



Mesmerized by
Dragon

MOUNTAIN RESCUER

LISA DANIELS

© Copyright 2024 by The Publisher - All rights reserved.

It is not legal to reproduce, duplicate, or transmit any part of this document either by electronic means or in printed format. Recording of this publication is strictly prohibited and any storage of this document is prohibited unless with written permission from the publisher. All rights reserved.

Respective authors own all copyrights not held by the publisher.

Table of Contents

<u><i>Prologue Strike Like a Viper</i></u>	<u><i>3</i></u>
<u><i>Chapter 1 The Wrong Kind of Adventure</i></u>	<u><i>16</i></u>
<u><i>Chapter 2 Facing the Impossible</i></u>	<u><i>28</i></u>
<u><i>Chapter 3 Someone Stronger, More Capable, and Enraged</i></u>	<u><i>36</i></u>
<u><i>Chapter 4 An Impossible Reality</i></u>	<u><i>50</i></u>
<u><i>Chapter 5 Things Get Worse</i></u>	
<u><i>60</i></u>	
<u><i>Chapter 6 Not the Time or Place to Push the Boundaries</i></u>	<u><i>73</i></u>
<u><i>Chapter 7 An Ulterior Motive</i></u>	<u><i>80</i></u>
<u><i>Chapter 8 Experience Is the Best Teacher</i></u>	<u><i>87</i></u>
<u><i>Chapter 9 Another Soul Getting By</i></u>	<u><i>99</i></u>
<u><i>Chapter 10 Realizing the Obvious</i></u>	<u><i>105</i></u>
<u><i>Chapter 11 The Final Verdict</i></u>	<u><i>118</i></u>
<u><i>Aftermath Something Like a Home</i></u>	<u><i>128</i></u>

Mesmerized by Dragon Mountain Rescuer

Dragon Heroes of Alaska

Book 3

By: Lisa Daniels

Prologue Strike Like a Viper

“You can’t just walk off a set, Claudia!” The near panic in the older man’s voice actually made the young woman smile for the first time that day.

“Oh, I assure you that it’s not only possible, Dustin, it’s done. I’m just pulling up to my home now.” Automatically looking into her rearview, she made sure that no one was following her, a habit she had developed long before she started driving – and soon, she was justified in her paranoia. Her nearly lavender eyes flashed as she saw someone pulling up the driveway just a few seconds after she had. Hitting a few buttons, she closed the gates just in time for the car to smash into them. She smirked, imagining what it would be like to

explain that one – the gates were new so that the driver wouldn't have been warned about them. With the most immediate problem resolved, she focused on safely driving the rest of the way down her drive, rolling down the car's top so that her black hair billowed around her. There was a sense of peace and freedom that flowed through her as the breeze caused her carefully manicured hairstyle to tumble around her shoulders.

The only hitch in her sense of peace was the nasal voice coming through over the phone. "Claudia, you will turn around and go back right now. Once you get there, *beg* them to forgive you for..."

"You realize that you work for me, right? Not them. You are making demands of the person who pays you, which I have to say isn't your best move given your current situation."

"I'm responsible for getting you work! If you quit a project like this, *no one* will work with you again."

"So, you care about making your job easier, not protecting your clients? Got it."

"You have no proof, Claudia! You can't just go making accusations and storming off-set! If you want to work, you have to..."

"I *do* have proof, you hack. My only question now is how long have they been paying you off? How many other actors have you bullied into staying with that threat?"

"What are you implying? This is slander!"

Feeling her hands start to shake with anger, Claudia said, "It's not slander when it is spoken between two people. Slander has to be me saying things about you publicly, which clearly is not what is happening right now, you desperate has-been. And this time, you've really stepped in it."

"Are you threatening me?"

"I've been talking with Sadie, Orion, and Audrey. I know your next play, so let me save myself some time – I'm not new to this game. I've been acting since I was four years

old. People will continue hiring me long after you've been sentenced to prison time."

"You can't..."

"Save it, you human equivalent of a participation trophy. I've already sent confirmation and the tape over. It couldn't happen soon enough. If I had been recorded for that film, I don't know that I would have ever recovered from the things going on behind the scenes. Wasting two days was more than enough to scar me for years. I look forward to seeing you in court, then never again."

Not giving him a chance to say anything else, she hung up as she pulled into the garage. She looked around with a sense that something was off.

It's paranoia, Claudia. You just went through a lot, and it's getting to you now. Just relax by the pool, recharge your batteries, and then you can start to pay attention to what you need to do next. If you don't rest up, you'll end up burning out.

Her internal warning system was based on experience, and it hinted toward something that she had learned as a successful child actress. For a moment, she thought about her boyfriend, thinking that it might be nice to have someone around to keep her distracted. However, she quickly dismissed that idea. She and Bryan had not been dating that long, and already, she felt that the relationship was not going anywhere. He had come across as interesting and down to earth, but after two months, it was clear that there was little more behind his beautiful façade. Bryan talked big but was clearly the kind of person who was more interested in scamming someone into taking care of him – rather than having a real relationship. The only thing she really needed from him at this point was to break up with him. She wanted someone reliable in her life, and that clearly was not Bryan.

Entering her kitchen, she stepped into the adjacent laundry room. She had recently run her favorite bikini through the wash, so it was just a matter of finding it in the dryer. Once she located it and changed, Claudia headed to the patio door, draping the bulky dress from the movie over a chair before

stepping outside. Her shoulders were still tense as she felt the cool breeze on her face, willing her mind to think of the positives. That was not particularly easy at that point in her life, and the next problem she needed to address was particularly messy.

Her horrible mother.

Flopping down on one of the lounge chairs, she allowed herself to feel a small measure of satisfaction as a month's worth of work was finally starting to play out. The building clouds above her felt very apropos of how she was feeling. Still wearing the makeup that had been applied that morning, Claudia knew that she needed to go clean up before too long. She had pulled the trigger a little prematurely, and that meant that others would have some time to try to counter what was coming.

But they would fail.

"Hey, beautiful. Got room for your plus one?"

Opening an eye, Claudia looked up at her boyfriend Bryan, who was wearing just a towel. His chiseled abs were a momentary distraction, but it was his hair that drew her attention. He ran his large hand through his typically boy-band-styled blonde hair as he stood over her, dripping from what she knew was a shower. He wasn't in the pool when she came outside, and there were no wet footprints from the pool going inside her house. The look on his face was cool and confident, but she could see something behind his eyes. Shifting her gaze to the house, Claudia saw movement from her bedroom.

Allowing a coy smile to slide across her face, Claudia began to draw her finger up his leg, starting at his calf. "I didn't expect you to be here, especially since I was scheduled to be gone for a few more hours. And, of course, there's the small problem of you not having a key to my place."

He stepped closer, his eyes turning a bit darker as he looked at her. "I wanted to surprise you. And you told me where you hide your key, so it was easy to make my daring entrance to surprise you."

“Really? A few hours before I got home? And in my shower without me?” She let her hand move around to his inner thigh, and her eyes were drawn to the part of the towel starting to shift, making it obvious where his focus was at that moment. He was clearly thinking with something other than his brain because his logic couldn’t have been more flawed.

Standing up, she moved her body a little closer to his. As she opened her mouth to speak, some movement drew her attention to her house. Without warning, she pushed him backward as he was about to pull her to him. As he pinwheeled into her pool, Claudia turned and ran into her house, her eyes on the quick movement in her room. She was out of range of the splash, her arms pumping as she felt she knew what she was likely to find in her bedroom.

The actor couldn’t have guessed just how much worse things were about to get. She heard Bryan calling her name as she disappeared into the house. Instead of barreling through the halls, though, Claudia stopped and locked the door to the backyard. Bryan would have a hard time getting into her house now. With him out of the way for a bit, she turned and began to walk slowly down the hallway, her steps entirely silent. She closed her eyes to block out her sense of sight – enough time had passed that the figure could have left her room. Focusing on sound, she moved through her home without needing to see where she was going. There were faint sounds of rustling coming from her bedroom, letting Claudia know that the person was confident, stupid, or both.

A wicked grin spread over her otherwise pleasant features.

Screwing around in my house, huh? Were you foolish enough to think this was the leech’s house? That boy has never been anything but arm candy. And even then, he was never reliable. It’s a shame some girls are so easily fooled by a pretty face. A shame that I fell for the same thing.

The door was partly closed, so she pushed it open. Sitting naked on her bed was her mother. Claudia stared at the woman who had manipulated her for nearly 25 years. Although her nostrils flared, Claudia managed to keep her

anger in check. She had known her boyfriend was screwing someone as soon as she saw the movement in her house. She was also well aware that her mother was horrible. However, this was far beyond even what she thought they were capable of. Letting the darkness start to cloud her vision, Claudia said coolly.

“Get out of my house.”

Standing up, her mother walked toward her.
“Sweetheart, I had no idea you would be...”

“Samson!” Claudia’s voice was clear as she activated her smart home. “Call the police and let them know I have two intruders.”

“You wouldn’t call the police on your own mother?”
The woman batted her eyelashes, clearly not ashamed that she was standing nude in front of her daughter.

“You have overplayed your hand, Allison. All I wish is that I would have stopped to check the footage before I came home – I could have made sure the police took care of you so I wouldn’t be permanently scarred by seeing your naked body and knowing that Bryan was dumb enough to think that was worth what’s going to happen to him.”

“I am still very attractive for my age, darling.” She tried to reach a hand out to her daughter, but Claudia swatted it away. Arching a well-manicured eyebrow, her mother said, “Your boyfriend sure seems to think...”

The sound of crashing glass made it clear just how Bryan planned to get into the house. Allison looked shocked, but Claudia was fueled by pure rage at this point. Spinning on her heel, she marched to the living room, emerging from the hallway in time to see her boyfriend looking at the floor, not sure how to get over all of the broken glass.

“Clearly, you didn’t think this through, did you? You are as useful as a desert lighthouse.” Her tone was deceptively calm.

His eyes looked up at her, his body fully exposed, the towel forgotten back at the pool. He clearly couldn’t

understand the insult, but he still had something to say. “You pushed me in the pool, and then you locked me out of the house.”

“MY house, yes. I didn’t invite you over. I haven’t given you a key. So that means that you broke into my home. Thank you for making it that much easier for the police to understand what’s happening.”

Almost as if on cue, there was a knock on the front door.

“Samson, open the front door.” No sooner did she say it than several men in uniform came rushing into the house. Pointing at the man standing on the other side of the broken sliding glass door, Claudia said, “My ex-boyfriend broke into my home.” Then she jerked her thumb toward the hallway, “And you’ll find a woman named Allison in the room at the end of the hallway to the left. She broke in as well.”

The woman emerged from the bedroom, her hands buttoning up her shirt. “I’m her mother, gentlemen, and I was already in the house.”

Clearing her throat to get the police officers’ attention, Claudia said, “I would like to press charges against both of them. If you need it, I have the footage showing that they both broke into my home – I did not give either of them a key or permission to be here.”

The officers looked at each other. One of them spoke up, “Ma’am, we don’t want to get pulled into whatever drama is going on here.”

“Do you not see the smashed door there and the moron standing on the other side? I didn’t smash that window. And the woman has a restraining order against her. She’s not allowed to contact me, let alone be in my house. Now, you can make this difficult, and I will make sure that you aren’t employed much longer. Or you can do your job and haul off the parasites, so I don’t need a bug bomb to remove them.”

That seemed to get the police to move. Not wanting to stick around as Bryan and Allison called out to her, yelling and

pleading, Claudia walked back to her room. As soon as the door was shut, she closed her eyes and leaned against it. The young woman took a deep breath and focused on the room as it had been when she had moved in – empty. Several minutes later, everything that had been in the room was gone – it was the easiest way to make sure that she never touched anything contaminated by the two people being hauled off at that moment. Exhausted from the effort, Claudia gave a sincere smile.

She had no idea how much time had passed before the house around her beeped, but she knew that the unwelcome pests were out of her house. Then, a British voice spoke through the growing haze in her mind, “Ma’am, the perpetrators are gone. Two police remain outside to talk to you.”

“Thank you, Samson.” She pinched the bridge of her nose, the completed task having brought on a mild headache. “Please lock up the front and change the locks again. I’ll deal with the police.”

“They used the garage, ma’am.”

“So one of them has access to the garage?”

“Yes, although they arrived together, so I can detect which one knows.”

“It has to be Allison. Bryan has the brain capacity of a small rock.”

“I would have to disagree. Given his actions, a pebble might be a more accurate comparison.”

For the first time since arriving home, she smiled. “I accept your suggestion. I’ll consider getting someone in to change it in case they aren’t locked up for long enough.”

“Very good, ma’am. The police are waiting near the front door.”

“Thank you, Samson. You can go rest for a bit while I have a chat with the cops.”

There was no response as Claudia opened the door to her room and moved back down the hallway. She exited the house for a bit, chatting with the police to give them a report. After promising to send them the footage of the break-in, she watched them leave. Once she was sure they were through the gate, Claudia closed it, and then she closed the garage door, a sense of exhaustion making her feel like she was walking through molasses.

“Samson.”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Please get pictures of the broken glass.”

“In addition to the police pictures?”

“Yes, please. I wouldn’t be surprised if some of the evidence were to disappear. It wouldn’t be the first time the police lost important information or evidence when Allison is involved. She squirreled away quite a fortune throughout my childhood.”

She waited for a few moments; then, she received the confirmation she wanted. “It is done, ma’am.”

“I think I’ll sleep on the couch, Samson. But not if they used it. Can you check to see what they contaminated?”

There was a pause, then the voice said, “They’ve contaminated nearly everything in the house, ma’am.”

“Of course they did,” she muttered. “Samson.”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Please put the house on the market.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“It will be ready for you to create the images in 30 minutes.”

“They did not know about your safe room.”

Claudia looked up at the walls, “Interesting. Then again, neither of them were particularly thorough.”

“No, ma’am, they were not.”

“Oh, right. And if you would, Samson, please send the footage of them breaking into the house and the evidence against the production company. Keep copies of that and the images of the broken back door.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The house fell silent as Claudia sat in the middle of the floor in the living room. Closing her eyes, she thought of everything within the home, and slowly, the items disappeared.

Just 30 minutes later, the place looked like a completely different home. Everything was modern and clinical, the kind of house that people would expect one of the richest actors in the world to own.

And nothing like the house that Claudia wanted. Pushing herself up, her legs shook a little, causing the actor to take a couple of hurried steps forward. She moved carefully through the area where the broken glass once covered the floor – now it was completely clean. Sliding the now fully restored door open, Claudia kept her head up as she moved toward her secret room.

It would take two days to recover from everything that had just happened, but that was fine. Having just blown up a criminal venture, there wasn’t anything on her calendar for the foreseeable future. Getting rid of her mother was a real bonus, as she expected to need several weeks for that. While it was incredibly draining to have to deal with her after exposing the production company, Claudia knew it meant that her schedule was now her own for a while. No emergencies, no problems, no fires for her to deal with until the judicial system started really churning. Then, it would become clear just how corrupt the system was.

At least Allison streamlined the whole process, having jumped the gun for the protective order. She’s really slipping if she thinks that she can go breaking the order a week before it is up. Or perhaps she’s just as entitled, thinking that she won’t suffer repercussions just because of who her daughter is. It’s going to be a hard wake-up call for her when I invoke the stalker portion of it.

A grin spread across her face as she thought about how her mother would react to learning she couldn't wiggle her way out this time.

However, it didn't take long for that thought to be spoiled by the other issue.

Still, this was not the way you expected to dump Bryan. It was never going to work, but good grief, I didn't think he was that thick. What did he think was going to happen when I found him alone in my house with my mother?

The idea of having a relationship with someone who would do that to her was more than a little unnerving. The disgust she felt toward her ex was nothing compared to the abject rage she felt toward the woman who had used and manipulated her for nearly two decades.

The old viper always has something up her sleeve, and you just don't think the same way she does, making it impossible to anticipate her next moves. Hopefully, she'll get a few years for this, so I can finally get a break from her.

Reaching a small shed, she opened the door and stepped inside.

"Samson, could you please lock up the place? No one is to enter or exit. If you detect anyone here, send a notification to that security company you found."

"Ma'am, you didn't set up a contract with them yet."

"Ah, right. Ok, well, you are authorized to initiate and finalize it."

"Very good, ma'am. And sleep well."

She knew that it was just a program, that there was no real emotion behind it, but after years of questioning people's sincerity and being proven right in her suspicions, it felt good to hear those words. "Thank you, Samson. Take the next few days off. There will be plenty to do when I wake." With that, she pressed a button on the side of the workbench.

Seconds later, a hatch slid open in the floor, revealing a set of stairs going down into the ground. Carefully making her

way down the steps, Claudia finally allowed herself to pitch forward at the bottom, her body crashing into a soft bed. She was asleep even before her head hit the pillow.

Chapter 1

The Wrong Kind of Adventure

Leaning back on the headrest in the backseat, Claudia let out a sigh. The last two years had been rough, but everything was finally resolved, at least for the next few years. The appeals would start now, but those should be denied fairly quickly. If not, that was going to be someone else's problem.

At this point in her life, Claudia just wanted freedom. With the court cases out of the way, she needed to focus on her future. And that could mean changing careers.

There was no point in her life when Claudia really had a chance to decide what she wanted to do. It was always a push to do more, to be more. First, it had been her mother. Then, it had been the production companies. All of that had been removed from her life now, and she finally had a chance to decide if that was the career she wanted.

Thinking about it, Claudia was leaning toward giving up acting. There were so many horrible memories surrounding it.

Now that she had time for a break, the actor was escaping the city – the whole state. She wanted to go somewhere that would give her space and peace to think about what she wanted out of her life. Even if she didn't continue with her current career, it had given her the funds to do whatever she wanted. Trying to figure it out anywhere near LA was not going to work, though. The media frenzy around all of the court cases had been particularly horrific, and even if that was over, she knew more people would come slinking around to talk about it. They were particularly interested in the salacious details about the relationship between her mother and ex-boyfriend. It was almost enough to make her lose all hope for humanity. The only way to get the time she needed was to be somewhere that was nearly impossible for the media to follow.

Alaska seemed to check all of the boxes for what she felt she needed. Unfortunately, though, there was little way to hide who she was on her way there. As Claudia stepped out of the car, it came as no surprise that people began to point at her.

Trying to ignore them, she grabbed her bags as she thanked her ride-share driver for the lift. When she turned around, she had to come up short as she nearly bumped into a striking man strolling along the sidewalk.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” she said and gave him the usual Hollywood smile.

