

ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



*Dragon*  
**MATE**

SUPERNATURAL BONDS

*Jary Strong*

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Dragon Mate

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# *DRAGON MATE*

**Jory Strong**

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## Chapter One

Kirill paced. First the length then the width of the lair's outer chamber. Every few turns, flames erupted from his mouth and engulfed the collection of gems piled in the center to serve as a bed.

Centuries of being a dragon's target had shattered the weakest of the stones and napping on them had done the rest, further reducing the inferior ones until they were a powdery dust that incinerated or blew from the chamber with each fiery breath.

If such hard usage had destroyed *all* of the jewels making up his daybed, he wouldn't have cared. They were baubles really, except to humans. Like most of his kind, he kept his priceless treasures in the hidden depths of his lair.

Color reflected off the silver of his torso scales. The blue of sapphires and green of emeralds. The red of rubies and black of onyx as well as the sparkle trapped in opals and diamonds.

Kirill roared and blasted the stones again with dragon fire. The deep blue of his tail swished in aggravation and the matching crest along his neck rose and fell as he cursed the fate that had landed him in the position he now found himself in.

Another stream of flame followed, heating his bed of gems into something even a dragon would find uncomfortable to lie on. And as one of the outer gems gave up the battle and broke apart, Kirill cursed one long-dead sorcerer in particular, then sorcerers in general.

He stalked to the lair opening and looked at the portal building in the distance. It sat on top of a narrow column, high above the ground and accessible only to those who could transport magically or were winged. A ledge surrounded it, allowing dragons to arrive and depart in their first form, though the dimensions of the chamber itself

required them to shift into a magical construct making them appear human before entering it.

The portal chamber taunted him from its position in neutral territory. It mocked him for his delay, his past mistakes, his reluctance to admit to himself that even cursed as he was, he would never walk away from the treasure of a human mate—the one whose image he'd seen centuries past in the sorcerer's mirror.

He exhaled through his nose. Only this time the flames were the venting of lust and not anger, the eruption of a heat that boiled through his veins though his cock remained sheathed and frozen inside his body.

There were ancients who never shifted from their first form because they loathed the weakness inherent in the human one. Kirill wasn't one of them even if he could count on two hands the number of times since he'd been cursed that he'd focused his magic into constructing the second shape and containing him in it.

In dragon form his penis remained retracted within his body, enabling him to hide the truth from himself—his inability to harden and claim a female with the thrust of his cock into her waiting channel.

Without having to confront the horror of his always flaccid organ, he could lose himself in the study of his various treasures. He could pretend that collecting and possessing a wealth of rare books and priceless gems were all that mattered to him.

In human form there was no such escape. His mind strayed constantly to his limp penis and the woman who was his perfect mate.

His inability to take her taunted him, becoming an ever-present reminder of his youthful foolishness and the spell that had rendered him impotent. Virgin. Without hope...until his soon-to-be-named heir Xanthus returned to the dragon realm with a Drui mate.

By the Great Shared Ancestor, how had Xanthus managed it?

The Drui were originally a nomadic people of magical bloodlines. They'd hidden the truth of their natures by blending in and traveling with human tribes known as the Galatai.

Because of their ability to draw poison and disease from human bodies, they'd been viewed as great healers. The Drui could also use their abilities to restore supernaturals to health.

All this was before the dawn of religions and priests who felt threatened by the Drui ability to heal, and the influence they held because of it, men who'd labeled them evil and urged those in power to round them up and kill them. In their fight for survival, some of the Drui used their ability to heal supernaturals, not to draw away poison and curse-born afflictions, but to draw power—the magical lifeblood—of those beings who weren't human.

As soon as the supernaturals realized what the Drui were capable of, they began hunting them as well. Enslaving some, killing others, and mating with a few in the hope of gaining control over such a powerful ability.

From time to time Kirill had heard rumors of a Drui living among elves, and another among the Sidhe. He'd believed the first telling but not the latter.

The elves were the first to see a future where the humans not only walked in the same world as the rest of the supernaturals but took it over. They'd fled and carved out a home for themselves in an alternate realm. The dragons followed later, and lastly, the most powerful of the fey and those allied with them, leaving behind a magic-poor world for the humans to rule.

He'd thought the Drui extinct in the human realm. Otherwise he would have parted with every gem and pearl, every piece of gold and bar of silver, every book of magic he possessed in order to be cured of the curse centuries ago, with plenty of time to regain his fortune and collect his mate.

Kirill swept his tail across the floor of his lair in aggravation. The tip of it struck the edge of his bed and sent gems scattering across rock and bouncing off walls.

He couldn't fathom why Xanthus would entertain the notion of allowing Marika to return to the human world. But then, there was fey in Xanthus' bloodlines. Perhaps that was what had corrupted his thinking. It certainly explained Xanthus' taking of both a male *and* female mate. Then again, perhaps Xanthus had come to prefer the human realm over this one as many of the younger dragons did.

*I will never understand it*, Kirill thought, glancing around his lair and thinking of all the treasures it contained.

Dragons hoarded and guarded. It was their nature, and nothing was more priceless to a male than a human mate. With or without magical ability, such a mate was to be kept in the lair, nestled on a bed of gems preferably, or, if she insisted, allowed outside, but never out of sight and rarely any further than the boundaries of a male's territory.

Whatever Xanthus' reason for thinking otherwise when it came to his mates, could no longer matter to Kirill. Learning that the Chalice of Enos had been found and would be made available to any male and his mate without discrimination or price, changed everything.

Kirill roared, cursing sorcerers yet again. This time directing his anger at Enos, the wizard who'd crafted a chalice then tied the fertility of the dragon race to it.

While the wizard lived and maintained possession of the chalice, dragon-kind had been held hostage, forced to turn over vast amounts of treasure in order to drink from the cup. Then afterward, until the chalice was lost in the mortal realm, it had been in the possession of Queen Otthilde, one of the Sidhe fey.

Cursed as he was and without hope of mating, much less siring offspring, Kirill had agreed to name Xanthus as his heir on the condition Xanthus' Drui mate remain in the dragon's realm, where she could be guarded as the treasure she was.

He'd planned on collecting the female who was to be his mate and bringing her to his lair then finding something—besides coming and going between realms as she pleased—to offer the Drui, Marika, if she could undo the sorcerer's curse. But in the



wake of Marika's arrival and his agreement with Xanthus, he'd learned of the Dragon's Cup recovery, adding complication to his situation.

Kirill hissed, sending a wall of flame out before him, finally accepting the only course of action possible for him. He would trust the Drui to heal rather than kill him. He would renegotiate with Xanthus. There was no other way.

If Xanthus was foolish enough to allow his mates the freedom to choose where they went and do as they pleased, then so be it. That was Xanthus' problem and his failure.

*I won't make the same mistake with mine,* Kirill thought, launching himself from the lair's rim and flying, his silver wings revealing an underside of the same blue as his tail and neck crest.

Once, the entire valley had belonged to his ancestral lair. They'd guarded it fiercely and managed it wisely so despite the scarcity of game, the harsh landscape and cold climate, they'd thrived. But slowly, as the effects of the sorcerer Enos' curse had diminished their numbers, feuds erupted and boundary lines were drawn.

Things would change now that the Chalice of Enos was in dragon possession—in *male* possession. Even in the days when it was possible to find a submissive female dragon, many males preferred human females. They were deliciously fragile, the rarest of treasures, made more so in those times because so few of them survived the shock of being taken away from their families by creatures they saw as terrifying beasts.

Those who did survive and accept a dragon lover were guarded fiercely because it was generally believed if a human female could accept one dragon male, then given enough time, she would respond to a new mate. His kind were acquisitive and competitive. Stealing a treasure added to the satisfaction of acquiring it, though Kirill was glad their culture had evolved so physical possession no longer equaled right of ownership when it came to a human mate—not that he intended to put such a thing to the test with his female. He wouldn't allow her to stray far enough away for another male to carry her off.

He would go to her realm and collect her from the location where he knew he'd find her, where centuries earlier his future mate had been revealed as he looked into a sorcerer's mirror. He would return to his lair with her immediately, and once there he would proceed to couple with her until he was certain he'd claimed her so completely that she had no desire to leave him.

Despite the size attributed to his kind by human legend—a size made bigger not only with each telling but because of dragon illusion magic—he could mount her both in human and dragon form. He might be larger and heavier in his first form, but with care he could still penetrate his mate. He could still pleasure her to orgasm and impregnate her while he was dragon.

Thinking about it built up such heat that Kirill exhaled flames and increased his speed, anxious to get to Xanthus' lair and speak with the Druí.

At the edge of his territory he stretched out his neck and trumpeted a call. Xanthus' grandfather responded, both acknowledging Kirill and granting permission to pass through claimed lands.

The valley narrowed further. Occasionally there was movement on cliffs seeming too sheer to navigate. Kirill caught glimpses of pygmy goats and scurrying rodents but the hunger driving him had nothing to do with the prey animals below.

His shadow marked his passage along red and gray rock. The cold light made his dark reflection seem deadly and sinister. It reminded him of the fear that used to erupt in villages and fields when dragons passed overhead in the days his kind shared the same realm as the humans.

He trumpeted again. This time Xanthus answered, not bothering to hide his irritation at being interrupted from his mating, though he granted permission for Kirill to enter both his territory and his lair.

When they'd last met, they had agreed Xanthus would come to Kirill's lair when he was ready to finalize the details naming him heir and spelling out his responsibilities as

well as his rights. But given the news of the Dragon's Cup, and Kirill's own decision to trust Marika, Kirill couldn't wait any longer.

As a courtesy he forced himself into a human form at the entranceway. He was surprised to encounter a huge cougar in the lair along with Xanthus and the Druí. *Shapeshifter?* he wondered, even as beast became man and another word formed in place of the first. *Sjen*.

How had Xanthus managed it? But then Kirill's gaze settled on the hair-woven collar around the Sjen's neck, matching the color and texture of the strands to the Druí's, and he knew.

He bowed low to Marika, seeing compassion and curiosity in her face and gaining confidence that his decision to trust her was the correct one. "May I have a word in private with you?"

Had he not already agreed to name Xanthus his heir, it would have been a dangerous, outrageous request for one male to make of another. Despite their tie by blood, they were essentially strangers to one another.

The answer came in a growl from the Sjen along with a matching one from Xanthus. Marika touched both of their arms, soothing them automatically, and Kirill could tell they spoke in the way of bonded mates, mind-to-mind.

The Sjen took the form of a cat no larger than a rabbit then left the outer chamber by way of a small fissure in the rock. Xanthus released the magic holding him into a human form and launched into the air to glide and circle above the canyon as a dragon.

"Thank you," Kirill said, spine stiffening to counter his sudden awkwardness over the nature of his problem.

"Would you care to sit?" Marika asked, a wave of her hand indicating a museum-quality Oriental rug on the floor.

Kirill nodded and followed her deeper into the lair. The carpet was littered with plush cushions but she pushed them away in favor of sitting cross-legged. He matched her pose, though he couldn't mimic her calmness. For the first time in memory, his

tongue felt tied to the bottom of his mouth, held useless there like a fledgling whose wings were still too weak for first flight.

Thankfully she took pity on him. "You've been cursed?"

Kirill only barely resisted the urge to look down at his flaccid cock. Was it obvious despite the clothing created by his magic?

Of course it was. Marika would stir any male to life.

He felt heat rise to his face, shame and embarrassment and dragon fury. If he hadn't already incinerated the sorcerer...

Kirill took a deep breath then exhaled carefully to ensure only air emerged. "Yes."

The Drui nodded. "I thought so. Granted, I haven't met many dragons, but all of them except for you have carried what I think of as a signature energy pattern around them. What was the curse?"

