CHAPTER
EIGHT

Cordelia

As I stood on the balcony overlooking the vast grounds surrounding Ferguson Castle, I tried desperately to ignore the allure of the man standing less than a foot away. Ever since dinner, he'd stuck to my side like glue, and I was loathe to admit that I loved it. I was in serious trouble, and I didn't know what to do. Whatever this was between us, it was growing stronger by the hour, and I feared I would take drastic measures whether I wanted to or not. It was a completely irrational thought, but I couldn't seem to help myself.

I rubbed my hands up and down my arms, trying to relieve the sensation of being out of control, to no avail. I needed to consult my cards and see if I could glean any information about what might be going on. Was there some kind of magic or spell the dragon possessed that could play tricks on me? I should have asked more questions about them before our arrival. Or I could talk to Lettie more about them. She had a vast knowledge about many things and a deep well of magic to call upon. But she too had begun acting strange since the minute we'd arrived.

“Are you cold? Should we go back inside?”

Ian's deep, masculine voice drifted across my bare skin, sending a shiver racing down my spine. I shook my head. Inside only made it worse. Without the open air, I could only

smell the wildness of him. A heady scent of fire, musk, and man that seemed to beckon me closer. It was the most unique thing I'd ever experienced, and I couldn't seem to get enough of it.

What the hell was wrong with me? I didn't know him at all. Ian was certainly attractive, and I could chalk up my interest in him as perfectly normal for a woman my age who had never been with a man. But this...this was different.

It was as if my whole being was building towards something big, and I didn't know how else to explain it. Only that it had something to do with him.

Heat was building in my core with every passing minute, and I couldn't stop rubbing my legs together, trying to ease the pressure between them. Not to mention the slick moisture soaking my undergarments. I understood what it meant. I was a virgin, not an idiot. I'd just never experienced anything quite like this or had anything described like this to me. This did not seem normal.

"You keep rubbing your arms and fidgeting. Is something else wrong, then? Can I assist?" Ian took a step closer to my side, and my breath caught in my lungs. He was so close I could feel the heat radiating from his skin to mine. Everything I felt growing inside me intensified. I could barely breathe with the ache of unmet want pounding in tandem with my heartbeat.

He reached forward and barely grazed my arm, but it was enough to cause a moan to slip from my lips. Horrified that I'd made such a noise in his presence, I slapped my hand over my mouth and recoiled from his touch.

"Don't do that," I finally snapped. "It's not right."

"In what way?" he asked.

"I guess I'm technically betrothed to your brother, and you and I are alone without an escort. You shouldn't touch me. What if someone saw? What would they think?"

"That may be true. But it's also as necessary as taking a breath. Isn't it? I could no more stay away from you than you me."

My head jerked to meet his gaze, shocked to see that golden glow of his eyes looking back at me again. “What is that supposed to mean?” And why was my body angling in his direction?

“It’s difficult to explain to a—”

“A what?” If he was about to insult me, I was going to both die and lay into him for it. There had been more than enough insults for one day. Also, I was on edge and possibly unable to control my emotions. Although, that was putting it mildly.

“Someone not like us,” he finally whispered, which I heard perfectly fine.

I took a small, shallow breath, hoping for some relief or, at the very least, a shred of control. “You mean a shifter?”

He nodded. “Unless witches have a similar phenomenon.”

Since I had no idea what he was referring to, I doubted there was anything similar between a witch and a dragon. I shuddered at the memory of Prince Isaac and his gigantic black dragon on the front lawn. The smoke that had risen from his black scales and the steam that had erupted from his nose was going to give me nightmares for quite some time. I was in no hurry to see that from him again.

“I couldn’t say, considering I have no idea what you are talking about. Stop talking in circles and say whatever it is you think needs said.”

“Don’t you? Know, I mean?” he asked, leaning a little bit closer so that when he spoke, I felt his breath against the shell of my ear. A shiver worked down my spine, and the heat already building in my core grew infinitely more intense. It took my breath away.

“I demand you tell me what’s going on,” I wheezed. “Is this some sort of trick you are playing on me? If this is a shifter thing—”

“While it is a shifter thing, I assure you it is no trick. At least not one played by me. Fate, on the other hand, does enjoy games, and they are rarely fair.”

“I feel like you are purposely talking in riddles in order to confuse me. You must tell me more information. Have you done something to me? Is this a poison of some kind?”

He smiled down at me, and I swear he got even more rakishly handsome like that. One part gentleman and two parts devil. What else could explain this inexplicable draw to a man I didn't know?

“The answer is both simple and complex. Simple because destiny is in charge and almost impossible to resist, and complex because you are betrothed to my brother and there is a war at stake.”

The more he spoke, the closer he drew, until our chests were almost touching and his lips were closer than anyone would call decent.

“What does that have to do with what has made me feel so ill?” What else could possibly explain my irrational thoughts? “And everyone seems to have conveniently forgotten that your brother rejected me. I don't understand why I am still here.”

“You're here because my parents wish it so. As do I. And Isaac is a fool. How he could not see what a unique and lovely woman you are is beyond me. I, however, am not a fool.”

What felt like a thousand little butterflies took flight in my stomach at his words, their wings madly brushing against my insides. As inappropriate as it might be, it filled me with warmth to hear such high praise from someone not related to me.

I leaned a little more forward, lowering my voice. “Why are your parents so interested in me marrying their son?” It was the only question I could think of.

He smirked. “The better question is how do we change their mind? You will most certainly *not* be marrying Isaac.”

My mouth dropped open, and before I could recover, my face flamed hot with embarrassment. “Well, if that is how you feel, then I definitely want to know why I am still here. If you and he are so determined to throw me out, then I should not have stayed for dinner.” I tried to pull myself away from him, but he

grabbed at my arms and pinned me in place. The heat from his hands burned through the bare skin of my arms and promised a sort of pleasure I wasn't sure I could comprehend but that I wanted to experience nonetheless.

His words about me were clear, but his actions told a completely different story.

“I said my brother won't be marrying you,” he growled in a low tone that rumbled through me, making my blood sing. “But you will be wed. To me.”

CHAPTER
NINE

Ian

Watching her eyes go wide with shock and disbelief did little to disguise the barely banked desire written on her face. I didn't want to scare her any more than she already was, but I could scent her extreme arousal. The perfume of it scented the air around her in a mouthwatering delight that I could practically taste. Soon it would grow stronger, and I would no longer be the only one who knew what exactly was happening.

Ready or not, appropriate or not, Mother Nature had made us for each other, and we would soon have to answer her call.

“That is an outlandish suggestion, Mr. Ferguson. Lettie and I will most assuredly be leaving first thing in the morning. I am not some sort of tug-of-war toy between two childish siblings. Nor do I need your pity just because your brother rejected me.”

While her words sounded somewhat resolute, she'd yet to pull from my grasp. In fact, the heat of her skin had wrapped around me and issued its own invitation for me to step closer. Which I accepted.

“You cannot leave. What you are going through won't allow it.”

“What on earth are you going on about? That's not tru—”

“Isn’t it? Look at us. Look at how my body fits and molds against yours, and try to tell me you don’t feel like you are going to burn from the inside out if I don’t somehow get closer.”

She slowly looked down, and her slight gasp hit my ears at the same time the smirk erupted on my face. Her shock and outrage were almost as alluring as her delicious scent. I couldn’t wait to feel her warm heat wrapped around my cock. Dragons did not make for small men, so it would be tight. And breathtaking.

Because of my size, I was not normally meant for a virgin and her first time. But in this case, it was an exception. Nature seemed to understand these limitations when it came to an Alpha and Omega coupling, and when the heat began, there would be more than enough natural lubricant to ease my way.

“You’re being scandalous,” she gasped.

“You have no idea. In fact, you are lucky I have kept most of my thoughts to myself. As those might be downright frightening for someone such as yourself.” I leaned closer. “But know this,” I whispered against her skin. “The moment my cock kisses your wet pussy, you are going to hear every little thought in my head and then some.”

“Tan,” she cried, giving my arms a halfhearted tug in another attempt to move away from me. “You can’t say—”

“Yes,” I growled, interrupting her because part of me was starting to lose its edge. “That is one of the names you will call me. Beast is another. And there will be many more.”

Her face bloomed beet red from my coarse words, but the sound of her racing heartbeat gave away her true desire. She wanted me as much as I wanted her, and there wasn’t a damn thing she could do about it. Fate had us in its tight grip, and there was no letting go.

“You still haven’t explained why this is happening. Have you tricked me somehow? Am I ill? Have I been poisoned?”

I roared with laughter at her ludicrous assumptions. Not to mock her. Simply because I found her confusion adorable.

Albeit quite understandable, under the circumstances. Her lack of experience meant that it was up to me to school her, and I was more than up for that job. “No. You have not been poisoned. I dare say that would be easier to deal with if that were the case. No, my beautiful. You are an Omega, and I am your Alpha. We are mates.”

Her eyes widened in surprise, all the color draining from her face. “Mates? What? You can’t be serious? That’s an absurd suggestion. I’m not like you. I’m barely even a witch.”

“I’m quite serious. While it does sound unusual that witch blood would be affected as keenly as shifter blood, it would seem that my touch ignited the match that will become your first heat, so not so absurd after all.”

She scrunched up her nose. “I am *NOT* a dog. I do NOT go into heat. You, sir, have lost your mind.” This time when she pulled hard at my arms to get free, I let her go. I felt the loss immediately, and the dulling of her eyes indicated she did as well. It took more than a little willpower to give her some space. But it was clear she needed it, and I felt it prudent at this juncture to encourage it. Soon enough, that would not be possible.

“You can’t be that naive about shifter mating. With the new clans that we formed some time ago, people have gossiped, and information like that is hardly a secret.”

Her face darkened, and she shrank away from me farther. I didn’t care for her withdrawal, and I intended to get to the bottom of it.

“I am not naive, but I have been sheltered.” She spoke quietly, and I got the impression she was about to share something immensely private. “My family is ashamed of me and do their best to make people forget about me.”

“What? Why?” The dragon rose as my human half got upset.

She shook her head as if to warn me not to touch her so she could say her piece. “For starters, I do not look the way I should. My parents are both beautiful people with everything aligned and perfectly proportioned as expected. I am like an

ugly duck compared to them.” I started to vehemently protest her words, and she shook her head to stop me, clearly not done with what she had to say. “To make matters worse, my magic emerged years later than most of my kind, and it’s not very powerful. It worried our ruling council that the High Priest and Priestess did not have a child strong in magic. So my parents kept me mostly hidden to keep the rumors quiet until I could prove my worth.” She waved her arms around. “And clearly since I am here, they have given up and decided this is how I will be of use to the coven. As far away from them as they could get me.”

The heat of anger built inside me. I couldn’t imagine being stifled or restricted in such a manner. Of course, dragons were a different breed and much harder to control. Hence, my brother running wild and doing what he wanted. The only one who had a chance in hell of stopping him would be my father or me. And neither of us wanted to go there very often. Even a family bond might not be enough to keep the dragon from going too far.

The thoughts of not believing yourself good enough, however, I could relate to. I didn’t doubt who I was or what I was capable of in any way, but as a boy there had been brief moments when I’d entertained some self-doubt about not being as important as my brother. I also knew that if I wanted to, I could fight him for his position. I’d just never wanted to.

“I don’t like what I’m hearing,” I admitted. “Parents should not hide their children. They should be celebrated for whoever or whatever they are. They are precious.”

She shrugged. “They did what they had to in order to protect me. Witches are unforgiving and relentless. They are ranked in the coven by the power they wield. If they all knew how weak my magic actually is, they would likely come after me. I would be burned at the stake or...sacrificed.”

That dawning that entered her eyes made me crazy. My spine straightened. “Now, that’s absurd.”

Her shoulders dropped slightly. “It is reality and all starting to make a lot more sense. No coven wants a weak link in their

leadership.”

“Well, you won’t have to worry about that with me. I won’t allow anyone who wishes you harm anywhere near you. Even a cross look could draw my dragon fire. Dragons cannot stand to be crossed or insulted or stolen from. What is ours is ours, and we are nothing if not prideful.”

She bit her lip and stared at me, seemingly at a loss for words. That little bite of her teeth into her bottom lip was enough to throw my thoughts back to the situation at hand—her imminent heat and my pure alpha response.

“I can’t be what you think I am. It just can’t be. I’m...”

She didn’t have to finish that sentence. The dragon roared to life, filling me with a surge of heat that I knew from experience lit my eyes and heated my skin. “Why not? Stranger things have happened in the past. My own mother is not a shifter, and she is a queen.”

She seemed to have no answer for that as she looked out into the darkness and the mountains beyond. With the moon high full, they were a regal silhouette in the distance. It would be a beautiful night for a flight with a pretty girl. Ugly duck, my ass.

“You don’t want a witch like me. I won’t be of much use. It’s no wonder your brother rejected me. I tried to tell my parents this was a bad idea...”

I stepped close again, refusing to allow her to put any more distance between us or to accept any of her words. “You couldn’t be more wrong. My father may be looking for a political alliance, but I am *not*. A true and pure mating is far too precious to be used as some sort of pawn.”

She turned and met my gaze. We stood like that for a moment just staring at each other as the need between us grew palpable and more heat rushed through my blood.

“You’re quite stubborn,” she finally said.

I laughed. “You have no idea. Stubborn, temperamental, protective, overbearing. The list goes on. When you are at the top of the food chain, your—”

“Ego grows to no bounds,” she laughed. “I have to say you aren’t convincing me that I would enjoy being mated to you. I may not be the epitome of a princess, but I am no shrinking violet either. I have opinions. Loud ones.”

I again accepted that as the challenge it seemed to be issued as. I took another step closer, and she took one away. If she thought she would get away from me that easily...

We continued that dance until her back hit the wall at the end of the balcony and we were both enveloped in a corner of darkness. It was true that polite human society would not approve of an unmarried woman and an unmarried man hiding together in the shadows. But we weren’t human, and I wasn’t as polite as I looked.

“You didn’t let me finish. I am a dragon. I covet and hoard treasure of all kinds. You, my lady, are the greatest treasure of all. The ultimate find. The one all shifters will seek and few will ever find. Which means I will do anything and everything to keep you, including drown you in pleasure.”

Her small gasp at that was music to my ears and my perfect opening. I leaned forward and captured her mouth in a kiss meant to tease and tantalize. But I underestimated how much her need had progressed, and it hit me with the force of an unstoppable tidal wave.

I moaned into her mouth as I dove deep, pressing my tongue to hers. Immediately, I realized taking a taste was the best AND worst idea. Her taste and scent exploded inside me, the heat of which drew the beast as close to the surface as I would allow. Her need spiked as well as she mewled and grabbed on to me.

Withdrawing from the kiss, with great reluctance I might add, I pressed my forehead to hers. “This is happening fast. You need me. I can sense it. Let me help you ease into the transition. You do not have to suffer.”

She made an unintelligible sound in her throat, which might as well have been her screaming yes at the top of her lungs. My already hard cock tightened impossibly full as all the blood in my body rushed to the region. I kissed her forehead and then trailed my lips to her ear. “I CAN help you.”

“It’s not right,” she protested. “We shouldn’t even be alone out here.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. There’s nothing more right than easing a mate through her heat. Convention has no place in situations such as these.”

“I’m not your—”

I covered her mouth with my hand, refusing to let her voice another useless argument. The scent of her extreme arousal was unmistakable, and she was only moments away from begging me to assuage the ache herself. It would turn painful if she denied it too long, and I couldn’t bear for her to be in pain, unless that’s what it took.

“Shall I wait, then, until you beg?” I whispered. “Or save you now from that pain?”

CHAPTER
TEN

Cordelia

Part of me wanted to stop him. Flee back to the privacy of my own quarters until whatever this was passed. I had no experience with anything like this, and I was clearly in over my head with him. His suggestion was so outlandish, it almost made it believable. But his heated breath on my ear and taste on my tongue seemed impossible to resist. I was so hot all over that I had to fight not to tear off all my clothing in my search for relief. If he stopped now, I was certain I would burn from the inside out.

How could I admit that I wanted him more than I wanted breath? Or live up to what he needed from a woman? A man like him would have expectations that I could never fulfill. But I could feel the desire for more soaking my undergarments. I couldn't resist...

"Can you kiss me again?"

I watched as his eyes darkened in response and his gaze dropped to my lips.

"I can and I will. But you have to know. It won't stop there. I must ease you."

I didn't get to respond before his lips were on my neck, just below my ear, blazing a trail as they moved lower and lower. The dress I wore was not as modest as what I was used to, but for the first time since donning it, I was grateful for the

exposure. Especially when his lips came in contact with the top curve of my breast.

In that moment, any words of protest died on my tongue.

The heat burning through my cheeks was nothing compared to the warmth building in my core. Despite what he might think, I truly wasn't naive about relations between men and women. Our coven often drew on the combined power created from sexual coupling, and witches were taught of its existence quite early on.

However, learning about it and experiencing it were two completely different things...

He flicked his heated tongue across my skin, and my eyes rolled to the back of my head. Oh. My. Goodness. "More," I gasped the word before I could think to stop myself. He was right. I would beg for it if that's what it took.

The pressure from my core to my pelvis increased tenfold. My grip on his arms tightened, my fingernails dug through the dress jacket he wore, and I was half a second away from trying to rip it off him so I could touch his skin like he touched mine. At this point I was no longer sure I could stand on my own without using him to hold me upright.

"Your wish is my command, my lady."

I almost laughed at the ridiculously formal way he spoke about what was happening. As if nothing mattered more to him than fulfilling my desires. It was ludicrous—and, yet, as necessary as taking a breath.

Before I realized what he was doing, he'd rucked up my skirt, pulling it up between us until his fingers landed on one of my stocking-clad legs. My sharp intake of breath at his heat touching my skin so intimately filled the quiet of the night. Part of me didn't understand how this was happening, while the other understood it exactly.

Mating heat. A phenomenon I understood no witch could be affected by had dug its talons deep into my flesh, making it more than clear only one thing would assuage the relentless ache.

“Are you sure about this?” I asked. “Is there truly no other option?” I wasn’t sure how I’d managed to form the questions with his hand quickly burning a path farther up my leg. He was seconds away from discovering my embarrassing secret. I wasn’t just turned on for him. I was desperate, and I had the flood of wetness between my legs to prove it.

“You are my mate. I swear this to you,” he whispered at my ear, the heat of his every breath driving me a little bit more wild. “There is nothing I want more in this world.”

My rational brain tried to fight against his words. I wasn’t an animal, driven by lust. I couldn’t want this, could I?

Despite the control slipping through my fingers, I considered the question. My parents had sent me here to marry the prince—who had rejected me on sight. Would it really matter if I married a different prince?

My mind jolted. Wait. I wasn’t betrothed to Ian. He had made no promises to my parents. To lose my virginity like this could be a serious complication.

“What about your brother?”

A growl sounded in his chest. A dark sound that seemed full of warning. “He had his chance and threw it away. Good thing though, since I would have killed him on the spot if he’d laid a hand on you. I still might kill him just for the way he spoke to you.” His teeth grazed against my neck, and I moaned, surprised to find that some of them were now pointed and threatening to break through my skin.

The sudden desire for him to bite me swept over my entire body, pulling me deeper into this thrall of heat. I arched closer, despite there being no space left between us. His threat to kill another man on my behalf scrambled my brain. I had to be losing my mind and had no clue how to regain it.

While I worked to solve this dilemma, Ian’s fingers found the gusset of my panties and the evidence he sought.

“I knew you were mine,” he growled only a moment before his fingers swept away the last barrier between us and sank deep between my wet folds.

My mind fractured. My defenses crumbled. And everything in between gave way to the exquisite pleasure of Ian Ferguson's diabolical touch.

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

Ian

The taste of Cordelia's skin under my lips was the most tantalizing thing I'd ever experienced. My whole body sizzled with it. Her reactions to my touch were also priceless. I couldn't get enough. Nor could I stop.

I wanted nothing more than to touch her everywhere. Roam my hands across every inch of her body until I had every curve and sensitive spot forged in my mind for eternity. If we weren't hiding in the shadows where we could be discovered at any moment, I would take the time to study every curve and plane of her gorgeous body. Preferably without all these layers hindering my view.

It confused me that she would call herself an ugly duck. How could she not see what I did? The most beautiful, wondrous creature I'd ever laid eyes on. And I had a feeling underneath the lush landscape of her body lay a woman dying for the freedom from the constraints her coven had placed on her.

How anyone could stifle her made me as angry as the beast clawing at my chest. There would be time for analysis later. Now, there was nothing but her body and mine and the ache we both felt to become one.

"Cordelia," I whispered in her ear as I worked my finger into her tight channel. The melody of her name on my tongue caressed through my mind, pulling me even deeper into the burgeoning weight of her mating heat.

I'd never heard of a connection like this outside of a shifter coupling, nor did I care. The finding of my true mate was all that mattered. That, and making sure I helped her get through what would come.

"Ian," she shrieked, grabbing tight to my shoulders.

"Take a breath, sweetheart. I can give you enough relief to get through a day or two at best, but not if you trigger the dragon. Your need requires him to claim you."

"Why do you talk about him as if he is a different person?" she gasped out as I continued the slow, gentle strokes that would soon send her over the edge.

"We are one, but with two halves. The one in charge at any given time will be the one with the highest stakes." I wiggled my finger in her tight clasp, barely able to think past the image of sinking fully into her with an entirely different part of my anatomy.

"But—"

I covered her mouth with mind to halt her questions. Clearly I wasn't doing my job well enough if she could still think about questioning me. I pushed my tongue past her lush lips and fused us together in every way that I could. At the same time, I pressed my thumb to her clit and rotated it in tight circles until I felt her go nearly boneless in my arms.

Now that was more like it. I smiled into the kiss and drove my tongue deeper, letting myself get as lost in her as I hoped she was in me. It was still difficult to wrap my head around the idea that I had found my Omega. But now that I had, there would be no one who could stand between us.

"My skin feels like it's on fire," she whimpered against my mouth. "It's so tight. And it hurts."

The desperation in her voice drove my movements into a frantic pace. If I could make her come quickly, there would hopefully be time to move us elsewhere before I, too, lost control. There were words now falling from her lips that I could no longer understand, and her nails dug through the fabric of my clothes as if they didn't exist. Her legs were

shaking as I fed another finger alongside the first. At the moment she was so tight I could barely imagine fitting my cock there without hurting her.

Thank the Goddess for the heat as more moisture coated my fingers. Nature definitely knew what needed to happen to make this work.

“Ian,” she gasped.

Her muscles tightened and rippled around my fingers, forcing me to bite back a groan. My mind was about to explode right along with her. I felt half a breath away from ripping both our clothes off and burying myself inside her.

“What’s—oh my—” She was screaming now. Her entire body lost to the shudders and spasms I could feel against my fingers. I couldn’t maintain my own composure as she tightened almost painfully on my hand.

“Yes,” I groaned at her ear. “Come hard for me, and then I’ll get us somewhere private so I can taste—”

“Ian,” she keened before I could finish, and her hands began tearing more forcefully at my clothes. “It’s not enough. More,” she begged. “Now!”

It was then the tiny tether that held my beast under control tore through my chest and flooded my mind with the full desire to claim her. Her eyes were wide and wildly casting about. Her chest heaved as she fought for breath, and I could see the heat had fully laid claim to her, pulling at the magic that always sat just below the surface of my skin.

I pressed her harder into the wall, pinning her in place as my mouth descended on hers once again, desperate for another taste of her, despite the consequences. Her eyes went bright, and whatever magic she possessed rose to meet mine. I withdrew my hand from between her legs and ground my hips in its place. I needed her to feel how hard I was for her. How urgently I needed her as well. She was not in this alone.

She tried to whimper, but with my tongue sweeping through her mouth, I swallowed each of them down before they had a chance to escape. She yanked harder on the fabric of my

jacket, and it started to rip, her fervor sending me into a near frenzy as I kissed her more forcefully. If she kept this up, she was going to find herself without a stitch of clothing on and my cock buried so deep inside her we'd both see stars.

As if almost reading my mind, she tried a different tactic and began yanking my coat from my shoulders and then quickly changing her focus to the buttons on my shirt. With little finesse and a heaping dose of desperation, she managed to pop one of the buttons free and slide her hand inside the opening.

I hissed at the feel of her soft, warm hands rubbing against the planes of my stomach. I wasn't going to be able to hold back much longer. In fact, as her short nails scratched roughly against my flesh, I growled in her mouth, grabbed her by the wrists, and pinned them against the wall behind her back.

"I should have warned you that to tempt the dragon like this would come with dire consequences." I breathed the words along her neck as I dragged my teeth along the vulnerable skin. The ache to bite her was almost more than I could bear. I needed to mark her. Somehow I managed to hold back from breaking the skin and instead sucked on the sensitive skin hard enough to leave a different kind of mark. Albeit this one only temporary.