He looked at her, then gave her a similar smile, one that she knew few would recognize as being heavily manicured to look sincere. However, the edges of his mouth were just as rigid as she knew her own to be. He wore sunglasses, and much of his face was covered by a shadow from the structures behind him. Despite the shadow, though, she could tell that he was stunningly beautiful.

When he spoke, his voice was a calm baritone. “It’s quite alright, miss. After you.”

He stepped back and held out his other hand to indicate that she could continue walking.

Her eyebrow rose as she looked at him. His reaction was not at all what she would have expected. Usually, people were initially rude, then once they realized who she was, they started babbling. Her carefully crafted smile softened as she gazed at the man. If he was playing it cool, she was impressed.

“Thank you, kind sir. I guess chivalry isn’t completely dead.”

Her eyes were drawn to his dark red hair, which was moving gently in the breeze. She then looked at his young face, and she couldn’t help but wonder what he used to get that color. The man tilted his head to the side. “It’s not chivalry, just common courtesy.”

“You must not spend much time in LA.”

“This is my first time here, and I sincerely hope my last.” The harsh words were tempered by the soft, melodic timbre of his voice.

“Do I know you?” It was a line she had heard so many times, but this was the first time Claudia was using it on someone else, and it had tumbled out before she could stop it.

His eyebrows rose over the sunglasses. “I dare say not.”

“You look like ... someone who could be a member of ... an idol band or something.”

The man’s smile finally gave way, a sincere amusement hitching up his lips. “I can assure you that my musical ability is purely amateur. The public eye is decidedly not something that I or my family seeks.”

“Your family?”

“The Erlings.”

She paused, thinking about the name for a moment. “I don’t think I’ve heard that name before. Are you from one of those old money families who prefer working in the shadows?”

It was said in jest, but something about the way his expression shifted suggested that she wasn’t too far off the mark. However, the only thing he offered was, “If that were the case, admitting to it now would undermine the overall goal.”

For the first time in years, Claudia tilted her head back and laughed, her hand on her chest. “Oh my, it’s refreshing to meet someone who is even more guarded than I try to be.”

The man smiled, his clean-shaven face barely showing any wrinkles. “It is nice to hear a young woman laugh. Now, if you will excuse me, I have business to attend to before heading home. And I would really like to leave this oppressive place.”

The man had uttered the words that described how she’d felt for a while, although she had not been able to express it quite so precisely. The word *oppressive* really struck home. That was exactly the right word.

As the phrase ran through her mind, she let him know that she had no desire to detain him further. “Oh, I’m so sorry. First, I nearly run over you; then, I hold you up from whatever merger you are handling. Have a lovely day. And thank you very much for the laugh. I was due for some humor.”

She strode forward, knowing that he was not going to respond. He had said that he had places to be, and that meant that he had basically dismissed her. At least, that was the way most men like him acted.

The rest of the boarding process went smoothly. Before she knew it, she was walking down the walkway, her mind firmly focused on appreciating every moment. Since she didn't want to be treated differently from everyone else – at least as much as possible – she had chosen a seat near the back of the plane. Walking down the aisle was a new experience, but not as unpleasant as people had constantly warned her it would be. As people moved around her, focused on their different tasks, for a few moments, she felt just like any other passenger.

Of course, it was only a matter of time before that would change as people finished their tasks and started looking around them.

Stretching up to put her bag in the overhead bin, Claudia felt people's eyes on her. Judging by the intensity of the stares, she guessed – correctly – that many of the other passengers were debating whether or not she was Claudia McKenna. When the closest couple started whispering to each other, she knew that they were discussing if they should approach her.

No point in waiting. Besides, getting someone else's perspective could be enjoyable.

A gracious smile spread across her face as she looked at the whispering couple. "Could I convince you to help me out?"

She didn't need any assistance, but asking for help was the best way to show that she was a regular, normal person. The couple quickly hopped up and began working with her to fit her bag in the half-filled bin.

Once the job was done, the man looked at her and said a little too loudly, "I'm surprised you're flying back here with us."

Claudia smiled. "I'm doing a bit of research."

The couple exchanged a look, clearly thinking they may get a bit more information out of her.

“What’s the role?” The young woman looked like she wasn’t sure if she should be asking but clearly couldn’t help herself.

Taking her seat, Claudia began to talk about a project she had been considering around the time things went south, although after so much time had elapsed, she wasn’t sure if the film would ever be made. Given what she had done the previous couple of years, a lot of producers were afraid to cast her in their projects, not that any of that mattered to her now.

The young couple didn’t need to know that she’d decided not to return to acting. They wanted to talk about potential projects to get a peek at what her life as a movie star was like. She had no problem helping them feel like they were getting some inside information, especially since no project was ever guaranteed to be complete, let alone released. So she told them about the elements of the story that had caught her interest and what kind of research she needed to do to better understand who the character was. As she talked, Claudia described how she saw the movie from the standpoint of a director rather than an actor. If she changed her role in the movie business, she would attract a lot less attention, which had a certain appeal that she couldn’t ignore.

As she talked animatedly about the process of making a movie, she decided to leave out the less pleasant aspects of being an actor, like the fact that she was usually seen as a sentient prop and, in some instances, even less than that. It was the one thing that really made her want to leave acting and work behind the scenes instead. It could be a fairly easy transition, or she could start her own production company. She had enough money to do that, but she wasn’t sure that she wanted to stay in the industry, but that was not something she could tell anyone else.

The next few hours passed fairly quickly as she continued chatting with people who were so interested in hearing what she had to say. First, they questioned her about the project, but soon, their discussion transitioned into

something more personal, as the couple told her they were going on their first cruise. They had decided to start in Alaska so that they could experience something completely new.

When the couple began discussing activities they wanted to do on the ship, Claudia turned to look out the window to see the mountains of the Pacific Northwest, hoping to see Mount Rainier. That's when she realized that she had been distracted and had missed two entire states. As she took in the panoramic view, Claudia marveled at the landscape. The sunny, desert look of LA had given way to the beautiful icy world of Alaska and northern Canada, where the mountains stretched out as far as the eye could see. Claudia felt almost as if she had entered an entirely different world. Having never been this far north, she had no idea how close they were to their destination. What she did know was that her bladder was warning her that waiting to go to the restroom was a bad idea, especially if they were getting close to landing.

Smiling at the couple, who had turned their attention to the pamphlets about their upcoming cruise, Claudia excused herself. As she made her way down the aisle to the restroom, the plane shook a little. Worried that the fasten seatbelt sign might turn on, telling them to stay seated, she hurried down the narrow walkway to the nearest bathroom. The plane began to move a bit more violently as she neared the restroom, and she reached out to steady herself on the wall nearest the area for the flight attendants.

Muttering, she continued forward, getting to the door just as an announcement came over the PA system. She shut the door just as the pilot started speaking.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please remain in your seats. We are in for a bumpy ride.”

As Claudia rushed to complete her business, the plane started shaking violently around her. Struggling to right herself, she braced her feet against the walls. Next, she turned to wash her hands as she strained to hear what the pilot was saying.

Suddenly, the plane pitched downward, slamming her against the wall.

We're going down.

The thought was so matter-of-fact that it felt detached from the situation. For the second time in her life, she closed her eyes and focused on saving herself. She couldn't teleport or undo her past, but she could visualize herself in the snow, away from this plane.

The next thing she knew, her body was aching, and the world around her was freezing. A loud explosion not too far away created some heat, but Claudia was well aware that it was neither safe nor sustainable. Looking up, she tried to move her head from side to side to brush her black hair out of her face. A trickle of blood flowed into her eye as she took in the scene in front of her.

The plane was engulfed in fire, and she was close enough to see some of the passengers who had perished in the crash. It flitted through her mind that the lovely couple she had just been talking to had perished.

Everyone else perished; it was as if her mind was correcting her.

Losing two people was horrible – losing an entire plane full was unfathomable. It wasn't the thought she wanted to have, but even as she closed her eyes to try to sense survivors, she knew that it was true. Whatever had happened had killed everyone.

A rumbling from the plane told her she still wasn't safe. Between the discomfort of the cold – she had left her coat in her seat – and the pain of hitting the snow-packed ground, she could not quickly remove herself the same way she had materialized.

Without looking where she was, Claudia started to roll away from the plane, hoping that she would be able to get far away enough before things got even worse.

What she hadn't anticipated was the long drop.

The strange feeling of free-falling quickly eclipsed the fear she had of getting away from the plane. Stunned by the sudden sensation, Claudia's body went limp as she tried to figure out what was happening to her. By the time she had pieced together that she had rolled over some kind of cliff or deep drop, she had landed shoulder-first on something hard. There was a loud cracking sound that she barely registered through the pain. She gasped as she rolled a few times. Each time her shoulder touched the ground, unimaginable pain shot through her body.

Finally, her body stopped moving. For a few seconds, she kept her eyes closed, almost too afraid to find out what had happened. When she finally convinced herself that she couldn't just lie there, unaware of her surroundings, she slowly opened her eyes. Above her was an impossibly blue sky that hinted at a cold, indifferent beauty.

Keep watching because it's coming, the aggravatingly calm thought told her.

The gorgeous, clear sky was soon marred as a fireball appeared where she instinctively knew she had been less than a minute earlier. Shrapnel from the explosion flew into the air, and Claudia realized that at least some of it was likely to fall toward her.

Struggling to get up using her good arm, Claudia looked for someplace to hide. Not too far from her was an outcropping that would protect her from the falling debris. Scrambling toward it, she slid under just as some metal objects began striking the ground. She shrank against the rock wall, making herself as small as possible to keep from being struck. Above her, she heard the rumble of metal striking rock, and she shrank farther back, which was particularly painful due to her injured shoulder and arm.

A combination of fear and pain held her attention as Claudia waited for the debris to stop falling around her. Even when she heard nothing, she clung to the rock, figuring there might be bigger pieces of the plane that had yet to fall. So she pressed her back against the rock, hoping the shower of metal would be over soon.

After a while, however, she became more aware of the cold and the growing pain on her right side. Closing her eyes, she hoped to be able to make something appear that she could use to warm herself. Had she been able to focus on the item, Claudia would have made her coat land somewhere close by. However, the pain was far too much of a distraction. Since she couldn't dedicate her thoughts to the task at hand, Claudia was only able to think of something that she could wrap around her to block out the cold. She watched the air, not sure what she would see.

Something small and light fluttered down in front of her, not too far from her hiding place. She reached out and snatched the item, pulling it toward her and under the outcropping. Struggling with her one good arm, she tried to stretch it over her body as much as possible. She shivered as the adrenaline began to leave her system.

You are trapped on a mountain in the middle of nowhere.

The thought wasn't exactly comforting, but her mind and body were almost completely drained by the effort of surviving the plane crash, making it nearly impossible for her to do anything else. The best she could hope for was that the thin blanket would be enough to protect her from the worst of the cold. Her thoughts pushed her to do more to survive.

If you can cover this area with snow, it will block the biting wind.

A shudder went through her as she once again reached out to the environment around her. As horrifying as the thought was, she needed to enclose herself in snow. Given the crash, it didn't take that much for her to shift a little bit of the snow to start an avalanche.

The rumble would have been terrifying if not for the fact that she was so exhausted from the events of the day. As she brought her thoughts back to her current situation, Claudia imagined the snow creating a warm pocket around her. She was barely aware as everything around her turned white. Her mind was already slipping under as the space around her

started to warm now that the cold wind could no longer reach her.

Chapter 2

Facing the Impossible

You're going to die here.

It was easily one of the most disturbing thoughts she had ever had upon waking after using her abilities. As her heart began to hammer uncontrollably in her chest, Claudia began to realize that, for the first time in a very long time, she had used her powers for more than just convenience. What was worse, she couldn't immediately remember anything that had led up to her needing to use her abilities.

Groggily, she tried to open her eyes, the sense of emergency building in her, not matching her current physical abilities. It didn't matter that she felt a sense of urgency; her body simply hadn't recovered enough to be able to react with speed. As she opened her eyes to a world of whiteness, she tried to remember what might have happened. Her first thought was that her mother could have done something. The problem with that was that this didn't look like the kind of place where her mother would go. Then, she had the flash of a memory of her mother being taken to prison.

With her mind largely unable to track what had happened, Claudia decided to rely on the world around her, so she tried to clear her vision to assess her situation better. Placing her left hand on the ground, she noted that she was not indoors, something that really didn't help her too much. However, the way the ground shifted and moved under her hand was much clearer.

Picking up her hand and looking at it, Claudia was momentarily confused by the whiteness now clumped between her fingers and in her palm. When she shifted her body to touch the whiteness with her right arm, a searing pain made it impossible to think of anything else.

Crying out in pain, Claudia finally had the physical reminder of what happened, not that it eased her pain at the moment.

As the sharp pains up and down her arm, across her shoulder, and down her side made all other thoughts impossible, Claudia was stunned by two apparently coherent sentences that spoke over the agony.

I thought I sensed someone there. Can you hear me?

Claudia blinked, momentarily stunned. She was used to a cold voice in her head providing analytical feedback, so it wasn't unusual to have some detached thoughts. The problem was that the voice currently speaking to her was decidedly not the voice she usually heard. Also, the usual voice only asked rhetorical questions.

This new voice seemed like it was looking for a response, as if it was expecting a conversation. Unfortunately for the voice, Claudia's capacity to form sentences was hindered by her current predicament.

Ouch, ouch, ouch ... was the only thing she could think to reply as the pain again began to take over her thoughts, and it was decidedly better than screaming in her mind, which was her initial reaction.

Somewhere, that detached voice was trying to say something, but it wasn't nearly as loud as the pain.

As she started to realize just how rough a situation she was in, Claudia felt something shift in her mind. It felt almost as if someone had just left, similar to how a full elevator feels when someone steps out of it. She almost didn't notice because that full sensation returned less than a second later.

But the voice didn't make any more sense the second time.

Holy shit, Elliot is going to want to meet you. How did you survive? We received the pictures of the crash site, and no one should have survived that.

Claudia tried to focus on the words, but all she managed to think was – *It hurts. My arm feels like it's on fire. Like all of the bones have been crushed.*

This was met with the same sensation of someone disappearing. Not sure if she was hallucinating or dead,

Claudia knew that she did not want to deal with a new voice in her head. Focusing on what felt like a door, she tried to close it.

What are you doing? I have to be able to relay where you are.

Claudia opened her eyes. “What is happening?”

You, like a lot of other women, are drawn to that area. Not human.

“What? Are you saying I’m dead? Because if that’s the case, good grief, I would love to laugh at just how wrong all religions were about what comes next.”

For the first time in her life, Claudia could hear someone laughing in her head.

“Oh,” she said, her eyes widening. “Is this me going insane? I mean, not surprising given everything that’s...”

No, this is a link that our kind can make with each other. It’s how I know you aren’t human.

“Not dead? Okay. That does seem to explain everything. I’ve lost it. This must be an experimental padded cell.” Claudia stretched out her left hand and immediately pulled her hand back. “It’s snow!”

The voice sounded concerned, *Yes. You were in a plane crash. No one else survived. Clearly, there’s something about you that kept you alive.*

“Alright. This is just nuts. I’m not doing this.”

Whatever was stepping into her mind, Claudia forced it out, then made sure that it could not return.

That’s when things seemed to get so much worse.

The ground shook under her as something huge landed nearby. Some memories began flashing through her mind, and Claudia knew that they were real memories of what happened before she had fallen unconscious. She had been on a plane, and it had crashed. She remembered the feeling of pain as she tried to get away from the plane as different parts of it caught

on fire and exploded and the avalanche she had caused to stay protected.

After what had just happened, Claudia was too afraid to keep her thoughts internal – the last thing she wanted to do was to open the door a crack so that whatever it was could come back in and manipulate her thoughts. Clearly, she had enough to contend with without an intruder in her mind.

Muttering, she said, “You buried yourself, and now there’s more snow over you. How are you even going to get out of here in your condition? Genius move, Claudia. Just really standout thinking. Now, it sounds like there’s more piling on it. You are going to die buried dozens of feet in the snow.”

The ground continued to shake, but it was followed by what sounded like a roar.

“I don’t remember the avalanche sounding like that.” Claudia stared at the snow in front of her. To her surprise, it seemed to be getting wetter. Shaking her head, she dismissed the thought that it was melting. She was not going to allow false hope to enter her thoughts. That might cause the strange voice to return.

Then she started to feel wetness under her. Unsure if she was fully understanding what she was seeing, Claudia reached out again, her hand to touch the snow. This time, it didn’t feel packed – it felt wet.

“Oh my ... it *is* melting. What is happening?”

There was another roar; then she felt something warm against her back. Looking over her hurt shoulder, Claudia fought through the pain. She had pressed herself against a rock.

And now the rock was warming.

“What is happening?” Her voice was starting to reflect the rising sense of panic in her.

Again, the ground rumbled, then it felt like something was putting pressure on the ground over her. She had originally thought it was an avalanche, but that wouldn’t

explain the melting snow. What she did know was that the rock was getting hotter and that it was starting to burn her.

Against her better judgment, Claudia closed her eyes and thought herself back onto the snow. Getting herself outside of the little cave she had created was the only thing she could think to do to escape whatever was happening. Hoping that it wouldn't require nearly so much of her energy as the first time, she focused on being farther down the mountain.

For the first time, she felt something interfering with her ability.

Suddenly, the white in front of her began to lighten as if it were being removed. The heat had stopped, but now something just as confusing and inexplicable was occurring literally in front of her eyes.

Claudia stared, her thoughts racing. Nothing that she had ever learned could explain it.

Suddenly, that familiar analytical voice spoke up: *Dragons. Something like a dragon could explain it. So many ways to die up here. And this one will be so much more interesting.*

The thought was mortifying, especially as it had no basis in reality. Sure, she had been in a series with dragons in it, but that was entirely fiction.

The voice sounded almost huffy as it replied to the accusation; *people don't just disappear and reappear. Nor do they clear out an entire house with their minds. You are hardly one to judge what is and isn't real. Then again, you always thought you were right.*

“Ok, I really don't appreciate the snarkiness.”

The voice didn't respond. While she didn't like it, Claudia could not ignore the fact that the voice had been right.

“It can't be a dragon. That just doesn't make sense.” She argued with the currently silent analytical voice. “If dragons were real, there is no way we wouldn't know about it. No matter how hard I tried to keep things about my life

private, people always found out. But something like a flying reptile? There's no way that could be kept a secret."

You are in Alaska. You have no idea how many ways there are for you to die up here.

Claudia bit her lip, praying that, for the first time, the little voice was wrong. After all, if dragons were real and that was what was literally burning away the snow, how was she supposed to survive that?

Her heart began racing as something dark began to show through the snow. It felt almost as if time stopped as she waited like a trapped creature in a cage.

Then it emerged – a strange shadow through the snow. It grew darker, then inexplicably lighter.