Kirill closed his eyes, almost preferring to have the Great Shared Ancestor call him home in that instant rather than be forced to say the word.

The image of his waiting mate gave him the strength to proceed. "Impotence."

A heartbeat passed. Then a second and a third. Plenty of time for the Drui to compose her features before he opened his eyes and looked at her again. "Can you undo the curse?"

"I need to know more about it first. Was witchcraft used, or sorcery?"

"Sorcery."

"How was it cast?"

"With words delivered on lightning bolts shot from his fingertips."

Kirill's nostrils flared as he remembered them striking him in the region of his hidden genitals, icy cold spears that caused him to drop the mirror he clutched into the ocean surf and very nearly follow it into the water.

Centuries of reading ancient magical tomes in the vain attempt to locate a counterspell allowed him to anticipate her next question. "The sorcerer wasn't known to me personally, nor was I known to him. It was a chance encounter."

Marika held her hand out, palm up, and he obeyed her silent command, placing his own palm down on hers. Feminine lips pursed in contemplation. Her eyelids lowered and he hardly dared to breathe as he waited for her verdict.

A slight nod made his heart leap. Dark eyes met his. "You've heard that the Chalice of Enos has been claimed and is being kept at Drake's Lair?"

"Yes."

"Then you won't really need an heir, will you?"

Heat coursed through his bloodstream as he envisioned his mate swelling with their offspring. Hope blossomed further in his chest. "You can cure me of the curse?"

"Yes." She met his eyes directly. "It's weakening. Two hundred, three hundred years from now and it will probably be gone."

Surprise took his breath. A dragon female never would have given up such a powerful bargaining chip.

Of course, he had no intention of waiting two or three hundred years. By his calculations, he would soon have only barely enough time to get to the human realm and the location where his mate would be. If he missed her, then she would become the subject of a hunt that might last for years.

"I have agreed to name Xanthus my heir. I will honor my word though our agreement hasn't yet been formalized by blood-oath."

"Xanthus said you intended to travel. Do you mean to leave this realm and remain in another?"

Kirill shuddered at the thought of living in the mortal world. "I plan to leave, but only long enough to collect the treasure waiting for me and return."

Marika's smile said she easily guessed the exact nature of his treasure. Her fingers curled around his and she leaned forward, unconsciously forcing him to do the same so their faces were only inches apart.

"Family is important to the Drui. When the time is right, I'll have children. They would enjoy the company of cousins in this realm, your children, Kirill, companions to fly and climb and explore with.

"You know Xanthus doesn't covet your treasure or your land. He wants only to ensure that his grandmother can pass to and from the portal at will. This isn't my world, nor is it Tallis', or even Xanthus' any longer. Our life is among humans. My days of wanderlust are done with and it's time for me to do what my kind has always done, serve the land by healing its people."

Kirill inhaled, taking in the scent of magic. He had known it would come to this.

Dragon instinct railed against letting a Drui leave this realm. And yet the vision Marika's words evoked, not only of a cure allowing him to sire children but a connection allowing him to be part of an extended family, made him ache with longing. He'd been alone for centuries, self-exiled because of his search for a way to break the curse.

"I will let it be known that I no longer seek an heir. I will enter it into the pledge records that for as long as I, or any of my blood, hold the land at the end of the valley, Xanthus' direct ancestors, mates and descendants may pass unhindered and without payment of tribute."

"Thank you," Marika said, her hand tightening on his before she released it to remove a small oak seed from her locket. "Xanthus is bringing soil from the valley. When he gets here, we'll begin."

The Sjen slid through the crevice he'd disappeared into. Cat form gave way to human form. Kirill acknowledged Marika's introduction of Tallis as Xanthus landed at the edge of the lair and also shifted, being careful not to lose the dirt grasped in his fist.

He joined them, kneeling on the carpet and transferring the earth to Marika's cupped hand. She placed the seed into the dirt then took Kirill's hand once again.

"Since the spell cast on you has slowly been dissipating, I'm not sure how obvious my drawing the rest of it away will be to you. It might be best if you concentrate on your upcoming journey and the treasure you intend to return with so we will both be confident the curse has been removed."

Kirill nodded. Fantasizing about his soon-to-be-claimed mate came easily to him though he didn't look away from Marika.

She closed her eyes and at first he felt nothing. Saw nothing.

Then slowly there was a tingling in his nether regions, a thawing that had him wishing he'd returned to his first form, where his penis was sheathed inside his body and wouldn't emerge unless pressed to an opening or forced out by thrusting. As he thought of mounting his female from behind, a sharp spike of heat stabbed through the center of his cock, making him gasp.

A tendril emerged from the bed of dirt in Marika's hand. It grew upward, into a seedling, mirroring the stiffening and thickening of his shaft as hot lust roared in to fill his penis.

Pride kept him from taking himself in hand. An iron will along with the determination not to spend his seed until he could give it to his mate kept him from coming, though desperation to get to her made his departure abrupt.

He took his first form as soon as Marika signaled she was done. His thanks and formal oath to Xanthus were trumpeted as Kirill launched himself into the air and sped toward the portal chamber.

## Chapter Two

Jazzlyn McCabe stopped outside Inner Magick and nervously rubbed her palms over the material of her skirt. Through the glass she could see the store's owner. Aislinn was an artist in her own right when it came to using stones in jewelry and small statues, though that wasn't what brought Jazzlyn to the shop.

Now that she was there, the prospect of going in and asking someone who might not even remember her for a favor made Jazzlyn's chest feel tight and her stomach roil. But what choice did she have?

Despite her cousin's penchant of hooking up with the wrong type of man, and despite the fact Caro had failed to show up for their great-grandmother's ninetieth birthday party, no one else was concerned about Carolyn except for her. No one was willing to file a missing person report. And even if they had been, a call to Carolyn's unhelpful "oh, Caro comes and goes all the time, I'm sure she's okay" roommate would have sent the report right into the police department trashcan.

Jazzlyn's instincts said differently. But then, she'd been the one Caro stood up the day before the party. And that was another part of the problem. Carolyn had a reputation for standing the women of their family up, and almost always because of a man. She'd just never done it to Jazzlyn before, though they'd also never had a fight that left them estranged for six months either.

A sharp pain slid through Jazzlyn and she quickly closed her mind to Caro's hurtful parting words. An internal voice chided, *So get this over with already. The sooner you do it, the sooner you can get back to work.*

Imagining the tiny studio apartment that also served as her workshop did a lot to calm Jazzlyn. Polished and unpolished stones could be found on every surface, including the tiny kitchen counter and her bed. Books were often stacked in the same



places, or left turned to relevant pages. They were heavy on pictures and light on text, but all of them were invaluable when it came to providing inspiration in creating the pieces of jewelry she made.

Her actual living space claimed only about ten percent of the apartment, most of it accounted for by the king-sized bed she'd imagined herself sharing with a significant other—only so far one hadn't come along. *My fault*, Jazzlyn thought, accepting the blame.

Despite how often her mother and grandmother told her that with her looks she should be married by now, meeting people wasn't easy for her. It still didn't come naturally.

She'd been nearly paralyzed by shyness when she was younger, introverted to an extreme. She was better now, especially one-on-one. But holing up in her apartment and losing herself in her work was still her "default setting".

Going out took a conscious decision and an act of will. What socializing she did usually involved rock hounds and gem dealers, or other artists, people she'd come to know in the course of making and selling jewelry. And Alexandria, of course, her closest friend, whose two passions were hunting rare books and carving fetishes.

"You're stalling," Jazzlyn whispered, feeling her heart start to race at the prospect of going into the shop and asking Aislinn for a favor—especially this kind of favor, especially when only desperation made her consider the possibility Aislinn might be able to help.

*All you can do is ask*, she told herself.

Jazzlyn forced herself to take a step forward, then another. Her palms grew damp again as she reached for the door and opened it.

Gentle chimes sounded, announcing her presence. Aislinn looked up from whatever she was working on and Jazzlyn's imagination took off on its own flight of fantasy. For an instant Aislinn resembled an elf. The delicate jeweled butterflies perched at the top of her ears gave her a fey appearance, and in the shop's light there was

something otherworldly about her, something making it easy to believe she had a supernatural talent.

Aislinn's smiled. "It's Jazzlyn, right? Sophie introduced us at the gem mart in Miami. You made a necklace for her to award as a prize when her latest fantasy story releases."

Relief poured into Jazzlyn, clearing her mind of whimsy. "Yes."

"Do you want to look around? Or is there something in particular you're searching for."

It was the perfect opening though Jazzlyn's stomach still cramped when she took it. "I'm hoping you can help me. My –"

The chimes and a whoosh of air announced another arrival. A breathless woman's voice said, "Sorry I'm late. Today's been crazy. I've been behind schedule and racing all day to catch up. Is it ready?"

Aislinn gave Jazzlyn an apologetic glance. Jazzlyn waved it off. "I can wait. I'm not in a hurry."

"Thanks. I'll be right back."

Aislinn ushered the woman through beaded curtains and into a back room. A flash of color caught Jazzlyn's attention, drawing her to the counter where a round, antique wall mirror lay flat.

Intricate symbols swirled on the frame, curling around one clear stone then another, as if linking them in a complex spell. The thought made Jazzlyn smile and shake her head slightly. Until desperation compelled her to seek out Aislinn, she'd never spent much time contemplating magic. Well, not magic in general. She smiled ruefully. Alexandria's fetishes were a different matter altogether.

Jazzlyn traced the sigils and was surprised at how warm the stones felt against her fingertips despite their ice-cold color. Her eyebrows drew together in concentration as she studied them more closely.

Not diamond. Not quartz. She didn't recognize the gems used in the mirror frame.

The longer she looked, the more she thought she saw hints of color, the more intrigued she became. Some kind of hypnotist's gem? she wondered, picking up the mirror and studying it more closely, trying to determine if it was one of Aislinn's creations, made to look antique.

Aislinn and her client emerged from the back room. The woman left as Aislinn joined Jazzlyn at the counter.

"This is beautiful," Jazzlyn said, feeling more confident talking about a craft they shared an interest in. "Is it your work?"

"In part. I restored it. The original jewels were stolen, probably hundreds of years ago. Thankfully the frame survived and wasn't melted down for the silver."

Jazzlyn rubbed her thumb over one of the stones. "What are these? I've never seen or felt anything like them. I thought they'd be cool but they're warm to the touch. And the longer I stare at them, the harder they are to look away from."

The mirror captured Aislinn's surprise and Jazzlyn started to put it back on the counter. Aislinn stopped her with a hand on her arm. "Hold on to it for just a few minutes longer, please. You're the first person it's reacted to."

Aislinn's smile was infectious, further putting Jazzlyn at ease. "Forgive the personal question, but are you involved with anyone?"

Jazzlyn felt her face heat up. "No. Why?"

Aislinn touched one of the crystal-clear gems. "These are called heartmate stones. Or sometimes simply heartstones."

A jolt of surprise speared Jazzlyn. "They exist?"

Aislinn startled. "You've heard of them?"

"I've got a friend who collects and sells rare books. She showed me a passage in one of them, and the pictures accompanying it since she knows I'm interested in old jewelry designs. There were two rings, each supposedly set with a heartmate stone."

“Does she still have the book?”

“Probably. It was written in a language she didn’t recognize. I think she was going to take it to the university and see if one of the professors there could identify it so she’d know exactly what she had in her possession and who the likely buyers might be. There was a penciled in caption under the pictures, someone’s translation.”

“What’d it say?”

Color rose in Jazzlyn’s cheeks as she thought about the conversation that had ensued, the private hopes she and Alexandria had shared about meeting Mr. Right, as they’d sat on the balcony of Alex’s apartment watching the sun set and drinking piña coladas while Jimmy Buffet sang about being wasted away in Margaritaville. “It claimed heartmate stones were incomparable when it came to finding true love.”