It would be no less visible, but it would prevent her from being locked to me the rest of her life. Maybe.

Probably not.

Unlikely.

"I'll take my chances," she whispered back before she boldly leaned forward and captured my mouth with hers. I growled again, turned on even more by this brash turn of events.

We were taking quite a risk right now, but it seemed we were both in it together and would take both the risk and deal with the fallout later.

As if to punctuate my thoughts, I released her wrists so I could explore the rest of her more. In particular, her breasts. Their inviting allure as they spilled gently over the top of her dress too much to bear any longer.

I reached to brush her nipples, but the thick material of her corset hid them from me. On a frustrated growl, I grabbed the top of her dress and yanked it down, freeing said nipples and grasping them the moment the dark-pink buds came into view.

Her back arched, pushing her hips tighter against my cock, and I realized just how lost I'd become. I wasn't going to wait for the privacy of my room. The ripeness of her heat had peaked, and it was far too late for modesty or convention. I only hoped to the Goddess that the staff and my family were smart enough to stay away.

"We can't wait any longer," I said, pinching both of her nipples firmly between my fingers, knowing that I was skirting an edge of both pain and pleasure.

Her mouth dropped open and formed the perfect little O, and for a moment we were frozen in time and lust.

She moved first, giving into the sensation as she reached up and gripped my hair in an attempt to direct my mouth between her breasts. A smile tipped at my lips at the same time another growl rumbled through me. The pain of her tight little fist in my hair felt so fucking good, and I couldn't get enough of it

She wanted my mouth on those delectable nipples, and while I did too, there was something else I wanted more. I pulled at her skirt and yanked at the yards of material until I found an opening. We had on entirely too much clothing, but I didn't have the will or time to stop and rectify that.

I grabbed the backs of her legs and hoisted her up around my waist. With my dragon strength, it took nothing to hold her up with one hand and yank her panties until they ripped free with the other. I still had my pants on, but I ground up against her anyway. It was difficult to take the time to worry about clothes when the weight of need to be close to her pressed against my mind like a fiery squeeze.

And it was difficult to stop kissing her. I couldn't get enough of the heady taste of her. She might as well have been wine for as light-headed and off balance as she made me feel.

“Still not enough,” she murmured into my mouth, and I couldn’t agree more. I groaned my assent, her hunger and mine all I could focus on as I reached between us to unfasten my trousers and free myself.

She raked her hands through my hair and grabbed on to the strands again with a painful hold. A sensation I relished as I lined my cock to her entrance as the anticipation of what we were about to do rippled down my spine and pulsed through my blood. There was no turning back at this point for either of us, but neither did I necessarily want to rush it so fast we didn’t remember it.

“Do it!” she cried, tearing from my mouth, the sound of our heavy pants filling all the space around us. It would be a true miracle if no one in the house heard what we were doing.

“You’re mine now, Cordelia. Do you understand that?” My voice was rough with need, making my words sound much harsher than I intended.

Her eyes snapped open and her gaze met mine, and for an instant we stood stock still and locked in that moment. She studied my face, searching for something. Whatever it was, I probably didn’t have. Especially if it had anything to do with logic or reason. Fate was nothing if not illogical.

Still she said nothing.

“Do you want me to stop?” I wasn’t sure I could without great pain to both of us at this point, but if that was her desire, then I would find a way to make it happen. Anything for her.

She shook her head. “Goddess no.” She reached up and cupped my cheek in a surreal gentle moment that seemed out of place in the middle of all this frantic need. Especially when I knew she burned as hot as I did. “Don’t stop.”

Those two words broke the oddly peaceful moment. It was also all the assent I needed to push forward and kiss her even harder than before. My free hand roamed across the smooth fabric of her dress and up and over her breast until again skin met skin with my hand splayed across her chest.

I hated all the yards of material pushed up between us, and had I had the foresight, I would have ripped all of it away. Soon, I reminded myself. When we were alone. Then I could strip her down and take the time I needed to savor her. But time was of the essence, and strain in the muscles of her neck as she tried to get closer to me reminded me of the desperation bleeding out between us.

“Now, sweetheart.” It was all the warning I could give before I claimed her body with one powerful thrust. Her eyes went wide and her mouth opened on a scream that I quickly covered with my mouth. That sound imprinted on my mind almost as much as the way our bodies fit perfectly together.

It was so incredible that I barely held myself together long enough to give her time to adjust. When I didn’t think I could wait another second, she whispered in my ear.

“More.”

Fuck if that one little word didn’t snap something in my brain as I pulled back and drove forward again. Thank the Goddess for the slick between her thighs. As much as I didn’t want to hurt her, I also couldn’t stop. It was if something in my own mind had gone haywire and I’d lost all control.

Mate.

She moaned, a sound so filled with need I had no choice but to heed the call. I would give anything to her, including my life.

Mine.

I let go of her mouth as I moved quickly back and forth. Instead, grazing the side of her neck with my teeth and even grabbing on to the vulnerable tendon there, barely stopping myself from breaking the skin. Not here. Not like this. I had to keep reminding myself that I had to save that for later. It had to be special.

But I did need to sate her. Hell, sate us both. My flesh prickled with the need to practically crawl inside her. I wanted her to become a part of me so badly that every muscle and bone ached with it. First I would spill my seed inside her and then later mark her fully as mine. And me as hers. With her lips

parted and her head lolling to the side, I could well imagine her own teeth digging into the flesh of my neck.

I growled again as I thrust deep inside her over and over again. Her muscles were tightening around me to the point of near blindness. She would soon come, and I would be helpless to follow.

“Kiss me when you come,” I hissed, the words barely understood through the gravelly sound of my throat. But she heard them and she did exactly as I asked. In fact, her tongue barely stroked mine once before her muscles clamped around me in convulsions that vibrated through my entire body.

Holy hell.

She was pure heaven and sin as she pulled me under, my release exploding from my body like never before. My hands tightened at her waist, and I used them as leverage to force my way deeper for what would come next. My cock swelled and thickened until I was locked into place.

For the first time in my life, I had to put all my energy into keeping the barb from emerging. I could feel it, just under the skin, pulsing to be free.

“What’s happening?” Her eyes were wide as she tried to stir against me. I groaned at the new pleasure her movements added as I spilled more inside her. My eyes rolled to the back of my head as my body pulsed and the reality of what we’d done and the position we were in fully settled in my mind.

“Don’t move,” I ordered. “We’re locked together.”

CHAPTER
TWELVE

Cordelia

My eyes widened as I tried to comprehend the words he'd said. "What do you mean, we're locked together? You need to let me down so I can cover myself before someone finds us," I whispered harshly, the cold light of reality beginning to settle over my heated skin.

He shook his head. "That's impossible."

"Nothing is impossible," I whispered, my voice beginning to shake. The fear of what this all meant was suddenly more real than anything I'd ever experienced before. I had taken irrevocable actions with dire consequences.

"If I try to withdraw, I will hurt you. Trust me. It shouldn't take too long."

With every word out of his mouth, panic rose. "Is this like—?" I couldn't say the words. I didn't want to believe them. But I could feel him hard and swollen inside me, and even the slightest movement sent another ripple of pleasure racing down my spine. We were locked together, and I felt every pulse of it.

"I'm sorry. I didn't have time to prepare either of us. I didn't expect things to get this far so quickly."

I knew what he meant. The desperation had ebbed, but it was still there just under my skin, reminding me that it wouldn't be forgotten. It wasn't any more his fault than it was my own. I'd

wanted this as much or more. But with my skin cooling and the realization of what I'd done with a virtual stranger, along with how much I already didn't want him to stop was beginning to frighten me. I needed some time and space to pull my thoughts together.

And my traitorous body. Information I wasn't ready yet to give him.

"You're shaking..." He reached up and wrapped a hand around the side of my neck, and his thumb stroked gently back and forth across my skin. I closed my eyes against the delicious sensation, kind of hoping it would go away.

While the fear did not recede, my skin tingled along the path of his touch. It was more subtle now than the electric jolt from before, but I could feel it warming across my entire body. It made me want to lean into his touch as much as it wanted me to run away.

"How long?" I breathed, desperately trying to drag more air into my lungs as the denial sitting on my tongue slowly died and my muscles clenched fiercely around him.

He sucked in a sharp breath. "Probably not more than ten to fifteen minutes."

My body jolted. That might as well have been a lifetime. Anything could happen in that time frame. "What if someone comes looking for us?" The horror and embarrassment that idea suggested knifed through me.

"I doubt they will if they haven't already. Besides Lettie, everyone else in this house should already know what is happening."

I wasn't sure what he was trying to imply, but I imagined Lettie expecting an explanation over my delayed return. Wait...

"Are you suggesting that everyone heard us?" Heat flooded my face as he kept his features stoic. Of course they did. I'd been warned that there would be very little privacy against supernatural hearing and that I should always be very careful

and make sure a silencing spell was in place any time I had to discuss something sensitive.

“I need to get back to my room so I can pack. Lettie and I will leave tonight.” And die of shame. The king and queen were probably horrified that they’d let someone like me into their home, and I needed to escape as soon as possible.

“That’s not going to happen. This isn’t over.”

My head jerked in his direction. “Excuse me? What in the world does that mean?”

He closed his eyes for a moment, his thumb continuing to stroke my neck. When he slowly opened them again, I could see the color had changed. The molten golden glow of his pupils no longer looked human, but it wasn’t frightening or offensive in any way. They were beautiful, and I couldn’t look away.

“Mating heat isn’t a one-and-done type of process. It’s based on a biological impulse to procreate, and nature knows that it could take time. You won’t be able to leave. It won’t let you.”

Oh Goddess. No. Was he suggesting...? “Are you saying—?”

He nodded. “You won’t make it through the night without me. Nor I you.”

This situation couldn’t get any worse. I had a dragon man knotted inside me in broad view of anyone who wished to walk by, I would soon have to explain to everyone why I had brought shame to my family and was unable to marry the chosen prince, and now that prince’s twin brother was suggesting it would happen again.

“There has to be something we can do to stop it. A tonic or something. Maybe a spell,” I whispered harshly. I wanted to keep my voice low enough that no one heard anything more, but the sheer panic I was feeling was almost impossible to contain.

“Why would we do that? A true mate is a precious gift. A treasure.”

I warred between rolling my eyes, slapping him, and leaning forward to kiss him again. My emotions were going in every direction, and it appalled me that I was stuck in this position and holding a semi regular conversation. Or that I would even take his words somewhat seriously. To call it surreal was an understatement.

“I don’t think there is anything to celebrate just yet. What will the king have to say? Or my parents for that matter? When I return not married to the prince, I will probably be shunned by my coven or worse. I don’t even know the consequences for something like this.”

A dark cloud passed over his face, and I immediately realized I’d gone too far. This was why I shouldn’t be trying to hold a conversation with him inside me. Measuring my words under the best of circumstances was hard enough, and it was impossible now.

As if the Goddess finally sensed my distress and finally took pity on me, I shifted slightly and he slipped free. A bubble of laughter slipped from my mouth, covering another shard of pleasure and he looked at me sharply in response. “I don’t think it’s proper etiquette to laugh when a man’s cock shrinks and is forced to lose its treasure.”

I clamped my lips to hold back a laugh. It might not have been funny to him, but the bigger deal he made of it, the more I wanted to howl with laughter. “I’m afraid we left etiquette behind a long time ago. To call upon it now would be ludicrous.”

His eyes sparkled with humor and his lips twitched at the corner. We were both about to lose it as he fussed with the folds of my dress and the fastening of his trousers. “I’m afraid your panties didn’t quite make it.” He held up the tattered pieces of what was left of them.

“Oh good Goddess,” I cried, grabbing them from his hand and shoving them into the layers of my skirt where no one could see them. “Have you no shame?”

The deep chuckle from him made a shiver work its way through my chest and settle into my core. I wanted to be angry

over his behavior, and I was, but I also felt a pull to him that I couldn't ignore. It seemed he was telling the truth about this mating heat thing and how it might not be over. Although I damned well wanted to fight it. If for no other reason than pride.

And the fact I knew very little about him other than he and his brother were twins and seemed to disagree on a lot and that he seemed to care about his mother a great deal. Even if he disagreed with her pretty extensively...

"I think the state of one pair of undergarments is the least of our concerns," he said with a smirk. "But we probably should take this somewhere more private."

I shook my head. "I couldn't agree more. I've got to get back to my room before Lettie comes looking for me. I already don't know how I'm going to explain any of this."

He frowned. "What is there to explain? Destiny has spoken. There shouldn't be a supernatural alive that doesn't understand this. Besides, you're a grown woman capable of making her own decisions."

Anger flared inside me. "Is that what this is?" I waved a hand between us. "Something I get to make a decision about? You've implied more than once that I have no choice in mating heat."

The lines across his forehead deepened. "The heat will eventually ebb. However, it can't be denied, but it's also a gift. I don't understand how you don't see that."

I took a deep breath and held it for as long as I could. There was so much to say, and yet, I couldn't see the point in arguing with him. Even as a low-level witch, I understood fate and supernatural forces. The universe worked in mysterious ways, but it didn't often make mistakes. I should be able to trust in my natural instincts without letting human or witch propriety dictate what was best.

"I need to consult with my coven. I came here with a specific mission, and I'm not sure they will see this the same way as you. Maybe they'll have a way to break this."

It was his turn to take a deep breath, and I could see the loss of patience in the stiffness of his shoulders and the frown pulling at his mouth. In a different time or a different place, this could have been so different. Dragons were still our enemies, but I didn't fall in line as often as one might think.

“Come back to my room. I'm afraid if we separate, I may not be able to control the dragon. The minute your heat takes over again, he's going to be ripping down doors and breathing fire to get to you. It could be dangerous.”

A ripple of fear worked over me once again. The idea that he couldn't control such an important part of him left me with grave concerns. Could he be more like the mad prince than I'd initially thought? Were all dragons volatile and dangerous to those around them? Exactly how much trouble was I in being alone with him?

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

Ian

I paced relentlessly through the house as I waited for Cordelia's return. I'd been unable to get her to budge on returning to her room, and with every passing moment, I could feel the pull to go to her growing stronger.

I should have known my chosen Omega would be stubborn. But the dragon and I had our limits. She was ours, and no coven or peace treaty or any other damned thing was going to change that.

However, unlike Isaac, I wasn't going to force my way in with the subtlety of an oversized deranged dragon scaring the hell out of everyone he encountered. I could be smart about this. I knew how this worked, and she'd soon be driven to find me. I only had to be patient. To a point. Although kidnapping her was not off the table.

If it came down to that, I wouldn't hesitate.

"I'm surprised to see you down here this morning. Shouldn't you be in your quarters taking care of something?"

I cringed at the sound of my mother's voice behind me. While I needed to have this conversation with my parents, I didn't need to discuss the logistics of Cordelia's mating heat with her. That was our private business.

"I don't have much time," I admitted. "But I thought we should discuss this turn of events."

My mother smirked, and I wondered why I was having this conversation with her and not my father. “Where is Father?”

“He left early this morning. This turn of events with the witch is going to change everything and have multiple repercussions. He’s going to have to work doubly hard to prevent a war between us and them.”

I scowled. “I’d think he could have included me in his plans. It affects me now as well.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “We both thought you would be busy and unavailable today. Did we misunderstand what happened between you two?”

She knew she hadn’t, but it did probably seem unusual that either of us had managed to crawl out of bed this soon. The fact we’d never actually made it to a bed was part of the problem. Only, we’d both gotten swept up into the moment, and stopping long enough to make it to the other side of the mansion had seemed too much.

“No, you did not. As I’m sure you are well aware, Cordelia’s mating heat was triggered yesterday when I touched her, and I’m in the process of claiming her. Which is why I don’t have much time for pleasantries or small talk.”

She stifled a giggle, and I shot her a glare. “Is that what you call this? Dear Goddess, son. You look like you are about to crawl out of your skin. What’s happened? Can I do anything to help?”

Some of the tension I was feeling leached away. “She’s not a shifter. She had no clue something like this could happen to her...”

“And she isn’t taking it well.” She stood from the table. “I should talk to her, then. I can explain what it was like for me.”

I shook my head. “While it doesn’t sound like a bad idea. I believe she would be mortified if the queen of the manor tried to talk to her about something this delicate.”

“That’s nonsense. I doubt she is so feebleminded as to be unable to listen, and who would be better suited to understand her plight?”

“Leave her be. She requested some space and time, and that’s what she shall have.”

My mother scoffed at that. “Your brother wouldn’t wait.”

I glared at her and her insinuation. “Are you hoping to piss me off?” The dragon stirred under my flesh.

“Only pointing out that leaving her alone at a time like this makes both of you vulnerable. Unless there is another reason you are hesitating. Maybe you’ve made a mistake and she’s not really meant to be yours. She isn’t what I would have expected for either of my sons.”

Anger lit a fire in my blood as I rounded on her. “How dare you.”

A chuckle sounded from behind me, and before I could lash out at my mother, I turned to face my brother, who really did have a knack for the worst timing. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

He pushed off from the spot he’d been leaning against and entered the room. “I would think that would be obvious. My fiancée is in distress, and I’ve come to finish what you started.”

A dragon roar ripped from my throat as I leapt in Isaac’s direction, slamming him against the wall, my forearm across his throat. “She is nothing to you. Is that understood?”

I didn’t recognize the sound of my own voice. Scales were pushing through my skin, and heat burned through my blood.

“Get off of me,” he seethed, his voice as unnatural as my own and his eyes glowing a fiery red with his dragon fire.

I didn’t move, instead baring my teeth. I wanted his blood. “Unless you wish for me to rip out your throat and drink your blood, I’d suggest you go back to whatever cave you crawled out of. Things have changed.”

“So I smell.”

I looked into the dragon slit of his eyes, seeing the same desperate determination that I felt pulsing under my skin.

“She’s mine,” I growled.

“Maybe we should ask her. If she belongs to you, then you are a piss poor choice. I could scent her pain miles from here. No true Alpha would allow that to happen to his Omega.”

A roar ripped through my throat, and only a sheer miracle kept the dragon fire out of it. The more he spoke, the more I wanted to tear him limb from limb.

“Boys. This is not the way to handle this.”

I ignored my mother’s warning. Physically removing Isaac from the situation was the perfect way to handle my problem. It wasn’t as if he didn’t have it coming. I’d spent my whole life appeasing his every forsaken whim, and I was sick and tired of it. On this I would not succumb.

“We’re twins, asshole,” he snarled. “That means my DNA would line up with hers as well as yours.”

“I’ve already claimed her. You touch her, and I WILL kill you.” I pressed harder against his throat, my magic butting up against his.

“There’s no bond yet. That means she is fair game.”

Another roar ripped from my throat, and Isaac escaped from my hold before my fist would have landed in his face. It sank into the wall instead, and the stone crumbled around me. I was definitely going to kill him.

He wasn’t wrong that the claim I had on her was not complete. And he could challenge me for her. But that didn’t mean I would stand for it.

“That’s enough!” my mother cried, the fear in her voice breaking into my mind. Well, that and the power she had because of the Tallan. In that respect, she was the strongest of us all. She could push a well of emotion our way that could potentially cripple us if she chose. “I’m not going to stand by while the two of you destroy this castle or our family.” She turned to me. “Ian, if you intend to claim this woman as your mate, then do it. Anything short of a full bond makes you both vulnerable.”

“Hey—” my brother protested until my mother shoved a hand in his face to shut him down.

“Otherwise,” she continued, “Isaac is well within his rights to do it for you. Although why you intend to let the swell of your cock override your good sense makes no sense to me.”

I cringed at my mother’s vulgar words. I didn’t want her using words like that about me. There was nothing good about a mother taking an interest in her son’s love life. Peace treaty or not, it was none of her business.

“You gave her to me,” Isaac said through clenched teeth. “She should be mine.” I guessed we were both struggling with our anger issues today.

“She’s not, so stop being a child,” I lobbed in return. “You cruelly rejected her. Even if you could come back from that, she’d never have you.”

“That’s the thing about mating heat, isn’t it? Eventually she doesn’t get a choice. I could tell her to jump, and she’d ask how high as long as she got my cock and my barb locked inside her.”

I reared back and swung harder, this time connecting with my intended target. My fist landed in his face, and the unmistakable sound of bone crunching filled the room.

He grabbed his face, and I took immense pleasure from the blood running through his fingers. “What the fuck, Ian. You just broke my nose.”

“And you’ll have it healed inside of two minutes. Just be glad I didn’t do something more permanent. Although if I were you, I’d watch what I say next. I make no promises that I won’t kill you if you can’t control your filthy mouth.”

“Fuck you,” he spat. “Obviously she doesn’t want you anymore than she wants me, or you wouldn’t be standing here. She’s ripe for breeding, and we both know how rare that is. We can’t afford to stand around and wait for her to decide. Not when the future of our kind depends on rare women like her.”

“He’s right,” my mother whispered. “We have to think about the future. She may not live up to the same standards as her

parents, but she looks sturdy enough. She should be able to handle being bred.”

My head was about to explode from being in the same room as them. Since when had my family become so elitist? I wasn't going to stand here and let them insult Cordelia and then treat her no better than a brood mare.

“This is some bullshit,” I started. “Your callous words are unacceptable, and I won't have you speaking of my Omega that way again, is that understood?”

“You're right about the bullshit. Good thing I'm leaving. Guess you'll have to find some other sturdy woman for your sons.”

Fuck.

I swung around to face the woman who'd managed to sneak up on me. “Cordelia.”

She shook her head. “Don't. I only came in here to let you know that I'm leaving. Now that I've heard what your family really thinks of me, I'm convinced leaving now is the right choice to be made. I'd wish you all well, but I'm not sure you deserve it. Goddess help the next woman who is faced with marrying either of you. But it won't be me. Not now. Not ever.”

The conviction behind her little speech almost convinced me...except for the tiny tear now sliding down her cheek and the blazing need scenting the air.

The dragon's roar deafened inside my head.

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

Cordelia

I couldn't believe I'd shed a tear for any of these people. What was wrong with them? And for that matter, what was wrong with me?

Mating heat.

Those two words blazed through my mind, causing more anger than I thought I could bear. The coven was right. Dragons couldn't be trusted, and I had a feeling that despite my bold words, I would end up mated to one of them before I could stop it.

Lettie had been no help. My former ally had turned on me in a way that I couldn't explain. She'd even gone so far as to tell me that I'd made my own bed by accepting the attention of a man who was not my betrothed. Apparently, now I had no more worth to my coven than a lady of the night, despite the station of my birth.

"Cordelia..." Ian started towards me, and I took several steps back.

"No. Please don't touch me."

Both the lady of the manor and her ugly son shared a look between them. I had no intention of speculating what that meant, but the burn in my stomach told me it was nothing good.

"We must talk," Ian insisted.

I so badly wanted to disagree, but I could feel the pull to go to him deep in my gut.

“Take her to the Tallan house,” his mother interjected. “That will give you the space you need to work this out.”

“Mother,” Isaac growled.

“Don’t *Mother* me. You rejected her. It is not you who triggered her mating heat, and she should be the one to make the choice, not the two of you. If she rejects Ian, then that changes the situation. Is that truly your intention?”

She turned to me, and I froze at the force of her question as well as the implication if I answered incorrectly.

“My intention is to go home,” I answered.

She shook her head. “As simple as that sounds, it’s no longer a possibility. Arrangements were made with your father, and while this is not the exact agreement that we made, it is still a viable option.”

“Mother,” Isaac growled again, stepping in my direction. Fortunately, Ian crossed his path and blocked him from getting too close.

“I have made my decision. You screwed this up, and now Ian will fix it. Maybe next time you’ll remember this when you’re off on one of your tantrums. Is that clear?”

It wasn’t clear to me at all. How I was standing here being bantered back and forth like a piece of cattle to be bargained with made my stomach roil. But I could feel my options slipping through my fingers.

“Is this an acceptable arrangement?”

I thought the question had been directed to me until I heard Lettie stir behind me.

“It is. Only so long as the lord marries her before he breeds her. That was the deal. It’s imperative that this deal is completed with honor.” Lettie’s words were the strangest I’d heard to date. Breed me? Honor? Really?

I started to open my mouth and say something but was interrupted by the queen and her latest question.

“Ian?”

Everyone in the room turned and stared at him, including me, curious to see what his answer would be.

He stared only at me for a moment without saying a word. His eyes were filled with something I didn't know how to describe. Desire. *That* I could make out, but it was more than that. I suddenly got the impression that he was about as thrilled by our mating as I was, and for some reason that bothered me.

“Yes, I'll marry her,” he said while staring straight into my eyes.

My stomach pitched, and the room tilted slightly off of its axis. Whatever fantasies I'd had about escaping this place and returning home went up in smoke. Dragon smoke. I clutched my midsection and tried to stave off the sudden nausea.