Nothing made sense, so Claudia stopped trying to figure it out. For now, all she could do was wait. When she knew what she was facing, she would decide what to do.

The shadow disappeared for a few moments, and she felt the earth moving around her. Closing her eyes, she desperately tried not to imagine a dragon walking around looking for her.

"Why would a dragon even waste time on me? There are so many bigger animals to eat. I'm not even an appetizer for something that large. The stupid thing should fly off and find something else to hunt."

It was not a comforting thought, especially as the shadow returned. The snow continued to clear away; then, it seemed to disappear entirely.

That was when she came face to face with the impossible. Staring directly at her with large dark blue eyes punctuated by a white face and long, thin snout was a dragon.

As if that weren't enough, she was all too aware that the dragon was blocking her only way out of the impromptu cave. The thing was enormous, and she knew that all it had to do was wait for her to crawl out. When it realized that she wasn't going to do that, Claudia was sure that it would have no trouble reaching in and pulling her out from her hiding place.

All rational thought essentially shut down in the face of such impossible danger. She reacted purely on instinct, causing two things to happen simultaneously.

Her body reacted with the loudest scream she could manage – a cliché that she had long hated. She was finding out that when there was nothing else to do physically, her body reacted like that.

Her mind reacted by creating a vision – she imagined the dragon dead in front of her. Never in her life had she wished anyone or anything dead, but again, when faced with an impossible situation, she could not stop that natural survival instinct.

Chapter 3

Someone Stronger, More Capable, and Enraged

For a fraction of a second, the dragon just blinked at her as she screamed. Then it opened its jaws, displaying a set of enormous white teeth that were nearly as big as she was. Staring down the mouth of a dragon, Claudia felt certain that it was either about to reach in and eat her or blast her with fire.

Then, she realized that her vision had not worked. For the first time in her life, a vision had failed. The thought was hardly fitting for what she thought would be her last as she could hear the creature taking a deep breath.

Then, to her surprise, it reared back and let out the loudest roar she had ever heard. If the image of a dragon looking at her had woken a part of her mind that she hadn't been aware of on a primal level, the sound of the roar tapped into something else. Despite the enormous pain she was in, Claudia brought both hands up to her ears and covered them as her body automatically pulled itself into the fetal position. While the fear was all-consuming, it did give her momentary relief from the pain that had made her think she was trapped in the makeshift cave.

The sound of stomping made it clear that the dragon was moving away from her, but the roaring continued, leaving her too terrified to do much else. Yet a part of her still tried to deny what she had just seen.

To her chagrin, that wasn't enough to stop the inevitable voice, though.

You, of all people, really should be more open to these things. And you probably should not be trying to wish something like a dragon dead.

Judging by the way the roaring was fading, Claudia figured the dragon was storming away. She had no idea why, but it was possibly her only chance to get away.

The hole up to the surface was several feet long, and her body was in really rough shape, but Claudia knew if she didn't move now, any chance of escaping would be lost. Tapping into

the fear that had allowed her to ignore the pain, she struggled to climb through the opening toward the surface. It didn't take her too long to figure out that she wasn't going to be able to pull herself through the hole with her right arm – at best, all she could manage was to move it up a little ahead of her so that she didn't have to drag her arm up the hole. Eventually, she realized that it was both too much work and too painful, though, so she allowed it to fall by her side. Using her left arm and her feet, the actor struggled up the opening to the surface.

The stomping and roaring grew a bit louder as she neared the top, and she tried to guess what was occurring.

“It's possible that you'll get to the top and will see the poor thing in the throes of death.” Her voice was breathy and labored, but Claudia felt some comfort in speaking her thoughts aloud. “The more demanding use of your abilities takes a while. I mean, look how long it took to clear your house a couple of years ago. Not everything's instantaneous. You've gotten a little too complacent, Claudia. You know that you need to be patient. And I can't imagine that a dragon could be killed so easily anyway.”

Her hand touched the edge of the opening, and she paused, trying to determine what her next course of action should be. Then she realized that the world around her was nearly silent. Struggling, Claudia managed to get her head out of the hole so that she could look around and did not see the dragon. With a bit of effort, she was able to turn to look to her left. Still nothing.

Taking a deep breath, she struggled to look to her right, but her body began to slip. Her feet were not able to find a toehold in the snow and trying to turn her head to look to her right had caused her to lose some of the grip her left hand had on the top of the opening. Realizing that she had no other choice, Claudia pulled herself out of the hole, the progress slow and painful as the parts of her that didn't hurt now ached from the exertion.

Her body flopped down on the top of the snow, her face planted in the cold, white powder. With a lot of effort, she managed to roll to her left and then rested on the snow with

her face looking up into the cold blue sky. A part of her mind wondered what happened to the dragon, and a deeper part of her was terrified that she had just killed it.

Too tired to speak, she thought, You probably should have just let it eat you. What can you do now? You'll die up here anyway. The poor thing could have made it fast for you, and it would probably not be more painful than what you are already experiencing. At least it would have been over within a couple of minutes. Then, your death would have at least served some kind of purpose. Being food is better than just being a corpse in the snow.

A loud, angry voice broke the silence of the world around her.

“What in the hell did you do to me?”

Claudia blinked as she looked up at the sky, thinking that she must have been dreaming a voice in her head.

“Look at me when I’m talking to you!”

It almost sounds believable.

The sound was coming from her right side, but Claudia was not about to turn to look in that direction, knowing that it would just result in more pain. So she let her head flop to the left as she closed her eyes.

“What do you...” The enraged voice died, and she could tell that the source was close to her now.

There’s no one here, Claudia. It’s best not to start creating illusions. Or maybe it is. I mean, it couldn’t hurt to have a hallucination to keep you company until you expire.

She moved her neck so that she was once again looking up into the sky, not wanting to believe that it was the end. This time, there actually was something approaching her. At first, it looked real, but as she tried to turn to look at whatever it was, the voice said, “Best not to do that. You’ll only do more damage. Hold still, and I’ll see if I can access any of my healing abilities.”

She knew that he had said not to move, but Claudia could not believe that there was actually someone up on the mountain with her. Through the pain, she continued to turn her head. The man was now right next to her, kneeling down and reaching for her. Her learned reaction to a man doing that was to pull away, but Claudia was finding it far harder to believe that someone was on a mountain in the middle of nowhere. She ignored her learned behaviors for the mere impossibility of what she was seeing, her mind rejecting what her eyes were relaying.

The man was frowning, but even in profile, she was stunned by his appearance.

Is this some kind of mythological god coming down to save me?

Claudia's thoughts started to reach for whatever answers could explain what was happening, and it had a really good argument.

If dragons are real, is a god or demigod that far-fetched?

The man continued to look at her, his hands not too far from her. His face was young, with high cheekbones and a well-defined jawline. As she looked at him, Claudia couldn't help thinking that he was fairly angular, not exactly thin, but not at all like the kind of men she saw back in LA. What really stood out, though, was his white hair. Unsure how she had seen red at first, she looked between his flawless, wrinkle-free skin and the white hair, unsure how he had managed to get that look without seriously damaging his hair.

Then she noticed his eye. It was large, almost disproportionately so, and an impossible color blue that she had never seen – not even with color contacts. The one she could see was a deep blue that almost appeared to be lavender from her current angle.

He looked her over, then finally decided to finally touch her. Without looking at her or asking for permission, he said, "I do apologize because I feel quite certain whatever you did will make this fairly ineffective. Not that my healing abilities

are particularly great at the best of times.” As he spoke, the man placed one hand on her waist and another on her bicep. “I mean, my kind are lucky to have some ability to heal ourselves but not others. Fortunately for you, I know someone who may be able to use her immense skills here if you didn’t damage my connection too much.”

Finally, he turned to her, a look of annoyance on his face as he accused her of something that made no sense to her. When she finally looked at his face straight on, though, Claudia took in a sharp breath. His grip on her arm tightened, distracting her from what she was thinking. There was a vague sense of something warm passing through her, but Claudia had no idea what was happening.

He looked at her face, then tilted his head to the side. “I’ll clean you up in a bit. Sophia is good, but I don’t think she’s going to be able to do much through me at the moment.”

Claudia blinked at him. Her chest felt a little less constricted as she managed to say, “What are you talking about?”

“She’s a cat shifter. Those lucky bastards tend to be exceptional when it comes to healing. Although Sybil’s no slouch. I mean, I’ve heard what she was able to do when she was alpha of her pack. I think whatever you did to her has made it nearly impossible to tap into her skills for a while, though.”

“Huh?” Claudia asked, feeling like things had gone from bad to worse to bizarre.

The man sighed. “I don’t know what your heritage is, but you have certainly learned a lot about using your abilities. Whoever taught you must have explained at least the basics of shifters.”

Claudia closed her eyes and squeezed them shut for a moment, then opened her mouth. “I wasn’t raised traditionally.”

The man snorted, then turned his attention back to her injuries. “None of us were. A lot of it’s because our parents

tend not to be involved. I mean, Nigel and I were fairly lucky. And it sounds like the Sexton boys are making a pretty good go of it with their next generation, but listening to Gavin, Felix, and Grayson, it seems there are a lot of parents lacking. At least when they reach positions of power. I mean, family should always come first.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about,” Claudia replied.

“Sorry. You’ve done a real number on me, and I tend to think aloud.” He motioned with his head to indicate the injured arm. “How does that feel?”

Claudia looked down and saw that he was now holding up her arm and moving it a little. The pain came flooding back to the forefront of her mind, but it wasn’t nearly so intense. “It’s still really ... painful, but I think I can move it a bit more now. How did you do that?”

He exhaled. “Good, because that was a whole hell of a lot of effort.” Removing his hand from her side, he offered a few more confusing but encouraging words. “I managed to repair the internal damage and fix a few organs, so there shouldn’t be any long-term damage to your vitals. Your arm and shoulder, though,” he shook his head. “I’m afraid that by the time we get somewhere with more shifters, some of the damage will be permanent.”

She blinked at him. “What are you talking about?”

He stood up, apparently ignoring her question. “Usually, I would shift and get us out of here, but someone had to go and sabotage that.” His dark eyes looked down at her with resentment. “I have to admit, there’s only one time in my life when I could not shift, so I’m going to be rather bitter for much of this rescue about that. I mean, I’m missing an entire family celebration because of it.”

Claudia got the sense that he was blaming her, even if she had no clue what he meant by saying that she had sabotaged him. Still lying on the snow, she said, “I’m sorry?”

“Sounded more like a question than an apology.” Then he shrugged. “I would say there might be some brain damage, but Sybil didn’t sense any when she reached out to you, and I didn’t detect any when I was touching you. Still, I imagine you could be a bit disoriented, which would make it understandable that you would attack people you don’t know.”

Claudia blinked at him as he held a hand down to her. She did not reach up for his hand. “What are you talking about? I haven’t attacked anyone.”

He gave her a wry look, then leaned over to help her up. “You need to get off the snow before you get hypothermia. Unfortunately, healing you used up what little warmth I have to offer. And considering we need to get off this mountain the old-fashioned way. Well, maybe not the entire way. But no one is available to shift their way here quickly, and we aren’t in an area where choppers will be able to assist.”

“What is going on?” Claudia said, looking at the man now leaning over, trying to get her to stand. “What do you mean shift their way here? How could you *possibly* know that I had internal damage? What’s the old-fashioned way of getting off the mountain? Can you please talk like a normal person? And who *are* you?”

The man stopped and looked at her as he started biting the right side of his lip. Then he asked, “What kind of shifter are you? A type of cat? I’ve learned just how far they’ve spread unchecked.” He didn’t wait for her response, “No. If you were, you would have healed yourself. And you definitely aren’t a wolf. They virtually never move solo. So what are you?”

Part of Claudia was highly offended at the suggestion, but it was clear from his tone that the man was not trying to offend her – he really believed that she wasn’t human.

She frowned as he slid a hand under her back and helped her sit up. “That voice in my head ... that was a, um, a ... what do you call yourselves?”

He looked at her askance as he got her to her feet. “Shifters. We are shifters.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, considering you are one, you should know. With the way you use your abilities, you must have at least a basic understanding of what you are.”

Claudia blinked a few times. “You think I’m like you?”

Tilting his head to the side, the man looked at her a little closer. “You look ... familiar. Have you come up here for one of the conferences? Where are you from?”

Internally, Claudia groaned. The last thing she wanted was for this strange man to start fanboying over her, especially since he was already talking nonsense. “I just have a familiar face.”

“No, I’m sure that we’ve met.”

“I can assure you, we haven’t.”

He folded his arms over his chest. “Fine. I’m Ari Erling.”

The name struck something in her mind. Claudia watched him for a few moments as she tried to figure out where she had heard the name. “The name sounds familiar.”

“So you are from up here?”

“What? No! I’m from California.” She continued to try to hide who she was, but it was starting to bother her that she couldn’t place him. “Are you a producer or something?”

Suddenly, a look of clarity passed over his face. “Oh, I ran into you at the airport almost a week ago. You thought I was a member of a band. Now you think I’m a producer. Interesting that you seem insistent that I’m high-profile.”

For a moment, she frowned at him as his words sank in. “The airport...” She remembered the couple on the plane; then, her mind started to work backward all the way to her arrival at the airport. Shaking her head, all she could say was, “I’m pretty sure I would remember running into you.” She pointed up to his hair, causing some pain in her arm as she did. Flinching, Claudia said, “I would remember that color hair

because I would want to know what you used to get that color and not have seriously damaged it.”

The man stared at her for a moment, and she thought she saw movement from the sides of his eyes, almost as if he was blinking – but it was from the wrong direction. And his eyelids never moved. When he responded, he said, “You almost bumped into me when you got out of the car. You asked me if we had ever met – which I have to say is a very tired and lazy pickup line.”

“Hey!” Claudia couldn’t help but feel offended, but the man didn’t stop talking.

“You then tried to keep the conversation going, saying that I must not spend much time in LA, laughed at a couple of not particularly funny quips, and then walked away, probably hoping I would chase you down to ask for your number.”

Claudia looked at him incredulously. “I was not hitting on you, and after everything I’ve been through, I’m not even remotely interested in a relationship.”

“You could hardly classify a one-night stand as a relationship.”

“What?” She stood frozen. “I’ve never had a one-night stand, nor would I! You must be full of yourself to think that I was hitting on you.”

The man smirked. “Really? That’s funny considering the pheromones you were giving off at the time.” When her mouth dropped open a little, his smirk widened. “It wasn’t just your behavior that made your intentions clear.”

Feeling incredibly insulted, the actor finally said, “Do you really think that *I* need to hit on people?”

He shrugged, “What else would you call our interaction?”

“Just chatting.” Finally, she sighed and rolled her eyes. “You recognize me because I’m Claudia McKenna.”

He looked at her, then raised an eyebrow. “Sorry?”

She paused to try to understand what he meant. “Sorry about what?”

“I’ve never heard of you.”

Too stunned to say anything, Claudia just stared at the man. He soon lost interest in their conversation. “Well, if you want to insist you weren’t hitting on me because you think you are important, good for you. Now, it’s time to consider how to get out of here since my usual methods are not available to us.”

Annoyance rising, Claudia asked sarcastically, “And what are your usual methods?”

“Flying,” he said, looking around them.

“I thought you said that choppers and planes couldn’t really come here.”

He looked at her, “I’ve never been on an artificial flying machine.” Ari stopped, “Oh, actually, that’s not true. I was on a hot air balloon once. That was ... interesting.”

When he talked about flying without anything artificial, it kicked at the one thing screaming in a part of her mind that she had been ignoring. Suddenly, she grabbed the man and pulled him down into a crouch. He lost his balance, falling with his butt hitting the snow.

“What are you doing?”

“There’s a dragon! There are dragons here! I don’t know where it went, but it tried to eat me. I envisioned it being dead in front of me, and then it disappeared. It’s possible the thing is dead somewhere nearby, but I’m not sure that my ability is strong enough to actually kill something like that.”

After a bit of silence, she looked over at him. The look in his eyes wasn’t clear, but she thought he must be just as stunned as she was.

“I know,” she said, a ghost of a smile on her lips. “I didn’t think they were real either. Alaska is so much ... stranger than I think anyone realizes.”

Instead of words of incredulity and mocking her for what she saw, Ari said, “You imagined me dead?”

He stood up and brushed himself off, but she grabbed his hand to try to pull him down. “You don’t understand. There’s a dragon somewhere around here.”

“Yes, Ms. McKenna, I know.” He pulled his hand out of hers and quickly brushed the snow off his slacks. “But you’ll be happy to hear you won’t need to worry about that for a while.”

“What do you mean? How do you know?”

He looked down at her, annoyance radiating from him. “Because whatever you did when you envisioned me dead, it made it so that I can’t be in my natural form without severe pain.”

Slowly, she rose. “What do you mean, your natural form?”

“I wasn’t trying to eat you. I was trying to save you.”

What he was saying didn’t make sense to her at first, but then his meaning dawned on her. “Are you suggesting that you...” she hoped to get him to admit to it. If the man actually thought he was a dragon, she would need to get away from him as quickly as she could.

“I’m a dragon shifter, Ms. McKenna. And you’ve made it so that I cannot fly us out of here.”

She looked at him, deciding that the man really was dangerous. After a second of consideration, she turned and ran, her mind no longer calculating anything as she allowed instinct to take over.

Chapter 4

An Impossible Reality

Between the admittedly duller pain in her arm, the snow, and her inappropriate footwear for the conditions, Claudia knew she didn't have a chance of getting away from the unhinged man if he wanted to catch her. Her arms pumped as fast as she could manage – which wasn't very fast considering how unbalanced each step was.

Then, something appeared beside her. When Claudia turned to look, she saw Ari running backward with apparent ease. Startled by the sight, she lost her balance and toppled over sideways. Expecting to hit the cold snow, she was surprised she hit something warm, then found herself back on her feet, her arms pinwheeling.

Ari looked at her. “What is wrong with you? What exactly are you hoping to achieve by running away?”

“You're insane! You think you are a dragon!” She took a step away from him.

“You have to know about shifters.”

She held out her hands, realizing that she was in no position to escape. “Please, just let me go. I will give you whatever you want.”

He looked around them. “Let you go to do what? Die on top of a mountain? Get killed falling over a glacier?”

Claudia opened her mouth to snap back at him, but there was nothing she could think to say in response. “I just ... please, I'm just starting to have a life of my own.”

He sighed, then said. “All I'm trying to do is to get you off the mountain. That's part of my job.”

“You have no gear, no team, and no means of travel.”

“I'm. A. Dragon. Shifter.” His annoyance almost radiated off him, and Claudia's eyes were drawn up to his hair, which seemed to be changing color. It went from white to a dull pink; then, some red streaks started to show and spread. As she watched, it went back to white as he finally explained.