Aislinn nodded. “If you’re sensitive to them, they react in the presence of your perfect mate. Usually they’re placed individually in pieces of jewelry. Most people wear them in a ring or a pendant. They’re very rare now, but once they were widely used. They can be any color, though they can only be worked successfully by those with a certain heritage.”

Jazzlyn was reminded of the flight of fancy she’d had when she stepped into the shop – Aislinn as a fey being with supernatural powers – followed by the odd thought she’d had about the symbols and stones on the mirror’s frame being part of a spell. Her sense of humor came to her rescue, allowing her to dip her toe into the waters of magical belief without losing her balance and being submerged in it. “So how does this work? Should I say something like ‘Mirror, mirror in my hands, where’s the man I’m meant to land?’”

“Like reeling in a fish?” Aislinn’s asked, eyes dancing with mischief.

Jazzlyn couldn’t suppress an answering smile. “In my case it’s more likely to end up a fish *story*, about the big one that got away.”

Aislinn's laugh ended with a slight shake of her head. "Only if you allow him to get away. The next time you see Sophie—after she and Severn return from their honeymoon—you can ask her about the heartmate stone she wears."

"She's married?" Jazzlyn asked, surprised. Less than a month ago she'd overheard Sophie joking about the lack of available men.

"For all practical purposes. All that remains is an official ceremony. Severn will probably insist on it the minute they get back."

Jazzlyn glanced down at the mirror, half hopeful and half afraid, and not completely convinced the magic Aislinn apparently believed in was real. Alexandria would *love* this. "Nothing seems to be happening."

Almost as soon as the words were out, Jazzlyn thought she saw a flash of silver streak through the stones. Aislinn's quick smile made her ask, "Did you see that?"

"Yes."

Jazzlyn worried her bottom lip as her courage started to desert her. Asking Aislinn to find Caro was one thing, even police departments sometimes used psychics, but holding a magic mirror and believing in heartmate stones...

She took a deep breath to steady herself. "How does this thing work?"

"I'm not sure," Aislinn admitted. "If the mirror is the same one I found referenced in an old book, the original gems set in the frame were sorcerer stones."

It was too much of a journey into the surreal. Jazzlyn lost her nerve and started to put the mirror down on the counter. Aislinn's hand on her arm stopped her.

"Please, hold on to it for a minute longer. It's safe, that I can promise you. If it'll help, we can talk about what brought you here. Before my client burst in you started to say you wanted my help with something. What can I do for you?"

Jazzlyn looked at the mirror she continued to hold and felt a confusion of emotions, all of them making her uncomfortable. How could she accept one possibility—that Aislinn could help her—without accepting another, that this could be real too? How

could she accept that Alex's fetishes became something *more* than just carved stone, and completely discount this?

Maybe because this was a lot riskier to her heart.

Jazzlyn took another deep, centering breath. She'd come this far, she'd think less of herself if she didn't follow through. But that didn't mean she intended to ignore the conversational lifeline Aislinn had tossed out.

"Sophie told me once that you have a gift and can sometimes help find people who've gone missing. My cousin Carolyn didn't show up at our great-grandmother's birthday party. I've looked and I've asked around, but no one has seen Caro or knows where she is. I'm afraid something's happened to her."

"Have you talked to the police?"

"No. I'm the only one worried about her. Her mother and mine both say she'll show up eventually. But I can't shake the feeling she's in trouble. No one in my family will back me up if I ask the police to look for her and I don't have the cash to pay a private detective, not without selling some of the gems I need for my jewelry. You know how that is. Unless it's the right buyer, I'd take a loss on them. If you can help, I thought maybe you could look through my collection—"

"If I can help, you don't owe me anything." Behind them the chimes announced another visitor to the shop. "Or better yet, consider the debt paid in full by your humoring me and holding on to the mirror so I can determine if using heartmate stones instead of sorcerer stones achieves the outcome I hoped for."

Before Jazzlyn could think of a response the stones flared, becoming liquid silver spiked with dark blue. The change was so obvious Jazzlyn couldn't deny seeing it.

For a split second, just as a man's face was captured in the mirror, she would have sworn he was outlined in the image of a silver dragon with a blue neck crest. A blink and he was only a man, the stones clear again but still warm to the touch.

*He can't be real*, she thought, her stomach doing a somersault and her throat going so tight she doubted she could get a word out with a crowbar.

There was gorgeous, and then there was raw, primal beauty. He could have been conjured right out of one of her most decadent fantasies. The kind where a dominant male – one who deserved her trust – took possession of her and never let her go.

Dark blue eyes bored into hers intently, causing her channel to spasm and drench her panties in arousal. Embarrassment flooded into her with the realization he could probably see her expression in the mirror and read her thoughts.

She hastily set the mirror on the counter and turned as Aislinn did. Her breath caught at the full impact of the stranger who'd entered the store, the very one whose image in the mirror had sent desire racing through her, and who – if what was claimed about heartstones was true – was supposed to be her perfect mate.

Black hair cascaded to his shoulders in waves she wanted to touch. A broad chest and muscular arms begged to be caressed. And his lips...

Pleasure. They were made for it – both giving and receiving it.

Jazzlyn shivered as she realized her perusal of him was chaste compared to the one he gave her. He stripped her with his eyes. Bent her over the counter and fucked her where she stood.

The heat in her cheeks deepened. Escaping the shop was impossible.

She couldn't move. Couldn't utter a single word.

She was drowning in lust and confusion. She was totally out of her depth.

"I am Kirill."

His name rumbled through her saying something more. *You are mine.*

Her nipples tightened painfully and her cunt clenched. "Jazzlyn," she managed, amazed she could even remember who she was given the intensity of his stare and the effect he had on her.

She licked her lips and he stepped further into her personal space, swamping her with his heat and scent, making her lightheaded with it. She yielded, stepping back involuntarily only to have her escape blocked by the counter.

Movement, Aislinn's hand settling on Kirill's arm, reminded Jazzlyn of where she was and why she was there. More color slid into her cheeks, though her embarrassment didn't deepen. If *anyone* could witness what had just happened between her and Kirill, and accept it as perfectly normal, it was Aislinn.

"I promised Jazzlyn safety from whatever came of holding the mirror," Aislinn said.

Kirill only barely resisted the urge to roar and breathe fire. The hope he'd nurtured even after journeying from the portal and realizing his soon-to-be mate was going to be found in Inner Magick went up in flames and left him cursing sorcerers, elves, and his fate in general.

By the Great Shared Ancestor, was it so much to ask that after centuries of suffering a thing many males would prefer death rather than endure, that coming to this magic-poor realm, collecting his mate, and returning home would be an easy task?

Oh, he'd known the *coordinates* of the location where Jazzlyn would hold the mirror, but he'd had no reason to venture here until now.

Of all the places, why this one?

True, he'd never been here, but he knew of it from the reports he'd gotten when he was seeking an heir and considering Xanthus.

Marika worked here and called Aislinn her friend. And now the half-elf had offered Jazzlyn a promise of safety, a guarantee that would no doubt be enforced by the three dragon lords who had guards posted outside the shop.

Kirill suppressed his fire by will alone, pushing it deep inside where it melded to that scorching through his cock at being so close to his mate. *Think*, he ordered himself, forcing his eyes off Jazzlyn because it was nearly impossible to consider anything other than gaining possession of her when he looked at her.

The mirror came into focus. It was a match to the one he'd held centuries earlier, except for the gems. Once they'd been sorcerer stones, now they were something else entirely.



A closer look and satisfaction purred through him. Heartstone.

They were clear now where moments earlier they'd been blue and silver. Dragon colors. His colors.

He turned his head and met the soft lavender of the half-elf's eyes. She knew Jazzlyn belonged to him. So why had she chosen to meddle?

As if guessing his thoughts, Aislinn said, "It's good you arrived when you did. I recognize your name. If I'm not mistaken you're related to Xanthus."

"I am," he said, wondering what game the half-elf was playing.

"Jazzlyn came for my help. She's afraid her cousin is in danger and—"

"No!"

The denial was out before Kirill could stop it. And in its wake came the cooling of his soon-to-be mate's scent.

A single glance at her expression communicated his error clearly. Determination and distance had replaced desire. A rigid posture had replaced an accepting one.

By the Great Shared Ancestor, despite the Drui's healing, he was still cursed when it came to his mate! But at least he understood the half-elf's game now. She *knew* he intended to whisk Jazzlyn back to the dragon realm immediately and sought to ease the way by reducing his mate's anxiety.

A small flame of appreciation sprang to life in Kirill's chest. No wonder Marika was so fond of Aislinn.

"I meant only that such a state of affairs can't be allowed," he said, forcing an unnatural calmness into his voice even though the words tasted like ash. "I will ensure this cousin is located and made safe."

*There, that should take care of the matter,* he thought with great satisfaction. What good were treasure and the reworking of his agreement about Marika's returning to this realm if they couldn't both be put to use? Xanthus and Tallis could easily see to this matter on his behalf.

Aislinn's smile warned him. It plainly said the old days and old ways were gone.

He ignored it only to be forced into swallowing his fire again when Jazzlyn said, "If Aislinn is able to tell me where Carolyn is, I wouldn't mind your going with me just in case. But finding my cousin is *my* responsibility."

Kirill saw red and wondered if it were possible for a dragon to spontaneously combust when in a human form. Perhaps he'd investigate it if he survived this newest ordeal.

His throat closed on a roar, a flame, and what he wanted to say. Had it been possible, he would have surrendered every gem, coin and book he possessed just to get Jazzlyn alone, mated, and safely ensconced in his lair.

He took a deep breath. This quest to find her cousin could be used to his advantage.

In ancient times, the vast majority of human females died of fright when taken by dragons. Traveling between realms might be equally shocking. The more time he spent with her here, the easier her transition would be, and beyond that, before they left he wanted her to drink from the Dragon's Cup.

After centuries of waiting, he was with her now. He didn't doubt his ability to keep her safe.

Kirill took Jazzlyn's hand in his, shuddering in ecstasy at the contact. Calmness settled into him as he felt an answering ripple of pleasure pass through her. "Allow me to assist you. I find the thought of you in danger unbearable."

Saying no was beyond Jazzlyn. Her comment about allowing him to go with her to find Carolyn had come out of nowhere, passing through her lips and shocking her to her core.

She dragged her gaze away from him, hyperaware that he continued to hold her hand. "I'm not sure how your gift works," she said to Aislinn. "I have a picture of Carolyn if that helps."

"Did she handle it?"

Jazzlyn shook her head. "Casually, maybe. I'm not sure of even that. My aunt took the picture, but she always gets double prints."

"Can you get something that belongs to Carolyn? Something she cares about? Items with sentimental value work best, but in a pinch, favorite items are better than nothing."

Jazzlyn worried her bottom lip as she mentally walked through her aunt's house. Except for the photo albums chronicling Carolyn's childhood, she was fairly certain her aunt didn't have anything her cousin would value.

"I'll have to go back to Caro's apartment," Jazzlyn said, feeling her chest tighten with the prospect of confronting Deana again. "She shares it. When I was there earlier, her apartment mate wouldn't let me through the front door, much less into my cousin's room in order to search for clues about where Caro was or who she was with."

"She will not deny me," Kirill said.

The purring confidence in his voice was a warm tongue lapping Jazzlyn's swollen folds and sending a tremor of need upward, through her clit and nipples before sliding down her arm and into the hand Kirill held.

Flared nostrils and taut features told her he'd felt it. Heated eyes echoed his words but turned them into a sensual promise to Jazzlyn. *You will not deny me.*

Sudden nervousness made her try to extricate her hand from his. He wouldn't allow it.