Ian was at my side before I could tell him to stay back.

“What's wrong?”

“It's the mating heat. Once triggered there is no going back. All you can do is finish it.” The queen suddenly appeared at my side as well. “The longer she goes without you, the more painful it will become. Prolonging it is cruel. You should take her and go. We'll work out the rest of the details on our own. I'll prepare a ceremony in two days'—no, make that three days' time. That should be enough time.”

“This is highly irregular,” Lettie interjected.

I barely held back a snarl at her as a wave of sharp pain invaded what felt like every part of my body. “This is far more than irregular—it's crazy,” I whispered.

“Let me help you. I believe my magic can give you a small reprieve. Can you stand, and may I touch you?” I blinked up at the queen from where I'd doubled over and simply nodded. I was beyond words at this point. I wanted to drop into a heap

on the floor, but instead I straightened as best I could while still clutching my midsection.

“Perfect,” she praised soothingly.

“Mother. Is this a good idea?” Isaac questioned, stepping forward.

“It’s fine. I’ll be fine. Just enough to get her through the next thirty minutes or so.”

I didn’t understand what the problem might be, but I also didn’t care. It was difficult to comprehend anything beyond the agony ripping through my body.

The queen nudged aside Ian, who looked no more eager about this than Isaac, and placed her hand on my chest. Immediate warmth flooded through me, and after a few seconds I could feel the pain beginning to subside.

The queen, however, looked ashen and grim. Her lips were pressed together in a thin line, and her brows knotted together in a painful expression.

What exactly was happening?

By the time she dropped her hand, she staggered backward, only to be caught by her eldest son. “I think I forgot how painful unmet mating heat actually is.”

“You shouldn’t have done that. Father is going to be furious.”

She smirked, leaning against Isaac. “He’ll get over it. Especially when the peace treaty is finalized.” She turned to Ian and me. “Now go, before the effects of my magic wears off and it is she who is in pain again. And for heaven’s sake, don’t dally anywhere.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Ian grabbed my hand and pulled me into his arms.

“Uhm, I can walk.”

“Yeah.” He nodded and kept going with me in his arms until we were through the castle and out the French doors that led to the rear of the property.

“Where exactly is this house we are going to? And why are we going there?”

“The original house on the property. It’s down by the river.”

I turned to look at him. “The river? Isn’t that kind of far?”

“It is. But it is also just far enough that it will provide the true privacy that we need.” Once outside, he set me down on my feet and began removing his clothes.

“What are you doing?” I thought not to stare, but my eyes thought otherwise.

“Changing. I’d rather not ruin these clothes when my dragon comes out.” He dropped his shirt and started to loosen his belt.

“What?! Your dragon? Why?” The level of panic swelling inside me wasn’t good. I was barely able to face Ian, let alone his dragon.

“Mother said you had about thirty minutes before the pain returned. Without my dragon, it will take us far longer than that to get to our destination.” He yanked his pants down, and I turned to look away. He chuckled. “I think it’s a little late for embarrassment, sweetheart. I’ve been inside you, remember?”

I sucked in air. “You don’t have to be vulgar about it. And one time with a stranger doesn’t mean I’m comfortable with watching you walk around naked.”

His laughter died. “I’m not a stranger. I’m your Alpha. And I won’t be naked long. Although I would appreciate if you carried my clothes. It will make this easier.”

“What am I supposed to do? How does this work?”

“I’ll carry you on my back, tucked against my wing.”

“For how long? And won’t I fall?”

“Look at me, Cordelia.” When I didn’t turn, he reached out and touched my arm. “I would never let you fall. Ever. I promise you that as long as you are with me, you will always be protected.”

I jerked at his words. “You don’t mean that.”

“I do. I understand if you don’t fully comprehend that yet, but you will. I already told you that a mate is a dragon’s greatest treasure, and if there is one thing you can always trust in, it is that a dragon will guard his treasure with his life.”

He had moved so close that I felt the last words against my skin. His breath was warm and tantalizing against me. I shivered, despite not being cold. I guess if we were going to go through with this, I was going to have to take a leap of faith and trust in his word.

“Okay,” I whispered a moment before his lips landed on mine. Warm, soft, and firm all at the same time. This kiss wasn’t like the ones from before. This one felt almost sweet in comparison, and yet, it was so full of promise I never wanted it to end.

“Be brave,” he said after he broke our connection.

I nodded. It seemed that whether I was ready or not, this was happening.

Ian moved out into the open field, and a flash of magic washed over him. As I had suspected, a red dragon appeared inside that light.

Mesmerized, I couldn’t look away. The scales of his big body shimmered in different shades of red with every movement as he approached. There were ridges along his spine and horns on top of his head that drew my eye to them. But it was the wings he unfurled that nearly took my breath away.

Where Isaac and his black dragon had scared the hell out of me, there was something different about Ian that drew my curiosity instead of fear. Suddenly, his suggestion that I ride on his back didn’t sound quite so horrible.

As if reading my mind, he dipped a wing to the ground and made a ramp with it for me to climb on. He tipped his head and snorted, reinforcing my exact thoughts.

I quickly scooped up his discarded clothing and made my way onto his back. I took gentle steps, despite the sturdiness of his wing underneath my feet. When I settled into what looked like

the best spot to ride, I reached down with one hand and ran it along his side.

He made a sound that, while the rumble couldn't be described as a purr, it didn't sound like he hated the touch either. And a moment later, when he brought his wing back up, I found myself wrapped in what felt like the softest leather as he scratched at the ground with his enormous talons.

"I guess I'm as ready as I'll ever be."

He huffed and lifted his head a moment before he beat his mighty wings and lifted us into the air.

My stomach swooped as we left the safety of the ground and he took a sharp right turn and headed in the direction of the mountain.

Cool air rushed over my face, and my hair ripped free from its confines. I laughed as the feeling of freedom washed over me. The castle disappeared quickly from sight, and we soared over the trees and into the clouds that clung to the entire mountain region.

I'd always enjoyed the view from home and never took it for granted. But this—this surpassed anything I'd ever seen before.

Ian suddenly banked right, and I slipped a little, causing me to scream. He tightened his wing, and I held on to it as tightly as possible. When he righted his big body once again, I started laughing.

And I couldn't stop.

It was then I realized that meeting this man, who turned into this powerful being, might have been the single greatest moment of my life. Maybe this mating heat wouldn't be some sort of death sentence after all.

Only time would tell. But first...

The dragon suddenly dove straight for the ground, and I screamed, hoping to the Goddess this wasn't the end.

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

Ian

Under normal circumstances, I hated having anything on my back as I flew. But Cordelia wasn't just anyone or anything, and I could sense her childlike wonderment at her first sensation of flight. I'd been there once. A very long time ago when I'd been a dragonling, learning to master every aspect of my dragon form.

We weren't born as dragons. We looked and seemed as human as any other child born. Until we hit puberty, and then everything changed. For me, it had been painful and hard and both the worst and best experience of my life.

For my twin though...

For Isaac, the transition had broken something in him, and he'd never been the same. It had made him bitter and mean... and dangerous. The idea that he could have laid hands on Cordelia first was enough to make my dragon fire explode if I gave it too much thought.

After a sharp turn towards our destination, I coasted down and used the wind force to slow my pace as calmly as possible. I had precious cargo, and I didn't want to scare her any more than I already had. Although her laughter had done something to my soul I hadn't expected. It soothed me like a balm.

We landed with a thump on the soft coastal ground, my claws digging into the dirt to keep myself steady. I eased my wing

away from her soft body, and she scrambled to the ground. The smile that seemed plastered across her face made my magic respond, pushing the beast back inside so the man could be with the woman I wanted more than breath.

“That was insane,” she cried out, her whole body practically vibrating from her excitement as she handed me my clothing. “Is that what it’s like for you every time?”

“Even better,” I chuckled. “When I don’t have any cargo to worry about, I fly pretty wild.”

“Is it dangerous?”

“Not like you probably think. I’ve been flying a very long time. It’s an innate skill at this point. Much like breathing. But there are other predators.” I finished dressing and pulled her into my arms. I could feel the effects of my mother’s magic wearing off and the mating heat stirring under her flesh.

She visibly shuddered at my words. “My coven, right?”

I nodded. “Dragons may be at the top of the food chain when it comes to predators, but that doesn’t mean we’re impervious. We have long lives and are hard as hell to kill, but it can be done.”

“And that’s why this peace treaty is so important to your family?”

I shrugged. Peace treaties and war with witches was about the last thing on my mind. “The only thing that excites me in all of this is you. I’m not a politician, nor do I rule over our shifter clans. But if a peace treaty is what brought you to me, then hell yes, it’s important.”

“If the mating heat hadn’t happened, what would you have done?”

“The right thing.”

Her lips turned down in an adorable frown. It should not have been sexy, but everything she did seemed that way to me. Even if she didn’t appreciate what I had to say.

“Am I supposed to know what that means?”

I took a deep breath and held on to her tighter. “I would have married you either way if that’s what you’re asking. Isaac might have come to his senses and done his duty. With him, you truly never know what he’ll do.”

“And you’re the twin that makes up for that part of him? That doesn’t seem fair.”

“It is our way. We aren’t just blood. We share a bond that goes beyond that. And not every dragon shifter has a simple transition. For some it is harder than others, and sometimes the man is never the same after. Isaac is one of those, so it’s my job to protect him.”

“So you were bluffing about killing him, then.”

“Maybe. At the time, it didn’t feel like it. You are the great equalizer. I was not joking about what a mate means to our kind. It changes us just as it’s changing you. However, I felt those words to my soul when I said them. Although I’d like to think my father would stop me from going too far.”

“That’s a lot to take in.” She pursed her lips, and I couldn’t resist bending down and pressing mine to hers.

The low burn of heat I’d detected in her flared to life. My hand tightened on her waist as I pulled her body flush to mine and deepened the kiss. Out here we didn’t have the worry about being discovered, which gave me the freedom to do as I wished.

I broke the kiss before it went too far and released her. “Let’s go inside and have a look around before I end up fucking you right here in the grass.”

Her face flushed red, and it made me grin. I had a feeling I could tempt her into a garden tryst if I so desired. Just because my coarse words made her blush, it didn’t mean she didn’t like them.

We entered the house, which in comparison to the main castle was quite small. But what it lacked in size it made up in grandeur. The front entry soared into the sky, and the grand staircase looked like it could fit any army down it.

“Your family doesn’t do anything small, does it?” she asked, spinning around to take it all in.

“For safety’s sake, it’s always smart to design to the size of the residents in shifted form. This house worked fine when it was just our mother and father, but once Isaac and I came along, they knew they’d have to go bigger.”

“I can only imagine. Two rambunctious boys turning into giant dragons on a whim.”

“And not always able to control when it happened.” I grinned. “My mother had her work cut out with the two of us.”

I could hear the fondness of how I spoke about my childhood, so I was sure she did as well. Those had been much happier times.

“I’m having a hard time picturing Isaac as a happy child. He seems so cold and mean now.”

I led her through the foyer and into the living and dining rooms before I answered. “It is the risk every shifter faces at their transition. It amplifies all of your good and bad qualities tenfold. And sometimes it’s just too much.”

“So you keep saying.” She ran her hands across the back of one of the gilded chairs, making the gold practically sing under her touch. She claimed to have low level magic but this house had immediately woken to her presence. “Why is this now called the Tallan house? Isn’t it more like a treasure home?” She waved her hand around, essentially pointing at the gold that covered so much of the space.

“Well, you know the Tallan is the source of Mother’s power. And I assume that you know that dragon magic is fueled by gold and other precious gems. So this house basically serves as a power respite for us all and a gateway for her that makes her psychic powers grow stronger. Although she usually refers to it as her meditation space.”

“I’m surprised you would bring me here. Shouldn’t it be better guarded?”

I dropped down onto one of the sofas and draped my arms along the golden frame, absorbing some of the power offered

up to me. “It’s actually guarded quite well. The magic imbued in these walls and the surrounding grounds will only allow certain individuals to get close. No one outside of my family can get within a mile.”

She frowned, but I couldn’t quite read what she was thinking. It almost looked like...disapproval.

“Not to mention no roads lead to here. Someone would have to traverse the most dangerous rock faces on this mountain to make it. That’s not likely to happen,” I added defensively.

“It sounds like you’ve thought of everything.” Some of the frown lines at the corner of her mouth smoothed out.

“I don’t believe anything is foolproof. But we’ve taken every precaution and safeguard that we could think of.”

She nodded, gingerly taking a seat in one of the dark-green velvet chairs.

“How are you feeling? I can feel my mother’s magic waning.”

She grimaced. “I hate this. My entire life has been one moment after another where I’ve been overlooked or degraded, and now this. I know I came here as an arranged marriage, with no expectation for choice, but I had still hoped that somehow, some way, things could be different. This is not what I meant.”

It was my turn to frown. The pain she would endure was one thing, but this feeling of degradation... No one deserved that.

“I don’t think it’s meant to be experienced like that. It’s supposed to be a beautiful gift. A promise from the Goddess herself that you will be blessed with love and family for the rest of your life. Shifters covet this experience. And it doesn’t have to be painful.”

“If I give in.”

“Aye,” I said. “Although...”

“What?” she asked sharply, her eyes suddenly tightened with pain.

“It can be rejected.”

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN

Cordelia

“**W**hat?” I shrieked, practically jumping from the chair.
“But you said...”

He drew to his feet as well, squaring off before me. “The pull to each other is damned near irresistible. Already right now I want to take you. And I can’t stop thinking about it.”

“Me too. So how do we make it stop?”

“We finish the claiming ritual.”

I shook my head. “But you just said there was another way.”

His shoulders fell, and some of the light in his eyes dimmed. I could see that he didn’t want there to be another option. It made my heart hurt to see him like that. Especially after seeing him laugh and smile with me. Dragons definitely did not play fair.

“It wouldn’t be easy. Especially since the ability to keep any distance between us is next to impossible. You’ll beg me, and it would hurt me too much to deny your needs.”

“I’m begging you right now to tell me what other choice I have.” I took a shallow breath as the heat between my legs increased exponentially. I could already feel the desire so strong on my tongue that I would soon say or do anything to have him inside me. “Please.”

His hold on me tightened before he answered. “In theory, if you don’t receive the claiming bite while my barb is locked inside you, then our fate is not sealed together.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad...” Surely we could get through this whole thing without biting. My head jerked up. “Wait. Did you say barb?”

A slow smile crept over his face. “I did. One of the ridges on my cock will extend when the time is right to plant an egg. It will lodge in your womb, and Goddess willing you would become pregnant. That is the whole reason my cock swells so much and locks us together. So the egg has time to be delivered.”

I seriously couldn’t breathe now. Ridges, I repeated in my head. How could I not have noticed such a thing?

“The ridges aren’t as pronounced as they might sound. And most of the time they will simply enhance your pleasure. But their primary purpose is for fertility.”

Oh Goddess. Had I voiced my thoughts out loud? Had I no shame? I tried to pull away, but his grip remained steadfast on my hips.

“Ian, I need a moment.” Or five hundred. Was the room starting to spin?

“Let me ease some of the side effects of your mating heat first. Then we’ll both be a little more level-headed and able to make some decisions.”

“Is that your way of saying you want to have sex again?” That might have come out sarcastic or funny if I wasn’t panting for his cock. Instead it sounded very much like the plea it was.

“That will never be a question with you. I look at you, I want you. I smell you, I want you. I hear your voice—”

“I get the idea.” I had to stop him before something really embarrassing happened. “Does this palace have a bedroom?”

“Many for you to take your pick from. C’mon, I’ll show you. But first you have to give me a kiss.” The rakish smile that followed his demand practically made the heat between my

thighs incinerate my panties. That look was dangerous to my mental health.

I knew something sarcastic hovered on my lips, but damned if I could voice it. Instead, I leaned in and gave him exactly what he asked for. I pressed my lips to his, immediately reveling in the soft heat of the man I craved more than air. It should have been impossible, but it wasn't.

Smiling against my mouth, he reached up and cupped the back of my head until I was pressed impossibly tight against his kiss and his tongue was invading my mouth. My soft moans and his low growls made that smoldering fire in my belly flare to life. I grabbed at his shirt and held on tight.

Our future confused me, but at least in this moment we both knew what we needed and understood what it meant. I didn't want to twist my emotions into this, but he made that almost impossible. This feeling right now was too good. The idea of it going away made me whimper.

He pulled back. "Are you okay?"

"I will be." I smiled. "Just as soon as you show me that bedroom."

He chuckled darkly as he led me up the stairs and down a dim corridor. Fire lit in the torches lining the walls as we passed each one, and by the time he stopped in front of one of the doors, the house no longer seemed dark or cold.

"Your refuge awaits." He popped open the door and swept his hands in front of it to usher me inside ahead of him. I crossed the threshold and froze. There was no denying that the entire place dripped with luxurious details, but this room went above and beyond everything else I'd seen thus far.

The sheer size alone was enough to take me aback. But factor in the dark velvet walls, the heavy silk drapes that all seemed to serve as the backdrop to the largest bed I'd ever seen in my life... It was a four-poster monstrosity that looked like it had been carved out of—

"Are those crystals?"

“They are. While all precious gems are a source of power for dragon magic, crystals like these are also imbued with protection spells. It makes for restful sleep.”

“I bet,” I said as I studied every detail in wonderment. I’d never even heard of something so opulent, let alone seen it.

“The bathroom is through that door.” He pointed to the far corner of the room. “If you want to freshen up or change clothes, you’ll find some things in the closet. Feel free to take your pick.”

He continued to point out the amenities, but I had already zeroed in on the window and the view beyond. While he talked, I wandered over and looked out. I’d lived in these mountains my entire life and was well aware why people referred to them as the Smoky Mountains.

But this view was nothing like any I’d seen before. As much as I enjoyed spending time outside, I had not climbed a mountain to come even close to what I was now seeing. Ian’s extra palace, or whatever the heck it was supposed to be, was so high up the mountain it literally sat among the clouds that clung to the tops of them. It took my breath away.

“I guess this is one of the benefits of being a dragon too.”

“We do see the world from a different lens.”

I jumped at the sound of his voice right next to my ear. I’d been so lost in my appreciation of this view, I hadn’t heard him approach.

My skin had prickled with awareness before I realized what happened as the heat always present in his body enveloped me like a cozy blanket on a cold night.

“I could get used to this, I believe.”

He chuckled in my ear. “I would hope so. This will all be yours too.”

“I doubt that,” I said absently, rubbing the goose bumps from my arms.

He gripped my shoulders and turned me around so fast I was hardly aware of what was happening until I was face-to-face

with his eyes ablaze and boring into mine. “I mean it, Cordelia. As my mate or my wife, you will be my family. Everything I have will be yours for eternity.”

My heart stuttered. My own family had never made such a decree. In fact, more often than not they reminded me that anything I had was because they wished it. But they held all of it over my head as if they could and would take it away at any time. And I believed they would. Which is why I’d done my best to follow their rules when I could, and when I couldn’t, I hadn’t allowed them to see me break them.

“Eternity is a long time,” I breathed, barely able to get the words out because my throat had clogged with an unnamed emotion.

“Dragons live a long damned time. All shifters do. We aren’t immortal, but it’s not unheard of for us to live a few hundred years if we are lucky. If you and I become true mates and form the bond, you too will be gifted with similar longevity.”

I blinked at his words. Was he saying...? “Will I become a dragon too?” The mere idea of that sent fear spiking throughout my body. I could barely comprehend such a thing right now, and there was a good chance I never would. I didn’t want to be a—

He shook his head, interrupting my runaway thoughts. “Unfortunately not. But the magic will adjust your DNA to prolong the aging process to be compatible with mine.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“My mother is not a dragon. And she is a lot older than you might think.”

Curiosity gnawed at my psyche. I had to know. “How old is she?”

He smirked and shook his head again. “No one knows, except maybe my father. Vanity is not for humans only, it would appear. My mother refuses to reveal her true age.”

“Good for her.” I smiled tightly, still unsure how I felt about the queen. She’d been inconsistent and confusing on whether she cared for me or not thus far.

“The slowed aging will provide you with many years and opportunities to birth a family though.”

He said those words so quietly, I almost didn't hear them. But I did, and they sent a shock of heat and arousal coursing through my body.

“That is what this all boils down to, isn't it? You want to strengthen your clan, and the only way to do that is for more dragons to be born.”

He brushed his fingers through my hair for a moment before he answered. “I won't lie to you. Dragonlings are crucial. But a mate means so much more than just bearing children.” He looked over my head and out the window, the planes of his face softening. “Being mated is about feeling and experiencing a connection to another person in every way possible. We would be best friends, able to share anything with each other. We would experience love like so few others do. And of course, sharing children is a natural extension of that.” He turned me around so I faced the window and placed his chin gently on top of my head.

“You make it sound too good to be true.”

“Because it is. And I honestly never expected it would happen to me.”

“In my experience, too good to be true is a negative connotation, not a positive one. It's a facade meant to disguise something much uglier underneath it.”

“You are too cynical for your own good. And far too young to feel it.”

“I'm not innocent. Witches can be as brutal as shifters. We aren't coddled or pampered. Every member of the coven is expected to contribute, and while individual magic is a thing, we are far more powerful as a group. So individualization is not rewarded.”

“Every time you say something like that, I burn with the need for retaliation on your behalf. I want to hurt those who have hurt you.”

I turned in his arms, my mind at full alert. “You can't do that.”

He frowned. "It is my nature to protect you. Especially if anyone means you harm."

I shook my head. "No. Promise me." He didn't look too happy at my demand, but this was more important than he could understand. "Seriously, Ian. You cannot mess with my coven. They are far more vindictive and vengeful than you are. You can't win."

He scoffed at that idea. "That's absurd. It's true I would have to be far more careful and cunning than usual, but I could win."

"Promise me," I repeated. "If you want me to be your wife or your mate or anything else in your life, you have to make me that promise. Let them be."

"They hurt you."

"So what? People hurt people all the time. It's not important. Especially now. I'm here with you. They can't hurt me anymore, right?"

"Right." His arms tightened around me once again, and his lips pressed to my forehead.

"Then just promise. No matter what happens, you won't go after them." I needed him to understand how desperately I needed this from him.

He looked both confused and resigned. "Fine. I promise I will not go after your coven. But you ask for a lot." He slid his hand down the side of my face and cupped my chin gently. "Now, what will you give me in return?"

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN

Cordelia

“I don’t know what I could give that you would want. I have no money, no castle in the sky to take you to, or even any real power. I already explained that my magic is dim. I can cast a few spells, and that’s about it.”

He frowned. “That’s where you are wrong. You have all the power you need right here.” He placed his hand on my chest above my heart. “And right here.” He rubbed his thumb across my forehead. “And you hold the power to break *me* in the palm of your hand.”

That made no sense. I scrunched my forehead in confusion, trying to understand what he meant when it finally dawned on me. “The mating,” I whispered.

He nodded. “The mating is everything. I can’t emphasize that enough.” When I tried to open my mouth to object, he placed a finger across my lips and continued. “I’m not asking to take away your choice. Let’s make that clear right now. I’m not like others in that respect. But what I would like is...a chance. I need to know you have an open mind. You can’t take it off the table without giving me a chance to win you over. I need hope.”

I didn’t know what to say, although he had a reasonable point. And I wanted to be fair...

Mating heat or not, I could still make the right decision. “It means a lot to me that you want me to have a choice. Although I’m not sure I believe in choice anymore. I didn’t have one when my parents told me I was getting married, and I’m not sure I have the choice to resist what’s happening between us.”

His fingers continued to trail along my neck and down my shoulder, sending a shiver working down my spine.

“Then let me show you what being mated to me would be like.”

“I think I already know.” I hadn’t been able to stop thinking about the night before for more than a few seconds at a time.

“You think so?” He smiled wickedly and placed a kiss just below my ear. Until last night I’d had no idea that was such a sensitive spot. “If you think what happened on the balcony last night was the best that I’ve got, then I need to show you the real me.”

I tried not to smile in the face of his arrogance, but I had a hunch he could and would back up every word. “That sounds a lot like a dare,” I said, my voice now thick with need.

He took a step forward, forcing me to take one back, and continued until my legs hit the edge of the bed. “Not a dare. A mission. Now get up on that bed.”

His low, growled command should not have made my legs tremble, nor should it have made me practically jump onto his bed and spread my legs.

“You need some help?” he asked, his grin growing wider with his words.

“Yes,” I said, turning my back to him.

It took no time for him to realize what I needed as he reached for the back of my dress. But instead of unbuttoning it, he wrapped his fingers around each side and ripped it down my back. Buttons went flying, scattering across the floor, sending a jolt of lust straight for the core of my womanhood.

Before I could catch my breath, his hands were on my waist and pulling me back and against his hard frame. There he

dragged the valley of my sex over the hard length of his erection, letting me feel everything I needed and then some. There were still my undergarments and his clothes between us, and yet somehow, every ridge of his hard length burned a path across my skin as if there was nothing at all between us.