“I’m not exactly part of the rescue team, but they’ve been going through some changes recently. Plus, they came out when the plane went down looking for survivors, but obviously no one was found.”

Claudia looked at him, shaking her head, trying to process what had happened with his hair while trying to understand what he was saying. “Then ... why did you return?”

“Someone sensed that you were still alive. Another dragon shifter named Elliot. Usually, one of my brothers or I would have done it, but I was still in LA, Nigel is out to sea, and Ethan is still recovering from someone shooting him through the heart.”

Claudia blinked, “What do you mean recovering?”

“Oh, um, Sophia was there, so she restored it. Apparently, the bullet pretty much destroyed it. Anyway, she fixed him, but he’s a bit ... fragile still. Not that I would tell him that. We’ve been monitoring him to make sure he doesn’t do too much, and Nigel’s supposed to visit him as soon as he arrives. It’s only been a few days since Ethan was shot, but Rey says he’s going to move whether or not we help.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“Right.” Ari cleared his throat. “Just the basics. Elliott joined the rescue team as a flyover to spot any movement they might miss since no other dragon shifter was readily available. He sensed something in the snow, and that turned out to be you. Since most of the rescue team is full of humans, Elliott wasn’t in a position to do anything – he had to stay out of sight. So when he returned, he told us, and we contacted Sybil, who has an impressively long range for connecting with a shifter. She helped bring an astronaut down, apparently. I think it was her fiancé or something. Don’t know what their relationship is.” He continued to rattle off details that she couldn’t follow. “She connected with you. You managed to stun her and shut her out. Fortunately, she had gotten a rough idea of where you were, and she relayed that to me before you scrambled her abilities.”

“I didn’t scramble anything.”

“You literally responded to her mostly to complain about the pain, but enough so that she knew you heard her.”

Claudia thought back to when she had awoken. “Wait, you mean that was an actual person?”

“Hey. She’s a wolf shifter, still technically an alpha, so her abilities are substantial. She was able to get me close so that I could start looking for you. Unfortunately, I’m not gifted in sensing other shifters, so I had to resort to melting the snow to find you. When I did, you apparently wished me dead.”

Claudia shook her head and smiled. “This has to be some kind of joke. This can’t be real.”

“Really?” He gave her a look of incredulity. “You are a shifter, so how does any of this seem far-fetched to you?”

“I can assure you that I’m human. Always have been, always will be.”

“Right. Because humans can survive exploding planes.”

“Well, not through normal means. I imagined myself safely on the snow.”

His look of skepticism switched to one of surprise. Turning his face a little, Ari looked at her. “What do you mean?”

Claudia took a deep breath and collected her thoughts. “You know, I’ve never told anyone about my abilities, not even my mother.”

Ari’s expression changed to one she couldn’t read, his eyes looking at her face for something, although she wasn’t sure what. Then he started looking around them. “Let’s get you somewhere a little warmer. You are starting to shiver.”

Once he said it, Claudia realized that he was right. Her arms had moved around her body, and she was hugging herself, but it did not stop her body from shaking.

Again, he didn’t ask for her permission. Ari leaned over and picked her up, but this time, Claudia didn’t have anything

to say. She was admittedly shocked, but in his arms, her body started to warm to his touch.

“How do you do that?”

“Speed is a natural ability of all dragon shifters. It usually takes a lot of effort not to move rapidly.”

As soon as he said it, Claudia realized that they were moving impossibly fast. Stunned into silence, she waited until he stopped before trying to get more information. The last thing she wanted to do was to distract him.

She had no idea how long it took, but when he stopped, they were in an area with more trees – the plane had crashed into the mountain toward the top, where the trees were sparse. They had gone far enough down the mountain to reach an area with denser tree coverage.

When he put her down, Ari started looking around them. To her surprise, his hair was now a brown color that nearly matched the trees.

“Your hair keeps changing color.” Her eyes stared at the top of his head, still trying to process everything.

He turned his stunning eyes to look at her. The tone was dismissive when he replied, “Yes, it does. I don’t control it, which is a shame. Gavin says that his brother can, which would be incredibly beneficial.”

“How?”

“How does he control it?” Ari shrugged, “I have no idea. If I could, I would.”

“No,” she shook her head. “I mean, how do you manage to change it at all?”

“It’s connected to my emotions. Usually, I keep them in check well enough that it doesn’t happen – and always around humans. It’s an innate ability, sort of like camouflage.”

“I can’t do anything like that.”

“Well, no, it’s not common. Gavin’s brother is the only other shifter I’ve heard of who can change hair color. Every

shifter has different abilities. Well, there is a general set of abilities for the different species, then every shifter has their own unique set.”

Claudia put her head in her hands. “None of this makes sense. I must have died in the plane crash. Or more likely when I toppled over the cliff.”

“What ... cliff?”

“I wasn’t able to move myself far enough away from the plane to be safe. I rolled away so that I wouldn’t get killed when it exploded, and unfortunately, I was more focused on moving downhill than on assessing the area around me. It probably saved my life since I would have stopped instead of plummeting over if I had seen a cliff.”

“It was probably a glacier, but I understand what you are saying.”

Claudia looked at him. “Does it matter?”

“Probably not to someone from LA. Mostly, it’s an indicator of ... you know what, it’s not important for what you want to know. What you need to know is that all of this is real. And if you stop to think about it, you have to know that you aren’t human. No *human* can make a reality of something they imagine.”

“Sure. It’s called positive thinking and envisioning the future you want.”

He looked at her, and then Ari threw his head back and laughed. Grinning, he shook his head, “Sorry, Ms. McKenna, but that is not how it works. The process takes time – it’s not instantaneous. How long have you known that you could make your visions translate into real life?”

Claudia stopped and thought about it. “Um, I think Allison started telling me about it when I was four or five years old. It started to work by the time I was eight. Actually, the first time I was successful was also a life-threatening situation. One of Allison’s boyfriends tried to kidnap me, and he had a knife to my throat. I imagined standing nearby while a police dog knocked him down. It didn’t play out exactly like

that, but it was pretty close to what I imagined. After that, I started focusing on my visions when I felt it was important or necessary, and I realized that Allison was right.”

“Whose Allison?”

“Oh, um, my biological ... woman. Sorry, I refuse to give her the title of mother because she isn’t one.”

A look of dawning crossed his face. “Oh. You’re one of *those*.” He wiped a hand over his mouth, then exhaled slowly. “Elliott would have been a better choice for this. I really don’t have much experience with people who don’t know what they are.”

“I don’t know the guy, and I don’t know what you are talking about.”

Ari scratched the back of his head, his eyes studying hers. “This is really not the best time or place to be trying to explain what you are and why it matters. I mean, that’s a lot to take in.”

“Well, you seem to think I’m some kind of shifter, but I can assure you that I’ve never been anything but a human. Just like you.”

He scoffed at that. “You saw me as a dragon. Think about it: Where did the dragon go?”

“I would imagine it died. My visions have always come true, at least to some extent.”

“Have you ever tried to kill someone with your visions?”

“Well, no.”

“Killing even a regular human that way would be difficult. At least, I imagine it would be. Killing a dragon shifter, especially in their dragon form, well, we are incredibly hard to kill when we are dragons.”

“Then how do you explain the dragon disappearing?” She gave him a look as if she was forcing him to admit something.

“Because whatever you did hurt. Really bad. I shifted to stop the pain, and voilà, it worked.”

“That’s not possible. People can’t change into other shapes.”

“People can’t imagine themselves out of a crashing plane and onto safe ground.”

“One, I clearly wasn’t safe because that’s how I messed this up,” she pointed to her arm, which still hurt. “And two, people imagine things all of the time. It’s not like it was instantaneous.”

“If that were true, why weren’t there any other survivors?”

“People don’t believe that it’s possible, so they can’t imagine it. Envisioning what you want takes time and practice.”

“And it only works to get you to safety?”

“Well, no. I mean, I use it a few times a year. When my ex slept with Allison, I got rid of the furniture by envisioning it somewhere else. Then I had to get rid of all of the furniture when Samson told me that they had contaminated a lot of other rooms in my house.”

Ari was frowning at her. “I’m not sure which is more disturbing. The fact that your biological ... parent would sleep with someone you had been with, or that you think that people can just make things disappear.”

“It didn’t disappear,” she corrected him. “I moved it with my mind.”

“Ah, yes,” he rolled his eyes. “So much more practical and relatable.”

“It’s more logical than someone claiming they can turn into another animal.”

“Look, I’m here to rescue you, not argue.”

“That’s great, but how are you supposed to do that on your own with no vehicle?”

He groaned and rolled his eyes. “I’ve already told you how I was going to accomplish the rescue, so no, I don’t have traditional human means.”

“Well, you can clearly run fast. Can’t you just carry me down the mountain and be done with this?”

His expression changed to one of chagrin as he looked at her. “You must be some kind of rich girl, given the way you act. Given what you told me, why don’t you just transport yourself somewhere else?”

“I can’t move over long distances. The best I could do would be to move a mile or so, and that would leave me exhausted.”

“Imagine running down a mountain carrying a person. If you think envisioning something is rough, imagine what it’s like to everyone else who can only move through actual physical labor.”

Claudia harrumphed and turned away from him. “Are all rescuers this argumentative?”

“Are all spoiled girls like you this insufferable?”

“Hey!” Claudia put her hands on her hips, barely registering the pain in her right side. “I wouldn’t be so difficult if you would stop lying. You can’t honestly expect me to believe the nonsense you are spouting. And if you believe it, you are clearly a few sandwiches short of a picnic.”

“I’m not going to argue about this anymore.” Stepping forward, he reached out impossibly quickly. Before she could react, his hand was on her forehead, and she felt the cells of her body attempting to react to his touch. Unable to move, she stood rooted to the spot as her body seemed to change and shift.

“Hmm,” he stepped away. “Yeah, you can’t shift.”

Once his hand was off of her forehead, Claudia felt her anger rising. “How dare you touch me?”

“I was trying to force you to shift. Your ability really messed me up, but I can tell that you don’t have the right

switches present to actually change. Strange since you can transport yourself.”

“Of course, I can’t shift! That’s not a thing people can do!”

Claudia’s raised voice echoed around them. As the echoes started dying, there was a loud cracking sound. The actor looked around thinking that there might be another avalanche starting, possibly because of her being too loud. That was definitely something that happened in the movies – not that she believed everything that Hollywood writers made up.

When she turned to ask Ari if it might be an avalanche, she saw him on his knees, blood pooling under him. He glared up at her, “You envisioned killing me again?”

With that, he fell over onto the snow.

Chapter 5

Things Get Worse

Claudia quickly fell down beside him, her mind racing. “What happened? Why are you bleeding? Ari? Ari?”

She moved him so that she could look at his body as another loud cracking sound rang out around her. This time, the bark on one of the nearby trees splintered. The realization started to dawn on her as Claudia thought about the plane crash and the events of the last few years. Turning, she looked behind her, her eyes scanning the land for someone hiding in the snow. When there was another sound, her eyes focused on the area where the sound had originated.

Sure enough, there was a small group of people looking at her, and one of them was looking through a scope.

Placing her body over Ari’s, she immediately started imagining them as far away as she could possibly move them. In her mind, there was a very rugged cabin about three-quarters of a mile away.

Most importantly, she imagined the bullet wound being minor, causing Ari to be more shocked than injured.

Unlike normal, though, the image seemed to materialize almost instantaneously. When she opened her eyes, Claudia tried to sit up as she felt the rough wood under her legs. As the world around her started to swirl, she noticed Ari start to sit up, a confused look on his face.

Her body seemed to move in a circle with the world around her. She gave a loopy grin, “It’s never happened that fast before.”

As she watched the world moving in circles, Claudia pitched forward. Something warm spread through her as the familiar darkness took over.

When she started to wake, that cold, analytical voice wasn’t there, which was a first for her. Blinking a few times, she tried to process things around her.

A warm voice was close to her, drawing her attention.
“What happened?”

Claudia shut her eyes and squeezed them for a second.
“Where is the voice?”

There was a pause. “What?”

Claudia opened one eye, trying to focus on the person near her. There was a man with stunning dark blue eyes nearby, his dark hair moving hypnotically in his eyes. Her gaze moved from the eyes to the hair, then back to the eyes. “I don’t remember you. How did you get in my house?”

“What?” The man’s expression came into better focus.
“We aren’t in your house.”

Claudia sat up but was bothered by some mild pain in her right side. “Ouch! Why does my right side hurt?” She rolled her shoulder around in a circle. “My whole right side seems to be hurt.”

“You said that you rolled off a glacier.”

“Glacier?” The word triggered the memories, and her eyes snapped open wide. Unfortunately, her body had not fully recovered from the stress of transporting somewhere else, and she found the world moving a little too quickly in several directions.

“You might need to stay down for a little bit.”

She looked into the gorgeous, angular face in front of her. “You are Ari. You were shot.”

“Yeah. But something happened, and the ... bullet’s trajectory changed. It ended up requiring very little work to fix the damage after that.”

She sighed. “Thank God. That was terrifying.”

“Yeah. It was. My healing abilities are not robust, especially after you disrupted my abilities. But ... did you wish for me to get shot? Did you imagine that?”

Putting a hand on her forehead, Claudia said, “No. I wouldn’t do that, no matter how annoying you were being. If

anything, I would have imagined myself somewhere without you. Not that it would have been a great solution, considering I would have been alone on a mountain then.” That’s when the image of the group emerged. She shot up, registering that she was in a bed, but that was not the biggest thing on her mind. “There was a group of people who shot you. Then they tried to shoot me.”

Ari frowned. “Why would anyone do that? I mean, we are definitely in range for hunting, but we clearly aren’t any kind of creature on the approved hunting list.”

“Is that what it’s called?”

“What?” He looked at her, caught off guard by the question. “Oh, I don’t know. We don’t hunt. And I don’t pay attention to that kind of barbaric human activity.”

“That’s a bit judgmental. Humans have a harder time hunting down food than dragons.” She didn’t try to mask the sarcasm.

He looked at her. “I’m a vegetarian, so hunting my food is quite simple. Plants don’t tend to move.”

“You’re a dragon-shifting vegetarian? Is that normal?”

He sighed, then stood up and walked to the window. “I can’t imagine anyone up here trying to kill people, but I’ll need to go check it out to see what they want.”

“No, don’t.” There was a sense of concern in her voice. “I’m pretty sure that they were sent after me.”

He turned to look at her. “Why would they want to shoot you?”

“I don’t know that they wanted to kill me. It’s possible they wanted to drag me back to LA for someone who paid them to do it.”

He looked to the side, then back at her, “Why would anyone want to do that?”

She took a deep breath. “Because I’ve been busy over the last couple of years. I helped to expose several large

studios and their illegal activities. There is a lot of reason for any one of them to want to bring me back to make me pay.”

Ari assessed her for a few minutes, and she let him. It was hardly the first time someone had sized her up, and she knew when to allow someone to be so openly rude. Whether or not she liked it, Claudia needed him. That meant helping him to size her up and understand that there was a lot more to her than an entitled rich girl.

“I don’t understand why studios would care that much.”

Feeling incredulous, she asked, “Have you really never heard of me?”

He didn’t even hesitate. “No, Ms. Mckenna. I really don’t know who you are.”

“I’ve been acting for over two decades. My first acting gig was in a movie when I was four years old. Until a couple of years ago, I was one of the highest-paid actors in the world.”

“Oh. Ok.” He made a face and tilted his head to the side. “I’ve heard of those.”

Claudia wasn’t entirely sure what to say to that. “You mean, you’ve heard of actors?”

“Yeah.”

“You don’t watch TV? Movies? Streaming services?”

“Nope.”

“Really?”

“Not really interested in watching fiction, faux-histories, and other garbage that humans make up.”

“Well, that’s ... really judgmental.”

He shrugged. “I have a life to live, and I’m not wasting it watching people play pretend.”

“What about when you want to relax?”

“There are many other ways to relax that don’t require entirely shutting off my brain.”

“Wow, that’s brutal.”

He shrugged, “I’m hardly the only person to say it. Shifters really aren’t big on that kind of thing. I mean, how often do you watch that kind of stuff?”

“Actually, I…” her words dropped as she stopped to consider. In all of her years of acting, she really didn’t watch anything anyone made. She had only watched a few things she had done because Allison had forced her. “Hmm, I never really thought about it.”

“You don’t watch it.”

She frowned at him, wanting to argue, but she couldn’t. “No, I don’t.”

“I guess people with your career tend to be popular, too.”

“I don’t get a lot of personal time, and my actions are pretty closely followed by the media.”

“Sounds miserable.”

“Allison chose that for me because it meant making her a fortune.”

“But you did the work.”

“Yes. There was a lot that I exposed that proved to be quite unpopular with the people in the industry.”

He moved his head from side to side as if weighing her actions against what happened. “It sounds pretty well-deserved.”

“It was much worse than child labor and exploitation.”

“I don’t want to know.”

She looked at him. “A bit squeamish?”

“A bit too much for a dragon shifter. There’s a reason why my kind tends to live in more remote places. We tend to be quite critical, and when we make a decision, our actions are considered heavy-handed.”

Claudia's mind thought back over the tales of dragons. "You mean like burning villages and laying waste to people's lands?"

This got another unexpected laugh from him. "Something like that. Although we have different methods today. We prefer for people to keep thinking dragon hunters are fiction because humans have weapons that are a lot more destructive."

"Good enough that they could kill you?"

"Good enough to wipe out a lot more like than just humans."

Claudia considered this. "Yes, they do. But if they use weapons on you, wouldn't they just focus on dragons?"

"That's not really their history. And all it takes is one of them missing us and hitting another human population to start something much worse."

"I mean, yeah, that's pretty true, but it sounds like you aren't the biggest fan of an entire species."

"I don't make any bones about it. I love living up here. I love dealing with most shifters. And we have enough villains of our own who are far more dangerous."

As much as Claudia wanted to ask, in their current situation, it didn't seem relevant. Instead, she brought the subject back around to the problem at hand. "I'm sorry that you got dragged into this, that you almost died because of me."

Ari looked over at her, his mind clearly analyzing something. Finally, he said, "It's ok. Clearly, you didn't have any idea about the situation, and I can imagine that coming face to face with a dragon would be terrifying if you had no idea that they were real. I'm sorry that I assumed you knew about shifters. It's pretty rare for people not to know what they are up against in Alaska. I mean, when you have to live by your wits and physical abilities, you learn a lot more about yourself and your abilities. It's hard to imagine what it's like for shifters who grow up elsewhere and don't have that natural

instinct.” He sighed, then moved over and sat down next to her. “It’s even harder to imagine having shifter blood and no shifter abilities. It’s definitely the norm for female dragon shifters, but we don’t have many of those.”