"It's settled then," Aislinn said, plucking a business card from a holder on the counter and writing a phone number on the back of it before handing it to Jazzlyn. "Call me when you've got something of Carolyn's. If I'm not here at the shop, you can reach me on my cell."

Jazzlyn slipped the card into her skirt pocket. For the first time since Caro was a no-show at the birthday party, some of the worry slid off Jazzlyn's shoulders.

Kirill's thumb brushed across her knuckles. "Shall we go?"

There was only one answer. She cast a quick glance at the mirror with its clear heartmate stones and said, "Yes."

## Chapter Three

*A curse on human technology*, Kirill thought, fighting the urge to dig his fingers into his seat cushion as Jazzlyn swung from behind a monstrosity of a truck and raced to pass it as a car in the distance sped toward them.

How did those of his kind tolerate living in this realm? It wasn't natural to travel surrounded by steel instead of on wings. Nor was it natural to be bombarded by constant noise and unceasing movement.

He'd thought it bad when humans gave up their crossbows for guns, but this was horrendous! This was –

Kirill closed his eyes as Jazzlyn's car lurched into place in front of the truck then veered sharply onto an off-ramp. A grunt escaped as he knocked into the door and the involuntary protest was enough to elicit a sharp comment from his soon-to-be mate.

"You should have followed in your own car if being in one with a woman driver makes you this nervous."

By the Great Shared Ancestor, what had he done to deserve this torment?

"How much longer until we reach your cousin's apartment?"

Apparently it was the wrong thing to say. The simple question seemed to inflame Jazzlyn further, making her shift her gaze from the road long enough to send a fiery glare at him.

His cock responded even as his stomach dove in near panic and didn't settle until she was once again looking forward. Relief poured into him when she slowed the car further, saying, "We're almost there."

Kirill prided himself on having learned an important lesson when it came to dealing with Jazzlyn. He remained quiet rather than saying “good” even as every cell in his body vibrated with the word.

He could hardly wait to be out of this metal death trap, though he promised himself that if he was forced to remain in this world for any length of time, he would learn how to drive so he could take charge of the task. It was too dangerous an activity to leave to his mate. And beyond that, he could clearly see the necessity of purchasing a convertible in case he needed to incinerate any threat he couldn’t avoid by skillful driving.

Kirill relaxed further, pleased he’d come up with a contingency plan in the event Jazzlyn’s cousin couldn’t be found quickly. He turned his attention away from the road and contemplated his soon-to-be mate.

She was beautiful to him, exquisite. Her lines and curves came together in perfection, as if she’d been created by an artist, one of the old masters the humans so revered. A shiver told him she was aware of his scrutiny, and the sharp scent of her aggravation gave way to that of desire.

Her nipples pressed against the front of her blouse, begging him to lean forward and take possession of them, to touch and taste and bite. He resisted their pleading call only by forcing himself to look away.

“So what brought you to Inner Magick?” she asked, her voice husky with nerves.

A soft purr formed deep in his throat but he kept it suppressed along with images of claiming her. Soon they would be finished with this business and he would have her complete attention.

“Fate,” he answered, unwilling to give the long-dead sorcerer any credit. Then, hoping to make Jazzlyn more at ease in his company, added, “Marika, Aislinn’s assistant, is now related to me through her bond with Xanthus.”

They turned into an apartment complex. A shudder passed through Kirill at the number of individuals living in such tight confines. How did humans stand it?

The car slowed to a stop and the drone of the engine ceased. The desire to escape his claustrophobic confinement would have propelled Kirill from the car's steely depths like prey fleeing the jaws of a predator, but the skill he was slowly acquiring when it came to dealing with his mate warned him that such an action would cause him to lose ground with her. He opened the door and eased out of the car, limiting himself to only the smallest sigh of relief.

Jazzlyn heard it. A smile twitched at the corners of her mouth. She ought to be offended, she was an excellent driver!

At no point had she gone more than ten miles over the speed limit, and even then, she'd been one of the slower cars! Still, she couldn't seem to work up a good mad. In fact, she found his effort to calmly get out of the car strangely endearing. The man acted as though he'd never been a passenger before.

Her heart did a little flip-flop in her chest. He could have followed in his own car. She assumed it was parked close to Inner Magick. It had to count for something that he'd chosen to stay with her instead, even if sitting in the passenger seat had scared him into a silence she hadn't worked up the nerve to break until they were almost at Caro's apartment complex.

Liquid warmth pooled in the pit of her stomach when he took her hand as soon as she stepped onto the sidewalk. This was all such new, strange territory for her.

"My cousin's apartment is upstairs. Her roommate's name is Deana. There's assigned parking in this complex. Caro's spot is empty. Deana's isn't."

"What type of work does your cousin do?" Kirill asked as they climbed the stairs.

"She's a waitress in a high-end nightclub. When I went by, the only thing I learned was that she's not scheduled to work until the weekend."

"And the roommate?"

"She models. In between jobs I think she also works as a waitress. She and Carolyn met while they were both working at the same club, but Deana hasn't worked there for a while."

“Does she know the man in your cousin’s life?”

“She claims she doesn’t. She says Caro never introduces any of her boyfriends to her.”

“Do you believe her?”

“Yes.”

On the outside Caro seemed superconfident, even competitive when it came to men, but over the years, as Jazzlyn had watched her cousin go from one disastrous relationship to another, she’d come to understand that deep down, Carolyn had never gotten over her father’s abandonment. Maybe she would have if there’d been visits and remembered birthdays, but there hadn’t been, and compounding the rejection was the knowledge that he’d moved in with a woman who had a daughter the same age as Caro.

So yes, while her cousin was very pretty, Jazzlyn believed Caro wouldn’t risk losing *her man* to someone like Deana, who was *definitely* beautiful enough to model more than part-time in Jazzlyn’s opinion.

They reached the top of the stairs and Jazzlyn pointed toward the right, to the apartment on the ocean side of the building though the complex was several blocks away from the beach. Kirill gave her hand a gentle squeeze, “Don’t worry, we will find what we need here. Before nightfall you’ll know your cousin’s whereabouts.”

His confidence boosted hers. They stopped in front of the door and Jazzlyn knocked. A moment later she sensed a presence rather than heard it. She could easily imagine Carolyn’s roommate looking through the peephole and pretending not to be home.

Kirill nudged Jazzlyn to the side, so he was visible. Almost immediately there was the sound of a deadbolt retracting.

Deana opened the door wearing a robe that looked like something taken from a lingerie photo shoot. It clung provocatively, emphasizing generous breasts and a thin



figure. "I haven't heard from Caro," she said, directing the words at Jazzlyn though all of her attention was focused on Kirill.

He took charge, saying, "Allow us in to search her room."

Deana stepped back, her eyes glazing over in lust—not that Jazzlyn could blame her. The timbre of Kirill's voice had been enough to make molten desire run through her veins instead of blood, and a cloud of potent masculine pheromones descend to effect her breathing.

"You can look at anything that catches your interest," Deana said, practically eating Kirill with her eyes.

Jealousy flared to life inside Jazzlyn, fierce and uncomfortable and unexpected. It screamed along her nerve endings, claiming *He's mine!*

The logical part of her shied away from it, denied it, only to be overridden by images of his hungry focus at Inner Magick. Of Aislinn talking about heartmate stones and perfect mates in the moments before the gems set in the mirror blazed liquid silver and dark blue.

She couldn't stop herself from checking Kirill's expression to see if he was equally affected by Deana. He wasn't. Or if he was, he was doing a good job of hiding it.

Relief rushed into her. She blushed when his eyes met hers, his expression growing possessive and determined, as if he could see into her heart and read her doubts, and intended to eradicate them completely at the first opportunity.

Her cunt spasmed, dampening her panties further. His nostrils flared in reaction and his eyes darkened from deep blue to the solid black of lust, reassuring her she was the one he desired.

Deana's hands on his chest ended the moment and reminded Jazzlyn of the task that had brought them here. She hated his being touched by another woman. But she took advantage of the distraction he provided even though primitive thoughts of breaking model-perfect fingers, hands and arms crowded her mind as she went to Carolyn's room.

Violent thoughts gave way to victorious ones as soon as Jazzlyn saw the battered music box on the nightstand. It was exactly the item she needed.

Caro's father had given it to her on her twelfth birthday, the year before he'd turned his back on his old family in favor of his new one. The music box had been broken more than once, hurled against the wall in anger and sadness. But each time, something inside Carolyn drove her to collect the pieces and have the box repaired.

Seeing it saddened Jazzlyn. Her father left when she was nine, unable to "live a lie" any longer. In his case, not living a lie translated into coming out of the closet about being a gay man who'd tried to be a straight one.

Jazzlyn sighed, wishing Carolyn could let go of the past, or at least understand how it played into her decisions when it came to men. She picked up the pillow and stripped the pillowcase off it.

At least she understood her own motivations for trying to maintain a relationship with her cousin despite how little they had in common anymore. Old loyalties died hard. She might not be as painfully introverted and shy as she once was, but she remembered those earlier years with agonizing clarity. She wouldn't have survived her first twelve years of school without Caro there.

Jazzlyn carefully wrapped the pillowcase around the music box, trying not to touch the wood. It might not matter to Aislinn, she hadn't said anything about not handling whatever they found, but Jazzlyn preferred safe to sorry.

She turned to leave then realized she couldn't, not yet. The thought of invading her cousin's privacy knotted Jazzlyn's stomach, but she might not get another chance to search Caro's room for something *tangible*, something that might identify Carolyn's current boyfriend or provide a hint as to where they were.

Deana's husky murmur came from the living room. Jazzlyn cocked her head and listened more intently, hearing footsteps but not the sound of Kirill's voice. She wondered what he was doing to keep Caro's roommate occupied, and found with a

surprise, that whatever it was, she trusted him to be in the same room with someone as gorgeous and underdressed as Deana and not be seduced.

How much longer before Jazzlyn emerged from the bedroom? Kirill wondered as he managed to get to the other side of the eating table without it appearing as though he was in a full-blown retreat.

By the Great Shared Ancestor, he'd forgotten the effect his kind could have on human females in this magic-poor realm. Clearly it had been a mistake to grip Deana's wrists and pull her hands from where they'd been trying to strip him of his clothing as he struggled to occupy her with conversation. Apparently doing so had been like waving a red flag in front of a bull or a glittering jewel in front of a dragon.

The robe fluttered to floor as she moved toward him. "Don't be this way," she said, shrugging so her nightgown strap slid down and a breast was revealed. "I know you want me. You practically *devoured* me when I opened the door for you."

Her scent reached him. It enveloped him, but unlike Jazzlyn's it didn't stir either his cock or his fantasies.

A small, niggling worry slid into Kirill's consciousness as he remembered the silent exchange with Jazzlyn and the wave of dragon pheromones freed by the lust he felt toward his soon-to-be mate. Was it possible Deana had been caught in the backlash? Were her actions the result of his own lack of control?

Between the sorcerer's curse and the image he'd carried of Jazzlyn since he was barely old enough to be considered an adult, he'd never pursued a female or had reason to try to seduce one. He had no sexual experience, though before this day was over, that would no longer be the case.

Embarrassed guilt caused Kirill's face to redden. It deepened when Deana said, "There's no need to be shy with me. I'll take good care of you."

He dared a glance toward the hallway where Jazzlyn had disappeared, only to look back and find Deana was climbing onto the table, the movement making the short nightgown ride up, leaving her buttocks exposed.

Horror vibrated through him as he backed away. Would Jazzlyn think less of him if he escaped to the car or if joined her in the bedroom like a scared fledgling seeking protection?

Approaching footsteps stiffened his spine. Panic brought inspiration. He did not want his soon-to-be mate to walk in on this scene!

Kirill lunged forward, plucking Deana off the table then hurrying to scoop up the robe. He wrapped it around her securely and tied the belt so her arms were bound at her sides.