I started to say something but could only make a whimper instead. It was hard to think of anything, even words, when it came to this mating heat. Either sensing my distress or for the sheer pleasure of it, Ian leaned down over my back and latched his mouth tightly against my neck.

The nerve endings there lit up, and my whole body responded. The slick between my thighs grew heavy with anticipation as I tried my best to keep my wits about me. But the magic that made up Ian was too intense, too encompassing to ignore. Every flick of his tongue and squeeze of his fingers into my hips pulled me deeper into a sensual firestorm I had no desire to escape from.

When he suddenly released my hips, I began to groan my displeasure, but then I heard the sounds of him unfastening his trousers and yanking them down. By the time he'd finished, I'd grabbed the edge of my underskirt and pulled it up over my hips. Whether I wanted to admit it or not, my body begged for him to fill me. I couldn't wait to feel the tight stretch as he pushed himself inside.

I dropped my head and buried my face in the bed, all but eagerly admitting that I was ruled by this need—this need for him.

“Fuck,” he groaned against my neck. “My need for you is so strong it's overwhelming. I'm struggling to keep control.”

“Then don't.” I pushed back and rubbed against his hard length, the gusset of my panties blocking his entrance and frustrating me to no end. “Control is not what I want right now.”

As a response, he lightly grazed his teeth roughly along the sensitive column of my neck and quickly followed it with a soothing swipe of his tongue. The pleasure of that had my eyes

rolling to the back of my head as a low moan slid from my throat.

One minute my panties were blocking his way, and the next they were gone and he was sliding deep inside me.

“This is the kind of thing legends are made of, beautiful. You are so tight around me, it’s all but impossible to think straight.”

“You’re telling me,” I groaned as all the nerve endings he touched felt like they’d caught fire, sending an overload of sensation to my core. The intimate muscles in that area quickened and pulsed, turning my brain to near mush as I focused solely on the pressure inside that continued to build.

Having him draped across my back as he pumped slowly in and out was like having a protective heated blanket around me that would keep me safe, secure, and cozy, allowing me the freedom to simply revel in all the feel-good sensations rocketing through my body. But it was the frantic way his hands moved up my arms and grabbed my fingers that truly robbed me of breath.

Or maybe it was the continued smooth strokes of him moving in and out of me that were going to make me blind with pleasure. Because I swore he’d found a spot in me that made me feel like my entire body might soon explode. It was brutal, and soft, and intense, and even somehow reverent the ways in which he touched me.

“Ian,” I gasped, trying to warn him.

“I know, beautiful. Me too.” As if every nerve wasn’t already feeling on overload, he reached underneath me and brushed his finger just above where he’d entered me. I bit down on my lip as he rubbed that sensitive bud up and down, side to side, and in tight circles that made me see stars.

I lost total control as he worked his thrusts faster and faster. My muscles locked tight, and that budding explosion detonated inside me. My muscles clenched, making Ian moan as he pumped even harder. He was so big, and I was so

stretched, and somehow my muscles fluttered and flexed through what felt like a never-ending release.

Ian's grip on my hands turned crushing as a final groan rumbled through his chest and his teeth scraped my shoulder blades as he planted deep and the swell of his cock sealed us together once again.

His weight was heavy on my back, but I welcomed the pressure as I rode out the aftershocks of what we'd done. Our harsh breathing filled the room, and I smiled into the bed below me. Ian was a force to be reckoned with, and I wasn't sure I could ever deny him anything. Especially not this. The relief, the pleasure he brought to this...

In this one singular moment, when I locked everything else out of my mind. This felt right. One hundred percent good and more than I could have dreamed of. The idea that the Goddess had chosen such a man for me was almost something I could believe in.

If only I could hold on to this feeling forever...

CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN

Ian

I woke before the sun came up and turned to look at the woman lying next to me. Goddess, she was perfect—and complicated.

I don't know what I expected this morning when I woke, but the look of pure contentment on her face as she slept practically made the dragon purr in my head. Fucking softie.

At some point in the night, she'd pulled all the blankets and pillows she could find into the bed with us and was now sleeping in what looked like some sort of cocoon. I half expected that when she woke, a butterfly would emerge. She was so different from the kind of women I was used to and not at all what I expected from her coven.

For years they'd been wary of our presence and in the last few years had become unexpectedly hostile. An all-out war had seemed imminent as it became evident that we couldn't co-exist peacefully. Cordelia, however, didn't seem to have anything more than a little apprehension when it came to my family. That could have been the mating heat influencing her, but I didn't think so. It was almost as if the coven had known exactly what we needed and when.

What I didn't understand was how they didn't recognize what a treasure they were giving up and why.

Although, according to her, she wasn't like the rest of her coven and they'd ostracized her because of it. That thought did not endear me to her people, even if I was grateful to have her in my life. Nor did I feel particularly inclined to give them the peace they asked for because of it. I wasn't normally a suspicious person, but after years of dealing with Isaac and his declining mental health, I'd grown leery at best and paranoid at worst. My brother literally defined the word cutthroat, and I was determined to be different from him in every way.

However, there were other ways to make her coven regret they'd ever given her a moment's pain. She was my mate after all, and as such deserved my vengeance on her behalf. I would just have to bide my time and wait until after we were married and life settled down.

Married.

What an odd requirement. I wasn't sure why the witches were so hell bent on observing human traditions. Why did they care about such things? It was all for show. They probably thought a human wedding would show everyone in their part of the mountains that we were giving in. What else could explain it? They somehow thought accepting Cordelia into our family showed submission, but they couldn't be more wrong. She was my Omega, and the human ceremony carried little weight with our kind. It was the mating ritual I wanted. Without it, I would certainly face a perilous future.

If she rejected the call...

I shook my head. She couldn't reject it. The consequences were too dire. Neither one of us would live a long, happy life without that bond. The fates would be sure of it.

Asking me not to bite her was going to be the hardest thing I'd done in my lifetime, and that was saying something.

I pushed the sheet off my body and stood from the bed. We would need food before the next wave of mating heat consumed us. And since this house wasn't fully staffed, it would be on us to take care of ourselves.

“Where are you going?” she asked sleepily without opening her eyes or moving an inch.

I leaned across the bed and brushed the wild curls of her hair out of her face and kissed the tip of her nose. “We need food.”

She shook her head. “Just sleep.”

I laughed, rubbing my hands across her naked shoulders. I could sense the mating heat just below her skin, but for now it wasn't urgent, and she did need her rest.

“Sleep, baby. I'm not going far.”

“Mmmhmm,” she mumbled briefly, burrowing deeper under her nest of blankets and pillows. I watched her for a minute more until I was sure she'd gone back to sleep before pulling on a pair of trousers and slipping from the room.

I headed straight for the kitchen to see if there was anything to be had, and if not I could probably make my way home and back again well before she woke.

I entered the kitchen and came to a halt. “I knew I smelled something bad. What the hell are you doing here?”

Isaac nodded to the kitchen counter without looking up from the newspaper he read. “Mother insisted.”

I turned and found an array of boxes laid out. My nose told me she'd sent a variety of baked goods, fruits, and cheese, as well as everything we needed to make tea and fresh-squeezed juice.

“Why would she send you?” Mother would have known sending Isaac here would be dangerous.

“She didn't want to, but what choice did she have? Do you think Father would have done it? Why haven't you mated her yet?”

“None of your fucking business,” I shot back as I moved to the counter and began unpacking boxes. As expected, there was enough here to feed an army. Or a really hungry dragon.

Isaac shot to his feet, and I tensed, expecting to have to fight him back.

“If you think you can take her from me, you’re very much mistaken, brother. This is one fight you won’t win.”

“It would be the first.”

“That’s right. Because on this I will not appease you. Our whole lives it’s been all about you.”

“That’s horse shit. I’m stronger than you.”

I laughed. “I’d suggest you try to prove that now, but I have more important things to do today than deal with you. Go home. Do whatever it is Father needs you to do, and leave me be for once.”

“You stole her from me. I can’t believe you think I should just walk away from that fact.”

“No one stole anything. I shouldn’t have to keep reminding you that you rejected her. And if we have to rehash that one more time and I have to think about the things you said to her and how they made her feel, then I’m not going to be responsible for what happens.”

Isaac snorted, but he also made no further moves in my direction.

“If she doesn’t accept your mate claim soon, then I will take her. It’s that simple.”

“Over my dead body.”

He shrugged. “Mother might not appreciate it, but it would be no issue for me.”

The cold look in my brother’s eye made me believe every word he said. It seemed the rumors that ran rampant through the valley about the mad prince were truer than I wanted to believe. I’d always wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt, to believe that the brother I’d always loved was still in there somewhere.

Today I wasn’t sure.

We both stood staring at each other, waiting for the other to make the first move, when Isaac finally turned towards the back door. As he crossed the threshold, he turned back once

more. “Tick tock, brother dear. I suggest you get that bond in place before I have to return. She might not like it when I kill her lover and force her into my bed, but it *will* happen.”

His words burned through my blood, and the dragon roared forth. His words alone were enough for him to draw blood, and he wasn’t going to wait. Fortunately for Isaac, he was already mid shift at the door and took to the air before I made it outside.

My dragon roared his intent, and Isaac returned it with a blazing trail of fire in the early morning sky. Arsehole.

I didn’t move until my brother disappeared from sight, and even then I stood there for a very long time, watching and waiting. I didn’t trust him not to circle back and try to surprise me. He’d made his intent clear, and I believed he meant every word.

I’d meant what I said too. The lines between us had been drawn and the bonds of brotherhood finally broken. Sometime in the near future, I would mourn that loss, but not today. I was furious that he’d pushed us to this, and I wanted nothing more than his death.

Except her.

I finally turned back to the house where Cordelia still slept. For her, I would do anything to keep her safe. Whether that meant it would cost my brother his life remained to be seen. There was also the promise that I’d made to her about letting her choose the bond.

I cursed at my weakness and the risk that now posed.

CHAPTER
NINETEEN

Cordelia

“Oh my goodness. These are amazing.” I stuffed another biscuit into my mouth and swallowed more of the fresh juice that Ian had seemingly conjured from thin air. By the time he’d returned to our room with a huge tray of food, I’d found myself ravenous.

“Courtesy of my mother and her kitchen staff.”

Panic shot through me. “They’re here?” I was sitting on a bed with nothing more than a sheet wrapped around me, stuffing my face like a heathen. I wasn’t acting as I should with Ian, let alone any guests.

“No. No. She had them delivered earlier. We are alone.”

I sagged in relief, although the notion of anyone else in the house reminded me of my current lack of propriety and the proper ways in which I should be behaving.

I swallowed down my food and placed my glass back on the tray. “Can you turn around so I can get up and get dressed, please?”

He looked at me as if I was the one who had grown horns and wings. “What on earth for? I’ve already seen and touched every spot on your body. There’s no need to be shy around me now.”

“It’s not about being shy. It’s about proper behavior. I shouldn’t be lounging in bed without clothes on while eating.”

You have a perfectly respectable dining room for that.”

“That’s ridiculous. You need rest from the toll of mating heat, and you were comfortable here.”

My body flushed hot at the reminder of what we’d done.

“Just relax and don’t worry about proper fucking behavior.”

His cross tone took me aback. Up to now, he’d been patient and kind. Demanding yes, but not unkind. I didn’t understand the change.

“Has something happened?” Maybe the mating heat was over and he now saw me in a different light. My stomach plummeted at that idea. I hated to admit that I’d allowed all of his loving words to charm me and I’d started to believe that he meant all the praise he’d heaped upon me.

He scraped his fingers through his hair and blew out a hard breath. “Shit. No. I’m sorry. Isaac was here earlier, and he got under my skin. He’s gotten so much worse than before.”

I breathed a sigh of relief but tried to cover it up with my hand.

He narrowed his eyes and saw straight through me. “You thought I was angry with you for some reason.” Since it wasn’t really phrased as a question, I didn’t offer an answer.

“What did he want?” The nerves in my stomach seized for an entirely different reason. I couldn’t forget that I’d been promised to Ian’s brother, and it still seemed possible, given this turn of events, that I would be expected to live up to that devil’s bargain.

“Mother sent him with the food, but of course he can never leave well enough alone.”

The biscuit I had just inhaled turned instantly to stone in my stomach. The idea that the evil black dragon had gone out of his way to bring us food made me ill instead of grateful. There had to be an ulterior motive. Isaac did not strike me as the type to do anyone a favor.

“What did he say?” I used my meager magic to open my senses and reach out to Ian. I often had enough power to feel the emotions from those around me, and it came in handy

when trying to suss out whether or not someone was telling the truth. Ian's anger was so strong, I could almost taste it on my tongue. The bitterness of it turned me sour.

"I think he came to see if we'd completed the mating ritual yet." He frowned but quickly tried to wipe it away. Irritation and disappointment flared alongside his anger. I scooted away, feeling a lot like I was invading his privacy.

"What did you say?" I worried the corner of my mouth by digging my bottom teeth into my lower lip.

"Darling," he said, shaking his head. "I didn't have to say anything. His dragon senses would have picked up on the mating bond long before he even entered the house. He knows we haven't gone through it, and he's trying to assert his claim over you."

My worst fear was coming true. My ability to choose my own fate had slipped through my fingers whether I liked it or not. I turned my back on him so he wouldn't see the tears welling in my eyes. My initial plans of escape were gone, and I didn't yet know how to reconcile my new fate.

"Cordelia. Look at me."

I shook my head. Looking at him was the last thing I should do. He was in the same position I was. Neither of us had a choice in our future. Our family obligations were stronger than our individual freedoms, and we both knew it.

"You should just do it and get it over with, then," I said on a harsh whisper.

"This isn't something you just do to get it over with. When I take you that way, you will become *mo chridhe*—my heart. I don't take that lightly, and neither should you."

"Trust me. I'm not taking this lightly." I turned back to him, letting him see the tears now streaming down my face. "But like everything else in my life, it's out of my control."

There was no hiding the bitterness in my voice. I hated speaking to him like this. He wasn't like the rest of his family. He was kind. And sexy. And sweet. Under different

circumstances, I was positive I would fall in love with him. And if I were honest, I might already be.

He grabbed my hands and knelt down on the floor in front of where I sat. “I get that the timing of all of this is suspect at best and detrimental at worst. But I vow when we are mated, your life will not be out of your control. We will be equal partners. And hopefully you will be pleasantly surprised just how important you will become in our world. You don’t actually think my mother is less important than my father, do you?”

“Well, he is a king...”

“And she is his queen. People worship and adore her, but more importantly, they listen to her. Including my father. He values all her input, whether he agrees with it or not. That’s the mating bond. And years of living and loving together. I’m sure if she was here, she’d tell you that she didn’t love my father at first. Like us, they didn’t know each other at all when he triggered her mating heat. And he bonded with her before she even understood what was happening.”

My eyes widened. “Really? Against her will?”

He chuckled. “I don’t think I’d classify it as against her will, because they were both swept up into the mating heat and my father lost control. Trust me, they have shared far more details than I ever wanted to hear, but they were both pretty surprised when they ended up bonded for eternity.”

“I’m surprised she didn’t kill him. Your mother gives off a certain impression.”

He laughed again. “That she does. And my father is lucky she didn’t do anything worse than she did.”

Now I was intrigued and wanted to know more. “What did she do?”

“Had him arrested.”

“For—?”

“No. No. Nothing like that. She made up some tale about him stealing from her home, and he was immediately taken away

and held for trial.”

“That sounds risky.” And I wasn’t at all surprised.

“That is not a joke. Had he been found guilty before she had a change of heart, he might have been hanged in the town square. This was a long time ago, and criminals back then were not handled in a civilized manner.”

“Are they now? I’ve not spent a lot of time in human cities. But I can tell you that witches take their crime AND punishment very seriously. The severity of the consequences doesn’t always seem to fit the crime.”

“Shifters can be the same way. While we aren’t ruled by our animal DNA, we do tend to lean a little on the more savage side of things.”

“So obviously she forgave him and they lived happily ever after.”

Ian nearly fell onto his bottom he started laughing so hard. “Have you met my mother? Or my father? Let’s just say their life has been filled with adventure. They love fiercely, but they fight like savages when they don’t see eye to eye. It can be a little scary.”

“You are not selling me on this whole mating bond thing with this story.”

“Why not? Would you prefer to live in a loveless marriage with a man who barely speaks to you and keeps a mistress in town and more on the road for when he travels?”

I sniffed. “I’d like to see a husband of mine try something like that.”

The smile he gave me made my belly swoop. “You never have to worry about that with the mating bond. I will never look at a woman the same way as I do you.”

Well darn, those were some good words, even if they were magically forced on him. My heart was beginning to melt.

“That will be true whether we go through with the ritual or not. I already know that you are it for me. No woman could compete with you, nor would I want her to.”

“I find that hard to believe, Ian. Look at you. You are the most gorgeous man I’ve ever seen. You deserve someone who is more than—”

“Be very careful with what you say next,” he growled in a low tone. “I won’t tolerate you insulting yourself or me for knowing you are the most beautiful creature I’ve ever seen. The fact that you are different from other women is precisely why I am so drawn to you.” He brushed a hand across my knee, and I felt the heat of him burn me through the sheet.

He was making it incredibly difficult for me to remember all the reasons I didn’t want to magically tie myself to him. If half of what he said was true, then he would make a better husband than any other man I’d ever met. My own father didn’t seem this devoted to my mother, and he was fairly attached to her.

“And you’re sure this is what you want? You have no doubts? I mean, what happens if after the bond is in place, one of us changes their mind?”

“It won’t happen. You are missing the whole concept if you believe that is possible. We are destined for each other. Fated, if you will. Our bodies, our hearts, were literally made for each other. There is no one else in the world we’d find better suited. It just would not happen.”

That niggle of *no choice* burned at the back of my mind. But what if it was I who was wrong not to accept everything he said? I understood fate as well as the next person. Witches believed in the will of the Goddess. Wasn’t fate just another way of saying the exact same thing?

“Okay,” I said, making the decision before I could change my mind or think too hard about how, if anyone could get their heart broken, it might be me. I had no doubt that Isaac would try to force me into a bond with him, and I didn’t trust that because of his twin DNA that he couldn’t do it. But more importantly, my instincts about who Ian was were strong, and I felt his intentions were honorable.

There were many unions started on far less.

“Okay,” he repeated, his mouth turning down in a slight frown. “That’s not the exciting enticement I hoped for.”

I winced at his tone. It physically hurt to see his disappointment in me. “I don’t mean to appear lackluster. It’s just...”

“You need more time.”

Again, it wasn’t a question, and if it were, I wouldn’t know how to answer it.

“If I had more to give, I would do so gladly. But Isaac will return, and I can’t be sure when.” I started to say something, and he interrupted. “Take the morning. The house is fed by a natural hot spring, and you’ll find a bathing tub through that door.” He pointed to a closed door on the other side of the room. “Soothe your body before it urges us together again.”

I looked between him and the door in question. A bath sounded perfect. “What will you do?” I asked.

“The dragon is restless and anxious too. The call to you is so strong. In order to give you the peace you seek, I will take to the skies and work on some of the aggression. Isaac’s little visit has not helped.”

I could see the tension and strain in his body, and as much as I wanted to reach out and soothe him, he was right. We both needed some time to ourselves to think about the future. Although it would not be without the influence of the mating heat. I could already feel the pull towards him tingling under my skin.

“Good. It’s settled,” I forced out before my body betrayed me and said something entirely different. I scooted around him and made my way into the bathing room. I closed the door behind me and leaned against it as I willed my frantically beating heart to slow.

He had done me a kindness by giving me some space. I only hoped it was enough.

CHAPTER
TWENTY

Ian

I landed as softly as I could outside the patio doors, but Cordelia no doubt heard me. When it came to two tons of pissed-off dragon, there was no such thing as soft. I had hoped that a few hours of time in the clouds, enjoying the sights and working up a hefty sweat, would at least help a little. I knew it was too much to hope for a complete turnaround of my poor attitude, but a little bright side might have helped.

“What’s it like for you?”

I jerked up at the sound of her feminine voice close by to find Cordelia standing in shadow just inside the French doors, watching me.

“What do you mean?” I wasn’t clear what she was asking, but I rushed to finish dressing so that I could join her on the patio. She took a few steps forward, emerging from the house and allowing me to get a clear view of her. She’d obviously found the suitcase of her clothing that Isaac had provided, and she’d chosen a plain, soft-blue dress that reminded me of the color of the sky just above the clouds that clung to the mountains.

“Flying,” she replied, giving me a soft smile as she did.

“It feels like freedom. And I don’t just mean from obligation or people, although there is that. It’s a little more than that. When you have this thing inside you that wants out, when you

finally do give it the opportunity, it transforms your whole world. You become something so extraordinary that it seems for a while nothing else matters.”

“Is that how it felt today? Were you free from all of this?”

My muscles tensed as I guessed at her meaning and read the tension in her body that she tried to hide. However, no number of pretty dresses and hats could hide her fragility in this moment.

“No. I was not,” I admitted, taking several steps in her direction. “I can’t stop thinking of you.”

Her eyes narrowed with suspicion, and I had to stifle a grin. That may have sounded ridiculous to her, but it was true. The dragon was just as affected as I was by her mating heat, and it had not been easy to stay away from her for even a few hours.

“What about you?” I asked, nodding towards the sky. “You got a taste on the way here. What was it like?”

She sucked in the corner of her bottom lip, and it took considerable restraint for me not to lean in and kiss her there so I, too, could nibble on her. I really had it bad when it came to her. I had expected that mating heat could be quite consuming, but I didn’t realize it would make me this desperate. Or maybe that was just her. Besides the obvious connection we shared, the more I learned from her, the greater my respect grew. She had not had an easy life, and yet she stood tall and brave in the face of predators who could be unkind and ruthless,

“Freedom would be a good way to describe it.”

“But?” I could hear the hesitation in her voice. There was nothing about this situation that made her feel free.

“No but, exactly. I’m just sure it wasn’t the same for me as it is for you. You could literally decide to fly away and never return, and no one could stop you. But for that brief time, I felt freer than I ever have before, and I really liked it. I think that’s why I’m having such a hard time with this bond we need to make. I need to feel that sense of freedom again.”

I closed the small space between us and pulled her into my arms, and thankfully she did not resist. “There will be many more moments like that in our lives together, I swear it. I have no intention of stifling you or holding you back from what you want. I’m not sure how else to explain the mating bond, though. Our lives may be entwined, but it will not stop you from any and all pursuits you may have.”

“You really swear it?” The desperate plea in her question tore through any hesitation I might have had about how we were going to handle this. She may be so much younger than I, but she was wiser than her years.

“I do. On my life and on my heart, *mo chridhe*. I swear to you that I will never imprison or impair you from your pursuits. I only long to support you and keep you safe.”

A tiny smile formed at the corner of her mouth. “Is this what you thought about while flying?”

“I could think of nothing else. I also may have spent some time thanking the Goddess for sending you to me. I shall owe her for this.”

Her smile widened, and the scent of her underlying arousal sharpened.

“Then I accept your promise and make the same to you. You have proven to be an honorable man, and I think I shall be lucky to call you mate. However, I do not ever wish to be a hindrance or an embarrassment to you.”

I reared back and caught her gaze more sharply. “Do not ever say such a thing. You would never be an embarrassment, and I will never accept any negative comments about my mate, not even *from* my mate.”

“Okay,” she whispered, another smile teasing her lips. “I shall not repeat it.”

The dragon inside me relaxed. We both could sense that soon there would be no question to whom she belonged.

“So what do we do next? Should we go to the bedroom now?”

A smile lifted the corners of my mouth. As good as the image of her lying naked on the bed waiting for me sounded, I could still see some nervous tension in her eyes. I had an idea for how to get rid of that first.

“Not yet. I’m hungry.”

Her eyes shuttered for a moment. “Of course. Lunch. You must be starving. I’m sure there’s something I can put together from the supplies in the—” She started to twist out of my arms, and I grabbed her tighter, holding her in place.

“It’s not food I’m after,” I growled, sliding one of my hands down the generous curve of her hip and cupping her ass.

“Ohh,” she said, blinking. “But I thought you said...”

“There is a difference between a mating ritual and what I have in mind.” I said the words as I trailed kisses down her neck and pulled the neckline of her dress down so I could reach more of her flawless skin. A shiver worked through her as I circled my fingers around her collarbone and then dipped them between her ample breasts.

Anxious for more, I reached down for the edge of her dress and pulled it up, exposing the thigh-length white stockings she seemed to favor. “Mmm,” I growled in appreciation as I quickly draped her dress over my arm and reached for the matching white panties. I hooked my fingers into the waistband and pulled them down to her ankles, leaving her bared.

“Ian,” she whimpered. “We’re exposed again. We should go inside.”