“Really? Why not?”

“They used to be considered more disposable. They can’t shift, so they were seen as weaker than males, who can.”

“So ... there aren’t any female dragons?”

“Only rarely.”

“Why?”

He shrugged. “It’s just the way the species is. For most mammals, the females are shifters, which is what you find a lot of them up here. Shifting is a distinct advantage up here and looking human can be ... more than just a disadvantage, even with the special abilities.”

“It sounds unnecessarily complicated.”

Ari chuckled. “Not any more than humans. Consider the difference between males and females. Women’s bodies are capable of so much more, but males are stronger.”

Claudia considered his words for a few moments, then she crossed her legs on the bed and scooted forward. “What about babies?”

“What about them?”

“Are they different?”

He seemed to consider the question. “We are born in our animal forms. All females carry their children in their human forms, though, unless they are born animals that can’t shift. I’ve never met one of those, though, so I don’t really know what it’s like for them. But even dragon shifter females carry the babies as humans do.”

“Really?”

“Yep. There are a lot of similarities with humans, except that people don’t know we exist. Well, for the most part.”

“So,” she bit her lower lip, thinking about what he claimed to be, “you really are a dragon in your other form?”

“You saw me.”

“A white dragon?”

“You saw my eyes. Those don’t change.”

His words forced her mind back to that terrifying moment when she looked up into the face of the dragon and its stunning eyes. “Oh my ... the eye color was the same.”

He gave her a grin, “Not exactly a common eye color, is it?”

“No. I’ve never seen anyone with a similar eye color. But is it common among dragon shifters?”

“It’s not. My brother’s eyes are similar. Nigel, not Ethan.”

“You have two brothers?”

“One biological, the other recently adopted. That is not the point, though. Shifters have more vibrant eyes. That explains yours, too.”

Again, she reflected on his words. “Oh, actually, my eyes are like yours. Do you think that means we are related?”

He laughed. “Not a chance.”

“Then ... do all dragon shifters have lavender in their eyes?”

“No, and it’s not only dragon shifters that have that eye color. Cat shifters can also have some really interesting eye colors.”

Claudia looked down at her hands. “This is so much to take in.”

“Yes, it is.”

Her eyes met his. “We should probably get moving.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because they will be looking for me, and I don’t want you to get hurt again.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Hurting me twice was enough, huh?”

“What do you mean twice?”

“Well, you caused me some significant pain as a dragon, and now I can’t shift for I don’t know how long. Then you wished for me to be shot.”

“Wait, what? No, I didn’t wish that at all.”

He tilted his head, causing his perfectly styled hair to move gently. For a moment, she wanted to reach up and touch it, but she focused on his eyes. “You didn’t? I thought you were irritated and that you just visualized it.”

“No! I already told you I’ve never wanted to kill anyone! Not even Allison, and she’s definitely the person I would have the most reason to want dead. But prison is so much better. Death is an end. Prison is more like what she did to me for so much of my early years.”

“Wait,” his eyes narrowed, “so people just happened to be nearby when we stopped to talk?”

She shrugged. “I guess so. But if there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that people know how to track celebrities. I’ve never been able to go anywhere without being found within 24 hours. Alaska was supposed to provide me with some distance so I had the chance of escaping.”

He held up a hand. “No, that makes sense. The problem is that your plane went down. You should have been dead with everyone else. So how would anyone know that you survived?”

Claudia had no response to that. “I – I – I have no idea. Well, you said someone else figured it out. Nigel?”

“My brother? He’s out at sea.”

She waved her hand. “You said so many names I can’t remember, but whoever joined the humans to check for survivors.”

“Oh, you mean Elliot. That’s different. He didn’t know that you survived. He just sensed that there was someone still down there, but he’s not exactly the most connected to people. Because he sensed something, Sybil started trying to find any responding consciousness on the mountain. It took a while, too, since you were knocked out for a while.”

“Right. But couldn’t there be someone else who figured it out the same way? If the humans didn’t see a dragon in the sky watching them, couldn’t they have missed someone else looking at it from somewhere else?”

Ari looked at her, his mind clearly racing. “It’s possible but not likely. Elliott sensed you but no one else. And believe me, it’s hard to find anyone more thorough than him and Sybil didn’t sense anyone else either,” he shook his head. “I don’t think that there was anyone else there. Between Elliott and Sybil, I don’t see how anyone could hide.”

Claudia bit her lip, certain that he was wrong but not wanting to argue. “We can figure it out later. Right now, we need to get out of here. I won’t allow you to get killed because of me.”

He opened his mouth to say something, but it turned into a warm smile. “Thank you, that’s very kind, but you don’t need to worry about me.”

“Why? Because you are a dragon?” she asked, not bothering to keep her sarcasm hidden.

“It’s really hard to kill a male dragon shifter through traditional weapons.”

“What about when their abilities are hampered?”

He started to nod. “Ok, you have a point. Let’s go to make sure you keep me protected.”

She gave him a wry look. “You know, if you want to get shot at again, I’d be more than happy not to lose a few days while you heal yourself.”

“You didn’t lose a few days.”

Claudia scrunched up her face. “Moving two people that distance and creating a cabin should have set me back a week, if not two.”

“Oh, well, that’s because you haven’t been working with another shifter.”

Claudia shook her head a little. “What do you mean?”

“It’s only been about 20 minutes.”

“That’s not possible.”

“You shifted the bullet’s trajectory and our position while building a cabin. You may not have the best idea of what’s possible.”

“I know how drained I am when I tap into my visions like that. It entirely drains me.”

“And I gave you a bit of my energy. Figured whatever was happening, we needed to get things cleared up.”

“What do you mean you gave me some of your energy?”

“I thought that you tried to kill me again, so I wanted to wake you to talk about it. Sounds like it’s a good thing, too, since it turns out things may be a bit more complicated than that.”

“So, you recharged me like a battery?”

This time, Claudia’s eyes watched as his expression changed, the humor blooming over his face. It was intriguing as the sound of his laughter filled the cabin. It took a bit for the laughter to die down, but when it did, Ari continued to smile. “Yes, you are the battery, and apparently, you are solar-powered.”

This got a slight chuckle out of her. “So you are so bright that you are comparable to the sun?”

“If you want to do a bit more imagining, we could see just how much you can use me.”

Claudia looked at him, considering the words. Then, something outside of the cabin caught her eye. “I think we

should try that because it looks like they found us.”

Ari turned to look out the window as Claudia closed her eyes and thought about them being back outside, but just as far away as the last jump.

The next thing she knew, the biting wind nearly knocked her over as the exhaustion caused her consciousness to fade.

Chapter 6

Not the Time or Place to Push the Boundaries

The feeling of warmth for the second time was reassuring, but it didn't last long as she passed out.

When she woke again, Claudia couldn't remember what had happened, but she knew that she couldn't keep going with her abilities. With the wind whipping around her, she muttered, "No more."

To her surprise, a warm voice said, "Ok, I'll take care of things from here."

Opening her eyes, Claudia found her vision out of focus, but she was still able to focus on a handsome and vaguely familiar face. Another first. She smiled, feeling that she was going to be alright. She shifted a little, getting more comfortable.

"Not too much there, Ms. McKenna. It's a bit hard to run and deal with you wiggling around in my arms."

Clearing her throat, she realized that she was quite thirsty. Still, that wasn't her primary concern. "What do you mean it's hard to run?"

"Um," there was some hesitation, then he said softly, "Don't worry about it. Just rest until you feel better. Do let me know when you are ready to talk, though."

"Hmm." Trying not to move too much, Claudia thoroughly enjoyed the warm sensation and the way she felt comforted by that presence. It was an entirely new sensation.

The wind continued to move around her, and the actor's best guess was that she was in a convertible, resting in someone's lap. That would explain the wind on some level, although she did feel a bit more exposed. And it would also explain the handsome man talking to her.

For some reason, she kept her thoughts under control, avoiding thinking anything in particular as she enjoyed the new sensation of comfort.

When she felt awake enough to find out what was happening, Claudia moved her right arm. There was some pain, but she couldn't remember why. There was a passing thought that she may have worked out too much the previous day, although she had no memory of it. Giving a gentle tap on the man's chest, she murmured, "I'm ready."

The wind calmed, and she figured that he was pulling the car to the side of the road.

"Sorry. I didn't see any other cabins along the way. But I think we are a pretty good distance from whoever was tracking us. Do you think you are ok to stand?"

"Um, I don't know. What happened?"

There was a moment of silence before the man answered with his own question. "What do you remember?"

"Um, not much. What kind of car are we in?"

"No car. We are on a mountain in Alaska."

"What?" she giggled. "Quit playing around. Obviously, we are in a car. I felt the wind."

She felt the man's chest expand, then slowly shrink. She recognized it as someone taking a deep breath as if they were trying to keep their patience. To Claudia's surprise, his tone was light as he said, "Wakey, wakey, Ms. McKenna. We have some important stuff to take care of."

"Like what?"

"Figuring out who is after us. And making sure you survive this. After all, your fans will love to hear that you survived, won't they?"

"Survived? What did I survive?" Even though the wind wasn't blowing nearly so hard, Claudia didn't want to open her eyes or move away from his warmth.

You know that you need to face facts. This is where you will die. Stop fighting it, and just let yourself go.

Claudia opened her eyes and blinked, her expression sour after that particular thought. "Apparently, things are

getting more dour.”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

Finally, she looked up and really took in the man speaking to her. As soon as she looked into his eyes, everything came back to her.

She nearly sprang out of his arms. “What happened? Where are they?”

“Well, you may be a bit slow to wake, but once you do, the world needs to watch out, huh?”

“I’m serious, Ari. What happened?”

He frowned a little, then pointed back up the mountain. “You passed out a few miles back. I caught you, then started to run with you. Figured it made more sense than just standing around holding you while you recharged.”

“Oh, right.” Claudia nodded slowly. “Right. Thank you, that was really good thinking. And, um, thank you for being so nice.”

“Nice? I wouldn’t say that I’ve been nice. Generally tolerable, maybe.”

“This is not something we should be arguing about in our current predicament.”

“I suppose you are right.” The half-smile he gave her made Claudia think that he was likely planning on bringing it back up later. “So, what’s the plan?”

“Can you become a dragon again?”

He quickly shook his head. “I don’t know how long it will take, but you managed to really scramble my abilities. It’s never happened before, so I don’t know how long it will take.”

“Then how do you know that you can’t do it now?”

“The same way you know if you can or can’t breathe.”

Unsure if he was being serious, she waited for him to say more, but he offered no other explanation. Finally, she asked, “Is it really that easy to shift?”

“It’s an innate ability. Very few of us remember the first time we shifted, so I would say that it is incredibly easy.”

Running a hand along the side of her neck, she asked, “What does it feel like?”

Ari looked up at the mountain, “Probably not one of our most pressing problems.”

“Right. Right. Sorry. It’s just so strange. My mind keeps coming up with more questions.”

“Well, there’s always later, as long as we can get you out alive.”

“You sound certain that you won’t be killed, but you were the one who was shot.”

“Yeah, but it wouldn’t have been fatal. Just would have kept me from being able to help you.”

“Really? But how?”

“Normal human weapons are rarely effective. The bullets they used wouldn’t kill me.”

“What kind of bullets would have done that?”

He narrowed his eyes and quirked the right side of his mouth. “Look, do you want to stand around talking about how hard it is to kill a dragon shifter, or would you rather work to get you to safety first?”

“Sorry. Just, it’s so difficult...” She held up her hands at his incredulous expression. “Safety,” she finally said, “I choose safety.”

“So what’s the plan?”

“I don’t have one. And you are a part of the rescue team.”

“It’s not my usual, but I did agree to it.”

“Can you just run down the hill?”

“We’ve discussed this. Technically, I could. But we are talking several days, with me being unsure how and when my

abilities will be restored, no food, and we are being chased by people who are likely after you.”

“Then what do you suggest?”

“We could try to face them.”

“Do you really think that’s a good idea?”

He folded his arms over his chest. “We should probably figure out who they are and why they are after you, as well as how they knew that you were still alive.”

“Does it really matter?”

“I don’t know until we have answers to those issues.”

“Well, you may feel that you are immortal, but I can assure you that I am entirely mortal. Taking on a group of armed people wanting to kill me is not the best way to keep me alive.”

“How many times can you use your abilities?”

Claudia closed her eyes and shook her head. “I was serious about that. I don’t think I can keep doing that. When was the plane crash?”

“Six days ago.”

“It’s been almost a week? How did I survive in the snow for so long?”

“I guess it’s because you have shifter blood. You don’t need to eat or drink nearly as often; you are more resilient in general. If you had been human, your odds of survival would have been lower, but not impossible.”

She tapped a finger against her leg. “I can’t believe ... usually it would take longer to wake.”

“There was someone actively looking to wake you.”

She stopped tapping. “You are right. That’s not normal for me. I’ve never let anyone else know what I could do, and I’ve always looked for somewhere safe so that no one would find me in a compromised position. A lot of firsts for me on this trip.”

“Doesn’t sound like it’s been in the best way, though.”

“I don’t know.” She looked at her unexpected rescuer and decided not to say what she had thought when she first woke in his arms. “Jury’s still out. So, I guess we should be thinking of a plan.”

“I’m for seeing what we can get out of them.”

“That seems unnecessarily risky.”

“Well, we don’t have much time left to debate it, so if you want to hide, we’ll need to come up with that solution pretty quickly. Especially if your abilities are out of play.”

“I’m sorry, but even after you helping me, I still don’t feel quite right, like part of the world hasn’t finished falling back into place.”

He nodded slowly. “I think I can understand that. The only other choice is to play the game.” Ari began walking toward her.

She watched as he walked around behind her. “What do you mean?”

Suddenly, he grabbed her right arm and twisted it behind her. “Hey!” Claudia said, trying to look over her shoulder at him. “That arm hurts! What do you think you are doing?”

The sound of motors caused her to turn back so that she was facing uphill. Her heart began to hammer as about half a dozen snowmobiles came into view.

Behind her, Ari’s voice was cold. “Guys! She’s over here!”

Chapter 7

An Ulterior Motive

It took moments for her brain to catch up to what was happening, but Ari's expression said it all – he was giving her over to the people who were after her.

“Is this what you meant? They can't kill you, you lying bastard!” She tried to free herself from his grip, but he squeezed her harder. “I trusted you! I trusted you!”

Her screams caught the group's attention. Making a beeline toward them, she and Ari were soon surrounded as the group swarmed around them.

One of the vehicles stopped. “Who the hell are you?”

Ari pushed on her arm a little, causing some extra pain. Before he could speak, Claudia spat out, “He's a liar! He can't be trusted.”

The laughter from behind her was harsh. “Where there's money, there's loyalty.”

“Really?” She tried to glare over her shoulder at him. Then she tried to stomp on his foot. He moved his leg out of the way, then used the motion to knock her leg out from under her. Claudia pitched forward, causing an intense pain in her arm. She yelped in shock as a warm feeling began to go through her, causing the pain to disappear. Too stunned to say or do anything, Claudia tried to figure out just what was happening. The sensation was familiar – he had used it to heal her when they first met. But why was he doing it now? Was it to help her? Or was he ensuring that she wasn't too damaged when she was turned over to the people looking to abduct her?

Ari forced her back into a more neutral position as her mind reeled. “I found her and caught her. If you guys want what's rightfully mine, it's going to cost you.”

“Or we could just kill you and take her ourselves.”

“You could, but I think you will find that the rangers won't take too kindly to that. As one of the rescue team, they

will be looking for the drivers of the vehicles that left tracks near my body.”

“Then we’ll just pitch your corpse over the edge.”

“You know, if that’s what you have to offer, I think I’ll just take her with me. No reason why you should get the money that is rightfully mine.”

The man on the stopped snowmobile pulled something out of his coat. Holding it out, Claudia froze as she found herself looking down the barrel of a Magnum. Her mouth went dry as the man pointing it at her said, “That would work, too. We get more if we bring her back alive. But we were only sent to verify that her body was in the wreckage.”

“Hmm,” Ari responded. “Interesting how you came armed for someone you thought was dead.”

“We were warned that there was a good chance that she was still alive. Since the money is greater if she’s alive, it would be preferable to take her back as she is, but it does seem like a lot of trouble, especially since she managed to pick up a leech.”

Claudia’s eyes flashed. “You will all pay for this, especially you!” She tried to elbow Ari, but he was too quick. She still had not decided if he was actually working against her or if this was some kind of ploy. They never did get around to talking about what he had in mind.

Once he had easily brought her back under his control, Ari continued to negotiate. “By that logic, it would make more sense to dispatch a few of your own men. I mean, it’s not like it’ll take all of you to bring her back, right? She’s just one little girl.”

There was silence among the group as most of them had stopped their vehicles to hear what was being said. The man who seemed to be the leader spoke before they could start expressing what they were thinking. “We were told that she’s clever and good at manipulating situations. How else could she have wound up in so many movies with so little talent?”

Claudia felt a twinge of anger at that, but she found she really didn't care if people insulted her acting skills. It was more that they were saying that she needed to manipulate her way into roles – that was what her mother used to do.

“Right,” Ari said, his voice cold. “So, the more of you there are, the easier it will be to manipulate you against each other.”

Several of the other men on snowmobiles exchanged looks, clearly going through what Ari had just expressed.

“Don't listen to him,” the man who appeared to be the lead said. “If we start fighting now, he can get away with her.”

“It's true. I wasn't actually suggesting that you should. Just pointing out that your logic to kill me could be applied to others. If you kill me, someone who is actively helping you by catching her, what's to keep you from turning on each other later?”

“You aren't part of the group,” the man growled. “We know each other. You are just some outsider who lucked out in getting to the target first.”

Ari made a tsk-tsk sound, then melodramatically inhaled. “Do you really think that I just happened to be here? Like I said, I'm one of the rescuers who was sent to check the plane. Do you honestly think that you were the only people hired or that I am working alone?”

There was another silence as the members of the group started to think about his words. They didn't entirely understand why they weren't just taking Claudia and leaving, but what Ari said was starting to make sense. It didn't seem far-fetched to think that other people were hired, especially if they had a legitimate reason to be at the crash site. They were clearly starting to wonder if they should work with him.

The leader glared at Ari, something that was impressive given how little of his eyes were visible through the cold weather gear on his head. “Obviously, you are alone. We haven't seen anyone else for miles. Not this far up.”