The shock of his actions kept her still. Or perhaps his proximity and pheromones subdued her. Either way, Kirill was grateful to have the situation under control as Jazzlyn entered the room.

Her gaze lingered briefly on his face, noting his high color. "Ready to leave?" she asked, her voice holding the faintest hint of amusement.

Kirill answered with his feet, getting to her side and hustling her to the car as quickly as possible. Even the prospect of being trapped in a steely deathtrap with Jazzlyn driving paled in comparison to remaining in the apartment with Deana.

It took extraordinary effort for Jazzlyn to hide her smile and keep from laughing, but she managed it. Poor guy, he'd suffered enough.

A sideways glance at Kirill and her heart turned over in her chest. He was such a contradiction.

Most guys who looked as good as he did would have major egos. They'd *expect* the kind of attention Deana had obviously been giving him. Kirill, on the other hand...

Her good intentions not to laugh almost disappeared as the image of Deana tangled and tied in her robe resurfaced. Jazzlyn bit her bottom lip, remembering his heightened color and panicked expression. If she didn't know better, she'd think he was gay.

*But you don't know better – yet,* a mischievous internal voice that sounded a lot like Alex's prompted, making her heart trip into a stuttered beat. *Maybe you should do a quick check. Give him a kiss in appreciation of his efforts on your behalf. Without him, you wouldn't have the music box.*

Lust burned her belly and flared outward. Her hands tightened on the steering wheel. Did she dare?

She wasn't a virgin, but she'd never taken on a man like Kirill. The two guys she'd dated to the point of actual intercourse had been gentle and considerate and...when it was done she'd felt unsatisfied and wondered if they felt the same.

It hadn't exactly been a boost to her self-confidence.

*But this is different. He's different.*

Indecision kept her driving a few moments longer, until she couldn't stand it anymore.

His scent filled her car. His nearness was distracting enough to cause a wreck.

She pulled to the curb and put the car in park before turning to look at him. His eyes bored into hers, dark and hungry, eradicating any possible doubt about her desirability.

"Thanks for helping me," she said, leaning forward, drawn to him like a moth to flame.

Fire scorched through her the instant their lips touched. It roared through her system, branding every inch of her as his.

She moaned. Or he did.

It was impossible to tell. Just as it was impossible to know whether he pulled her onto his lap or she climbed there.

She wanted him. She found him fascinating, like a gem with hidden facets, one needing the right person and setting to really see it in all its glory. He was endearing, strangely vulnerable, like a man out of his element, and totally adorable because of it, though she doubted he would appreciate the label, not when he bristled with masculine pride and projected the promise of dominance.

Her clit throbbed where it pressed against her panties. Her cunt lips were swollen, full. She ached with a desperation that made her want to guide his hand to her mound.

“We can’t,” she said, more for herself than for him.

“We can. We will,” Kirill said.

*By the Great Shared Ancestor, did she have any idea what she was putting him through?* he wondered, intensely aware of Jazzlyn’s breasts pressed to his chest and the proximity of her cunt to his cock.

Having her in his arms was torment and ecstasy, a battering of his senses. A reality beyond any he’d ever known.

His tongue delved into her mouth, explored, conquered. Centuries of need crested and he poured it into her along with his fire.

*Mine!* It echoed through him with every beat of his heart. She was his and he would never let her escape.

His hands roamed possessively over her back, aggressively tugging her blouse upward so he could caress her naked flesh. He shuddered at the smooth feel of her skin and the way she responded to him, clung to him, her scent revealing her readiness to accept him as a mate.

He fought the urge to let the hollow spurs at his wrists descend and fill with serum. A moan escaped as he imagined raking them across her back.

They were an ancient adaptation leaving human females unconscious—a necessity in the days when dragons lived in rocky lairs accessible only by flying. But more

importantly, the serum would alter her body, change her chemistry so she could conceive a dragon's young.

His cock spasmed, the tip becoming wet, lubricated in preparation for working its way into her tight sheath. He'd heard it said that great care had to be taken even in claiming those human females who had a great deal of sexual experience.

A growl escaped at the thought of Jazzlyn *ever* knowing any touch but his. He would eradicate any memory of a past lover, burn it from her mind and body with dragon fire.

His arm tightened around her. One hand left her back to smooth over her skirt from waistband to hem, then slide underneath.

She shivered as his palm made the return trip against her skin, stopping on her thigh. His fingers traced the edge of dainty, feminine panties, sending a rush of possessive desire through his cock.

"What color are they?" he asked, loath to relinquish her mouth long enough to gain an answer.

"Dark blue."

One of his colors, though she didn't know it yet.

Satisfaction rippled through him as he imagined her wearing nothing but jewelry from his store of treasure. Sapphires strung together with delicate silver links, their beauty accentuating hers as they circled her neck and wrists, ankles and belly.

He reclaimed her mouth as his hand delved into her panties. In his fantasies her mound was smooth, naked of pubic hair, kept that way for her pleasure as well as his.

The erotic shock of encountering bare skin made Kirill lose control. For an instant the car filled with shimmering silver and traces of blue as the magic holding him into a human shape nearly failed.

The squeal of brakes right next to the car jerked Jazzlyn into awareness of her surroundings. She pulled away from Kirill's kiss, flustered, needy – heart thumping and guilt rising as she remembered Caro.

It was harder than it should have been to slide from his lap, to return to the driver's seat. She nearly whimpered at the loss of his hand between her thighs. A second longer...

Jazzlyn squeezed her legs together and fought to make sense of what was happening to her. She'd never in her life responded to a man the way she did to him, to the point where she lost her inhibitions in public.

He crowded her, not letting her retreat into either shyness or mortification. His hand cupped her face, forcing her to look at him. "You make me forget myself." His voice sounded gruff, as if he wasn't used to losing control in public either.

Warmth exploded in her chest then sunk to her cunt. It didn't make sense, not given his looks, but she felt as though somehow they were kindred spirits. "You have the same effect on me."

"Good," he said, practically purring with masculine satisfaction.

She laughed, because on him a touch of arrogance was very attractive. It gave her the confidence to lean forward and brush his lips in a teasing kiss. "Don't let it go to your head."

He retaliated by cupping her breast and sending a spark of fire straight to her clit. "We will finish this after we've done what we can to find your cousin."

It was a statement instead of a question. But Jazzlyn answered anyway, whispering *yes* against his mouth before his tongue thrust between her lips.



## **Chapter Four**

“Perfect timing,” Aislinn said, joining Kirill and Jazzlyn at the door of Inner Magick long enough to lock it, then flip a sign over to indicate the store was closed. “And a perfect excuse for going home a little early today. Thankfully, it’s late enough that any of my regular customers would call before coming by. Let’s do this in the back room.”

They followed her through the beaded curtains.

Jazzlyn was momentarily distracted by drawings of things Aislinn was in the process of making. The work was unique, most of it small pieces of art to grace desktops, rather than jewelry, though she knew Aislinn did both.

With a wave of her hand, Aislinn directed them to sit down at a small table littered with stones. Jazzlyn unwrapped the music box and set it on the table. “I was careful not to touch it directly, just in case it mattered.”

She wiped suddenly damp palms against her skirt, realizing how many boundaries had already been stretched today and feeling nervous at being so far out of her comfort zone. Did she really believe in psychics and magic and heartmate stones?

Kirill’s hand came down on hers, pinning it to her thigh and reminding her of what had happened on the way to Inner Magick. A glance in his direction and she found it hard to care about anything but having time to explore the chemistry between them.

She might be introverted and shy by nature but that didn’t mean she intended to turn her back on the chance of a lifetime. In that way she was very much like her mother.

No regrets. Keep emotional baggage to the minimum. Those were the lessons she’d learned growing up.

A lot of women would have been bitter and vengeful at having a husband announce he’d finally accepted his homosexuality and ask for a divorce, her mother

hadn't been. Hurt, yes. Heartbroken—for a time. But she'd let it go and moved on, making sure Jazzlyn knew *both* her parents loved her and were glad they'd been together long enough for her to be born.

"How does this work?" Jazzlyn asked, looking from the music box to Aislinn.

"Every...reading, for lack of a better word, is different. Sometimes I'm more of an observer than anything else. Other times I feel what the person feels and experience what's happening to them in the present, or I experience what has already happened to them, though usually not more than about thirty minutes into the past."

Aislinn picked up the music box and closed her eyes. Kirill's hand tightened on Jazzlyn's and she was grateful to have him with her.

A minute passed, crawling by with agonizing slowness. Another crept by, equally nerve-racking. Then another.

Jazzlyn fought to keep from fidgeting, worried that her breathing was loud and distracting. She caught the subtle shifts in Aislinn's expression and tried not to read terrible meanings into them, but by the time Aislinn opened her eyes, Jazzlyn felt close to nausea. "Anything?"

"I've got an address." Aislinn's eyebrows drew together. "Beyond that, I couldn't pick up much. Hints of anger and fear but not full-blown terror or panic."

"So maybe there's nothing wrong. Maybe Caro and her current boyfriend are off somewhere fighting and I overreacted when she didn't show up for the party."

Even as Jazzlyn said it, it didn't feel *true* to her. "Trust your instincts," Aislinn said, setting the music box on the table and scribbling an address on a scrap piece of paper, her movements slow and concentrated, as if using her gift left her depleted of energy. "I'm sorry I can't tell you more."

"This is more than I would have been able to find on my own."

Jazzlyn picked up the piece of paper then glanced at the music box, hesitant to take it with her or handle it until she'd checked out the address. She hated to ask but she had

to know. "Can you read the same object twice? If there's reason to think a situation has changed?"

"I should be able to. I need some time to recover in between attempts. If you want to leave the music box here, you can. Home is the only place I'm going when I leave the shop. You've got my cell number. I can come back if you need me."

"Thanks," Jazzlyn said, truly grateful for Aislinn's help.

They left a few minutes later, Jazzlyn's heart doing its crazy flip-flop when Kirill turned down both the suggestion he retrieve his car and follow, and her offer to let him drive hers.

"So you're conceding I'm an excellent driver," she teased as she pulled into traffic. He definitely seemed more relaxed than he had on the way to Caro's apartment.

"I believe I can occupy my mind with thoughts other than those of imminent death."

She should probably be offended, but the purr was back in his voice, making her insides quiver. How did he do that?

Jazzlyn smiled as an image surfaced—his face in that instant it'd been captured in the mirror and she would have sworn it was outlined by a dragon with the same silver with blue as the heartmate stones.

His aura maybe? Or more likely, a hint at his true personality.

A soft laugh escaped. He definitely had some very dragonish traits, including the ability to make her go up in flames.

"Something amuses you?"

There was a delicious hint of menace in his question, the kind promising sexual retribution and causing erotic fear to flicker in her belly. "Do you like fantasy?"

His chuckle was purely masculine. "Yes. You've starred in a great many of mine, though I'm sure they'll pale in comparison to the reality of what we'll find together."

Her face flamed but she couldn't suppress the smile or the way pleasure and anticipation danced along her skin with his words. "Not that kind of fantasy. Fantasy as in reading books or seeing movies with supernatural beings in them. Things like elves and faeries."

"Neither of which are favorites of mine. They rank above sorcerers but what doesn't? Dragons are far superior."

She laughed again. "Somehow that opinion doesn't surprise me. You're very dragonish. I can definitely see you sprawled out on a bed of gold."

It was the wrong thing to say. Her channel spasmed, hard, almost painfully, further dampening her panties as the image of him naked, waiting for her to come to him, flashed through her mind.

He reacted to her comment by moving closer, searing her with his heat. "Dragonish. I like that description. I can see myself taking you on a bed of gold and gems, draping you in jewels and luxuriating in having you beneath me, a dragon with his most treasured possession, his very human mate."