“Mmhmm,” I agreed. “Except this time there is no one here to discover just how scandalous you like to be.”

“I never said I liked that,” she panted, her breaths growing increasingly shallow.

“You didn’t have to. The wetness that drips between your thighs tells me all I need to know.”

“You are such a scoundrel,” she admonished between gasps. It was all I could do not to chuckle. At least until I took a knee in

front of her and breathed the lush scent of her deep into my lungs. By scent alone, I grew impossibly hard.

“Is this not for me, then?” I asked, pushing my hands up her damp thighs until my thumbs met the apex, where I parted her plump petals and slid across the slick, sweet skin of her pussy.

Mine.

“You know it is,” she gasped, the words almost unintelligible as her head fell back. “Never before have I experienced anything such as this.”

“Good. I intend to explore every inch of you, until I have discovered everything new. And then I shall do it again.”

Her body swayed, and while I held her taut with one hand, she was still able to push slightly in the direction of my mouth. Whether she even realized what she was doing seemed debatable. But it didn't matter. My mouth watered and my cock ached. It was going to take Herculean effort not to unfasten my fly and thrust myself into her.

Only, my intention was to give this pleasure to her first before we took this further. Planting myself deep inside her and letting the barb take purchase was going to be the sweetest ecstasy of our lives. But I wanted her to see this wasn't just about mating. Our union would hardly serve as only something functional. Dragonlings or not, I intended to make my mate happy in every way.

Holding one arm around the backs of her thighs to keep her steady on her feet, I then pushed two fingers into her without warning. Her resulting gasp and the tight flex of her muscles around me made me groan. I pumped them slowly in and out, in a sweet, steady rhythm, driving both our need higher. Within minutes I could feel her body tensing, and she begged me for more, both of which I got off on.

However, I had no intention of letting her off that easy. Not after the hours I'd spent flying through the mountains, trying to blow off steam, to no avail. I thought of nothing except returning to her and doing this very thing. So now I was going to make it last and enjoy every moment of it. Every time she

got close, I slowed my movements and effectively pulled her back from the ledge she was dying to go over.

“Ian, please.”

Those two words were almost enough to make me break. I desperately wanted her to soar, but not until I was convinced I had her completely mindless and thinking of nothing but me. One way or another, I planned to erase all her doubts.

Taking her pleas to heart though, I leaned forward and brought my mouth between her legs. But I clamped my arm even harder around her legs, keeping her lower body immobilized. At some point, she finally realized her hands were free, and she fished them into my hair and pulled every time I did something to make her squeal.

Like tease her clit between my teeth. I grinned against her flesh as I feasted, making sure to nip, suck, and lick every delicious inch of her. By the time I'd had my fill and was as high as I could imagine on her desire, her entire body shook, ready to explode. Words fell from her lips, but I had no idea what they were. My thoughts were as incoherent as hers. And when her thighs tightened around my head, I renewed my efforts to drive her wild as I feasted on her mercilessly, until I, too, thought I might erupt.

But it was her next words that did me in.

“Please, Ian. Please. I need you.”

Hearing those three words from her finally broke me. The desire to give her everything she wanted and more rose up inside me and was fueled by dragon fire. Impossible heat flowed through my veins as I lashed across her clit. I had half a mind to dive into her now, but at this point, I wasn't going to last, and standing on a patio was no place for us to be locked together again.

“Come, Cordelia. Right now,” I roared.

Her legs shook so violently, it was obvious she could not hold herself up. However, I had no problem giving her whatever support she needed.

“Let me finish this feast with the sweetest nectar in the world.”

That was her cue, and she took it, throwing her head back and exposing her vulnerable neck to the world. On a scream that tore through the silence, she exploded with a release that threatened to drown me. I lapped and sucked at every drop, unable to get enough.

Her hands pulled so tightly at my hair, I should have resisted, but I didn't. In fact, I loved it. Her strength, both physical and mental, drew me in and tightened in my chest. I could hardly wait to get her inside to show her in full detail how much her decision meant to me.

With one last swipe through her delectable folds, I lifted my head and met her gaze.

“Cordelia, I—”

“Bravo. Bravo.”

The sound of my brother's voice shattered the moment of sheer bliss surrounding us as Cordelia screamed, and we both struggled to cover her exposed body with her dress.

“What the hell?” I roared.

Isaac chuckled darkly, all but ignoring me. “I must say. If I had known such a wild and wanton woman existed beneath those frumpy clothes, I would have been more inclined to overlook the less-than-pretty face, and never rejected her. Good thing we've come to rectify that mistake.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE

Cordelia

“**W**hat do you mean, *we*?” Ian demanded, his voice near to a roar.

I was still scrambling to cover up and mortified that his brother had seemed to witness what we’d done. I was about to run into the house and hide when another voice came from the shadows.

“Me, son.”

Oh my Goddess, No. My entire body heated with a thousand flames of embarrassment as the Shifter King himself rounded the corner of the patio. I had no idea where either of them had come from, but it was obvious from the look on their father’s face that he’d been privy to what his son had just done to me.

Shame shot through me as Ian grabbed my hand and shoved me behind him. I hated to admit it, even to myself, but I was fine to hide behind the cover of his body. As my heart threatened to beat out of my body, I was in no condition to face either of these men. And with the two of them here, I half expected the queen would show her face any second as well.

This was it. I was going to die of shame.

“I told you he wasn’t getting the job done,” Isaac grumbled.

“Aye, I can confirm for myself.”

The heat emanating from Ian grew, and I almost had to jerk my hand from his for fear of a burn. But somehow I managed to stand fast and keep my position without doing anything overt to draw more attention to myself.

“What happened to privacy?” Ian’s question thundered around them all, and I could have sworn his skin shimmered with red in the afternoon light. Was the dragon about to emerge again? So soon? I certainly hoped not, because I doubted it would be a good idea for us to be this close when it happened.

“Her family has arrived.”

“What?” I cried out before I could stop myself. I clamped my hand over my mouth and frantically looked at Ian for help.

“What do they want?” he asked, his impatience still evident and his dragon showing even more. His arms and back were now shiny red scales. I’d only seen them this close once, and as a dragon he’d intimidated me enough that I’d kept my hands to myself as much as possible. But this mostly human with a little bit of dragon showing seemed so different. It didn’t scare me as much, and I wanted to see more.

Of course, this was the absolute worst timing for that kind of reaction. We had an audience and hadn’t fully recovered yet.

“To see their daughter wed immediately, per our agreement.”

“Not a problem to be sure,” Ian offered, a definite edge in his voice. “We will return in the morning and complete the formal ceremony. After tonight, it will be a mere formality.”

“Damn, right, brother. Because I’ll get the job done myself right now.”

We both glared at Isaac. While my heart tripled its speed in the face of his threat, I had to admit I was getting tired of his bullying, and he wasn’t even my brother who I’d had to deal with for years. Just a few days in, and I was ready to kick him in the balls.

The king sighed, and his expression turned dour. I had a sinking feeling that whatever he was about to impart to us would not be good.

“Your brother has issued an official public claim over the girl. I’m afraid since you have not yet completed the mating ritual, you will have to hand her over at this time.”

“No,” I cried. This could not be happening.

“Over my dead body,” Ian spat. “She has already made her claim, and it’s a mere formality for it to be official. If you had not so rudely interrupted, that part would probably be under way as well.”

Isaac snorted, and I covered my face. The shame building inside me layer after layer would soon explode. Tears pricked at the back of my eyes, and I needed to desperately get away from this insanity before I lost all control.

“Your dead body works for me. Are you making an official challenge?”

The silent tension grew so thick, I thought we were all going to shatter into tiny pieces when it broke. I didn’t know if it was my magic or theirs...or both...but I could feel its nearly suffocating effects as it swirled wildly around us.

“You’re damn right it is. Right now. Right here. I see no reason to wait. We have a proper witness, and that’s all we need.” Ian’s entire body vibrated with the anger in every word. He’d reached the end of his rope, and I could feel the resolve radiating from him.

I looked on with horror as Ian dropped my hand and moved away from the house. The red shimmer of his scales had intensified, and what was left of his skin looked nearly engulfed in flames by his dragon fire.

“Ian, son. Think about what you’re doing. I do not wish to witness you die at the hands of your brother.”

I gasped, my hand barely holding in my scream. “What are you talking about? No. No. No. This is too much. No one has to die. Just no.”

“Cordelia, please.” Ian cut me with a sharp look. “Go inside the house and wait for me there where it is safe. I promise everything will be all right.”

His angry confidence gave me pause. I couldn't think straight. It was all happening so fast. When my senses returned, I shook my head. "No, Ian. Please. It's not worth it." I'm not worth it. I did not say those words aloud, but he likely heard them anyway. My meaning was clear. I absolutely could not stand for him to die because of me.

"You are worth my life and so much more," he said calmly, giving me a look that seemed to say it all. I could feel his magic sizzling across my skin. "But I made a promise to you, and I intend to keep it. I will not hand you over to him, and that's final."

The king shook his head, and Isaac grinned like the maniacal psychopath that he was. Thus far he'd lived up to every bit of his reputation. From the moment he'd crashed onto the front lawn and declared me not good enough to now, where his eyes glazed with the intent to kill. The idea that it was his twin seemed to matter little.

"You should stand back, m'lady," the king said firmly, coming to stand next to me on the patio. "The goal is not for you to get hurt."

"No one should get hurt. This isn't necessary. We were to be mated tonight." I looked on in horror as Isaac moved to the lawn across from his brother, and in a flash of magic and the truly horrifying sounds of bones popping, his giant black dragon emerged.

"It appears that it is necessary, although it is not for us to say. This is their decision, and the challenge cannot be revoked."

"*This* is ridiculous."

"Perhaps it is. But it is also our way of handling disputes of this nature. Thy will be done."

I bit my tongue to keep from blurting something rude and likely to land me in hot water with the King of Dragons.

Since it did not look like my protests would have any effect on stopping this travesty, I tried to think of something else I could say or do. First. I had to do my best not to distract Ian from the duel. After that, no idea.

“Ready?” The king shouted his question with a powerful roar in his voice, the tone of which rooted me in place.

Magic shimmered across Ian, and before his shift completed, Isaac flapped his massive wings and shot forward. I gasped as his giant black body crashed into Ian’s smaller red one. While they were close in size, I could see that Ian was definitely a bit smaller.

A blast of fire erupted from their tangled bodies, and Isaac’s black form shot through the air to narrowly miss getting burned. My heart was already beating so fast, I feared it might explode from the stress.

“That was cheating!” I cried, clenching my fists.

The king, however, shook his head. “I’m afraid not. There are no rules when it comes to this kind of thing. They fight to the death no matter what it takes.”

“That’s barbaric.”

He shrugged. “It is the dragon way. Something you will have to get used to, as you will soon be part of our world permanently.”

I glanced over at him with a glare, but he had his gaze fixed forward on his sons. Hate curled through me as I thought of what came next. And in that moment, I made the decision that if, Goddess forbid, that black asshole won, I would not marry him willingly. They could drag me to the altar kicking and screaming. And while I didn’t doubt that between him and my parents, I would be forced to comply, I would bide my time and wait. I’d plot my revenge, and then I would run. I would not be a captive to their barbaric ways.

My thoughts shattered as a loud roar echoed through the clouds a second before Isaac burst through and barreled his way towards Ian. This time the red dragon was ready, and he jumped into the sky and headed directly for his brother.

They collided midair in a tangle of wings, roars, and fire. It lit up the sky and colored the low-hanging clouds with fiery stripes of red, orange, and black. The smoke alone made it extremely difficult to make out what was happening. I moved

around the terrace, hoping for a better view, when suddenly Ian burst through the clouds, headed for the ground.

At first I thought he was flying towards us, but a moment later I realized he was falling.

“Oh my Goddess!” I slapped my hand over my mouth and started a chant. I knew I didn’t have enough magic in me to make much of a difference, but I couldn’t stand by and do nothing as he plummeted to his death.

Whether I was a help or hindrance remained unclear, but just before he crashed to the ground, his wings beat and he skimmed along the mountain in a gorgeous arc of flight. I had watched him for a while a little earlier as he’d returned from his morning flight, but this was different from then. While I could see the tension in his body before, now I could almost feel and see the anger in him from the aggressive flap of his wings and the lines of fire he continued to paint the sky with.

“They are fairly well matched.”

I turned to the king. “But I thought you said that Isaac would kill him.”

He nodded. “It is a strong possibility. My eldest son embraced his violent nature a long time ago and seems to lack in compassion. While that makes him hard to deal with on a daily basis, it does make him an excellent fighter.”

“More like an asshole if you ask me.”

The king snorted. “I would be careful how you poke him in the future with your sharp tongue. You do not want his wrath focused on you. The best thing we can all do is leave him be as much as possible. Concentrate on bearing him a youngling, and then you’ll be far too busy to worry about Isaac.”

“If he wins.” I had to hold on to the hope that it was still possible for Ian to win. If Isaac tried to force me into anything, I would find a way to kill him myself.

“Only the good die young.”

I shook my head at the way this man infuriated me. How he could be so callous about one son potentially killing another,

or not care that one would perish this day, I couldn't comprehend. Was the queen truly accepting of this violent behavior? No matter which man I ended up married to, I would never accept this as normal conduct. No wonder the witches hated them so much. We were far more peace loving than this.

We didn't arbitrarily force people to kill each other.

My thoughts were interrupted as a blur of red and black crashed into the ground in front of us and shook the mountain violently. It rumbled and split, forcing me to grab on to a post to keep upright from it. Neither of them were down for long. Ian blinked and spared me a quick glance as Isaac rose to his feet as well. This time Ian dove for his brother first, and they collided violently again.

All I could make out was the color of their scales and the wings they used to attack each other. Well, that and the gigantic teeth as they each snapped and bit at the other.

"I can't watch this," I said, turning my head away.

"You should. It's an important lesson. This is why your union to our family is so important. So we don't end up in a war with each other. We may be a savage species, prone to violence, but I don't believe either of us wants to see this kind of bloodshed amongst our people."

My stomach lurched at his words, threatening to empty its contents. As I raised my head and returned my gaze to the fight playing out in front of me, I refused to believe that easily on his words. I had faith that magic could prevail over this kind of brutality, but he was right. A war would lead to more death, and I couldn't have that on my head. I would do whatever it took to keep that from happening. I only prayed that didn't mean marrying the evil twin.

"Please make this stop. I'll do whatever it takes. I am not worth your son's death."

"You say that, but I disagree. You are more important than you think. Especially if you have feelings for him. Do you?"

The two dragons shot into the sky again and out of our sight. I paced across the terrace again, searching skyward, desperately looking for any sign of them. Waiting for this nightmare to end was going to drive me mad.

I didn't want to look at the king again. His too-knowing gaze and his expectation for answers. I didn't know if I had feelings for Ian, did I?

"Where are they?"

"Just over that ridge." He pointed to the mountain to my right that looked far away at the edge of the horizon.

"You can hear them from that far away?"

"I can." He turned to me and forced me to meet his gaze. "Dragon hearing is the best among shifters. I can hear for hundreds of miles if I try. But that's beside the point. You didn't answer my question."

CHAPTER
TWENTY-TWO

Ian

I ripped my body away from Isaac, leaving behind a chunk of hide and a trail of blood. I'd managed to avoid a fatal blow, but I was bleeding in so many places now, I'd lost count. My energy was not depleted, but I could feel the drain. I wouldn't be able to keep up this pace much longer.

The vicious look in my brother's eyes as he let loose with another trail of fire clenched my heart. Whatever love that had been between us before this seemed long gone. He didn't have a single reservation about killing me.

I, on the other hand, still struggled with it. Until I pictured Isaac with Cordelia. That was enough for me to see red and renew my efforts. I would not let her fall into his hands. Whatever he thought he wanted from her was warped and wrong.

Mine.

That singular word carried me forward on a rush of air as Isaac turned, bared his teeth and, on a roar, dove in my direction. This time I wasn't going to back down. I had to end it here, or he was going to wear me down, and then I'd be at real risk of loss.

I bore down on him, beating my wings as hard and as fast as I possibly could. He had gravity on his side and was using it to push him in my direction at a too-rapid speed. His wings were

tucked at his sides, but that left his underbelly unprotected. If I could strike him there, it might immobilize him long enough for me to—

I didn't even want to think the word. The rage inside me warred nonstop with the brotherly love that I still harbored for him, even after all the hell he'd put me through. He was still my brother.

A strange, feminine sensation invaded my mind, and I almost lost my concentration looking back towards the ground. Was that her? An unfamiliar whisp of magic moved through me and tangled with my own.

The sensation was unlike anything else I'd ever known. It felt heady and decadent and gave me an extra push of strength. I had no idea how this was happening since we weren't yet mated, but I could feel every cell of her as her magic entwined with mine. As I neared Isaac, who still seemed determined to meet me head-on at full speed, I estimated my own speed, his, wind speed, and a solution formed in my mind.

It was a damned risk, and if it didn't work, then Isaac would surely strike me down. There would be no time to recover and formulate a new strike. But if it did—and I was really lucky—I could possibly maim him instead of killing him, and then maybe it would buy me some time.

Energy pulsed through me as I worked harder to up my speed, twisting my body to the left. I would have to get just the right angle...

Right then, Isaac let loose with a massive line of dragon fire aimed right at my head. I had no choice but to roll or get burned. I returned fire and prayed this could still work. I flexed my claws and spiraled into a barrel roll at the very last second, just as his fire hit my scales and his claws ripped into one of my wings. But I was determined to win and knew it had to happen now or it never would. I held the roll as he focused on the shredding of my wing until I could reach out to him.

Lifting my right claw, I aimed at the target, sinking deep into his hide as I continued the roll. Blood poured out of him and coated my scales. I tried to use my own wings to get away

from him, but he'd ripped one of them nearly in half. I worked the other one in an attempt to compensate as Isaac's roar of fury reverberated through my skull. If I didn't get away from him...

I glanced back at my tattered, throbbing wing as blood poured from my body, and I realized my only chance for escape would be down. And with my brother's larger size and gravity, he would have enough upper hand to overtake me before I reached land.

Still, I had to try. Cordelia was counting on me, and the idea of letting her down was more than I could bear. I turned and dove for land, ignoring the searing pain and blood loss. I pulled on the last of the magic resources I had to keep me in my shifted form and raced. But I could hear the agonized roars of my brother just behind me, and I knew it wouldn't be long before he reached me.

We were both racing towards the ground, and I wasn't sure if I had anything left in me to land without breaking every bone in my body. I could self-heal to a point, but there were some injuries that I couldn't come back from. As the Tallan house came back into view, I knew I would have to slow soon. But I could feel the rush of wind at my back as Isaac bore down on me. I couldn't let him catch me.

We were both seconds from crashing into the ground at full speed when I heard a vicious, mind-numbing roar behind me and a blast of air underneath me at the same time.

I unfurled my good wing and prayed to the Goddess for the best. My speed slowed, but it wasn't enough. I flexed my claws and dove for the line of trees, hoping I could catch on to something to break my fall. But the wind underneath me and the use of one wing weren't enough. I flexed both wings, despite the agonizing pain, and fell, crash landing onto the ground with the force of what felt like twenty dragons on my back, pounding me into the ground.

I tried to draw a breath and couldn't as liquid filled my lungs and bubbled from my mouth. The bitter, copper taste of blood coated my tongue.

“Oh my Goddess, Ian! Are you all right?” Cordelia grabbed on to me, her face twisted in fear.

“No. He’s not! Out of my way.” My father pushed my mate out of his way, and I couldn’t even whimper a protest because I was choking on my own blood. The only sound I managed came out as a gurgle.

“Where are you hurt?” she cried, coming around to my opposite side. “Maybe I can help.” Tears were streaming down her face, and desperation shined in her eyes.

My father pressed his hands against my chest, and I felt his magic stir under my flesh. But it wasn’t going to be enough to fix this. We needed Mother. She was the only one of us who carried that kind of magic. I tried to reach for Cordelia, knowing I’d failed her. If Isaac didn’t bleed out from the injury I’d given him, he would claim her as his mate as soon as I died.

“I-I-I—” I choked, unable to form even a single word.

“His lungs are punctured, and there are many broken bones,” my father grumbled.

“I told you this was unnecessary,” she cried, practically shoving my father’s hands out of her way. “Get away from him,” she screamed. I spied the way my father’s brows raised, and if I could, I would shield her from whatever wrath he was about to bring down on her. Isaac had gotten his temper from our father. And while my brother’s was far more extreme, the king had very little patience and a short fuse as well.

I felt a warmth unlike my dragon fire swell in my chest and slowly felt some of the pain ebb away. I feared this might be the end, and I wasn’t ready to go. I had yet to tell Cordelia what meeting her had meant to me. How I felt about her. What kind of person I believed her to be...

The heat grew, and I was finally able to take a shallow breath. One and then another, until I could breathe deeper. It was then I realized it was her. I wasn’t dying. She was healing me with magic. I reached up and touched her cheek as gently as I

could. I'd never felt so vulnerable in my life or as perfectly safe.

"It looks like you don't need me here anymore," my father interrupted. "I'm glad you're not dead, son. But please finish this tonight so I don't end up back here tomorrow."

I nodded, knowing exactly what he meant without saying a word. He disappeared then, and I looked back to Cordelia and the pain shining in her eyes. "Where is Isaac?" I asked, surprised he wasn't bellowing his claim by now.

"He flew away when you hit the ground. You gutted him, baby. The blood was pouring out of him." She didn't take glee in that. Instead, she kept all her focus on her hands.

"You called me baby."

She looked up and met my gaze for a fleeting second. "I guess I did." Her face was shining with a sheen of sweat, and I could see the strain around her eyes. "Now stop interrupting me. I don't know what the hell I'm doing."

"I thought you didn't have magic?" I asked, turning my gaze back to the sky.

"I can't explain it."

"Hmmm," I growled as more of the pain receded.

"Please, Ian," she pleaded. "Stop distracting me. I'm almost done."

I smiled, stretching my arms over my head and testing the feeling in my limbs. They tingled with the sensation of pins and needles. "I think you're done, baby. I'm feeling pretty fine."

"Thank the Goddess." She collapsed back on her butt, her legs tucked underneath her, exhaustion weighing her down.

"Just one more thing."

Her gaze shot to mine, worry filling her eyes. "What? Where does it hurt?"

I smiled at her a moment before I pulled her down on top of me. "A kiss is all I need right now," I whispered roughly, the

need for her rising sharply. She had healed me, but there was still an overload of adrenaline in my body that needed somewhere to go, and right now, I chose her.

Lucky for me, she leaned forward and pressed her lips on mine as sweet and gentle as she could. That soft touch sparked something in my chest, and I grabbed her and pulled her down on top of me.

“Ian!” she squealed. “What are you doing? You almost died. We need to get you in the house and in the bed so you can rest. Do you have a doctor?”

I growled louder and kissed her harder, my hands pressing against her backside so she ground down on top of me. I wanted her to feel exactly what I needed, and it sure as hell wasn't rest or a damned doctor. She had healed me.

“I need you,” I said, finally breaking the kiss so we could both get some air before I suffocated us with my possession.

“You are insane.” She said the words, but I noticed she made no effort to move from her position on top of me. I squeezed and massaged her bottom and the backs of her legs, more determined than ever.

“Probably. But I just fought like hell, and now I want my prize.”

She shook her head and rolled her eyes, but her lips still found mine again, pressing nearly intently as mine. The rumble of the dragon moved through my body as much of the exhaustion from the fight disappeared. Blood rushed south as the roar of need filled my ears. All I could think about was her and how close I'd come to losing her.

“We should go inside. What if they come back?” Her lips trembled against mine. We'd frightened her, and it was my duty to settle her again. And I had the perfect idea.

“They won't. And I can't wait that long.” I rolled her onto her back and settled myself between her legs. The gasp that slipped from her lips told me all that I needed to know. Like me, her adrenalin had struck and kicked mating heat into the highest gear.

“Then finish what you started before we were so rudely interrupted.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-THREE

Cordelia

His heated lips moved roughly against mine, and I savored every decadent minute of it. I'd never been more scared in my life as I had been watching him careening toward the ground after Isaac had ripped one of his wings in half. I could only thank the Goddess for giving me the magic I'd needed to heal him. I still didn't understand how that had happened, but I would forever be grateful for it.

"Mine."

The word he growled against my lips made my stomach jolt and caused the space between my legs to come alive even more. Already I could feel the slick heat and the pressure in my core, indicating my body wanted this more than air.

"What about Isaac? Do you think he is dead?"

"Nay. He and I share the same magic. He will live. I would imagine he flew home to Mother, who has the power to heal him."

"Oh." I said the word slowly, letting the implications sink in. If Isaac was still alive, then we were exactly where we started before this whole fight ensued. "So that was a waste of time, I presume."