“You may be right,” Ari said, “but that’s a bit of a risk to take when you don’t know when or if you will be attacked. For all you know, we could be waiting for a rescue chopper. What are the odds if they arrive first? And believe me, you will not get off lightly when the rest of my men appear, especially since my team knows where to hide all the bodies so they are never found.” Ari’s voice was menacing, and Claudia turned to see part of his wide grin. “You are more than welcome to take a chance by disbelieving me and seeing how many of you survive. I’m not too concerned either way.”

“We don’t gain anything by bringing you along.”

“I’ve been milking her for information for a while.” He pushed her arm up, but to Claudia’s surprise, it just felt warmer. That’s when she realized that all of the pain was gone – in less than a day, her arm and shoulder seemed to have fully healed. She gasped, but not out of pain. “The little girl trusted me enough to give me a lot of details about where she socked her money away and her upcoming projects. Do you really think you will get that kind of information from her?”

“Why would you tell us any of that?” The leader asked, his voice clearly wary, but Ari’s words had caught his attention.

“You have a smaller team and smaller division of the second payday. My team can take her and deal with the headache of a spoiled celebrity while we go off to collect on a much bigger prize.”

“Everything you say sounds good, but I think that what Ms. Harvey is offering is more than enough. And since her plan to kill you on the plane failed, the reward has gone up. So thanks, but no thanks.”

Claudia watched as everything seemed to move in slow motion. Her mind automatically started creating an image of her somewhere far from here, but nothing happened – there wasn’t time for her visioning to actually move her before a bullet reached her.

The next thing she knew, she was falling to the side as the sound of a gunshot rang out. She was aware of a warmth

against her back; then, it rolled over on top of her.

Ari whispered in her ear, “Stay down, act dead, and envision yourself back in the cabin.”

She watched as he plunged something into his shoulder, causing blood to splatter on her. Stunned, the actor had no idea what to do, which was exactly what he wanted. He looked down at the blood on her, then nodded. Without another word, he pushed himself off her and ran. Claudia lay there trying not to think about the blood covering her and trying to look like she wasn't breathing. It was particularly difficult as she felt the snow melting under her body and starting to soak her clothing.

Ah, so you have found someone else to betray you. Did you really expect anything else?

The cold voice was saying exactly what Claudia had been thinking, but the actor no longer believed that Ari had turned on her. Apart from his initial reaction, Ari had acted in a way that actually helped her. Her arm was healed, and he had given her cover while clearly drawing attention to himself.

Instead of anger, she had a growing concern about him as more gunshots rang out.

Striving to keep herself from drawing the attention of anyone, Claudia tried to take in what she could while once again tapping into her visions. At first, she tried to draw Ari with her, but she could not sense him. Unsure what that meant and too afraid to think too deeply about it, Claudia focused on the bed where she had woken not that long ago. A sense of warmth and comfort surrounded her as she felt her body start to shift from the cold of the snow to the hard wooden floor.

It had definitely taken longer than usual because the battle had raged around her for some time. Her body had only made the move after the sound of the snowmobiles had started to move away from her.

Her mind reeling from the turn of events, Claudia put her hands against the floor and pushed up. “Ari,” she murmured, “what did you do?”

Stumbling toward the door, Claudia did something she had never done before – she fought the exhaustion as it began to wash over her. There was a bed not too far behind her, but she was too worried about the person who had sent her back to the cabin. Her hand missed the doorknob the first time she tried to grip it. Her body slammed against the door; her legs barely able to keep her standing as her hand continued to try to grab the doorknob.

“I shouldn’t have just left him there. I have to...”

The world spun around her as her hand managed to hit the knob. Instead of gripping it, though, her hand just brushed against it. Pitching forward, she toppled onto the floor as the world went dark.

Chapter 8

Experience Is the Best Teacher

Vaguely aware of the sensation of moving, Claudia felt very little else. Her body ached, and her mind was entirely scrambled as someone spoke to her. She couldn't make out what they were saying or even who it was. Letting out a low moan, she allowed her mind to slip back into the darkness.

When she finally started to wake, the sound of a crackling fire attracted her attention. Claudia managed to open one eye, but it really didn't help her understanding of the world around her.

Something made the bed sink near her. A hand moved the hair from her forehead. "How do you feel?"

Her gaze shifted unsteadily toward the voice, but her visions refused to get any clearer. "Mphbrghfor."

There was a chuckle, and then a hand brushed over her forehead. "Well, you did say you didn't want to do it again. Sorry, but I didn't see any way to get you out of there safely quite yet. I promise you won't have to do it again. You have decidedly gotten worse off every time, and this time, you've been out for a couple of days."

She mumbled some more nonsense, but Claudia's mind felt like it was largely working the way it should. A few days wasn't unusual for her after using her abilities, something she wanted to tell him, but she didn't seem to have the ability to do that.

"Don't try to talk. Your body is recovering from the repeated use of your ability, and it's starting to cause burnout. In this case, that is a pretty accurate description because I've sensed some damage around your mind. I'm guessing that's why you end up passing out after you use your ability, and by my bringing you back quicker, it's been doing some damage. I do apologize for that. Don't worry; you'll be safe for a while; no need to worry about anyone getting to you."

She wiggled her nose a little at him before mumbling the word "Tricked."

This was met with silence, but she was sure he hadn't left because there was a warmth coming from him. Although it was difficult, she started to move her body to try to get close to the warmth.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. What are you doing? You need to just rest."

Ignoring him, she continued to try to scoot closer. When her body touched his, Claudia started to curl around him.

This seemed to let him know what it was she wanted. "Ah, yes. When I found you, your body temperature had dropped. That didn't seem to happen before, so I'm not sure what was different this time."

Claudia made a few noises as she continued to try to snuggle against him. Finally, he sighed. "Do you want me to carry you over to the fire?"

She tried to shake her head, but it came across more like a bobblehead. He sighed again. "Ok. Hold on, and I can help you out. I just hope that you don't get too upset when you come to your senses."

The warmth disappeared for a moment, leaving her feeling cold. With her eyes shut, Claudia began to whimper. Then, there was a weight behind her. "It's ok. I'm not leaving you. Come here, and I'll warm you."

Soon, she became aware of the warmth behind her. Claudia continued to whimper, pushing herself back toward the warm sensation. Her body stopped at something firm, and she let out a contented sigh as the warmth spread through her body. Reaching back, she tried to grab something to bring over to the front of her body. Her hand gripped something roundish, so she wrapped her hand around it and pulled it forward.

"Um," he said, clearly not sure what to say. Claudia curled up a bit more, pressing her back further into the warmth as she wrapped her arm around what she vaguely realized was Ari's arm. Resting it against her chest, she then held his arm to her with both of her own arms, almost like a person holding onto a life raft in the ocean. Finally feeling warm, she relaxed.

Instead of passing out, this time, Claudia fell into a very deep sleep.

While her body rested, Claudia's mind wandered. It was a first for her, and she wasn't sure how much of what she was experiencing was a dream and how much was a part of her learning a bit more about what she was. It had never occurred to her that she wasn't human, mostly because she had never had any real connection with the people around her. She thought her ability to manifest things into reality had to be something that some people could do. After all, there was an entire movement around the idea, and since it had been brought to her attention when she was still a preteen, Claudia had taken that as a sign that she was expected to do it. Of course, she knew that she shouldn't do it out in the open without good reason – there was a sense of self-preservation that was innate. The rest she just assumed was normal and had not discussed it, just like most of what happened to her were supposed to be a secret.

Her body didn't seem to be fully formed, and when she looked at her hand, it was barely there. For some reason, Claudia was unbothered by it. Moving forward, she followed the sound of voices in a large house. The closer she got, the louder they became.

As Claudia neared the room, she heard a woman's voice. "Nigel, I have to do this, and I can't do it alone."

"You don't need to do it. The whole thing will work itself out; just give it time."

"NO! You aren't listening to me! I've seen what will happen. I know that things are going to go poorly if we just leave it."

Claudia reached the doorway and stopped when she saw three people standing together. One of the men was tall, his blonde hair impeccably styled to make him look like the picture-perfect heir to a fortune. His eyes looked familiar, but they weren't quite the same as what she remembered. The expression on his face made it clear he felt he knew best. The woman in front of him was stunning. Her large eyes were a

unique gold color, ringed with an impressive set of lashes. Her mouth was drawn into a thin line as she looked up at the man. Standing on her other side was someone with blonde hair, but that was about all she could see.

The man she could see clearly spoke, reaching out to touch the woman in front of him. She stepped back, her expression turning almost angry. The man sighed, “You are still young; someday, you will learn the difference between visions and possibilities. I know what is happening, and it will be fine. I promise you.”

A familiar voice spoke up before the woman could. “No, Nigel, it’s you who doesn’t understand. Lore is right about this, and if you ignore it now, there could be serious repercussions.”

This got a much less condescending reaction. “Really, Ari, I don’t think you need to be feeding her belief in what she sees. She’s not like Rey, and if we keep...”

“You are right, she’s not like Rey. What our sister sees is much more dire and something that both of us can feel. You need to stop hiding behind this belief that you know best. Our parents didn’t leave you in charge – they told all of us to...”

“We are not having this conversation. I’ve said it will be fine, and I need you guys to trust me. Now, I need to go take care of the things that we were specifically told to mind in our parents’ absence.”

He turned and strode away from them as his sister reached out to him. “Nigel, wait!”

When he didn’t even turn around to look at her, the poor young woman sagged. Ari reached out and put his hand on her shoulder. “I’ll go with you. I’m not going to let you do this alone.”

She pulled away from him, a defiant look on her face. “No, you won’t, Ari. You aren’t the brother that I need because you aren’t strong enough.”

His mouth quirked up. “With that logic, you shouldn’t go because you are far weaker than I am.”

“I can see what needs to be done; you can’t.” She took a deep breath. “I already know if you go, it will kill you.”

“Better than you doing it alone.”

“No, it isn’t.” She stepped forward and patted his cheek. “You are just too soft, Ari, and that will make you vulnerable. I’ll approach the Orsinos and see if they have anyone they can spare.”

“Bear shifters aren’t going to be able to help you.”

“They may not be as strong, but they are incredibly powerful. And now that the Lynx have been killed off, I know that they are ready to move against the Wendels.”

Ari shook his head. “You are going to start an open war if you do that.”

“Oh, so you can see the future now?”

“I can follow the reasoning of the Wendels. If you approach them with *one* member from the Orsino family, war will be inevitable.”

“So you have no faith in me?”

His shoulders drooped a bit. “It’s not about underestimating you, but in not underestimating the cruelty of that family. I know that I haven’t been the best big brother to you guys, but please believe me when I say that what you suggest will cost so many more lives.”

Throwing her hands up, the young woman said, “So I should just sit by and let things happen! Is that what you are saying?”

“No, I’m saying take me. Promise me you won’t try to involve anyone else and trust me to handle it.”

Her eyes searched his. “I will think about it.” There was a faint smile on her face. Ari pulled her into a hug, but Claudia felt something pulling at her, and she turned away from the scene.

Moving through the wall, she entered a dark room with an elegant coffin resting in the middle of it. Claudia moved

forward to look into it, but the sound of voices nearby again caught her attention. Drawn toward it, she moved away from the darkness and toward a faint light down the hall. This time, the people were speaking quietly. One was sitting on the ground, his back against the wall, his face in his hands. Ari was crouched beside him, his hair a dark black, his expression dour.

“This isn’t what she wanted for you, Nigel. It’s my responsibility.”

The blonde-haired man looked up, and Claudia was stunned by the change in his appearance. He had stubble all over his face, his eyes were sunken, and it looked like he had been crying. He looked entirely different from the man who had stood in front of Ari and the woman. “It’s my fault she died. It’s *my* fault. How am I supposed to live knowing that I ignored her pleas, insisting that she was wrong.” He started to choke up. “She’s dead because of me.”

Ari took one of his hands. “She’s dead because she refused to listen just as much as you did. I told her that I would help and insisted that she not drag anyone else into this. Yes, you both should have listened to reason, but compounding your poor decisions isn’t going to help anyone.”

Nigel yanked his hand away, then stumbled to get up. “You don’t get to say that! Not now! You could have been a better brother to us growing up, but you had to get mixed up with humans trying to solve their problems.”

Ari stood and held his hands up. “We aren’t the only ones suffering, Nigel. What the Wendels have done has caused immense harm, and no one is taking care of the humans.”

“Why should we?” Nigel shot back, clearly trying to focus on his anger. “She died because ... because ...”

Ari walked over and pulled his brother into a hug. Instead of pushing him away, Nigel leaned into him. “I can’t live knowing that I failed her.”

Rubbing his back, Ari said, “Yes, you can. And I won’t take over until you feel...”

Nigel shook his head. “Let me do it. Rey can’t continue to captain it, and I ... I’m the one who is full of regret. If there is anyone who should take over, it should be me.”

Ari took a deep breath. “You know that it is likely a death sentence.”

This got a watery laugh from Nigel. “I sincerely hope so. Then maybe I can finally atone for what I’ve done.”

Ari looked like he had something he wanted to say, but he held his tongue as he continued to soothe his brother.

Claudia started to rub her nearly invisible hand over her clavicle; the pain of watching the pair was difficult to experience. As soon as she felt the pull, she turned and moved toward it.

She moved through a wall and appeared on a cliff overlooking a bay. The wind was harsh, but she didn’t feel it.

An unfamiliar voice drew her attention to her right. Ari stood looking at the bay with a man a bit shorter than him. The man was clearly older than Ari, and his light-colored hair looked like a mix of white and light brown. He was thin, and there was nothing menacing about his physical appearance, but even from where she stood, Claudia could see intelligence in his light blue eyes.

The older man reached a hand up and patted Ari’s shoulder. “It’ll be all right, Ari. This is probably what’s best for him.”

This brought a deep sigh from the dragon shifter. “I failed them both. If only I’d focused more on family...”

“The Wendels would have wiped out more human towns and brought about the extinction of more shifters. Losing the Lynx will be much more detrimental than anyone realizes. That’s why we really can’t lose you out at sea.”

Ari looked over at him, the annoyance clear on his face. “I must be really pathetic if everyone needs to protect me.”

The older man laughed. “Believe me, Nigel is in a much better position for one of the members who will be boarding

soon enough.”

Ari shook his head, clearly unconvinced. “Rey, I understand what a crew member needs to join.”

The man smirked. “You think so?”

“I’m not a fool.”

“And you aren’t nearly so soft or forgiving as people think.”

“I’m not going to deny someone a chance at redemption and atonement.”

The older man’s eyes moved back to the ship. “Would you let a Wendel on the ship?”

Anger flashed in Ari’s eyes for a moment, and his hair went through a wide range of colors as he growled, “They deserve everything that’s coming to them.”

“Young Ethan certainly deserves the chance that Nigel will be able to give him.”

Ari gritted his teeth. “He deserves a slow, painful death in front of his parents so they can see their lineage destroyed.”

“And that’s why you are a poor fit for the vessel.”

Ari looked away.

The man continued, “It will work out in the end.”

“And what am I supposed to do? Watch everyone I love get killed because they feel I am of no use?”

With a firm clap on Ari’s back, the man said, “Just keep being you.”

“It’s brought me no joy up to this point.”

“And no regrets, Ari. Remember that. You may not feel like you have done anything right, but thousands of people have been saved because of you.”

“I would trade all of their lives to bring Lorelei back.”

The man looked at him. “Would you really?”

Ari looked away again. “I don’t want to keep failing when it matters.”

“You won’t.”

As the man walked away, Ari asked. “You always have something to say to people, some kind of hint on what they need to do. I know that most of the time, you lie to make things happen. Do you have nothing like that for me?”

“Ari, the day someone needs to tell you what to do is the day that we are all in serious trouble.” He offered a small smile, then walked away.

Ari’s attention returned to the waters where a ship continued to move out to sea.

“There’s nothing like reliving your failures over and over again.”

The voice startled Claudia, and she looked to her left. Standing beside her was an older version of Ari, the one she knew. “You can see me?”

“These are my memories. Not exactly sure why this is what you wanted to see, but I hope you found more comfort in it than I do.”

Claudia shook her head. “I have no idea how I ended up here.”

Ari looked over at her. “I’ve been allowing you to use me to stay safe. You haven’t eaten since before the airport, and even someone with shifter blood needs some form of sustenance.”

“Oh, wow.” She looked down at her body, which was translucent. “I hadn’t even thought about that.”

A calming laugh came in response. “I’m glad you haven’t gotten hungry. You will once we get back to somewhere with food.”

“I take it you aren’t going to make me food.”

“I don’t know how to cook,” he said, forcing a smile. “Don’t know how to kill and prepare meat even if I did know

how to cook. Unless you want to head up to the plane to see if we can forage...”

Claudia held up her hands. “Nope. If it doesn’t hurt you and you don’t mind, I’m perfectly fine going without. It’s pretty much the dream of anyone who has to diet, and that’s all too common in acting.”

“It doesn’t sound like you are particularly happy with your chosen occupation.”

Claudia’s eyes looked out over the water. The Ari that had been on her right side walked away. “Will he be ok?”

“He’ll survive.”

She looked back at the Ari to her left. “Survival is easier than living.”

“Talking from experience?”

She looked at the translucent Ari still standing beside her. “I suppose it’s only fair.” Holding out her hand, she watched as he frowned a little. Slowly, he reached out and took her hand.

The world swirled as Claudia pulled him into some of her worst memories.

Chapter 9

Another Soul Getting By

Claudia slammed back into her body once her memories finished, the echoes of her mother shouting that she would get her revenge as the police hauled her out of court.

Turning toward the comfortable warmth beside her, Claudia rested her head against Ari's chest. He began to stroke her hair. She listened to his heart for a few moments, her eyes closed.

"I'm so sorry, Claudia. My life may have been rough, but at least I have my family."

She looked up at him. "I've never told anyone about most of that. It's not the kind of stuff that ... you really want to remember."

He nodded, his hand still stroking her hair. "You mean it's not the kind of stuff you feel you can tell. Not when the people who are supposed to help you will only make it worse."

Looking into his eyes, Claudia felt a pull. She moved a little, her eyes looking at his lips. "You aren't going to let me just gloss over anything, are you?"

"Has it really ever worked for you?"

"Very much so. People tend to be happy when you don't talk about anything serious. They don't actually want to know how you are doing. They just want you to act happy and put on a show."

Ari's eyes darted down to her mouth. "That's humans for you."

She reached up and touched his face. "Your opinion of people has changed, hasn't it?"

"Not really. It's just misguided anger with a bit of annoyance at their ability for cruelty that harms others."

"Worse than shifters can manage?"

"Not by a long shot. But then they have a lot less time to reach that kind of well-honed evil."

Claudia laughed. “Evil, huh?”

His eyes moved down to her mouth again. “Very much so.”