She could see it too—not just Kirill in a human form, but Kirill in a dragon form, and it was more erotic than she would have thought possible. "I need to concentrate on driving," she said, retreating, not sure how much more she could take before she melted into a puddle or burned up.

He backed off, settling on his side of the car and seeming content to make the rest of the trip in silence. She wondered, not for the first time, why she was acting so out of character, and shivered thinking about the symbols carved into the frame of the mirror like a spell working. When had she started to believe?

The moment she stepped into Aislinn's shop and had the impression of entering another world? Or the evening Alexandria had shown her the picture of the heartmate rings and they'd both wished they could find one of them?

A glance at Kirill and her womb fluttered. Belief, hope, it was hard to distinguish between the two. He was a stranger in so many ways. Yet at the same time, she was so

comfortable with him that it felt as though she'd always known him. She wanted him like she'd never wanted another man. He stirred fantasies to life and made them seem within her grasp.

Worry replaced desire the closer they got to their destination. Trust your instincts, Aislinn said, and they told Jazzlyn that Caro was in trouble, despite the surge of relief she experienced at seeing her cousin's car when they pulled to a stop in front of the house matching the address.

"This is it," she said, nervousness over the possibility of a confrontation making her hesitate.

"Stay here. I will go to the door," Kirill ordered.

It was enough to spur Jazzlyn into motion. "No," she said, getting out of the car.

She didn't expect Caro's boyfriend to come to the door with a gun. And if she was wrong about Carolyn being in trouble, the worst that would happen would be Caro getting mad.

Kirill's growl soothed Jazzlyn's nerves rather than fray them. It was all frustrated male, and accompanied by something that sounded like "by the Great Shared Ancestor".

She didn't have time to ask him about the curious curse before his fingers wrapped around her arm in a viselike grip, halting and turning her to face him. "Any trouble and you will go immediately to the car."

Dark eyes bored into hers. Fierce. Intense. Possessive.

"Agreed," she said, though she was very aware it hadn't been a question.

He released her. Reluctantly. Stirring her libido and doing crazy things to her heart.

At the door he let her be the one to ring the bell. It opened a moment later and Jazzlyn wasn't sure who was more surprised—the man standing there or her when he said, "Hey, you're Caro's cousin. Jazzlyn, right?"

“Yes.” She studied him. Jeans, polo shirt. Charismatic. At ease. But still a stranger. “We haven’t met.”

He smiled and offered his hand. “Sorry. You’re right. Caro showed me a picture of the two of you at the beach. I’m Mark.”

Jazzlyn took his hand, introducing Kirill. The men shook as well. She expected Mark to yell for Caro or invite them in. Instead he stepped out and closed the door behind him.

His gaze shifted to the driveway where Carolyn’s car was sandwiched between a sports car and a motorcycle. His eyebrows drew together in a show of puzzlement. “Did Caro know you were coming by?”

“No.”

Mark’s expression cleared. “That explains it then. She’s out with friends, shopping or something. Girl’s day out. I’m not expecting her to check in for several hours. I’ll have her call you if you want.”

Doubt assailed Jazzlyn. Maybe her instincts were wrong after all.

Mark seemed friendly and unconcerned, normal—not like the guys Caro usually went for though Jazzlyn hadn’t met many of them, only heard about them from Carolyn after the fact. So why did Caro stand her up and pass on Nana’s birthday party?

“Is Caro upset about something? I’ve left at least a dozen messages on her cell phone and haven’t gotten a call back.’

Mark shook his head. “Nothing’s wrong as far as I know. She lost her phone. It went overboard and she hasn’t replaced it yet.” He looked at his watch. “I was just on my way out. Girl’s day for her. Boy’s day out for me. Like I said, what if I have her call you when she checks in? It’ll probably be two or three hours.”

“That’d be great,” Jazzlyn said, accepting there was nothing else to do but leave and wait for the call.

She and Kirill returned to the car. As Jazzlyn pulled away from the curb, Mark straddled the motorcycle. Its engine roared to life. A tight maneuver to turn around in the driveway, a wave, and he was on the road, captured in the rearview mirror heading in the opposite direction.

Jazzlyn sighed, feeling both let down and hopeful. Her emotions were in a confused tangle while a tiny voice in her head reminded her she was closer to finding Caro and making sure her cousin was all right than she had been.

As soon as she was sure about Caro, she could concentrate on making jewelry. Life would back to normal. *Or not.*

Jazzlyn's stomach did a little flip-flop as she realized that without making a conscious decision, she was driving toward her apartment, where she and Kirill would be alone in a room with a huge bed in it.

Her palms grew damp against the steering wheel. For all her tough talk about grabbing this opportunity and having no regrets afterward, her courage threatened to desert her.

She could suggest they get something to eat or drink and go to the beach. They could claim a bench or walk. This time of the day there'd still be children there, a major deterrent to forgetting herself—not that she'd ever been bold enough to experiment with sex in public places.

Jazzlyn shivered. With Kirill she could imagine sex just about anywhere. There was something about being the focus of his attention that shattered barriers she'd never intentionally erected in the first place.

He made her feel totally feminine and exquisitely desirable, not awkward and shy and self-conscious. Was it foolish to want to bask in the heat he generated?

She smiled, remembering his saying he could see himself taking her on a bed of gold and gems, luxuriating at having her beneath him like a dragon with its most treasured possession. If she was honest with herself, something she always tried to be,

she loved the idea of belonging to a man in the way she thought it would be to belong to him. It was a completely unfeminist thought, but there it was.

The miles passed without her suggesting they wait for the call somewhere other than her apartment. She was afraid to start talking for fear of babbling.

By some miracle she managed to park and lead him to her door without trembling like a nervous virgin on a first date. She even managed to usher him inside without dropping her keys, though as the door closed behind them, she sagged against it, heart beating wildly in her throat.

She tried to see through his eyes—the organized clutter of her workspace, the glitter of stones on almost every surface—but he filled the studio apartment with his presence, dwarfed everything but the bed. The sight of it made heat coil in her belly and spread downward until her cunt lips were flushed and swollen and aching for his kiss.

Kirill made a sound resembling a deep rumbling purr. He turned, trapping her against the door with his body. His scent and heat swirled around her, and it was like being embraced by sensual fire.

“With all your gems, you’re very dragonish yourself,” he teased, rubbing his cheek against hers.

“They’re for my work. I’m a jewelry maker.”

“Perfect,” he said, brushing his lips against hers. “I’m a jewelry collector.”

Of their own accord her hands lifted and settled on his chest, her palms over tiny hardened nipples. His eyes darkened at her touch, and the fast beat of his heart raced in time with hers.

Part of her couldn’t believe she was here with him like this. He was still a stranger to her, despite the mirror and the heartmate stones and the help he’d given her in the hunt for Caro. But the larger part of her refused to listen to logic or be swayed by the dictates of restraint. That part of her wanted to be swept away by passion, whispered convincingly that this was the perfect time, the perfect place, the perfect man.



Her fingertips glanced over the firm points of his nipples and a thrill of feminine pleasure spiked through her as she watched what her touch did to him. Lust blazed in his eyes, hot and fierce and possessive. His body grew harder, the muscles taut, as though it took all his willpower not to push her to the floor and mount her.

Images of being on her hands and knees and having him cover her sent arousal gushing from her slit. A shudder moved through her when man morphed into dragon in her thoughts.

She shook her head to dispel the wayward pictures, felt heat rush to her cheeks in the wake of such a kinky erotic fantasy. Too much talk of dragons, she told herself as Kirill touched his mouth to hers, his tongue piercing the seam of her lips to tangle with hers.

Wicked flames licked over her with each slide of his tongue against hers. Need built, making it impossible to remain still. Her lower body pressed to his, her pelvis rubbing against his hardened penis in a sinuous dance while her fingers plucked and tormented his nipples.

She wanted him. No, it was more than want. It was a need so deep it sprang from her core, as if having him inside her was essential to her survival.

Her lips clung desperately to his. Her tongue yielded to his, promising submission, begging for him to mimic the thrust and retreat with his cock.

Kirill panted. If he didn't have her soon he would come in his jeans. She was killing him, turning his own fire against him until he barely had any control.

Jazzlyn was perfect for him. If he'd needed confirmation of it, if there'd been any lingering doubts that she was the right mate for him, then stepping into her apartment and seeing her collection of stones would have answered them. She could spend several lifetimes creating jewelry with the gems in his lair. She would be content there, happy and safe—as he meant her to be. And if she insisted, he'd even allow some of the lesser pieces to leave his possession and be sold or given to others.

Kirill closed his eyes and savored the feel of her against him, the scent of her. Now that he had her alone, he fought against a quick mounting. It would be over too soon if he entered her now.

“Mine,” he said against her lips, finally allowing her a breath that wasn’t his.

She trembled against him but didn’t deny his claim. Soon he’d mark her with his smell and his bite, later, with the rake of his mating talons across her belly or back. And when they crossed into his realm, she would wear a dragon like the one on his human flesh.

He took her mouth again, this time caressing and exploring her with his hands. Satisfaction purring through him as he swallowed the small sounds of pleasure she made.

She was soft and feminine, lushly formed. *His*. And he wanted to see her, to gaze at her without the barrier of clothing between them. That’s the way he’d keep her when they returned to his lair, naked save for the gems adorning her.

His cock pulsed. Arousal coated its tip, leaking now in a lava-hot warning that after centuries of waiting, there was a limit to the torment he could endure.

With a growl he forced himself away from her. He felt the loss of her touch immediately and would have vented with a roar and fiery exhalation if he could have. Instead frustrated heat condensed into a single, scorching command. “Disrobe.”

Her eyes flashed, but it wasn’t defiance he read in them, it was erotic fear. To defend himself against her effect on him, his hand curled around his cloth-covered erection, and the action was nearly his undoing.

Her gaze followed. Her tongue peeked out for an instant, bringing with it a rush of fantasies.

He wanted to feel her mouth on him. But even completely sated, he doubted he could hold himself into a human shape if she touched her lips to his rigid organ.

“Disrobe for me, Jazzlyn,” he said, tightening his fingers on his throbbing penis, using pain to keep from pouncing.

Desire made Jazzlyn feel lightheaded, as did the sight of him standing in front of her, his hand on his hardened cock. The way his fingers tightened, the knuckles paling as if the only thing keeping him from coming was the pain of his grip, was incredibly erotic.

It was exhilarating, an amazing boost to her self-confidence. And it was more, a soul-deep reassurance she wasn't alone in feeling powerless against the desire burning incendiary-hot between them.

Trembling fingers went to the hem of her blouse. She was glad there were no buttons to deal with because she didn't think she could manage them.

She tugged upward, aware of the way Kirill's nostrils flared as her midriff was exposed. A needy sigh escaped as she drew her blouse over the tight, sensitive points of her nipples.

Nervousness fluttered through her as the blouse dropped to the floor and her fingers went to the front clasp of her bra. She fumbled then, and in a blink his hands were covering hers, his body crowding hers.

She moaned when the clasp gave way and he took possession of her breasts, cupping them, tormenting them with his fingers, his eyes burning with so much lust she arched her back, dared to whisper, “Put your mouth on me.”

He intended to put his mouth on much more of her. It was there in his expression.

His head lowered. Firm masculine lips captured her nipple, sending flashes of hot need downward. His tongue rasped over the taut areola and her fingers tangled in his hair, holding him to her.

She couldn't remain still when he began sucking. His lips and tongue worked in perfect concert, gentle at first, then dominant and possessive.

Every pull sent exquisite sensation from her nipples to her cunt. She ground against his erection, rubbed her hardened clit against his rigid cock until with easy strength he lifted her into his arms and carried her the short distance to the bed.