He pressed a kiss just below my ear, and I stretched my neck to give him more access. "Proving to my family how much you mean to me and how far I'm willing to go to protect you

was essential. Dragons are stubborn and prone to not hearing the words you say to them. Actions, however, they see and hear loud and clear.”

“Good to know...” I trailed off, still thinking about the predicament and how frightened I’d been.

He pulled back and stared down at me. “Have you changed your mind? Do you not want to be my mate?”

I shook my head. “No. Nothing like that. I think to deny it now would be an obvious lie. I just wish—”

“For better circumstances,” he finished, sadness tinging his words.

“Yes. I mean no.” I was handling this badly. “Hell, I really don’t know. I can’t think straight like this. It’s not fair.”

He pulled back, and the loss of his heat made my heart stutter. “We don’t have to do this now. I can get you through the heat without the rest.”

I squirmed underneath him, trying to create some much-needed friction and get him back where he belonged. I didn’t want to talk about it. I just needed it to happen. But that’s not who he was. He wasn’t his brother, and he wouldn’t force this issue until it became a matter of my safety.

Although technically it had. I wasn’t going to take the chance with his life again. We were partners in this, and no matter what he said, my life was not more important than his.

“It’s not just the heat. I’m just—I’m scared.” Admitting that wasn’t easy, and I turned my head to look away, not wanting to meet his knowing eyes right now. But he wasn’t going to let that stand, as he gripped my chin and turned me back to face him.

“Don’t do that. Neither of us can hide from this, and we shouldn’t want to.” He nuzzled my neck, giving me a brief moment to take a breath before he continued. “It’s okay to be scared. Even as excited as I am about you becoming my perfect Omega, I have nerves too. Our lives are changing quickly. There will be some adjustment, but you have to trust in us and the fact that we can do this...together.”

“You are *not* nervous. I don’t believe that for a minute. You just ran off your brother after a vicious fight. You, sir, are fearless. And a little crazy too.”

He laughed, and I felt the rumble of it vibrating through both of our bodies as he pressed into mine. “Everyone has fears. To be fearless is to be stupid. There will always be someone bigger, or faster, or smarter. To defeat them, you simply determine what you are better at than them and find a way to use that in your favor. Isaac is bigger and faster than me, but I am smarter. Although only because he is ruled by his emotions. Especially anger. That is a weakness and the only way to get past his defenses. Even then, I still almost lost. So yes, I can and am nervous. although not about what is happening between us right now. Of that I have no doubt.”

I stared at him for long minutes, looking for some sign of deceit. I shouldn’t have bothered. Ian was nothing if not honest. *That* I trusted. But he was still loyal to his family, and I wasn’t sure I could set that aside.

“Kiss me and stop thinking so hard. The ritual can wait. Right now I just need you.” His voice was deep and harsh at the same time, brooking no argument from me.

That simple statement got me. There were a thousand words he could have said right now, and yet those were the perfect ones. I wrapped my arms and legs around him and squeezed him tight in a full-body hug. “I need you too,” I admitted, because it was the least I could do.

His lips were back on mine in a flash, and I drowned in his attention as I held on tight. The heat of him soaked into my tired bones, and my pulse slowed as my body softened against his. Despite everything, he still smelled so good. I took a deeper breath, drinking him in as the world around us began to recede. I could no longer see or smell or hear anything beyond him and his place between my legs.

Why was I fighting this when it was so obvious I was meant to be with him? We were a perfect fit, and deep down I’d known from almost the beginning.

“I plan to do this until the end of time. Every day. Every night. I will never get enough.”

His words took the heat I’d been feeling from before and set it on fire. My heart hammered out of control as I reached up into his thick, black hair and pulled him back down into a feverish kiss.

It was me this time who did the thrusting of my tongue as I plunged into his mouth. I wanted everything he had to give and then some. He was right. There would be no stopping us now. Lust swirled in the air, thick and cloying, while pulling us both deep into the throes of my mating heat.

“This is the moment I’ve waited my whole life for,” he growled into my mouth, his hand traveling up the side of my leg and under the loose dress. It shamed me a little how easy I’d made this for him, dressing without the proper undergarments. But deep down, whether I wanted to admit it or not. The minute he’d left me behind to bathe, I’d known this moment was coming and I wanted it.

“Kiss me harder,” he demanded. “Watching you lose control is pretty much the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

I smiled against his lips, both pleased and proud that I had this kind of an effect on him. To know it wasn’t one-sided was worth its weight in gold. And then I did as he requested, gripping his hair tighter and moaning loudly as my hands and legs tightened around him. He surged forward and bumped himself up against my clit, setting off a violent firestorm that threatened to rage out of control.

I pulled back from his kiss. “I want—” I didn’t get to finish my thought because he rubbed his entire length along the juncture of my thighs. My eyelids fluttered as the pleasure of his movements took hold and nearly sent me careening from a cliff.

A little out of control and a lot desperate, I reached between us and fumbled with the fastenings of his trousers. By miracle or pure determination, I finally tugged the buttons free and pulled him out. He sucked in a sharp breath as my hand wrapped around the base. “I seriously don’t see how—” I gasped.

“You already know it fits.” Humor shone from the depths of his golden eyes. “You were made for me. Although, I won’t lie. You are tight and the clutch of your body around my cock is enough to drive me mad. That first time was sweet and breathtaking, but it will be nothing like tonight.”

His dirty, filthy mouth did nothing to dissuade me. In fact, it seemed to make the need a whole lot worse. Like the first night, I felt my wetness begin to make its way to my thighs. Normally I would be mortified, but I found that impossible with the driving need to have him inside me, stealing my breath, and knowing that it was that moisture that would ease his way.

“I need you,” I whispered into his ear, my tone as breathless as his was harsh. He wasn’t the only one losing control or on the brink of madness. “Please, Ian. Take me now.”

He didn’t hesitate. He shoved his hand between our legs and guided himself to my entrance. Because we’d been so scandalously interrupted before, I’d never had a chance to redress appropriately and, in fact, couldn’t even remember where my panties had disappeared to. He stilled there for a moment, pressing only the tip inside. I held my breath, waiting as my legs and arms began to shake.

“Relax, beautiful, and open for me.” His instructions were followed by him clenching his jaw and one of his hands squeezing my hip with a bruising grip that told me just how close to the edge he was. He inched forward, and the force of my body stretching around him was almost too much to bear. Almost.

As before, my body did once again know better than me, and as he eased forward, my muscles relaxed and he pushed all the way in. The sensation of being filled to nigh bursting made it almost impossible to take a full breath. Instead, I took small shallow ones as I reveled in the sensations exploding in my brain.

Before I could say anything, Ian began stroking slowly in and out of me, each one making it harder and harder to think of

anything beyond the bliss rioting its way through me. Once my body had fully relaxed around him, Ian quickened his pace.

I grabbed at his back and raked his bare skin with my nails. I might have drawn blood, but the roar that erupted from Ian's mouth drowned out all thoughts of anything but him as he took me hard and fast. He grabbed one of my arms and pulled it over my head, pinning it in place. He then intertwined his fingers with mine, and the slight scrape of his rough skin over mine made shivers run down the length of my body.

"I promise, Cordelia. I will protect you to the end of time. No matter what happens. You are mine, and I am yours. Forever." The heat of his words washed over my skin, eliciting goosebumps and causing my muscles to clench around him. His declaration of devotion did something funny to my insides as I squeezed my legs harder around his waist.

With the level of ecstasy that he was giving me, it was hard to process what might be happening, but eventually it clicked. My magic. It was responding directly to him as it ebbed and flowed through me. He had awakened it.

"Oh my Goddess, Ian," I gasped as he plunged again and the tightening in my core wound impossibly taut. "My magic!" It was all I managed to spit out before the world exploded around me. My body spasmed as my release pulsed mercilessly against his invading erection.

He in turn shouted incoherently as the swelling I'd experienced before locked us together and made it impossible for him to move any longer. Only this time it was different. Something else was happening. "Oh my—what—" I tried to speak and couldn't at the sudden vibrations deep inside me. I opened my mouth to try again and screamed as a massive burst of pleasure exploded inside me.

"It's the barb, my love," he whispered in my ear as he held me tight through the near mind-numbing convulsions. "When it locks inside you, vibrations hit spots you might not know existed."

I heard the words but wasn't sure I understood a one of them. The heat gathering in my womb bordered between pain and

extreme pleasure. My body pulsed uncontrollably until I thought I would pass out from the purest form of pleasure I'd experienced in my whole life.

Tears streamed down my cheeks, and Ian kissed and licked each one of them away. "It's a lot, I know. But it's beautiful—you are beautiful." The hot kisses on my face continued as the spasms slowed and subsided completely, leaving us still locked together with our hearts beating in rhythm. They were exactly in tune. Each beat matched perfectly with the other.

"Our hearts," I managed on a whisper.

"We're mated now. Our hearts beat as one." He pressed another kiss to my neck and then sucked on the skin there.

I pondered that information. I hadn't considered whether anything about me would physically change. What if I—

"Is anything else about me going to change? Are you sure I won't become a—a dragon?" Thinking about the horrible bone-popping noises they made and how big they became, I didn't think I wanted to go there. My body was big enough.

"No, it doesn't work like that. Who and what you will become is set at birth. Dragonlings are birthed, not turned. According to my mother, the mating ritual alters you just enough. It puts you in sync with your mate. Hence why our heartbeats now match. Some mates become telepathic. But that is not always the case."

"If our hearts are in sync, does that mean if one of us dies the other..." I didn't want to finish the question. To talk about our deaths felt like tempting fate. We were supposed to embrace the time we had together, not worry about how long that might be.

"No, beautiful." He brushed his hand across my cheek, and I turned into his touch. "If anything happens to me, your life will go on. As will our children."

My stomach jerked. I hadn't thought much about children, despite all of his comments about dragonlings. What if I was already...

“It is possible,” he said as if reading my mind. “The barb is how we procreate.”

I gasped. “Did you just read my mind?” That was going to be a problem if I couldn’t even think in peace.

“No, but I didn’t need to. Right now you are like an open book, and I can sense all the questions as well as see them on your face. I would have them too. And while the odds that the first time would result in a fertilized egg are pretty low, there is no telling by the end of this heat.”

“What do you mean? I thought this would be the end of that? I feel good right now. Almost normal.”

He smiled down at me, the look in his eyes downright wicked. “That’s because you still have my cock inside you.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FOUR

Ian

I stood and stretched my arms above my head, ignoring the ache in them. I'd be happy to get to the point I couldn't move if it meant my mate was satisfied. A smile crossed my face as I remembered each and every explosive release she'd coaxed from me. By the time I'd taken her three more times since our mating was completed, we'd both fallen into a deep, much-needed sleep.

Fortunately, she still slept curled into the massive pile of blankets and pillows she kept pulling into our bed. Even now with her body curled around a pillow and one bare leg peeking out from underneath the covers, I felt my cock stir for her again. We were both insatiable at this point, and who could blame us? Every second was a blessing and the best damn feeling in the world.

However, the sun had set many hours ago, and when it rose again in a short while, we'd be expected to journey back to the castle for our "official" ceremony. First, she would need to eat, and we'd both have to bathe. Which was going to lead us to...

I pushed those thoughts out of my head, or I was going to be right back in that bed with her, making sure nothing else got done. It was my duty to care for her during this, and I wasn't going to fall down on the job and let my mate starve to death.

I grabbed a pair of discarded trousers and put them on quickly before I got waylaid again and made my way down the stairs

to gather food. Two days had passed since the fight with Isaac, and there had been no more visits. I'd sensed my father once, several miles away, but he'd never come closer than that. He'd obviously gotten the answer he sought and had likely reported back to the rest of the family that it would take some time before we could return.

A mate in the abyss of mating heat had little on her mind except sex. Her body burned, and the only relief came from the vibrations of the barb nestled in her body. My body warmed again as I pictured Cordelia on my dick. While I looked forward to the more mundane everyday adventures of having a mate, I couldn't help but enjoy the carnal nature of it either.

And with that memory fresh in my mind, it was damned hard to think about anything else. I entered the kitchen half expecting someone to be there waiting for me again and was pleasantly surprised to find it empty. Thank the Goddess my family had decided to stay out of my business for once. Cordelia and I needed this time alone, even if it had to soon come to an end.

An unwelcome interruption now could put a negative pall on our mating, and I refused to accept that. I was still confident that Isaac had survived our fight, but I shuddered to think the rage his injury might have caused. Since he didn't suffer such things as shame and a lack of pride, I was surprised he had yet to pay another visit.

His anger might still trigger another fight, despite the mating being settled.

Brushing those thoughts aside, I gathered and cooked what I could and then rushed back to our room. She had yet to stir, and I would have liked nothing more than to sit and watch her sleep. There was such peace on her face now, and I noted that was the first time I'd seen her like that since meeting her. I planned on many more mornings just like this. As our roles evolved in the family hierarchy and we took on more responsibility, taking time for ourselves would become more important than ever.

First, however, I had to wake her before her food became cold.

“Cordelia,” I called to her as I set the tray of food on the small table and swept up the dressing gown she seemed to favor the few times I’d seen her dress. Despite what had transpired between us, I knew she would want to dress before eating.

“Cordelia,” I repeated when she didn’t stir. I bent down over her and pressed a light kiss to her lips, which she met with a groan. I laughed as she grumbled about not wanting to get up. “You have to eat. The moon has shifted, and we will soon be called to return home.

Her eyes opened at that and turned in my direction. “What time is it?”

“An hour before sunrise. Here, I have your gown and food at the table. Come and eat it before it gets cold.”

“I’m not sure I can move.”

“I’d be more than happy to assist. Would you like me to carry you over?”

She glared at me. “No, that won’t be necessary.” She reached out and snatched her garment from my hands, and I turned back to the table to give her a bit of privacy. It wasn’t necessary to me, but I doubted her ideas of modesty had changed simply because she’d been overtaken by mating heat for a few days. Although when the mattress squeaked, I did take a quick peek to admire the ample breasts that I couldn’t keep my hands—or mouth—from. And the curve of her full hips that cradled me to perfection every time I pushed into her...

Fuck. We weren’t going to make it through breakfast if I kept on like this. I pushed at my dick and willed it to give me a break. If not for my sake, then hers. I couldn’t even imagine how sore her body must be.

“After we eat, we should bathe.” I hadn’t meant those words to sound so erotic, but the husky tone of my voice gave away some of my inner thoughts.

“I would like that,” she said, her voice rough as well.

I willed myself not to look at her yet as I pushed my fingers through my hair and took a deep breath. “Eat first. I would be remiss as your mate if you weren’t properly nourished.”

A soft laugh met my ears, as did the sound of her fixing a cup of tea from the pot I’d included at the last minute. “You like saying that, don’t you?”

“Is it not true?” I asked, finally turning to face her with a little more control than before.

“Of course it is. I guess I’m just not used to it yet.” She bit into the fresh-baked sweet bread and sipped on her tea. “I wish we had more time to adjust before we have to go back. I’m not looking forward to seeing my parents. I’m sure they will have a lot to say to me.”

My gut tightened. This was not the first time she’d hinted about the cruel treatment she’d received from her family. “I won’t tolerate them being unkind.”

She looked up, and as much as I tried to hide the fire in my eyes, I knew it was still there.

“I don’t need you to do anything about them. I can fight my own battles.” Her spine straightened, and she narrowed her eyes at me. My mate had her own fire, and whether she realized it or not, it made her the perfect partner for me.

“I have no expectation of you sitting quietly behind me as I threaten to burn your family to ash if they look at you cross.” I chomped on a piece of fruit as I waited for the coming explosion. Half the fun of having her in my life would be baiting her just to get a rise out of her. Her anger would be as exciting as her laughter.

“I hope you’re kidding...” She took another sip of tea without taking her gaze from mine.

“Hope away,” I growled, only half kidding. I wasn’t going to tolerate anyone treating her as less than perfect. When a little fear surfaced to mix with her anger, I reached across the table and took her hand. That touch alone had an intense calming effect on the dragon and would help soothe some of my rougher edges throughout this process. “I am not planning

anything nefarious, if that's what you think. But I truly won't allow anyone to hurt you."

"We have to keep the peace. After the fight between you and your brother, I don't wish to see any more bloodshed for a very long time."

I rubbed my fingers across hers, unwilling to let go of her hand. In fact...

I tugged at her until she was on her feet and falling into my arms. I wrapped my arms around her waist and gently pulled her into my lap. "That's better," I said on a soft growl. "I think keeping you close is the best idea I've had in days."

The tinkling melody of her throaty laugh went down like a balm tonic. She threw her head back as I eyed the sweet curve of her neck. Dragons weren't biters like wolves and cougars when it came to claiming their mates, but there was something about her that made me want to nip at the skin and mark her in the most visible way I could think of.

"I'm afraid I won't be able to stay on your lap all the time, my love."

My brain froze. I blinked and narrowed my eyes. Did she just —

"I can certainly try," I answered, her words still ringing in my ears. Had she even realized what she called me? That was the first time she'd said anything that indicated where her feelings might be going. Her actions of course spoke more than words, but I enjoyed hearing her speak them nonetheless.

She nuzzled into my side. "I wish we could stay here longer. Life is much easier when we are alone."

"Me too," I admitted. "Would it help if I promised after this wedding is over, we'll come back and spend as much time as you'd like here without any interference from my family or yours?"

"That sounds divine." She dipped her head and pressed her lips to mine in the softest, sweetest kiss of my life. When she pulled back, she gave me a smile that stole my breath away. "I'm ready to take that bath now."

“Mating heat?”

She shook her head. “No. The fire of that is barely a simmer now. Thank the Goddess. This time, though, it’s just for us.” She hesitated, looking more than a little nervous to finish before she blurted the rest. “To make love.”

I drank in her words and let them wash over me for a minute. Whether by fate or circumstance, or both, this THING between us was growing. And it made my blood sing with the fire of my dragon.

I jumped up from the chair with her in my arms and practically ran to the bathroom, where I’d taken a moment to draw us a bath before I’d woken her. Once there, I stepped us into it without bothering to remove our clothes.

She squealed and then laughed. “I take it you were already on board with my desire.”

I turned her in my arms and brushed her wild curls from in front of her face before I brought my lips to hers in a savage kiss meant to sear everything I was feeling into our hearts.

“You have made me the happiest man alive. Thank the Goddess for bringing you into my life.”

“I’m not sure she had anything to do with it. My parents were quite determined to bring me here.”

My lips turned up at the corners in a half smile. “Then I guess for that reason alone, I will find a way to tolerate them through the wedding without eating them.”

She snorted, the most unladylike thing I’d ever seen or heard and the most adorable. Her hand flew to cover her face, and I laughed in turn.

The next thing I knew, her hands were on my shoulders and she was pushing me under the water. I grabbed her and dragged her with me just as our lips collided once again. She didn’t know it yet, but she’d just made us late to our own wedding because it was going to take me hours to finish playing with her, and by the time I was done, she would be beyond boneless.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FIVE

Cordelia

As I approached the terrace doors of the king's castle, I turned back to ensure Ian was still at my back. He squeezed my hand and nodded without saying a word. I took a deep breath and brushed the bodice of my borrowed gown. It was a little tight, but it was the only one I'd found at the guest house that came close to fitting me.

It was blood red silk with a low neckline not quite made for someone with breasts my size. There was a little more cleavage than I would normally display, but Ian had been most appreciative when he'd seen it, and the depth of his excitement had glowed from his eyes.

I only hoped the color wasn't an omen of what was to come. I found it somewhat unsettling. Was it bad luck to wear red to my own wedding? Or simply scandalous?

"You have nothing to worry about. I won't let anyone hurt you ever again." His words were whispered at my ear so no one else could hear them, and they gave me the strength to continue. I pulled the doors open, and with my head high and my spine straight, I entered ahead of Ian.

This door led into what was known as the breakfast room, and despite being well past the normal time for breaking a fast, there were tables laden with food and many people milling about with filled plates and subdued chatter.

All of which died the moment we were spotted as all eyes turned to us.

Lettie approached us first, a dour, disapproving look on her face. “You are late, and what on earth are you wearing?” she hissed.

I ignored both her nasty comment and her question. We’d come as quickly as possible, all things considered, and I wasn’t going to feel bad about it. Today would be hard enough to get through.

“I think she looks beautiful in that gown. It’s one of my wife’s,” the king said as he approached.

“Yes,” the queen agreed. “You chose perfectly. Look how well that color suits you.”

I dipped my head in both respect and thanks, although I had to admit I was more than a little surprised to hear it.

“Yes, of course,” Lettie quickly amended. “Not seeing the gown we’d chosen before this trip simply caught me off guard is all.” She grabbed my arm and squeezed harder than necessary before pointing me in the direction of my own parents. “Your family arrived days ago,” she whispered through gritted teeth. I didn’t understand what had her so on edge, but that felt like another dig, which I also chose to ignore.

My parents watched me, unsmiling, from across the room, which made my stomach clench as we approached. To my surprise, Ian excused himself from his parents and took my hand at my side.

“I’m looking forward to meeting them,” he said with a smile, even though I doubted he meant a single word. I could feel the tension coming from him, and I just hoped my parents didn’t do anything to piss him off. I wanted to thank him for his support, but I didn’t want to do anything extra to cause any more strife than absolutely necessary. We just needed to get through this day, and then it would be over. They’d go back home, and Ian and I would start our new life here.

Although we'd have to deal with Isaac, and I would live amongst strangers with only Ian at my back...

It was hard to forget that there was a good chance I'd jumped from one burning fire to another. Both sides still had plenty of issues to work through. But at this point, there was no going backward.

I smiled at my mother, who smiled back as Lettie led the introduction of Ian to my parents. While they shook hands and Ian said something that seemed nice enough, my thoughts were as scattered as ever, keeping me from concentrating on a single word.

It was only when Ian was called to his father's side, they disappeared from the room, and my arm was yanked until I was turned back to face my parents, that I came out of my stupor.

"What in the world is wrong with you?" my mother hissed. "You had one job when you came here, and you screwed that up."

My mouth dropped open at the hateful tone in her voice. "What difference does it make which prince I marry? The union still meets the terms of your peace agreement with the dragons. That's all that should matter, right?"

"You weren't supposed to fall over them like a lovesick dog. Or play musical beds. Have you no pride?"

"I have plenty of pride. You just choose not to see it," I hissed in as low a tone as I could and still be heard. I didn't trust Ian not to hear my distress from wherever he'd disappeared to, and I wanted to do my best to keep my family's heads attached to their bodies while they were here.

My mother sucked in a breath, and my father looked at me sharply.

"Cordelia, what has gotten into you?" he said, his tone as unforgiving as my mother.

"Nothing has gotten into me. You may have arranged for me to marry the prince, but when I arrived, he rejected me. But Ian —"

“Yes, we’ve already heard this story. We’ve also been told that the younger prince has mated you like an animal.”

My breath caught in my throat at the savage insult, which seemed extreme even for my father. What in the world was I supposed to say to that?

“We can’t do this here,” my mother inserted. “There are ears everywhere. It’s too late anyway. She’ll have to deal with the consequences soon enough.”

I still couldn’t breathe as my heart pounded out of control. Their hate-filled words were too much, even if I didn’t fully comprehend them. “Why are you doing this?” I asked, apparently a glutton for punishment.

“You don’t get to blame us this time,” my father said as my mother snorted alongside him. “This is all on you. You brought this on yourself.”

I jerked my arm from Lettie’s still too-tight grasp. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.” I nearly choked on a sob getting out the words. “Ian is a good man.”

My mother shook her head in obvious disbelief. “Forget it. They have poisoned her mind. Maybe later we can fix this, but right now there is no time. The ceremony is about to start.” She looked down at my dress. “There isn’t even time for her to change into something more appropriate.”

My limbs went numb as I fought to push their hateful words out of my mind. It was then that I realized the last several days with Ian had been different from every day before him. Not once had he made me feel bad or lesser than him. Despite my weakened magic, or my oversized body, or the fact I wasn’t a strong dragon like him. He didn’t poke at witches as lesser than him. When he looked at me, he saw someone special, someone he wanted in his life at all costs.

I couldn’t remember the last time my family had looked at me as anything other than a burden.

“Is everything okay here?” Ian broke into my thoughts as he rejoined my family and me.

“Of course,” my father answered, his eyes hard as diamonds despite the smile he’d pasted onto his face. “Shall we get started?”

I nodded, no longer interested in talking further to my family. I could see nothing would ever change with them, and that was something I was ready to move on from. I had a new life to look forward to, and I was ready to embrace it.

Guests began moving outside the terrace doors opposite from the ones we’d arrived in, and I could see a sea of chairs set up in the garden. “It looks like your mother went above and beyond to make this a nice ceremony.”

Ian pulled me around to face him, his hand cupping my chin to force me to meet his gaze. The concern I spied there sent a sense of calm flowing through my blood as the heat of his hand warmed my cold skin.