Moving her hand around to the back of his head, Claudia murmured. “How would you know? You are a good person.” Then she pulled him down and kissed him.

Ari’s hand moved over her stomach and around to her back as he leaned into the kiss. Claudia moaned at the feel of his body on hers. Opening her mouth a little, she slipped her tongue into his mouth. In response, he pulled her toward him. It felt like fireworks in her head the more her body touched his. Wanting to feel more, she moved a leg over his hip. For a moment, he pulled away a little; then he moved his body over hers as his hand slid under her shirt. It moved to the back and easily unhooked her bra. She arched her back, making it easier for him to remove her top and bra. Tossing it to the side, he began to kiss her neck as one hand slid around her back and under her pants. The other cupped one of her breasts, a finger gently moving over her nipple.

Her eyes closed, Claudia moaned and arched into him, her hands moving into his hair. It was so soft that she looked down, shocked by the sensation. That’s when she noticed it had turned a brilliant shade of pink. Unable to help herself, she giggled.

Ari stopped kissing the top of her breast and looked up at her. His eyes looked entirely lavender as he tilted his head to the side. “What’s so funny?”

Momentarily distracted, she ran her hands through his phenomenal hair. “It’s pink.”

“Distracting?”

She began to massage his head, enjoying the feel of his hair on her hands. “Feeling amorous?”

His mouth quirked up. Instead of verbally responding, Ari moved up and drew her lower lip into his mouth. For a moment, he sucked on it, causing her to moan. His teeth then

gently bit her lip as he moved her legs apart and pressed his hip into hers.

Claudia's eyes opened wide. Her hands released his head as she began to try to remove his pants. She stopped when she heard a gentle laugh. She looked up into those stunning eyes. Ari's voice was low as he asked, "Amorous?"

"Desperate," she pulled him back down on her.

Instead of speeding up, he seemed to begin to move impossibly slowly, driving her wild as he took his time to explore her body. Whenever she started to feel desperate, he would begin to remove her pants. This happened several times before he fully took them off.

Her voice was breathy as she said, "You are sadistic."

Leaning down, he kissed her lips gently. Ari then murmured, "You started it. I'm just teaching you what happens when you make fun of my hair."

"Is this what you do to everyone?"

"Oh, no," he said, moving down her neck. "Only people who I feel might learn from the lesson."

There were other questions she had, but Claudia forgot them as she realized at some point he had removed his pants. Surprised at how much he had been able to distract her, she pulled his face up back to her and plunged her tongue into his mouth.

His tongue began to stroke her as one of his hands slid down her back. He tilted her lower hips up, then slid into her. The sensation of him filling her up took her completely by surprise. As he pushed into her, Claudia screamed into his mouth, her nails digging into his back. She could feel him smiling as he moved in and out of her. He repeated the movement several times as her body tightened, her muscles working to pull him even farther into her.

Finally, he began to draw himself out of her, allowing her to finally relax a little, her chest heaving at the intensity of what she had just experienced.

“Wow,” she whispered.

“Hmm. I’d hoped for a lot more than that.” Ari’s tone was one of slight disappointment, and Claudia looked at him, thinking that he wasn’t enjoying it nearly as much as she was.

Whatever she was going to say was lost as he slowly moved back into her, then halfway out. The teasing became intense, building up the sensation again. As she was about to orgasm, though, he pulled out completely. The next moment, she found herself face down on the bed, her legs spread out wide and her elbows barely keeping her face off the pillow. A hand pressed down on her lower back, forcing her butt higher in the air. Then she felt Ari slide into her, but this time, it felt so much fuller as he brought a hand around to her front. She began to move forward and backward, trying to get him to go deeper, to hit the same spot, but he denied her any control. She whimpered into the pillow as one of his hands slid between her legs and spread her lips further apart. One finger began to rub over her nub while he pressed further into her. By the time he was fully inside of her, Claudia had turned her face and was biting into the pillow as her hands clawed at the sheets.

Ari rested his chest against her back, and she was aware of his warmth fully covering her, almost like a blanket, then filling her from the inside as he kept her right on the brink.

With one swift movement, he brought her over, and she screamed his name over and over as her body wanted more of him.

When the orgasm started to subside, she moved forward, immediately hating the feeling of not having him inside her. Turning quickly, she threw herself at him, knocking him back to the foot of the bed. Claudia grabbed him and began to rub herself over his head while resting her head against his neck.

Realizing what she was doing, he shifted his body, moving so that his legs were over the edge of the bed. Ari then tilted his hips as she slid down over him. At first, she wanted to stay close to him, the feel of his heat intoxicating to her. However, before long, she needed more. Grabbing his

shoulders, she began to ride him. Her release wasn't nearly so intense, but she felt a sense of satisfaction when she opened her eyes and looked into his eyes. A wicked grin spread across his face as he wrapped an arm around her waist.

The next thing she knew, Claudia was looking up at him, her knees bent. Ari looked like he was in complete control, but there was something wild in his eyes, and he leaned over and started to kiss her. When she started to reciprocate, he drove himself halfway into her, then stopped. That was all it took for the orgasm to start, and this time, he was not going to just let her relax. Every time she started to come down from one, he moved his hips, pushing her over the brink again.

Claudia was almost ready to beg him to let her rest when Ari finally let up. Giving her a gentle kiss on the lips, he slid out of her. Pulling her to him, Ari began to stroke her hair.

“Much better.”

There were no words as her body felt exhausted. Rubbing her face into his chest, she murmured, “I could totally get used to that.”

His laugh was relaxing and comforting as she quickly fell asleep.

Chapter 10 Realizing the Obvious

The next few days were spent with Claudia recovering from using her ability. Ari tired her out so that when she slept, she was not disturbed by anything else. And when she woke, she felt more energetic and alive.

She had no idea how much time had passed. The birds were chirping one morning as she yawned and stretched. She felt beside her and there was no warmth there. She sat up, causing the blanket to fall into her lap, exposing her chest. “Ari?”

Her eyes moved around the small cabin, but he wasn't there. Frowning, she got up and put her clothes on for the first time since Ari had removed them. Although she knew it was ridiculous, Claudia leaned over and looked under the bed. When she didn't see him, she walked around the small place, not sure where else to look. It wasn't like there were that many places for a person to hide.

For the first time in a while, that cold, calculating voice returned.

I told you that you were going to be betrayed. You just refused to listen.

She turned to look at the door as it swung open. Ari stood there with a wild look in his eyes. “They are coming.”

“Why would they come back up the mountain?”

Ari moved over and looked at her, walking around her like he was looking for something.

His voice was almost cold as he asked, “Who is Ms. Harvey?”

Frowning, Claudie said, “Allison Harvey. The woman who gave birth to me.”

He nodded but didn't explain anything. “I should have realized.”

“Realized what?”

“You have shifter blood. That means she does, too.”

“Well, isn’t that how genetics works? Of course, she does.”

He shook his head. “It could have come from your father. Remember, one of the guys said that he was going to get paid by Ms. Harvey.”

Claudia stared at him. “You think Allison sent them? She’s in prison!”

“You told me how she reacted in court when she was convicted. She’s been using that hatred to connect to you.”

Claudia shook her head. “What are you talking about?”

“We don’t have time. They are nearly here, so we need to get out of here before we are trapped.”

He grabbed her hand and pulled her out of the cabin. Fortunately, she had finished dressing, even putting her shoes on as she thought she might need to go outside to find him. If she expected to get cold, though, Claudia was surprisingly warm. It was some comfort as he pulled her away from the cabin.

“Where are we going?”

“As far from this cabin as possible. Allison realized that we came back here.”

“How could she know anything? She’s in prison in California.”

Ari slowed as they neared a cliff. He looked over it, then turned to her. “She’s able to track you.”

“She doesn’t have regular access to technology from her cell. I made sure of that.”

“She doesn’t need it. Periodically, I felt some kind of connection that wasn’t with anyone I know. At first, I thought you might be connecting with someone on purpose; that’s why I thought you knew what you were. When it became clear that you had no idea, there were more pressing problems. Then you were in really rough shape, and I knew that you needed to

heal. I don't know at what point she was able to locate you, but clearly, she figured it out and has found you again."

Claudia froze. "How?"

"You have abilities. It's not unreasonable to think that your mother also has abilities. Considering how she manipulated you to earn money when you were a child, it makes sense that she looked for another way to manipulate you when you got older and were able to make decisions on your own. She needed a way of persuading you to do things for her without you realizing that she was doing it."

Vigorously shaking her head, Claudia couldn't believe it. "How could she do that? How could she manipulate me from so far away?"

Ari grabbed her shoulders, his soft hair a black color, moving with the wind whipping around them. "She's using your mind. Some shifters are able to communicate from a long way away. Sybil was able to contact you on that first day, remember?"

"Yes, but there..." Claudia felt her body go slack.

Goddammit! You aren't getting...

The voice cut out as Ari looked around them. "It's going to be cutting it really close, but..."

The sound of snowmobiles came up much too quickly, almost as if the sound had been hidden from her. "How did they get so close without me noticing?"

"Allison," he said as if that would be enough of an explanation.

It was almost funny, so she smiled. "She's not that powerful."

"You can literally make things happen with your mind. With that kind of power, what your mother can do is ... much easier."

There was no time to respond as the vehicles came into view, stopping not too far from them. Claudia noticed that

there were only three of them, but they were all armed and pointing their guns at them.

“We finally got you,” the leader said. “And this time, I think we’ll dispense with the...”

Ari grabbed Claudia’s hand and pulled her over the cliff. The feeling of falling was so unexpected that it took her a few seconds to register what had just happened. Her mind automatically started to try to think her way out of it, but Ari grabbed her. Simply shaking his head, he let her know not to do that. Then he pulled her so that she was just over him, his body warming hers as they plummeted toward the ground.

Just as she thought that they were about to die, she watched his body start to shift. It was slow at first, and she initially thought that it was him trying to slow his fall. Then, his body seemed to get longer and wider. The next thing she knew, her body hit scales. Her hands tried to find purchase on his back, but Claudia found that his body was too smooth. Sliding over his side, her trip toward the ground continued.

Now that she realized what was happening, she opened her mouth to scream as she flailed her arms. Now facing the sky, she could see something moving above her, but she couldn’t make out what it was.

Then she struck something firm and warm. At first, she thought that she had hit the ground, but that made no sense as the wind continued. Looking down at her body, she saw a pair of scaly arms holding her. Under her, there was a rumbling, then a roar erupted around her. This time, it didn’t cause her to feel terrified – Claudia felt a sense of elation.

Turning her head, she said, “You’re a dragon!”

Ari rumbled under her but didn’t say anything as he carefully turned around. He continued to grip her tightly, but now, she was looking at the ground, which was not that far away. Gulping, she closed her eyes, the sight a little too much after everything she had been through recently.

When his grip loosened a little while later, she opened her eyes, watching as it seemed to be coming at her all too

quickly. Just as they seemed to reach the ground, the arms around her changed. She was quickly moved so that she was being carried more comfortably for a human.

She looked up into those startlingly gorgeous blue-lavender eyes. He smiled down at her. “Sorry, but I need to leave you here for a moment. Don’t worry; she can’t reach you now.”

He didn’t wait for a response as he put her down and started running back toward the cliff. Then he shifted into an incredibly impressive black dragon.

As Ari soared up the cliff, Claudia muttered, “I thought he was a white dragon.”

This time, there was no analytical voice saying anything snarky or quippy in response. Claudia blew out her cheeks, starting to think about that strangely detached voice that had periodically bothered her. It had never been exactly bad or helpful, but it had always seemed to be correct.

Closing her eyes, she realized that was exactly what Allison had wanted. When she had manipulated Claudia as a child, Allison had started with words that seemed largely innocuous. Then, she started influencing how Claudia thought. The voice in her head had been there a long time, mostly stating the obvious, which was why Claudia had accepted it as her own thoughts.

But it had started to be much harsher lately, bordering on hostile. It had been highly critical, and the actor now realized that it had been trying to turn her against Ari. It had told her that he was betraying her and saying that she needed to realize she wasn’t going to make it.

Her hands balled up as Claudia realized that even in prison, Allison was still trying to control her, trying to use her for personal gain.

Warm arms wrapped around her. “She’s not worth it. We can teach you how to block her, and she won’t be able to do anything else to you.”

“She will never leave me alone until she’s dead; Allison is just going to...”

“You don’t have to be alone anymore. If you are willing to spend time up here, we can teach you what you need to know to control your mind so that you know when someone’s trying to manipulate you and when someone is just trying to contact you. We can show you a lot more so that you don’t feel so alone.”

She was about to argue, but for what felt like the first time in her life, Claudia knew that someone was actually telling her the truth. This wasn’t a way of controlling her or trying to get something out of her. Ari really was interested in helping her.

Turning around, she wrapped her arms around him. “On one condition.”

He placed a hand on her head. “Are you going to make me guess what that condition is?”

“No, I’m not a fan of guessing games. I want you to be the one to teach me.”

“I can accept that condition.”

“The son of a wealthy family has that kind of time?”

“You heard what Rey said. I’m pretty much left to my own devices – not even someone who can see the future thinks that I should be told what to do.”

Claudia pulled back. “He can see the future? Is that normal?”

Ari kissed the top of her head. “You’ll find that there are many shifters up here with ... abnormal abilities. The wilds tend to create really bizarre abilities. Although, no one up here can literally visualize what they want to happen, then make it happen.”

“So,” she wrinkled her nose, “I can do something no one else can do?”

“Yep, no one has even heard of that kind of ability.”

She nodded, then bit her lip as she looked up at him. “Still, I don’t think it’s nearly so impressive as being able to shift into a dragon. That’s ... wild. I think I would prefer to be able to do that.”

He stuck his tongue out. “There are plenty of men up here who can do that.”

She looked at his mouth. “Do that again.”

“Do what again?”

“Stick your tongue out.”

He did as he was told. As soon as his tongue emerged, Claudia rose to her toes and started sucking on it. Ari groaned, lifting her body off the ground. Claudia wrapped her legs around him as he moved forward. Finally, he was pressing her back into the cliff as his hand slid up her shirt.

For the next hour, Claudia forgot about everything else as she learned just how isolated they were – not that she was particularly worried about people seeing her. The thought that anyone might see her did not matter. All she wanted was Ari and the peace that he brought her.

All too quickly, it felt like it was ending.

Ari rested his head on her shoulder, his breath labored. “Well, that’s definitely a first for me.”

Claudia kept her legs around his hips, not ready for him to pull out of her. Her hands moved through his stunning pink hair. “Having sex on a mountainside?”

“Doing it so openly and publicly.”

She giggled. “I don’t think that this counts as doing it publicly. There would have to be a risk of people actually seeing us. This is so remote that I would say it’s even safer than any of the homes where I’ve had sex.”

“Ah, so you are big into getting freaky out in public?”

“Never. But any home in LA is much more public than out here. It’s so ... freeing here.”

Ari nuzzled her neck. “You have an amazing smell.”

Claudia let out a full-throated laugh. “I must smell awful after all this time outside, not bathing.”

“I’ve told you I’ve been taking care of you. Right now, you have an entirely natural smell, but it isn’t overpowering.”

Not sure if he was just being polite, especially with as much physical exertion as she had been doing lately, Claudia reached up and felt her hair. Just like he said, it felt nice. If she were being honest, it felt softer than usual. “How? I thought you didn’t have any abilities because I stopped them somehow.”

“Connecting with someone like we have allowed me to get around that problem. It probably would have been best to find another way to help you, but I couldn’t think of anything with the situation we were in.” His eyes looked a little sad. “I’m afraid that your attachment to me is caused by that connection.”

She frowned for a moment. “I don’t understand.”

He ran a hand through his hair, and then, finally, Ari pulled away from her. Righting her clothing first, he had trouble looking her in the eye as he set her back on the ground. “The connection that I made with you allowed me to take care of you, especially since you kept blacking out.” He fixed his own clothing, still avoiding looking at her. “I couldn’t get you off the mountain by shifting, and I had no way to connect with anyone. I didn’t see any way of being able to save you without actually joining with you.”

“Do you mean when we ...”

“What? No,” he shook his head. “That may have been a result. When you connect with someone, it can create a sense of positivity that can make you think you feel something you don’t. Um, and I probably should have kept that in mind.”

She put a finger under his chin and forced him to look up at her. “Are you saying that you think the only reason I wanted to be with you was because of that connection?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t want to manipulate you. I was...”

She leaned forward and kissed him to stop his apology. It was sweet and gentle, nothing like the way they had kissed since that first time. “I didn’t do it because of any connection that forced you to save me. And if it is, I don’t care. For the first time in my life, I actually feel safe, cared for, and like that I can trust someone. I haven’t had that since I was a child. And then the people didn’t deserve it.”

He looked at her uncertainly. “I’m going to end the connection now, then I’ll take you back to civilization. You need some time to really recover before you say anything about what you’ve felt over this whole ordeal.”

“I really, really want to argue with you. But I think there’s one thing I’ve learned.”

“And what’s that?” His eyes were soft as he looked at her.

“Arguing with you isn’t constructive. Working with you is. If you think that I need time away from you to form an opinion, then I will listen. It’s not like you’ve been wrong so far. But,” she said, holding up a finger, “I want you to remember that I don’t listen to people often. So don’t let this go to your head.”

He smiled, then leaned in and kissed her forehead. “I’ll keep that in mind. Now, let’s get you somewhere safe. Do you want me to check you in somewhere under a different name?”

“Oh, right. People think I’m dead, huh?”

“Public opinion is torn. And I know someone who can be your neighbor that will make sure you stay safe.”

“How do you know that he will be ok with you volunteering him to take care of me?”

He chuckled, “Oh, I guarantee you he won’t like it much. But he is a detective, so it’s really something he’ll have trouble turning down.”

“Maybe he won’t want to take care of a celebrity. That probably isn’t something a small-time cop is going to know how to do.”

“Oh, he’s not from around here.”

“Really?”

Ari nodded, biting his lip. Part of his nose wrinkled as he said, “His name is Detective Gavin Ott, and he lives in New York.”

Claudia’s smile dropped a little. “Ott. Ott. That name is familiar.”

Ari started to nod. “Yeah. His family is old money with a lot more visibility.”

Claudia’s eyes widened. “Wait, he’s part of the New York Ott family? And he’s a policeman?”

“He’s a detective, and yes.”

“What is he doing out here?”

“Family business.”

She shook her head. “I don’t know what kind of business his family would have up here in Alaska.”

Ari rolled his eyes. “You’ll probably learn soon enough.” He then looked at her, a little annoyed. “He’s a bear shifter, and he’s taking care of shifter business around the US, apparently.”

“What?” Claudia frowned. “That’s well, that’s unexpected.”