His earlier command for her to strip was forgotten as he set her on her feet then immediately freed her skirt. It pooled at her feet, leaving her standing in short heels and dark blue panties.

Satisfaction glittered in his eyes. His thumbs rubbed over the waistband before hooking, tugging, so the panties joined the skirt.

## **Chapter Five**

Jazzlyn stepped out of her shoes then moved into him, trembling with her need to rid him of his clothing. He allowed her to peel his shirt away, revealing sleek muscles and tight abs. A tattoo above his left nipple made her laugh softly even as she remembered that instant when she caught his image in the mirror and thought it was overlaying that of a dragon.

“Why am I not surprised?” she asked, tracing the blue and silver beast stretched out in flight.

He shuddered under her touch, drawing her closer, making it impossible not to lean in and press a kiss to the tattoo before moving lower and catching his nipple between her lips, sucking.

A growl was the only warning he gave. A sweep of his arm and the bed was cleared of gems and books, and then she was on it, hands pinned to the mattress, his body a hot, heavy weight on top of her.

He tugged at her bottom lip, sucked it into the wet heat of his mouth and sent a jolt straight to her clit. She was so wet for him, so ready.

The feel of him above her, partially clothed while she was completely naked seemed decadent. And yet it thrilled her in a dark, unexpected way, made her feel vulnerable, submissive.

White-fire raced down Kirill’s spine, spilling around to cup his testicles and burn away the magic holding his penis into a human’s shape and size. The ridges beneath his cock head throbbed as he filled to his true length and width.

He’d waited too long, and would wait even longer. She was his and he wouldn’t mount her until he’d tasted her, until he’d pleased her so thoroughly she’d be ready to take a dragon’s cock.

The magic would hide him again after the first release. Only then would it be safe to strip completely and be naked with her, to luxuriate in the feel of so much skin against skin.

A shudder went through him. He relinquished her lips and kissed downward, keeping her hands prisoner against the mattress.

Having her open and helpless satisfied something deeply primal in him, even as her willingness to let him take her intensified the hunger. Perhaps it was why the males of his kind had always been drawn to human females. They were physically frail, defenseless against a dragon's strength, making the capture of their love and trust, as well as their bodies, the true prize in claiming one of them as a mate.

The sight of her love-abraded nipple made him purr in satisfaction. He lingered on its twin, laved and bit, suckled until there was no mistaking he'd claimed them both.

He wanted to admire them further, but her heady scent and the feel of her bare mound against his abdomen drew him downward. He kissed his way to slick, heated woman's flesh and then could only stare, transfixed, as if he were caught in the snare of an exquisite gem.

Everything about her was beautiful to him. Everything about her spoke to his deepest instinct to possess and hoard and protect what was his.

Flushed folds parted to reveal a rosy slit. Plump lips glistened, begging for his kiss.

It was a temptation no male could resist.

"Mine," he said, rubbing his mouth against her hot skin and lapping his tongue through her slick center.

She pressed into him, like a cat wanting more of his petting and he was only too happy to accommodate her, to immerse himself in touch and taste and scent.

It was more than lust, more than a dragon wallowing in treasure. Each cry of pleasure he rung from her with the thrust of his tongue, with sucking, biting kisses, spread wild joy through him, promised a life of laughter and happiness, contentment

and family, an end to the loneliness that had marked centuries of his existence as he'd single-mindedly pursued an end to the sorcerer's curse.

*Jazzlyn.* Her name pulsed through him with every beat of his heart. Her claim to him was already soul deep.

There would never be another female for him. She was his first. She was his last.

Kirill trembled, feeling the magic shimmer in warning that soon the truth of his cock wouldn't be the only one revealed. With a final kiss, with one last thrust of his tongue into her heated core, he forced himself away from her cunt.

Somehow he managed to get the front of his pants open. A raw moan escaped as he took himself in hand. His hips bucked and only the pain of his fist tightening around his shaft kept him from desperately pumping through his fingers and spewing his seed.

Her hands tangled in his hair, urging him upward, back to her mouth. He obeyed, careful to keep the dragon ridges concealed beneath his fingers.

He fought to prevent the mating spurs at his wrists from descending and filling with serum. Tension vibrated through him but he couldn't ignore her breasts when his lips drew close to them.

A hard, quick suck had her arching her back, whispering, "Please Kir, please. I need you inside me."

*Kir.* The nickname blossomed in his heart, an unfurling of adoration with a tiny, hidden gem at its center, a private, intimate gift she'd given to him.

He took her mouth with his, thrust his tongue against hers as he guided his cock head to her opening. It was exquisite agony and unbearable pleasure, beyond anything he could have ever imagined to lie with her skin-to-skin, to know a female, his mate, for the first time.

He tried to go slowly, afraid of hurting her with his size. He wanted to commit every inch of sensation to memory as he slid inside her.

Kirill lifted his face so he could memorize her expressions. Her skin was flushed, her lips swollen and wet from his kiss, her eyes dark and smoky with lust.

Unparalleled ecstasy surged through him as her sheath swallowed him, rippling hungrily over the ridges on his penis, drawing him deeper. He shuddered as her fingers raked through his hair, her hands moving to his back, her fingernails against his skin freeing his dragon nature.

There was no thought but to take her. To pound into her ruthlessly and claim her.

The bed shook with the force of his thrusts. The apartment filled with the sound of his heavy breathing and her cries.

She clung to him, climbed with him. Grew as desperate for the hot fury of release as he did.

Heat shimmered in waves around and in him, built until he feared the apartment would go up in flames with his next exhalation. Fire, only barely extinguished and turned into a shout, erupted when her channel clamped down on him savagely, her release triggering his and causing jets of semen to flash through his cock, scorching and consuming him.

He collapsed, sweat-slick and shaking, but still cognizant enough not to crush Jazzlyn beneath him. He cradled her to him, burying his face in her soft hair, breathing in their mingled scents and taking great satisfaction in the way she trembled and clung to him in the aftermath of passion, in the way she still held him inside her body, as if she were reluctant to part from him.

Parting from him wasn't an option. It would *never* be an option.

As soon as this matter of her cousin was taken care of, they'd cross into the dragon's realm and he'd have her safely ensconced in his lair. Xanthus and his mates could see to packing her gems and books and tools, dealing with her apartment and disposing of her car and any of the other things she would no longer need—like clothes.

Kirill smiled at thoughts of keeping her naked. He closed his eyes, intending to savor the bliss of having her snuggled against him for a few minutes before taking her



again. But worry slid in, an insidious chill that grew as he imagined her reaction to learning he'd taken her to a different realm, one inaccessible to her family and friends.

In the old days, a female taken by a dragon was presumed dead. Rarely were they searched for. In fact, they were often virgins, *given* in sacrifice to a dragon, in the hopes livestock would be left unmolested and village buildings wouldn't be reduced to ash.

In these current times...

The uneasiness grew in Kirill. He'd been in this realm less than a full day and already he was anxious to return to the peace of his own, where he could soar in his first form, where it wasn't a constant struggle to keep from torching his surroundings.

His anxiety grew when he felt Jazzlyn's heart rate accelerate. Her body lost its soft lassitude and she tried to pull away from him.

Instinctively he tightened his arms. The very tips of his mating spurs descended, dragon nature asserting itself in the presence of a human female who might need to be rendered unconscious so she could be carried home.

He struggled to find words that would state his intentions without making her run from him. In play he would enjoy chasing her, swooping down on her in dragon form and capturing her. But after having her beneath him willingly, he had no desire to have her flee in fear or to see terror in her eyes when he ultimately found her again.

Jazzlyn's hands left his back to wedge themselves between their two bodies. Her palms were flat against his chest, pushing gently as though she weren't yet fully committed to extricating herself from his arms. He grunted when her lower body ground against his, sending a hot pulse of need through his cock.

The feel of him hardening inside her increased her struggles. But her struggles only fed a savage, fiery circle of lust.

"Keep that up and I'm going to breathe flames," he panted, the words impulsive.

Apparently it was the right thing to say. She laughed and some of her tension melted away.

Kirill rubbed his cheek against hers, wanting to soothe her further. He rolled so his body once again pinned hers to the mattress.

Reflexively he thrust. She felt too good for him to remain still.

Apparently that was the *wrong* thing to do. She stiffened.

“Don’t. We shouldn’t.” And then in a soft, barely discernable voice. “Not again. Not without protection.”

Protection? By the Great Shared Ancestor, what was his mate talking about? What greater protection did she need than to be with him?

Jazzlyn braced herself, not sure how he was going to react, not believing she’d been so stupid. She knew better! She’d even had a fleeting thought about tormenting him as she slid a condom onto his cock, but she’d been lost the instant he’d put his mouth on her cunt.

As the silence lengthened without him responding, she filled it nervously. “It should be okay. I’m not on the Pill but I’m pretty regular. It’s...I just...I don’t think there’s much chance of getting pregnant right now. But it would be better if we don’t risk it.”

He relaxed against her though he didn’t pull from her body. His lips nuzzled her ear, sending a shiver of pleasure through her.

“There is no risk. Fertility is a problem for all those I’m related to, except for Xanthus. It would be nearly impossible for me to get you with child now.” He guided her hand to the dragon on his chest. “But if by some act of fate it did happen, you are mine, Jazzlyn. I take care of what belongs to me.”

His lips captured her earlobe. He sucked, making her inner muscles tighten on a cock that had grown even harder.

She let her worries go, trusting in him as well as in her knowledge of her body’s cycles. Pleasure fogged her mind. Sharp spikes of need made her channel clench and

unclench on his penis when he released her earlobe in favor of fucking into her ear canal.

Her sheath gripped and released in time to the wet probing. Her hips rose off the mattress, forcing him to fill her more completely, to claim her more deeply.

He moaned and thrust harder, as if he'd pound his claim into her very soul. His tongue mimicked the dominance of his cock.

Need roared through her like an out of control fire, leaving her helpless to do anything other than writhe and cling. His possession was a blend of pain and pleasure, the size of his cock almost more than she could bear, and yet each stroke made her crave another and another, hunger for the hot wash of his seed and the satisfaction of knowing he desired her.

His thrusts grew faster, more frantic. More desperate. His arm slid under her, lifting her, changing the angle. "Come for me," he said against her lips.

There was no escaping the ecstasy as he struck her clit with each hard thrust, sent release searing through her, then followed her into orgasm with raw, uncontrolled shudders and fiery jets of semen.

She didn't pull from his arms afterward. It felt too good to be there, and besides, she doubted he'd let her.

At the very edges of her hearing she could swear she heard him purring. Not the rumble of a cat, but what she imagined a dragon would sound like as it lay on a pile of treasure.

The thought put a smile on her face. She couldn't resist the urge to press a kiss to the tattoo on his chest. "It suits you."

His fingers caressed her nipple then the spot above it. "But it will be far more satisfying to see it on you."

The words sent a flutter through her belly, part nervousness and part hope. She wanted to believe in Aislinn's mirror with its heartmate stone border. She wanted to believe there was a future with Kirill.

Did that make her incredibly foolish? Or hopelessly romantic?

The sound of music turned her thoughts to Carolyn. "That's my phone," she said, scrambling from the bed and hurrying to the door where she'd dropped her purse on the floor without even being aware of it.

She was breathless by the time she answered. Her heart rate sped up when she heard Caro's voice on the other end. "I only have a minute before we head out again. Mark said I needed to give you a call and let you know I'm okay."

There was something in Carolyn's voice that had the worry settling once again in Jazzlyn's gut. "Are you?"

"Of course. I know I missed Nana's party, but if you'd ever let yourself get over that boyfriend you had in high school, you'd know how being with someone you're crazy about trumps other activities. You met Mark. He's *nothing* like John Lamford."