“Are you really alright?” I could see the storm brewing in his eyes as he studied my face. If he didn’t like what he saw, I wasn’t sure the outcome of today’s festivities was going to go in the witches’ favor.

“I am now.” We needed to hurry up and get through this before tensions grew worse. An imminent war still felt like a possibility.

“What happened?” Ian’s penetrating gaze didn’t relent for a second. He sensed there was trouble, and he had no intention of letting it pass.

“It’s nothing I’m not used to. I don’t know why I expected anything to change. Sacrificing their only daughter was their idea to begin with, and now that I’m happy to go along with it, they seem angry. It makes no sense.”

Ian’s nostrils flared and a puff of smoke slipped from his mouth. “They won’t get away with that. Especially not under this roof.”

I grabbed his arm when he started to turn in their direction. “Please, don’t. They aren’t worth it. Besides, I’d rather focus on the future instead of the past. Can we do that? Please?”

He looked like he wanted to say no. I could see the dragon fire glowing in his eyes. The desire for retribution. I felt it too. Only, I didn't want the responsibility of war on my hands. There didn't need to be any more bloodshed on my behalf. The fight between Ian and Isaac had been more than enough.

“Against my better judgement, I will give them a pass this once. But...” His eyes went from molten gold to shiny, hard steel. “Only this once. If they can't be civil to you, then they will never be allowed to get near you again.”

I nodded my ascent. That seemed more than fair, all things considered. When he offered his arm, I looped mine through it and let him lead the way. There was nothing traditional about this ceremony, which bothered me not at all. In all the ways that mattered, we were already as good as husband and wife. The rest was all for show and the sake of peace.

At the terrace doors, we stopped and waited for the signal for us to approach, and I surveyed the guests, surprised to see so many. “Who are all these people?”

“Representatives and their families from all the supernatural clans we govern. Everyone wanted to see for themselves that this peace thing would truly stick. And I think they are curious to see if we really go through with this.” On one side of the garden, there were dozens of people taking up every available seat, with more standing in the background. On the opposite side, the bride side, sat my parents, Lettie, and a few trusted advisors—my parents' security detail. All other seats remained empty. It appeared none of the others cared enough to make the trip.

“And those men?” I tilted my head to indicate the three men standing along the front of the garden where we would take vows, dressed in black suits with dour expressions on their face.

His face turned serious. “Our clan guardians, courtesy of Clan Gunn. Their presence ensures a certain amount of safety and calm.”

I didn't doubt that. They did look ominous in their positioning. Clan Gunn. The cougar shifters. I may not have been able to

practice magic in my youth, but I'd tried to make up for it with my studies, and I had taken a keen interest in the supernatural population and their politics. If my information was correct, the guardians were actually referred to as "Death Dealers" by their fellow shifters.

Which gave me the feeling that their presence seemed a little extreme for an event designed to facilitate peace and prosperity. I wanted to question Ian more about them, but a heavy thrum of music began, and Ian turned to me once again. "Are you ready?"

I forced myself to shrug off the last of my doubts. The people in the crowd were not what mattered today. This was about Ian and me.

"As I will ever be," I said, taking my first step forward.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SIX

Ian

As I led Cordelia to the head of the garden, my eyes tracked and noted every person present. It seemed I was wrong in believing that some of the local human population would be in attendance. I'd been under the impression my parents wanted to make a show of our presence amongst the entire region, but I guess I'd been wrong.

I shook off my doubts, thinking this way was probably for the best. Without the humans, we could be a little more open about our traditions and let more of our supernatural powers rise to the surface.

We took our places across from each other, and I placed Cordelia's hands in mine. At the soft caress of her skin, the mate bond tingled between us as our touch lingered, and I tried again to reach out to her with my mind. However, so far it seemed like we would not have the gift of telepathy in our union. I hoped but knew there were no guarantees.

I took comfort instead in the connection that hummed between us, knowing that our bond could never be broken or cast aside. I would feel her always until the day I died.

To my surprise, as the ceremony was about to begin, Cordelia's father stood, walked to where we waited, and took the place in front of us. Apparently, we were to be joined by the coven high priest. I wasn't alarmed, but my skin did itch with heat as the memory of how he made my bride feel rubbed

against my mind. Letting behavior like that stand had not been easy, and I still wished to correct him.

And thus our handfasting began...

Welcome, friends, families, and loved ones — all who come in peace to witness the union of my beloved daughter Cordelia Polk to Ian Ferguson, Prince of Dragons. Together they will share a bond that will bring true peace to these mountains for the first time in many decades.

My eyebrow rose as her father continued. From the word beloved, I realized his words rang false and disingenuous, and I felt an uncomfortably tightening in my gut. Cordelia looked a little pained by it all as well.

The ceremony of handfasting is traditional among our coven and shows a commitment to each other in many different ways. It's up to each couple to determine how enduring they wish it to be. In the case of Cordelia and Ian, it appears they have entered in an eternal soul bond that will not leave them until they are both gone from this beautiful earth. It's a wondrous connection between two people that no other being should attempt to come between, lest there be harm.

I had to bite my tongue to keep from asking if this was a joke. Had I not just overheard her parents chastising her with ugly words for completing the mating ritual with me? I took a deep breath and pushed all the negative thoughts away. My beautiful mate deserved my undivided attention. Because despite all the crazy around us, she was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

I smiled down at her as her father continued.

While Cordelia and Ian have committed to a lifelong bond, they also realize that every relationship is fluid and dynamic. So we are here to help Cordelia and Ian commit to a connection based on their souls in any form, whether that be physical or not.

Okay, I was officially about to eat her father. There was a message to be read between his lines, and my instincts told me it wasn't good. Since there were no humans here, it wouldn't

be out of the realm for me to unleash my dragon. Only, when I looked deep into the gaze of my beloved, I could see her plea to keep calm and just let this happen. It would soon be over.

Cordelia, Ian, let there be no mistake. While the tradition of handbinding recognizes and accepts love as dynamic in nature, it is not to be entered into lightheartedly, because it is a sacred vow.

The vows you make today signify that your souls are bound eternally, whether or not your bodies are. You make these vows today with the understanding that you are committing to be a partner to each other and to honor the connection your souls now share with each other. These vows are sacred, and they should not easily be broken, as you make them to each other in the sight of these loved ones as witnesses.

Knowing this, Cordelia and Ian, is it your intent to enter into this commitment to each other?

I kept my gaze fixed to hers, as both of our magics rose to meet the other's. My dragon fire leapt across my skin and into her through our touch.

"Yes," she said, her voice breathless.

"Absolutely," I agreed, sinking into the pleasure of our magic intermingling. I hadn't quite realized how intense this handfasting would be, but I loved this feeling as much as I loved her.

Then let us begin.

Her father went through a series of six vows that we both repeated to the other. There were commitments to share our pain with the other, an honor to protect that my dragon took more to heart than she even understood, to share in our joy and our sorrow, and a vow to only use our anger to strengthen and temper the bond between us.

Every time she said yes, my heart skipped a beat. And when I said yes, her fingers tightened on mine. By the final "then let the binding be," I could feel the mating heat between us beginning to surge. Although this time it felt incredibly

stronger from my side than hers and the strain was beginning to take its toll.

When her father finally produced the ribbon that would seal the ceremony, my breaths were coming in pants. No matter how hard I tried to control my breathing, it wouldn't settle down.

Are you okay? she mouthed as her father wrapped the pure-white ribbon around our arms and hands until we were bound in more ways than one.

I nodded, hoping it was true. But something felt strange, and I didn't know how to explain it to myself, let alone her. Was this another form of soul bonding that I'd been unaware of?

Cordelia and Ian, having proclaimed the bond of your souls together in the sight of these witnesses and based on the strength of that bond and the power vested in me by the Goddess above and our coven council, I now pronounce you married.

Please seal your bond with a kiss, and may the Goddess bless what comes next!

At the final proclamation of the high priest, magic rumbled around and through us. A power so strong it had to have come from the Goddess herself surrounded us. The ground trembled and the earth softened, resulting in a few gasps from the crowd as the chairs they sat on shifted slightly. The guardians went on alert, moving closer to the altar where we stood.

With a smile on my face and my focus solely on my mate, I wound my arms around Cordelia and stared down at her, marveling at the changes that had transpired between us in a matter of days. Her faith in me and what she meant to me had become the most important thing in my life.

A smile flickered across her lips. "I love you," she whispered on the powerful magic in the air.

I leaned closer until our lips were only inches apart. "Together forever," I promised, placing her hand over my heart as I listened to hers beat in perfect sync with mine.

“Forever,” she repeated, and my heart felt like it might burst. Her lips parted as I leaned in, and my stomach tightened with the anticipation. How many kisses had we already shared, and yet this one felt different. We were sealing our fate at a whole new level. As the heat between us ratcheted higher than ever before, my body hardened, and I pushed against her dress enough for her to feel my cock against her soft belly. It was another promise of what would soon come.

Her eyes widened, and I felt another smile pull at my lips just as I fused my mouth to hers, sending a shock of pleasure surging between us. A blinding light lit behind my eyelids, and I reveled in the meeting of our powerful magics. Whatever had kept her magic bound had finally been unleashed and set free.

The heat between us intensified, and within a few seconds, the scent of burning flesh hit my nose as I realized something was wrong.

A scream tore through my head as the magic between us exploded and I was lifted from the ground and flung into the air.

I reached for Cordelia, but my fingers only met air. More screams hit my ears, and then in an instant, it all stopped.

The noise... The light... The chaos... Her... It was all just gone.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SEVEN

Cordelia

I stared in front of me, unseeing. How else could I explain what had happened? There were screams coming from behind me, and the men in their dark suits had already run past me to do Goddess knew what. I couldn't move. One minute I'd been kissing the man I'd committed the rest of my life to, and the next he was simply gone. With only smoke and magic left swirling around me.

Were we under some kind of attack? How had Ian transformed to his dragon without me seeing it? Had he taken to the skies?

Only a blood-curdling scream that pierced my skull with its shrill noise knocked me from my stupor. I swiveled in the direction of the noise to see the queen bellowing at an empty chair with tears streaming down her face. What the hell?

"You should run, daughter."

I jerked at my father's deep voice at my ear. He'd moved closer, and the chill of his words swept over me. He didn't seem confused or unaware of his surroundings at all. In fact, he appeared calm and expectant.

"What happened?" Surely, as a high priest, he had answers.

"What needed to," he sneered, his upper lip curling. "We were never going to live in peace with dragons on the loose. Especially the mad prince."

“What—what are you talking about? You negotiated a peace treaty with a plan that was to bring the region into harmony.”

He barked a laugh. “You were all fools to think that agreement was worth more than the thin piece of paper it was written on. This was the plan all along. To rid our world of violent, ill-tempered, power-hungry dragons once and for all.”

A chill from his words washed over me. “Where is Ian?” My voice rose in panic. Dragons weren’t the only power-hungry beasts living here.

I surveyed the scene, still not understanding. I hesitated to ask the real question I needed answered, but I had to. “Are they dead?”

“To us they are. They will never walk this land again.”

“What the hell does that mean?” I shrieked, unable to keep the fear and grief from my tone. “Where is Ian?”

“Watch yourself, daughter. You are already on thin ice. You had the easiest job of all, and you nearly ruined this for us. I suggest you leave while you can before anyone turns their wrath in your direction.”

Another wave of fear stabbed into my heart. What did that mean? Was I meant to be gone as well?

“Please, Father. Tell me where my mate is.” I grabbed at his robe and tried to pull him closer, but he didn’t budge. “I need to know where he is,” I whined frantically.

“Mate,” he sneered. “You sound as filthy as them when you say that.”

“Please,” I begged. “Tell me.”

“I will do no such thing. I also won’t warn you again. Run!”

All eyes that were still there turned to me, including Ian’s mother.

“You!” she screamed. “You did this! Where is my family?”

The hate and anger shining in her eyes and aimed in my direction made my blood chill. The air between us vibrated

with it as she pushed the chairs out of her way and tried to make her way to me.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” my father said as he walked away. He didn’t run or bother to quicken his stride. He simply walked away as if it were any other day and nothing devastating had just happened.

In the time I took to watch my father and mother disappear, Ian’s mother made it to my side and yanked me to her by my hair.

“What did you do?” she screamed at me, spittle flying from her mouth, her eyes burning with vengeance. “Where is my husband? My children?”

“I—I—” It was almost impossible to speak with the pain of my hair being yanked from my scalp burning through me and the loss of Ian threatening to tear me in two. I grabbed at her hand, not realizing that to do so left the rest of me unguarded.

With the hand not currently pulling me down to the ground, she punched me first in the face and then in the throat.

I choked, unable to take in air as my body absorbed the shock of her continued blows. Before I could recover, her hands wrapped around my throat and squeezed.

I grabbed and scratched at her grip, but she turned out to be a lot stronger than she looked. My instinct to breathe and draw air into my lungs made me fight like a banshee, kicking my legs and thrashing my hips. None of which made a bit of difference. Either by adrenaline or strength alone, the queen was a force to be reckoned with.

So, taking a lesson from her, I let go of her hands and reached for her hair, pulling as hard as I could.

She screamed in protest and tried to kick me away, but I was fighting for my life. She released her hold on my neck, and I took a rough, burning breath into my lungs. “Lillian, please,” I reasoned. “I don’t know what’s going on any more than you do.”

“Liar!” she screamed, slapping me hard across the face.

Tears sprang to my eyes as pain exploded in my cheek, and some of my resolve finally faded. If Ian was dead...

“Tell me what happened. You have to know something!”

“My coven. They did something to them. I don’t know. My father and mother were a part of it. But I know nothing. They told me nothing.”

Tears were streaming down my face as the queen sneered. She stood and straightened her dress as one of the darkly dressed men from the ceremony approached.

“M’lady. We need to get you somewhere safe until we can assess what has happened. You can take refuge with our clan. It will be safer than staying here.”

She scoffed at him. “I’m not going anywhere without my family. This is my home. I will not leave here until I have my family back.” She whirled on me. “Put her in one of the cells in the dungeon. She’s not going anywhere either until I get some answers.”

I struggled to my knees. “Please, don’t do this. Let me help figure this out. I have to help.”

“You’ve done enough damage. I should have known you were trouble from the moment you arrived in your...your ridiculous clothes and no ability to keep your legs closed to the first man who pried them open. First my sons almost fought to the death over you, and now this.” She looked over at the guardian still standing there as my stomach threatened to empty its contents. “Get her out of my sight.”

He reached down and grabbed my arm, sparking my grief and my magic into a firestorm. The idea that my mate might be gone forever didn’t mean any other man could touch me. Nor did I intend to get locked in some sort of cage because the queen mother was about to lose her mind and believed I was responsible for this nightmare.

I raised my hand to shove him off me, and fire leapt from my skin. He in turn got burned and immediately dropped his hold on me.

“Oh my Goddess!” The queen gasped from behind me. “No! It cannot be.”

“What now?” I whirled on her, rage pouring from every cell of my body. “I don’t care what you think, and while I understand you are as grief-stricken as I am, you do not get to blame me for this. My parents hated me. I don’t know what kind of dark magic they used to get rid of the dragons, but I vow I will not rest until I figure it out and find a way to bring them back to us. They are not dead!” And I would never believe anything else. Ever.

She was shaking her head with tears in her eyes. She suddenly looked tired as her obvious grief took hold and began dragging her down. She dropped to her knees and wailed.

I turned to the man still standing there, but now looking unsure what to do. “Leave us.”

He seemed unsure, but after the magic I’d wielded against him, he chose to do as I asked instead of fighting me. Exhausted and in pain, I dropped back to the ground as well.

The queen’s pain fed my own, and in a weird way—and whether she liked it or not—we were in this together.

“I’m not leaving,” I informed her with the full force of my love and convictions. “Ian is my mate. I can’t go on without him.”

“You can’t leave,” she said, as if not hearing a word I’d said. “And you will go on no matter the cost. Promise me.”

I blinked at her sudden about-face. What in the world?

“Does that mean you believe me now?”

She reached out and grabbed me in a bruising grip. “Promise me!” she screeched. “You will never give up. You will do whatever it takes.”

“They are not dead. I will find them.”

She shook her head. “This is no longer about them. You must promise you will never give up—for the baby.”

I couldn't comprehend what she was saying. The remaining shifters began bursting through their clothes as they shifted into a variety of wolves and cougars who were then howling and roaring into the air as they surrounded us. I looked down at the queen as what she'd said finally began to sink in, and my hand came up to rest protectively against my stomach.

Could it be true?

CHAPTER
TWENTY-EIGHT

Cordelia

Ten years later

“M other,” he interrupted. “It’s been ten years. Why are you telling me all of this again now? Between you and grandmama, I have heard the story of my father’s mysterious disappearance multiple times.”

I looked down at my beautiful son and willed the tears burning at the backs of my eyes to remain unshed. Now was not the time to cry. Tears were for later, when I was alone in my room and he couldn’t see the pain I kept bottled inside for his sake.

But it was so hard. Every time I looked at my son, I saw his father. They were so much alike. Even Lillian commented on how Aleck looked the same as her sons at that young age.

And despite what little time I’d had with the father of my child, I saw it too. Every look, spoken word, and every fit of anger from my young son always reminded me of the man I lost.

I shook my head and refocused on my son’s question. For now, I had to put away the past and the grief still weighing on me for his sake. In fact, that had become my full-time job. It wasn’t until recently that my magic had led me along a different path.

“Because it’s time you understood more about what happened and why your father isn’t with us.”

“I already know,” he said quietly. “Everyone claims he’s dead. All the shifters say so.”

I frowned down at my boy and bit back the anger-fueled words I wanted to say in favor of something more reasonable. “He’s not.”

“How can you be so sure? You just said they disappeared and they’ve never come back. That sounds dead to me.”

“Not everything is as it seems,” I assured him. “It has taken years and a lot of patience to get the truth from the witches who cast them away, and now more than ever I believe they are alive.”

“Then why didn’t Daddy come back for us? Grandmama says that I’m going to be a dragon soon and that they are the most powerful creatures on earth.”

“She is not wrong.” And my son’s continued safety was the deciding factor in finally leaving our entire world behind. “You will carry an enormous power that you will have to learn to control. But magic is powerful too, and the spell that was cast used dark magic. It’s not only dangerous, but it has consequences.”

“I still don’t understand.”

I ruffled his hair with my hand. “That’s okay. You will when you are older. I will teach you about your own magic when the time is right. Until then, you’ll have to trust me. The mating bond between your father and me still beats. In my heart.” I paused, remembering the moment our hearts began to beat as one as if it were just yesterday. “It has weakened over time, but it never went away.” I looked out over the endless horizon. “He is out there somewhere.”

A few years ago, Lillian had experienced a temporary event that seemed to stop her heart. When she recovered, she spoke of her mating bond feeling gone. We’d both come to the conclusion that somehow the king had died and the bond severed, although neither of us spoke the actual words out loud.

The queen had been heartbroken ever since. If not for Aleck, I wasn't sure she would have survived.

And if this trip didn't pan out and what little hope she had left of seeing her sons again died...

No, I refused to believe that. I would find Ian and reunite our family. It had to happen. I'd seen it in the cards...

"If your father could come to us, I promise you he would. That's why we're on this ship crossing the ocean. If he can't come to us, then we must go to him."

"If we can find him." I hated hearing my son sound so pessimistic about a reunion with his father. But after ten years of waiting and trying to figure this out, it might be I who was too hopeful. Not that I cared. I felt down to my blood that I was finally on the right path. Scotland had to hold the answers. Aleck would soon hit puberty and his first shift would be upon us, and I feared that without another dragon to help him, he could end up like his uncle.

My intent with this trip was to locate the birthplace of shifters and see what secrets I could unearth. It wouldn't break the curse my parents placed on them. Nothing would do that now that Aleck existed. They had tied the dark magic to their bloodline, and no amount of casting or any other magic could break it. Unless my family line ended, the dragons would never again set foot on North American soil.

Unearthing that information had taken perseverance, bribery, begging, and some force. And on the way, the queen and I had learned exactly what we were made of. Neither of us backed down from a fight. Until now...

As I steered my son into the interior of the ship and we made our way into the dining room, we found Lillian already waiting for us. Ten years had aged her more than I thought possible. Her dedication to the cause had not wavered, even after her heart no longer burned for her king. It was her love for Aleck that seemed to keep her going now, as well as the distant hope to see her sons again.

“Can I go and say hello to James?” Aleck asked. He’d made friends with a boy about his age the first day of the voyage, and he preferred to spend as much time as he could with him. Not that I minded. I had spent the last nine years trying to create some sort of normal life under our unusual circumstances. Luckily, the shifter clan leaders had practically adopted him as one of their own, which gave him an ample number of male role models.

“Of course. But don’t wander away without telling me if you two decide to do something else.” Neither boy thought much about having their run of the giant ship, but as we approached our destination, I felt the need to keep a watchful eye on him.

Aleck laughed and ran for the table across the room. He had no fear whatsoever, and I doubted that would change anytime soon.

“He’s getting so big,” Lillian said, looking after him with a mixture of joy and sadness in her gaze. “It’s good we left now. I don’t want my grandson’s first shift to be a test of whether or not the curse still stands.”

“It does.” Of that I had no doubt. “It’s unbreakable.”

“Nothing is unbreakable,” Lillian scoffed. “We just haven’t found a way yet.”

I took a seat next to her. I’d yet to tell her the whole story. “The curse is tied to my coven’s bloodline. Until the last one dies, it will remain in place. When dark magic is tied to blood, it is unforgiving and unrepentant as well as unbreakable.”

Her mouth dropped open, and a mixture of hurt and anger filled her eyes. “We should have killed them all while we had the chance.”

At this point, I didn’t totally disagree with her. The hatred for my coven these days ran deep. Even my parents were no longer immune to my ire. “If it were that easy, I would have done it.”

She closed her eyes and took a breath before opening them again. “You would have to sacrifice yourself to make that work.”

It wasn't a question, but she'd yet to fully realize the whole truth, and I did not want to be the one to voice the whole truth. Maybe if we never spoke of it, somehow it wouldn't be true. My gaze, however, wandered to my son at the table with his friend. His health and happiness were everything to me. If I had to live a life without Ian, then I owed it to him to give everything to Aleck that he would give.

"Oh my Goddess," she gasped. "No!"

It was my turn to close my eyes as a tear slid down my cheek. She'd put it together. "It will never be broken. Ever." The words were so final, I could barely process them. My throat thickened and my breath stalled from simply saying them.

"How long have you known?" She sounded resigned, not angry.

"Long enough to know that this time was coming sooner rather than later. Even if we do not find Ian, Aleck will still be free. I've made sure of it." I'd made every preparation possible and would have no trouble raising him on my own. And I hoped that with Lillian's help, he could get through his transformation relatively unscathed. She'd been through this with two sons. At least she knew what to expect.

The pit in my stomach ached. Ten years of living with my coven's betrayal had not gotten any easier. I thought I'd understood hate a long time ago, but it seemed there were more lessons every time I turned a new corner.

"Will they come after him?"

I turned my head sharply to meet her gaze, shocked she'd voiced that question aloud.

"Not if they want to live."

CHAPTER
TWENTY-NINE

Cordelia

One month later

As another day ended with no new information, I kissed my son on the head and left him to dream his dreams.

His tenth birthday approached in a matter of days, and his mood swings were getting worse. My once sweet child often morphed into an angry boy who tried all of my patience. Lillian assured me this was normal and did not indicate he would be more like his uncle than his father.

But I was still worried.

We had hoped coming to Scotland would mean finding more of his kind. Dragons were born here. As the stories went, they were forged by magic and carved by the land. But thus far, our search had resulted in nothing more than ancient history and folktales. It made no sense. Between Lillian's ability to see things others could not and my ability to channel magic, Scotland had become the logical choice to find answers if nothing else.

As I came down the stairs and entered the living room where Lillian sat reading a book, I decided that I couldn't sit still tonight and the hope of sleep was still a long way off. There was a storm brewing in my head, and I needed some fresh air to clear it.

“I’m going out.”

Lillian looked up in alarm. “To where? It’s already dark outside.”

“A walk. To where I don’t know exactly.” I absently rubbed at my chest as a burning sensation itched underneath my skin. “Maybe out by the beach.”

Her eyes narrowed, and I could see she wanted to say more. Fortunately, she refrained. I was in no mood to debate proper etiquette or anything else for that matter. I just had to get out of this house. As beautiful and as big as it was, I suddenly felt stifled.

“Take a guardian with you,” she said, turning back to one of the many books she always kept busy with. I shook my head and felt the tug of a smile at the corner of my lips, despite the melancholy shrouded around me. I considered arguing that I didn’t need a chaperone but decided it wasn’t worth it. In the end, she would win with some prevailing wisdom that I could not ignore. I had responsibilities and so on, all of which I had no desire to argue about.