Ari shrugged. “All of his siblings have responder positions. Two doctors, a firefighter, a stay-at-home mother, a retired soldier, and an EMT.”

Claudia stood there. “I suppose I’ll have a lot to learn from him if you are going to be avoiding me.”

His expression was closed off as he nodded. “Let’s get you back.”

“Wait, what about the guys who were trying to abduct me? We just let them go?”

Ari tilted his head to the side. “They’ve already been taken care of.”

“What does that mean?”

“My abilities are back, so I got a few people to come pick them up.”

“Weren’t you a little tempted to fry them?”

He smiled one of those manicured smiles for the first time since they’d met. “I rarely give into what I want. It tends to be counterproductive. Now, come on. You are hungry, and I don’t want you to get too upset when it really kicks in.”

He didn’t wait for her to respond, shifting in front of her before she could. Adjusting his body to allow her to climb onto his back easily, they took off.

Chapter 11 The Final Verdict

Claudia knew that it was a bad idea, but it had been almost a month since she had returned to something like civilization. The largest city in Alaska was so tiny compared to what she was accustomed to in LA. Still, she wasn't ready for the world to hear that she was still alive. Knowing that the media wasn't waiting around the corner was proving to be one of the most liberating things she had ever experienced. If she were being honest, Claudia wasn't sure that she ever wanted to let it be known that she was alive.

Shaking her head, she held up a fist and knocked on the door in front of her.

She heard someone moving around inside the apartment next to her own. The sound made it clear that the occupant was just on the other side of the door. There was a muffled burst of cursing before it opened.

Standing there in a turtleneck sweater and some tight jeans was the man Claudia wanted to see. "Hello, Gavin."

"Good evening, Claudia. How can I help you?" The words were right, but the tone was wrong, and she knew that he had no desire to chat.

"Orsino giving you trouble?"

This was met with another steady stream of cursing. Finally, he looked at her. "Yeah, something like that."

"Do you want to vent about it?"

"Not particularly. When I'm not working, I don't like thinking of things that upset me."

Claudia nodded. "That's a pretty good way to minimize the effect of work on your personal life."

"Yes, it is. But I'm sure that's not why you are here."

"I haven't heard from him since he dropped me off."

Gavin looked at her for a moment, clearly judging her and determining the right course of action. A part of her feared

that he would turn her away – that was definitely the impression that his judgmental gaze left. Instead, he stepped back. “Come in.”

“Oh, thank you.” Her expression perked up. Afraid that he may change his mind, she hurried into his place. “Really, Gavin, thank you.”

He held out a hand as he walked past her. “Come and sit at the table. Would you like anything to eat or drink?”

“Water?”

“That’s it?”

“I haven’t had much of an appetite since returning.”

He nodded, then moved to the kitchen. As he got her a glass of water, he asked, “So, what do you need from me?”

“Can you get word to him that I would like to talk?”

Gavin shut off the water and then walked over to the table. As he set it down in front of her, he asked, “Have you decided what you want to do with your life?”

She slowly shook her head. “I don’t see why that matters.”

“Ari is ... unique, even among shifters. Apart from one occasion, I’ve never seen him get emotional. Usually, he’s emotionally flat. He keeps his emotions under control in a way that I’ve never seen before.”

“That must be something coming from a detective in a major city.”

“You are starting to get an idea of how unusual that is. I’ve dealt with psychopaths, sociopaths, serial killers, abusers, politicians, and criminals. Never have I seen anyone who is so controlled yet still affable and gregarious.”

She blinked at him. “Ok.”

He sat down, then leaned forward, and for a moment, Claudia felt she knew how people felt on the other side of the table during an interrogation. “Ask me when I saw him emotional.”

Feeling very self-conscious, Claudia looked away from him. Swallowing a little harder than normal, she realized that she was starting to feel a bit uneasy. “Um, ok. When did you see him emotional?”

“After he got back.”

She turned and looked at him. “Is that a bad thing?”

“His hair cycled through about two dozen colors while he was trying to process what happened up on that mountain. Now ask me why I’m concerned about you trying to talk to him.”

Her heart was starting to hammer in her chest. “Why does it concern you so much?”

Gavin sat back and folded his arms over his chest. “He’s a lot older than me. Dragon shifters are the longest-lived shifter type, so he’ll still be knocking around after I’m dead. But he’s far more vulnerable than virtually anyone else I’ve ever met. I don’t like many people. People tend to be selfish, annoying, petty, and well,” he waved a hand at her before folding it back into the arm over his chest, “considering the people you’ve experienced, I don’t have to tell you what people tend to be like.”

She nodded, starting to realize what he was saying.

“There really only been one other person in my life who I wanted to protect so vigorously, and he is my younger brother.”

“I think I know what you are trying to say.”

Gavin leaned forward. “I think you believe that. I watched him fall in love with a very difficult woman, someone who could not possibly understand our world.”

“She’s human?”

Gavin nodded. “Yes. And while I understand you aren’t, you have grown up believing you are despite being able to do something that is *clearly* not normal.”

“To be fair, nothing about my childhood was normal.”

“That’s true of all of us. My older brother and I raised our siblings once our parents abandoned us.”

“I thought they did a lot of charity work.” Claudia had learned a lot about the Ott family because there had been a project that was looking into portraying some of the prominent members of New York society. It had died not long after she was contacted about it, but she still did the research into the Otts, mostly because they were fascinating.

Now that she was looking at one of the ones who had the least written about him, she was finding the actual people to be a lot more ... intimidating and interesting.

Gavin rolled his eyes. “Yes, they do. They spend all of their time doing that and left us to our own devices.” He waved off any questions. “It’s a sore subject. Perhaps they weren’t as abusive as yours, but neglect really isn’t an improvement.”

Claudia weighed the two things in her mind, and then she said, “Both are horrible in different ways.”

“Indeed. My point is that you aren’t from our world either. And you will be dead long before Ari is. The amount of harm you can do him is substantial, especially given the kind of life you have lived up to this point.”

“Do you mean living with humans?”

“I mean living as a celebrity. He does not need that kind of attention, and being in the public eye would be detrimental to him.”

Claudia looked into the shifter’s dark blue eyes. They were stunning, but more like the sky on a clear morning, instead of dark and rich like Ari’s. “So you would prefer that I just slip away, leaving him to find someone more fitting.”

“Is that what I said?”

“You seem to be hinting at it.”

He kept her gaze as he slowly shook his head. “What I’m saying is that you need to understand what you want and

decide what to do with your life before you pull him into anything that could make his life so much harder.”

She looked down at her glass of water. “You don’t want me to be with him.”

The detective began tapping on the table. “I want him to be happy, and heavens, if there is anything I’ve learned over the last few years, mates come in all different shapes and sizes. We don’t pick them, but it’s not something to take lightly.”

“What do you mean mates come in different sizes and shapes?”

“Claudia,” Gavin shifted in his seat, then laced his finger in front of him on the table. “Shifters mate. It’s not just about sex and marriage. It’s deeper, more personal. I’ve seen it *so* many times that I’m starting to think that I’ve been cursed with it. But I can recognize it when I see it. And if you ask him here, you need to know what you plan to do because he will do anything for you. This is new for you, and you have a right to happiness. And he does as well.”

He took a deep breath. “What you have is important and special. Don’t mess it up by rushing it.”

Claudia tilted her head. “So, you don’t think I’m bad for him or that he’s too good for me?”

“Oh, he’s definitely too good for you. Hell, I don’t think that anyone is good enough for Ari. Then again, I didn’t think anyone was good enough for Dillion either. But he’s been happier and more whole with Danielle in his life. I learned from trying to keep her out of his life that it was a mistake. All I want is for you to make the important decisions before you start pulling him into it. Only you can know if you can offer him what he deserves. It won’t be for his whole life, but it will be for all of yours if you do it right.”

A smile slowly spread across her face. “Who knew that the detective was actually a soft teddy bear?”

He sat back and rolled his eyes. But then he smiled, “And who knew the heartless Hollywood starlet had a soft side.”

Claudia let out a loud breath. “Lovely, thank you, Gavin.”

“Hey, I’ve got five siblings, five siblings-in-law, and a growing brood of nieces and nephews. If you are going to pick on me, I will play dirty.”

“That was such a tabloid description of me.”

He shrugged. “I find being called a teddy bear particularly offensive. Consider us even.”

“Is that how you see me? As a spoiled Hollywood brat?”

He gave a noncommittal shrug. “I don’t know you.”

“You are a detective. Isn’t being able to read people something you excel at doing?”

He held up his hands. “I’m off the clock.”

She snorted, then took a drink of water, feeling a bit better. They chatted for a bit longer, then she thanked him. As she left, she turned and looked at him again. “Thank you, Gavin. Do you mind ... spending a bit more time with me?”

One of his eyebrows went up. “Why?”

“I don’t have many friends. And ... I like you. Harsh but honest. It’s refreshing.”

His usual dour expression shifted into a smile, and for a moment, Claudia noticed just how handsome he could be. “Sure. We can talk. I’ve been a big brother to enough people to know when someone needs a bit of tough love. Good night, Claudia.”

“Good night, Gavin.”

For the next few days, Claudia visited Gavin, talking through the kinds of things that had been bothering her since the end of the trial. They actually had a lot in common, especially when it came to being in the spotlight. Commiserating over dealing with the media, he was able to

give her some tips and help her figure out what she wanted to do next.

Nearly a week passed, and they had spent most evenings talking, with Gavin making her dinner. As they ate one evening, there was a knock on the door.

Gavin frowned as he stood up and headed toward the door.

Claudia looked at him quizzically. “Were you expecting anyone?”

“No.” He opened the door. “Ari. It’s great to see you. Come on in.”

Claudia’s heart began to hammer as she looked at the man who had saved her multiple times and had almost completely consumed her thoughts.

He stepped into the apartment, not noticing her. “Thanks, Gavin. I was just...” His eyes fell on Claudia sitting at the dining table. There was surprise, then hurt in his eyes, his hair shifting through a few colors. “Oh, I’m so...”

Gavin sighed. “You came to talk about Claudia. She beat you to the punch a week ago.”

Ari looked between the pair. “And you didn’t let me know?”

“She needed to work a few things out before talking to you.”

Ari narrowed his eyes, “Something she can’t talk to me about?”

“Yes, Ari. We both have shitty parents and attention we don’t want.” He smiled at his brother. “I’ve got as much interest in her as I have in Stella.”

Claudia noticed that Ari’s cheeks turned pink, which she had not seen before. Ari cleared his throat. “Well, thank you then. I appreciate you helping her through that. I wouldn’t really have much to offer her in terms of advice.”

“I know. That’s why I talked to her.” He walked past his brother, giving him a light punch on the shoulder. “Take her back to her place. I could use a bit of time getting out and taking in the cold.”

Gavin disappeared down the hallway as Claudia and Ari looked at each other.

“Hey, Ari.” Claudia tried to sound casual as the butterflies swirled in her stomach.

“Hi.” He motioned to the door with his head. “We should probably leave him alone for a bit. I don’t want to take up his space.”

Claudia looked in the direction that the detective had gone. “Yeah, probably best to go back and talk.”

Ari took a deep breath and shoved his hands in his pockets as he nodded.

As soon as they were back, Claudia looked at Ari, not sure what to say.

He gave her a sad smile, “I guess you’ve been thinking about your future.”

She nodded. Then Claudia closed the distance between them, pressing her body against his. Without waiting, she kissed him. His surprise changed to a smile, and he wrapped his arms around her.

When she finally pulled away, she said. “I’m still working on what to do about my future, and I’m not going to pull you into it until I know what I’m going to do. But I know that I want you in that future, whatever it is.”

His eyes searched hers, “So, you don’t think that it was just ...”

She waited for him to finish his question, then realized he wasn’t entirely sure what to say. “I’m pretty sure we’re mates. At least that’s the term Gavin used.”

Ari looked surprised, his mouth agape. “*Gavin* said that?”

She nodded. “Gave me a real lecture, but it’s obvious his heart was in the right place.”

Ari’s eyes dropped to her lips. Words were no longer necessary as he carried her back to her bedroom.

Aftermath

Something Like a Home

To her surprise, Claudia found that life in Alaska was perfect for clearing her mind and thinking about what she wanted. She was sure that she didn't want to go back to acting, and the idea of working behind the camera wasn't particularly appealing. Gavin had given her the numbers of a few people in New York and Florida during their week of having dinner together, but she hadn't yet reached out. Apparently, he was trying to connect her with a couple of charities, but she wasn't sure that was the right direction.

She was flipping a card over in her hand as she waited for Ari to arrive for a date. They had talked about living together, but that hadn't happened quite yet, mostly because both of Ari's brothers were in serious relationships, and those were progressing particularly quickly. He didn't want to bring his up quite yet, so for now, he had been introducing her as one of his friends, and so far, only Gavin knew that their relationship was a lot closer.

What was both refreshing and surprising was that no one that Ari introduced her to knew who she was. He even used her full name, but it didn't seem to register. While it was strange not to have people coming up to her and asking her for a selfie or autograph, she absolutely loved it. When they went out in public, there would occasionally be someone coming up to her, making Claudia realize that she needed to make it clear that she was still alive. It couldn't wait too much longer, but she wanted to enjoy a little more time with Ari before announcing her survival to the media.

When he arrived, he leaned over and kissed her before sitting across from her. Taking one of her hands, he held it in both of his own. "How has your day been so far?"

"Better now."

"Are you ready yet?"

Claudia grimaced. "Give me a couple more days, then I'll be ready."

“Ok.” He kissed her hand. “I have the story of your rescue all set to be released. Just let me know.”

A familiar voice cut off her response. “Ari!”

Ari turned, and a huge grin spread across his face. “Dalton?”

The large man made a beeline for Ari, and Ari stood up quickly. As soon as the large man met him, they hugged. Trailing a little behind the new man was Gavin. He looked at Claudia and smiled. “Hi, Claudia.”

Ari looked behind him to his mate. “Dalton, this is Claudia.”

She watched as recognition dawned on him. “Claudia McKenna?”

She held up a hand and waved at him. “Hello.”

Gavin spoke up as he patted the man on his shoulder. “Claudia, this is Dalton Ott.”

She blinked a few times, the name not familiar to her. “One of your brothers?”

“Brother-in-law. He took our name.”

“Oh!” Claudia was impressed as the man beamed at her.

Ari beamed. “He’s got a lot in common with Gavin.”

Gavin rolled his eyes. “Not really.”

“I mean, same type. He’s not like me.”

Claudia looked between the three of them, not sure what to say.

Dalton looked between the two of them, then leaned forward. “Different type of bear.”

Understanding spread across her face. “Oh! Wow! Actually, no, that makes sense.” Her eyes moved up and down the large man, realizing that he was taller than both of the other two men. She stood up and offered her hand. “It’s a real pleasure to meet you, Dalton Ott.”

He shook her hand, then turned to Ari. “Stella wanted me to tell you hello.”

Again, Ari’s cheeks flushed a little. “Thanks, Dalton.”

Dalton patted his shoulder. “Sorry. But I am treating her well.”

Claudia watched as Ari was clearly working to keep his emotions under control. “Stella’s your wife?” she asked Dalton.

“Yes. Ari here proposed to her, but she was willing to give me another chance.”

The smile on her face faded. “Ari proposed to Stella?”

Ari nodded. “Yes. She helped me with a problem, then I helped her. The Otts tend to have a pretty messy personal life. I guess that’s what happens when children raise themselves.” He then turned to the other men. “Why don’t you guys join us?”

Gavin looked at Claudia, clearly the only one who realized that she was uncomfortable. But Dalton sat down before Gavin could decline. Claudia was silent for most of the meal, keeping her answers short.

At one point, Gavin leaned over. “Are you doing ok?”

She gave him her most photo-perfect smile. “Just fine, Gavin. Just fine.”

He leaned over, his lips brushing against her ear, “You are a terrible liar.” He then sat back, and Claudia was about to say something when she noticed Ari watching them.

His smile was forced as he asked, “Anything I can help you with there, Gavin?”

He stood up, tossing a few bills on the table, then winked at Claudia. “This one’s on me. And yes, Ari, tell her about your relationship with Stella. She’s feeling a bit jealous.”

Dalton looked at her, then at Ari. “Why?”

Claudia waved. “Gavin’s just kidding. It was a pleasure meeting you, Dalton.”

“It’s good to see that you are still alive.”

“It’s Ari’s fault. He got me out of there and kept me alive despite everything.”

“That sounds like Ari.” He stood and patted his brother-in-law on the back.

Once the men were gone, Ari looked at her. “What’s wrong?”

Claudia looked down at her hands. “You never told me that you proposed to someone.”

It didn’t take him long to realize why she was upset. He got up and sat down next to her. “It was impromptu, and I felt really grateful to her. Stella is a very unique person. Her ability allows her some control over death, which is really, really uncommon.”

Claudia swallowed, the jealousy still bubbling under the surface. “She was better suited to you?”

He put his hand over hers. “It never would have worked out. She loves New York, and I feel the same way about that city as I do about LA. Stella is a really impressive woman who needs someone who really knows her to thrive.”

“Are you saying that you didn’t really know her?”

“Oh, no, I only knew her for a few days.”

“And you proposed to her?”

“I’ve learned that when something’s important, don’t sit on it. Stella’s heart was pretty obvious, but she would have been a good match. But I really didn’t think it through. My parents would have been happy, and I may have been for the short-term, but Dalton is a much better fit, especially since they were sweethearts when they were young.”

“Oh.” Claudia still felt a little uncomfortable.

Ari leaned over and whispered, “It was never pink with her.”

All jealously she may have felt was quickly dismissed as she turned to look at him. “Really?”

“She doesn’t even know about any of that. I never even told her what I was, so as far as I know, she is unaware of my other form.”

Claudia nodded her head. “She might have had a different answer if she’d known.”

He shrugged. “She and Dalton are mates. I didn’t feel that with her.”

“Is she gorgeous?”

“Absolutely stunning. And she’s got a mean wit. Oh, and she’s a doctor.”

Claudia frowned. “She sounds perfect.”

“She’s an Ott. I liked her,” he said, pulling her to him, “but I didn’t feel like this with her.”

Claudia turned to ask him what he meant, but she saw that his hair was pink. “Is that safe to do in public?”

“Then you had better get me somewhere private so that I can get my emotions under control.”

“I would rather see you lose control.”

He leaned forward and kissed her. “Whatever you want, I’m all yours.”

She turned and looked at him. “I love you, Ari. So if you need me for anything, I’m all yours.”

He pulled her into a kiss. While they were kissing, he lifted her up and carried her out the door.

If you loved this story, click here for the series page:

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0CVVGYV4M>