I grabbed a cloak from the hook by the door and headed out into the night. I nodded at one of the men who always stood guard, and he fell into step behind me. I wasn’t going to argue whether he should follow me or not, but the moment I’d stepped outside and took a deep, bracing breath, I’d realized I wasn’t just going for a walk. I considered a carriage to get me to my destination quicker and decided I didn’t want to wait. We were only a mile or so outside of town and right along the coastline. It would be an easy walk. I glanced up at the sky and took in the full moon shining above.

Maybe that’s why tonight seemed different. The full moon signaled a pinnacle of magic each month, and it would mean that all supernaturals would feel a heightened sense of unrest. Witches and shifters, who typically tapped into moon magic, were particularly susceptible.

A gust of wind tore past me, leaving behind a distinct chill. I wrapped the cloak tighter and raised the hood to keep myself warm. Spring on the coast of Scotland wasn’t always warm,

especially at night. When the sun dropped below the horizon, the temperature went with it. And the slight drizzle of rain falling overhead didn't help. Although I personally loved it. Especially tonight. The volatile nature of the weather suited my mood.

And from the moment I'd stepped onto Scottish soil, I'd gotten the sensation I was finally home. So where in the world was Ian?

As I walked along the rocky cliffs that sat above the water's edge and wound my way through an unmarked path, I stopped and looked up at the moon. I rubbed my chest again, that burn more insistent than ever. "Ian," I whispered. "I miss you so."

How many nights had I done this in the last ten years? Every full moon, I called out for my mate in the hopes that one day he would hear me and we would find a way to be together again. And every month my heart broke all over again, leaving me to put it back together—alone. If not for me, then my son.

When a cloud crossed over the moon and its light dimmed, I pushed forward again and turned in the direction of town. There were those who had encouraged me to move on, maybe even take on another mate, all of which I dismissed. There was no one like Ian. We were made for each other. Fated, the wind whispered.

And he was out there somewhere. I could feel it.

I again pulled the cloak tighter as the memory of Ian claiming me flashed through my memory. There had been more than one time that day that he'd used his barb to lay a claim, but I felt a certainty that it was that first time, with the two of us in an open field after his near death, when Aleck had been conceived.

I knew that if Ian were here now, he would love our boy deep and without question. There had been no time to talk at length about having babies, but dragons were fierce about continuing their bloodlines, and he had mentioned dragonlings more than once to me.

Cordelia.

The voice of my mate caressed through my mind. It was only on nights like these that I could remember what he sounded like. Time had a way of making everything fade, but the full moon carried the power to remember. Or maybe he sat in a forest somewhere looking up at the same moon, making the same wish as I, and the magic carried it to me by the stars.

The wind picked up again, and I quickened my pace along with it. The air crackled in tune with my overload of emotions. Sadness seeped from every pore. Before the night was over, I would need to release this pent-up anguish and start the next month anew. And so the cycle went.

“We should turn back. The storm is going to roll in.”

I nearly jumped at the guardian’s voice as he appeared out of nowhere. I hadn’t forgotten that he was there, but I was so used to them that I often put them out of my mind. I glanced out over the ocean and spied the dark clouds now obliterating the night sky. I looked back in the direction of the house and then back the way I’d been heading.

I didn’t know why, but I couldn’t go back. Not right now.

“We’re closer to town. We can take refuge there.” I didn’t wait for an answer. I simply hefted the cloak up around my legs and quickened my pace. I felt called to town tonight, and I intended to heed it. It was high time I put more faith in my magic. I didn’t look back to see if my guard had followed. I knew he would. Men like him were ever faithful to their jobs. The guardians didn’t talk much, and what little I knew about them came from Lillian. They were rare black cougars, with the ability to move silently through the night. They were employed by the shifter council, handling whatever they needed, and now served as security to the queen in the absence of her king.

She called them a necessary evil, especially in the wake of what the witches had done. I hated to agree, but I wasn’t a fool. Precautions were a smart move.

Several minutes later, I spied lanterns ahead. I slowed to a leisurely walk and worked to catch my breath.

The town I spoke of was quite small, with only a few hundred people living in the surrounding area. We'd chosen it for the privacy it afforded us as well as the kindness of its people. The few shops would be closed now, but the inn and pub stayed open much later. If need be, we'd take refuge at the inn and ride out the storm there.

We were newcomers, but thus far our arrival had yet to raise any brows. By human standards, we were widows well past our prime, making us easy to talk to as well as affording us a certain amount of freedom not usually given to the unwed.

I headed straight for the pub and arrived just as the torrential rain began. As I opened the door, the wind caught the door and whipped it open, causing all eyes to turn and look my way. Either I looked a fright or these men were unconcerned, as they immediately returned to their own conversations and drink. My guardian took my cloak, and I headed for an empty table at the side of the room. Fewer than five minutes later, he arrived at my table with a cup of hot tea, sugar, and honey. Just as I enjoyed it.

"Thank you," I said gratefully before he once again disappeared into the shadows. He wouldn't go far, I knew, but he preferred to stay out of sight. I personally thought they were a bit peculiar, but who was I to judge such things.

"Here. You look like you could use this as well." I looked up as the barkeep set down a small glass of whiskey and quickly walked away.

"Thank you. I could indeed." I added the alcohol to my tea, along with the honey and sugar, and savored the first sip. The combination was perfect for a wet, chilly night. I would nurse this for a while, see if any conversation caught my attention, and hopefully the storm would pass so I could return home before it got too late.

I had my cup halfway to my mouth for another sip when the door crashed open and I splashed my drink down the front of my dress, where it burned like fire against my cold skin. I gasped, the sudden pain stealing my breath.

Everyone in the room turned to look, including me, and at the sight of the giant man in the doorway, I dropped my cup to the ground, where it shattered into pieces.

No, it couldn't be. I tried to speak, but a lump had formed in my throat that I couldn't seem to swallow past. I tried again, pushing myself harder this time.

"Ian," I finally breathed on a harsh whisper.

His head shot in my direction, and his eyes widened in disbelief. Goose bumps rose on my chilled skin, and the hairs at the back of my neck stood on end.

"Cordelia?"

I surged to my feet and raced across the room, my mind spinning at what had to be a dream. *Please, Goddess. Please. Don't let anyone wake me. I need this moment.*

He swept me into his arms and crushed me hard until I thought all my bones were about to break. "How is this possible?" he breathed against my neck, taking in my scent.

"I don't know," I cried, realizing that maybe this wasn't a dream after all. He looked real, he felt real, and he certainly smelled real. By the time he pulled back from our embrace, my entire body was racked with uncontrollable sobs. "I knew you weren't dead," I said between cries. "Everyone said you were, but I didn't believe it."

"Definitely not dead. A little worse for the wear, but alive and kicking." He pulled me back into his arms and ran his hand up and down my back until my cries began to subside.

"I have so many questions."

"As do I, darling. As do I. Like how in the world did you end up here?"

"I had to come. It was the only clue I had about where you might have ended up after that magic—" He covered my mouth with his hand and pulled me in close.

"Not here," he whispered, his gaze darting around the room. "There are eyes and ears watching and listening intently."

I turned my head to see every single patron of the pub was watching us with guarded interest. We were making a display, and they weren't sure what to make of it. I nodded, and he released his hand from my mouth.

"We should leave," I said, feeling a sudden urgency to be alone with my mate.

"Agreed. But the storm outside is bad. I can't fly in this. Especially not with a passenger." He kept his voice low so that no one else could overhear. But there was one who could, no matter how quiet we were.

The guardian approached, and Ian's back stiffened as he looked over my shoulder. "He's my guard," I said quickly before the tension escalated. "Your mother wouldn't let me leave without one."

"Mother is here?"

I nodded, seeing the happiness in his gaze war with sadness. "The king *is* dead, isn't he?" I asked, the little hope I'd had Lillian was wrong dying at the look in Ian's eyes.

Before he could respond, the guardian spoke up. "Since the storm will likely rage for a while and it's not safe for travel, might I suggest a stay at the inn for you and your wife?"

Thank goodness one of us still had a cool, prevailing head. I would have likely called Ian my mate and gotten some strange looks. Worse than were already aimed our way. We were definitely making a scene.

"That is an excellent idea." Ian grinned, making my stomach explode with a cascade of nervous butterflies. It had been ten years.

There was still so much to discuss, and yet, there was only one thing now on my mind...

CHAPTER
THIRTY

Ian

By the time we made it to the room we were given and I closed the door behind us, I thought I would burst from the need coursing through my veins.

Cordelia was here. In my world. Finally.

I was so grateful, I didn't even care how. Not having her with me had driven me to the brink of madness myself.

I dropped my rain-soaked cloak to the ground, and she followed suit. As she stood before me, I took in the changes since I'd last seen her. They were subtle. Her hair was longer, although the way it was pinned to the nape of her neck, it was difficult to see how much. And the dress she wore was a loose sheath that seemed designed to hide all of her assets instead of accentuate them.

Although no dress could hide the indentation of her narrow waist or the wide flare of her hips...

There were also shadows under her eyes. They didn't take away from her beauty, but they spoke of a sleeplessness I understood well. Loneliness was an evil thing that took its toll in slow, insidious ways, eating at you one day at a time.

"Ten years is a long time," she whispered, her breath shaky.

"Are you nervous?" She'd barely gotten comfortable with me before I'd... Anger moved to the surface as I remembered the last time I'd seen her. I'd been standing in front of her with our

hands bound as I kissed her and then the next crashing into the ocean off the coast of Scotland.

“Of course I am. I’ve waited so long for this. And yet, there is so much to discuss.”

“None of it matters more than this moment right now. I’ve dreamt of one more night with you for so long.” My emotions were so strong, I half expected my heart to crack.

It didn’t help that I picked up the delicious scent of her arousal as it rose from her skin.

“Ian, I have to tell you something important,” she murmured, her voice softer than before. The tone of which broke my restraint.

I approached her in two strides, forcing her to take a step back until her legs hit the bed and she had nowhere else to go.

“After.” A growl rumbled in my chest, and for the first time in a very long time, my dragon seemed excited and happy. “Kiss me.” I hadn’t meant that to come out as a harsh demand, but this moment had been a long time coming and I was on edge. Whatever she wanted to talk about could wait. We were trapped in a storm, with nothing but time.

The doubt in her eyes vanished as she leaned forward, and I took the opportunity to remove the clip from her hair and let it fall around her shoulders. If nothing else, having her hair free would give me something to do with my hands instead of ripping the too-plain dress she wore in two from neck to hem. She leaned closer, and I lowered my head to meet her halfway, my fingers dipping into the soft, silky strands of her curly mane.

I breathed deep, soaking in her unique fragrance, right down to the smell of rain that still clung to her supple skin. There was something different about her that I couldn’t quite put my finger on, but for now I would chalk it up to the long time apart. People changed. I’d changed. Life had hardened me in ways I didn’t want to confess to, especially now that she was here to hopefully soften me again.

Our lips finally met, and I sank hungrily into the kiss. It ignited a spark of need that ravaged through my blood lightning fast. I growled again, this one a whole lot less friendly and a lot more urgent. She grabbed on to my waist, and I bent her backwards onto the bed with the force of that one soul-searing, all-consuming kiss.

By the time we broke free, we were both panting breathlessly, and the urgent need flowing between us reminded me of that first time...

Oh shit.

She was already working on the buttons of my shirt and her hips were arching up to meet mine, forcing the outline of my hard dick to press sweetly between her legs.

“Hurry,” she cried, her voice filled with the same desperation rushing through me, threatening to burst through my skin.

I yanked her dress above her waist and grabbed at the plain white panties, tearing them from her body in one forceful yank. The slick heat between her legs had grown exponentially since our kiss and confirmed what I suspected. I’d triggered her mating heat, and it had taken off like a wild, out-of-control brush fire in a matter of seconds.

Intense. Hot, Irresistible.

The need to taste and touch every inch of my mate pushed through me as I grabbed her thighs, spread them wide, and dipped my head between them. The moment my tongue met her sodden flesh, she nearly jumped from the bed with her scream. My one functioning brain cell remembered that we were in a public inn and likely any guests in the building would hear us, but I couldn’t find the need to care.

Ten fucking years. Not a night had passed when I didn’t wake from a dream of her with my cock in my hand, and no matter how hard I pumped it, true satisfaction eluded me.

As I lapped and bit at her tender flesh, she grabbed my hair and pushed me closer. Gone was the timid woman I’d left behind on our wedding day, only to be replaced by this strong,

resilient woman who knew what she wanted and didn't seem to have an ounce of fear left in her body.

Under other circumstances, I might have questioned why that was, but I wasn't thinking beyond everything I could do to make her come. It was a singular focus, but a damned good one in my opinion. And she didn't disappoint. Her muscles quaked and her legs pressed tightly against the side of my face as I flicked at her clit until she came completely apart. Thrilled, I lapped up every drop before I lifted my head and licked my lips.

I was sure in that moment I didn't look fully human, but that was the way of the dragon. My eyes would glow, my heart would beat faster than any man, and eventually my dick would swell to lock us together with my come inside her. It didn't get more primal or nonhuman than that.

"Oh my Goddess, Ian. I forgot what this was like." She arched her back and pushed her hips towards mine. "I need more."

Her eyes were glazed and her words were drawn out as she gave in to the driving need.

"I'm claiming you again. The bond never broke between us, but we both need this as much as we need air."

"Yessss," she crooned as I placed myself between the cradle of her hips and notched my cock at her entrance. We were both shaking with the full force of long unmet desire, and it bordered on painful. And still I hesitated, watching her writhe beneath me. This desperation, almost frenzy, crackled in the air between us. "What are you waiting for?" she gasped, pulling on my chest to try and get me inside her.

"Let it rise," I said, closing my eyes against the crazed need to thrust inside her, while instead inching forward a tiny bit more. I wouldn't be able to hold back much longer. The heat of her slick pussy was quickly unraveling my resolve.

"Stop torturing me," she moaned. "I've endured ten years without you. Please, Ian. Give me you."

That did it. My control snapped, and I surged inside her in one solid thrust as the shock of pure pleasure shot through me. My

breath rushed from my lungs as the sweet heat of my mate stole all rational thought. All that mattered was this. Her. Skin-to-skin. Together. Forever.

“I’m never letting you out of my sight again.” I didn’t care if that wasn’t realistic. I refused to suffer the pain of losing her ever again.

“Yes. Please. Don’t stop.” Her mindless cries fed the emptiness of my soul as I pulled back and slammed deep once more. The tight muscles of her quim made my eyes roll to the back of my head as untold pleasure crashed over me. Taking all of me like that made her gasp each time, but she was my mate. The one person made to be mine. We were meant to fit together, no matter what.

“I’ll never stop,” I assured her. “Loving you is my new mission in life. Take me, *mo chridhe*, my heart. Claim me as I have claimed you. Promise me forever this time because I refuse to take less.”

“Yes,” she cried, tears now flowing from her eyes. I could feel the tension of the last ten years beginning to melt away with every stroke. We’d both learned the hard way that nothing compared to the love and bond of a mate. Or the pleasure...

I dug my fingers into her hips as the spiraling tension in my back signaled the coming explosion. Without easing up, I leaned forward and bit her nipple roughly through the dress. Later, when we weren’t feeling so desperate, I planned to go on an exploration of her entire body and reacquaint myself with every detail. No flesh would go untouched.

My muscles pulled taut, stretching to the point they might break, until at last the powerful waves of heated pleasure swept my mind of everything but her. Mine. My cock pulsed hard as the fireball of my release slammed into her.

She cried out, her muscles clamping around me as violently as my own as she too took flight with me into the abyss of unbelievable bliss. In the aftermath, my cock swelled, stretching her just a little bit more and locking us in place with my come trapped inside her.

Fuck, I'd forgotten how much I loved this part. My hidden barb unfurled and struck us both as the extra vibrations rocketed us into the sky. Stars danced as my memories of the last ten years began to fade with each new spasm of her body around me. Whatever force had brought us together again was enough to erase much of the pain I'd endured without her. A feat worthy of a miracle.

The release of that pain ebbed and flowed through me like heaven on earth. There were days I convinced myself I was not worthy to be hers, but today it felt right and good. So much so that the scales of the dragon pushed forcefully against my skin. I refused to give him the power to shift, but I did let him out a little, and the roar of the dragon shook the entire inn from the rafters to the floorboards and everything in between, making sure the whole world knew that I'd once again...

...claimed my queen.

EPILOGUE

T an

WHEN WE ENTERED the quiet house, I breathed deep, taking in the familiar and unfamiliar scents.

Mother.

She must have been the last one in this room, as her scent was the strongest. I couldn't wait to see her, although I didn't relish having to talk to her about Father's death and Isaac's complete and final descent into madness. They had both been gone for some time now, but for her it would be brand-new.

"Come on. Let's go wake him up." Cordelia rushed up the stairs, and I followed. They'd chosen a place to live well. This house was big enough to suffice for a dragonling. At least for a few more years. And he had decades to go after that before he would be a fully grown dragon.

She ran ahead of me, and I watched with complete rapture at her abandon. Despite the years of hardship, or because of them, she'd transformed. While I was sad I'd missed the opportunity to watch her come to understand that a family who loved each other was not only possible, but the most beautiful thing in the world, I was happy to see that she now understood and embraced the idea.

And if I smiled any wider, I was going to break my face. I caught up with her at one of the doors that undoubtedly led to

where my child slept. His scent grew strong as I breathed it deep and memorized every piece of it. It was wild like his mother's, with a hint of smoke that would soon become his essence. I looked forward to guiding him through that process.

We entered the darkened room, and I got the first glimpse of my son.

My heart clenched at the sight of the dark-haired boy sleeping on top of the blankets of his small bed in no more than a pair of short pants. Dragons ran hot and rarely used any type of coverings for warmth. He looked much larger than an average ten-year-old, but dragons were anything but average, especially when it came to their size.

I needed no light to take in his appearance, and I couldn't help but study him. His unruly dark hair covered most of his face and reminded me of his mother. His muscles were not yet filled in, but that would come after the change. I hadn't thought to ask the color of his eyes, and I now wondered whether they would be the tempestuous green of Isaac's or my cooler blue ones. While there was a chance they could be the color of chocolate like his mother, from what I could tell, he was the spitting image of my brother and me.

My heart clenched. Sometimes I longed for the days of our youth before Isaac was taken by madness. Until then, I'd thought having a twin the most spectacular thing on the planet. Even if we did drive our mother absolutely up the wall with our wild adventures.

"Aleck..." Cordelia called his name softly, and he stirred slightly without fully waking up. Aleck was a good strong Scottish name that would suit him and his dragon well.

"Maybe you should leave him be. I'm happy to stand here and watch him sleep." I also could use the time to put some of the anger and resentment of having missed so much of his life behind me. I had a lot to process.

"Oh no. He's been waiting for this day for so long, he would kill me if I didn't wake him immediately."

I grinned down at her. The affection in her voice when she spoke of our son took my breath away. There was so much I wanted to say to her, but again I found my mind overwhelmed with emotion.

“Thank you.”

From the doorway, she turned back and looked at me. “For what?”

“For everything. I thought the misery I had endured the last ten years was the hardest thing a person could go through, but I was wrong. Birthing and raising our son...alone...”

“I was never alone,” she whispered. “I had your mother’s help. Although, I must admit her anger scared me at first. Right after it happened, she thought I was in on the whole thing, and well, let’s just say your mother can throw a mean punch.”

My eyebrows rose at that, imagining that had to have quite a story to go with it. She smiled, though, disarming me once again.

“But once she realized I was pregnant, she left me alone. And then when Aleck was born, everything changed. We both changed. He became our focus and our hope.” She rubbed at her chest in the same place that mine often burned. “And I had you here, guiding me.”

Unable to resist, I pulled her back and kissed her hard, pouring everything I had into that connection. By the time I released her, she looked at me, stunned.

“What was that?” she asked, pressing her fingers to her lips.

“My love for you.”

A huge smile crossed her face, causing some of the weight on my chest to lift. We couldn’t go through the rest of our life wishing we hadn’t missed the last ten years or lamenting our bad fortune. It was time to live in the present and make this the happiest time of our life.

“Wake up, Aleck. I have a surprise for you,” she said without looking away from me.

The boy jumped from his bed in alarming speed, his eyes open and wild. “Is it my father?”

My eyes widened at his question.

“I had a dream about him.”

“Yes,” she answered, turning and rushing to his side. “He found us.”

That wasn’t exactly the truth. It was a little more of an accident than that. I’d landed here because of the weather, with the plan to drink myself into a stupor as I waited out the storm. Loneliness had dug its claws into my soul tonight, and I’d had no choice but to get out and fly.

Standing next to his mother, I could see that my son already reached her shoulder. He would soon zoom past her in height and would rival my own. I couldn’t wait to see his dragon. It would be hard at first, but once I taught him how to embrace his nature and he learned to fly, the world would be his.

“Father?” he asked, looking at me, his eyes as green as emeralds. Like Isaac. My stomach clenched. He would look like Isaac, but deep down, I knew he would be his own man one day and I would not have to worry about him as I did with my brother. To my surprise, he didn’t wait for me to respond. He raced across the room and launched himself into my arms.

Yes, this boy was born to lead this world. I knew it down to my gut, and I didn’t need my mother’s gift of sight to know it for certain. Our world, as it was. The home we’d carved in the beautiful Smoky Mountains was lost to us. But one day, I had no doubt, we would once again prevail and rule over all the supernaturals again. Until then, Scotland and the beautiful country within would be our home.



TWO MONTHS later

“YOU’VE DONE IT AGAIN, SON.”

I looked up from the fire I was building on the beach and looked to see what my mother was talking about. Aleck and Cordelia were running along the water's edge, playing some sort of game and laughing along the way, while she sat on a blanket keeping watch, a soft but devious-looking smile across her face.

My mother had aged more than she should have in ten years' time. I believed in part because of my father's death and the other the fact that Isaac had been the one to kill him before ultimately taking his own life. As hard as it was for her to hear, she had not been surprised by the news.

"What are you talking about?"

"Your mate is with child again. A girl this time." She paused before whispering a name on the wind. "Fiona."

"What?" I jumped to my feet and whirled to face Cordelia. While she looked happier than I'd ever seen her, I'd picked up on nothing that indicated a baby.

"Yes. Just like last time, I can see the dragon fire underneath her skin. Your daughter wants to play with them."

I sank down in the sand next to my mother and watched my son and mate. Another child. My chest swelled with excitement as I imagined holding a baby in my arms in the near future. But that also meant...

"It doesn't matter, son. You have nothing to worry about. That curse will not be broken for quite some time, I believe."

My stomach lurched at that news. "You've seen it?"

"Aye, I have. But the exact timeline is still unclear. Fluid, more likely. But I'm afraid it will not be in my timeline—or yours."

Disappointment warred with relief. My family meant more to me than anything else, and the idea of another child...

Cordelia approached, a wide smile on her face as she panted for breath. "He has so much energy, I can't keep up." She dropped down at my feet and wiggled her way onto my lap. I wrapped my arms around her middle and placed my hands on

her soft stomach. I could not wait to see her swell with child. Just the thought of it made me want to carry her back inside and show her exactly what I thought about it.

“She told you, didn’t she?”

“Aye,” I answered, laughing. “She is the worst secret keeper.”

“I had a feeling, but I wasn’t sure. Not until I saw your face.”

“I am that obvious?”

“Mmhmm. It was just as I imagined when I was pregnant with Aleck.”

We both sat quietly, watching our son play in the surf. His dragon had yet to appear, but it would be any day. In the meantime, I had already begun his training, which he’d taken to quite well. I couldn’t be prouder of him if I tried.

“And?” she asked, turning her head to look up at me and pulling me from my thoughts.

“It’s going to be a girl.”

Her smile widened. “I thought it might. How do you feel about that?”

I nuzzled her neck. “I’d like to show you.” I scooped her into my arms and began the short trek back to the house, knowing my mother and Aleck would happily stay on the beach for quite some time.

“We’re going to have to find a bigger home.”

I kissed her cheek. “We would have anyway. This one won’t hold Aleck for long. He will grow fast, and it will take many years for him to master control. So we will soon build another.”

She groaned. “He’s already twice the size of a normal boy his age. What will the people here think?”

“Nothing at all. Except they will know that he is their future king.”

“Excuse me?”

I stopped and set her down inside the door. She didn't know it yet, but we weren't going to make it to our room. I lifted her skirt and pulled down her panties.

“Did you really not know? This island is ours. It has been in our family for generations. We may be a small community, but we are mighty. And you—my beautiful, perfect mate—are their queen.”

Thanks so much for reading *The Curse of the Dragon*!

If you love dragons as much as I do, **be sure to read Ian and Cordelia's daughter's story in [One Crazy Wolf](#)**. A lot of time has passed and so much has changed.

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