Ice filled Jazzlyn's chest as worry for Caro turned into fear. John Lamford was Caro's high school boyfriend, not hers. He was the first and only one of them Jazzlyn had ever thought was decent.

She tried to keep her voice casual as she asked, "Where are you?"

"I'm—" There was a sharp inhalation on the other end of the phone, followed by a murmur Jazzlyn thought might be Mark talking, then Caro said, "I need to cut this short. Worry about yourself, Jazzlyn, not me. I can take care of myself. Bye."

Warm, masculine arms pulled Jazzlyn's back against an equally warm chest. She replayed the conversation in her mind, noticing Caro's call had come in with the phone number blocked.

"She's in trouble?" Kirill asked, pressing a kiss to Jazzlyn's shoulder, his arms protective and reassuring.

“Yes, but she thinks she can handle it.” Or at least that’s what Jazzlyn thought Caro was trying to convey, along with a warning to stay away.

“Perhaps that’s why Aislinn picked up only hints of anger and fear but not terror or panic.”

“Maybe.” Jazzlyn turned in his arms, chilled despite the heat pouring off his skin.

Aislinn had also told her to trust her instincts, and her instincts said Caro had wanted help, until Mark said or did something to make Caro say, “Worry about yourself.” Otherwise why would Carolyn have made a point of saying Mark was nothing like John Lamford?

Kirill’s hand stroked the length of her spine. “You don’t think your cousin can take care of herself?”

“I don’t know. She started to tell me where she was, then didn’t. I think she was warning me to stay away. But everything inside me says I need to see Caro in person before I can let this go.”

Jazzlyn sighed and closed her eyes, savoring the pleasure and comfort of being held. With sudden insight she realized how much she wanted to be able to let worries about Carolyn go, once and for all. She wanted to mark *paid* to the debt she felt she owed her cousin for helping her survive the school years when she was so painfully shy.

“Our relationship is complicated,” Jazzlyn murmured against the crook of Kirill’s neck, finding she wanted to say out loud the things that had been lurking in her mind for a long time. “If we weren’t related, if we didn’t have a history together, I doubt Caro and I would be friends.”

Pain slashed through Jazzlyn’s heart as she remembered Carolyn calling her a loser, someone afraid of her own shadow, after first dredging up Jazzlyn’s failings from the past and tossing them at her. Being reminded of them had cut so deeply she hadn’t even been able to share what had happened with Alexandria.

“We had a fight the last time we were together, about her choices when it comes to boyfriends. I told her why I thought she did what she did and suggested she see a counselor. She got mad. Really mad. Before she stormed out of the restaurant she said she was cutting me out of her life.

“That was six months ago. Then out of the blue she called me and said she wanted to meet for lunch. Only she didn’t show. And she didn’t show for Nana’s birthday party. Even if she was still mad at me, she wouldn’t have taken it out on Nana.”

A hot ball of fury formed in Kirill’s chest. He heard the suffering beneath Jazzlyn’s words and wanted nothing more than to remove her from this realm and leave Carolyn to the consequences of her own choices. But such a course of action was impossible.

He knew what Jazzlyn was going to say even before she said, “I want to go to Mark’s house.” And he choked back a roar of denial because he knew he’d start a fire with the force of his frustration if he didn’t.

The thought of her putting herself in danger was unbearable. But the thought of separating from her and leaving her unguarded in order to see to the task himself was equally intolerable.

For the first time, Kirill understood how it was Xanthus and the men he’d descended from found it possible to share a mate with another male—not that *he’d* ever share Jazzlyn. She was his, wholly and completely his. But he could definitely see the advantages of having someone who could be trusted to sacrifice everything if it meant keeping a chosen female safe.

Of course, keeping Jazzlyn safe wouldn’t be an issue if he’d accomplished what he set out to do—come to this realm, collect his mate, then return immediately to his lair.

Frustration got the better of him. A small burst of flames escaped when he exhaled.

Because he already considered her his mate, his dragon fire shimmered over her like an erotic kiss rather than a deadly assault. Her scent deepened as she felt it on her skin, telling him the petal-soft lips of her labia were parting in invitation for him to slide his cock or his tongue inside her again. Her nipples hardened against his chest, but

when he would have lifted her and carried her back to bed, she resisted, saying, "We can't. We need to go to Mark's house."

There was no suppressing his growl, though he did manage to keep from setting the carpet on fire. "You will stay in the car while I question Mark if he is there, or enter the house and search if he's not."

Her thoughts on the matter were evident in the way she stiffened her spine and pulled from his arms. Thankfully she didn't speak. His control was shaky at best, and made more so by her nakedness as she stalked away, then bent to gather her clothing, the view of her rosy slit so provocative his cock wept where its tip touched his belly.

She strode toward the bathroom and Kirill followed. He could no more let her out of his sight than he could resist the urge to get in the shower with her when he heard the sound of it being turned on.

Not all dragons loved water, but he did. There were hot springs in the neutral territory of the portal. He would take her there and mate with her in the water and on the smooth rocks, both in his first form and his human one.

The shower stall was tiny. And though her expression didn't welcome him, her body did. It softened as he crowded her, grew flushed from more than the stream of hot water striking their skin.

"It's my nature to protect and guard," he said. "I can't allow you to put yourself in danger, especially when you believe your cousin warned you away."

"*Might* have been warning me away," Jazzlyn said, warmth and amusement returning to her face as her gaze slid to the dragon above his nipple. Her hand followed, and the combination was a sensual caress that traveled straight to his cock.

She lightly traced the silvered wings with their blue undersides, stroked the dragon's tail and underside before moving downward to grasp Kirill's cock with soapy fingers. Mischief danced in her eyes, causing desire and love to explode in his chest.

"I've never thought about it before," she said, nearly driving him to his knees as she measured his length by moving her fist up and down on it, then released him to cup his

testicles and weigh them, “but I’ve never seen a picture of a dragon that is obviously male.”

Kirill braced his hands on the wall as she continued to fondle and explore him. The unseen rings beneath his cock head throbbed. He wanted to drop the magic and let her see the full truth of his penis. More than that, he wanted to urge her to her knees and have her pleasure him with her mouth as a mate should.

Somehow enough of his sanity remained to allow for rational thought, prompting him to use her torment to his advantage, to use her remarks to help prepare her for a reality he was forbidden from revealing until she was his mate in truth.

He leaned in, nuzzled and kissed her neck on his way to her ear. “Dragon cocks are sheathed inside their bodies. They emerge only during coupling, something you’d discover very quickly were you to enter the dragon world without already having a mate. No unattached male would be able to resist you. They’d battle for the privilege of claiming and mounting you while in their primary form.”

“Even though I’m human?”

“Especially because you’re human,” he said, the answer purring out of him.

“How is it even possible?”

Her scent told him she wasn’t repulsed by thoughts of being mounted by a dragon male. But he didn’t dare tell her more, not when only a sliver of control kept him from doing the very thing they were talking about. “Magic. I’ve got ancient tomes detailing it. I’ll show them to you in the future if you wish.”

She laughed. “Are there pictures?”

“Yes.”

“Very kinky.” She brushed her lips over his. “You’ve done a lot of research on dragons.”

“I think it’s safe to say I’m an expert on them.”



“Hmmm, is that so? Are you sure a dragon’s cock never emerges for any reason except to couple?”

“Positive.”

Her eyes held challenge and disbelief. “I think you’re mistaken. Tell me if this would work in getting a male dragon to show himself.”

She knelt before he guessed her intention.

Lust held him immobile, as did the sultry image of her gazing up at him through her lashes. Every drop of blood roared to his penis, scorching through veins and arteries as it went.

Like prey ensnared, he was trapped in the moment and the vision of her. His heart thundered in his chest, first in anticipation and then in sheer panic as her lips closed around his cock head and he realized the magic holding him into a human form was only a beat away from shattering.

His hips bucked, denying his intent even as he reached down to pull her to her feet.

They jerked again, humping air, as he lifted and pressed her to the wall.

His cock screamed in protest at being denied the feel of her wet mouth. But it was mollified when he found her opening and thrust all the way inside, hard and deep, his penis fully dragon.

“That feels so good,” Jazzlyn said, wrapping her arms and legs around him, seeking his mouth with hers.

He took her lips as fiercely as he took her cunt. He plundered her mouth with his tongue as his cock pounded mercilessly into her channel, the water lashing them, trapping them in steamy intimacy and heated sensation until they both cried out in release.

## **Chapter Six**

“None of the vehicles are in the driveway,” Kirill said as they got within sight of the house they’d visited earlier.

“One of them might be in the garage.”

He didn’t think it boded well for Jazzlyn’s cousin if her car had been removed from sight intentionally. “It’s possible.”

Jazzlyn parked where she had on their initial visit. But when she would have turned the engine off, he stopped her with the touch of his hand to hers, and hid a satisfied smile at having thought of a way to ensure she would remain in the car without having to do battle with her. “Leave it running. One way or another, I intend to enter the house and learn what I can about your cousin’s whereabouts and condition. Be ready to drive away.”

“I can’t ask you to break into Mark’s house.”

Kirill chuckled. He doubted such a thing would be necessary. Dragons excelled at entering without breaking. It was an essential skill for beings who loved adding treasure to their hoards.

“It might be the only way to learn something,” he said. “This might be the only opportunity we have to do so.”

Worry clouded her eyes, a concern that warmed him to his toes because he knew it was for him and not her cousin. “I’ll go with you,” she said, turning off the car’s engine to emphasize her intention.

Fear flashed through him, followed by pride. Despite the confident sound of her voice, he could smell her fear at the prospect of entering the house.

Kirill trapped her against the door with his body. His instinct was to demand and dominate, to insist with a show of strength and flash of dragon fire. But his feelings for her led him to tender kisses and gentle touches, to a whispered, "Trust me to do this for you, Jazzlyn."

"I don't want you hurt or in trouble."

"I'll take care so neither happens." He cupped her breast and was immediately rewarded by the scent of fear yielding to that of willing desire. "Promise to stay in the car so I won't have to worry about your safety."

Her laugh was husky, shaky. "You're not fighting fair."

Happiness filled him at her teasing. In all the centuries since he'd first glimpsed her image in the mirror, he'd been consumed with thoughts of ridding himself of the curse so he could claim her physically. He'd never imagined the pleasure to be had in verbal sparring.

"I'll allow you the opportunity for a rematch," he said, luxuriating in the warmth of her caring as her heart pounded beneath his palm.

"Go," she whispered.

"Promise you'll remain in the car."

What he really wanted was to make her promise she would leave immediately should Mark return, but he doubted he could win that battle.

"I promise."

"I'll be back in a matter of minutes," he said, giving her a hard kiss before leaving the car.

His approach to the front door was unhurried. He had no intention of skulking around, looking for a way in that wouldn't be observed. The covenants the supernaturals had agreed upon when they began returning to this world to play and explore might have forced his magic into a human shape, but at least he could still use some of it.

The only good thing to have come from the sorcerer's curse was that as a result of it, he had spent centuries studying magical tomes and practicing some of the more useful of the things he learned—not without a mishap or two—the most glaring of which was the way his eyes changed color, displaying his emotions when he was in the dragon realm, though thankfully it wasn't a concern in this magic-poor one.

A touch of his hand to the front door, accompanied by intricate gestures using the other one and a softly spoken spell, and he knew the house was empty. Another incantation and the simplicity of the door's locks were revealed, their image communicated through his fingertips.

Had the locks been complicated, knowledge of the spell would have saved considerable time. As it was, he used commonly known sigils accompanied by dragon will, and with a satisfying click, the locks disengaged.

Kirill resisted the urge to look back at Jazzlyn as he opened the door and entered the house. He moved quickly from room to room, his speed a reflection of his desire to get back to his mate.

Scents assailed him. Perfume and cologne. Food and furniture. All of them normal. None of them hinting of blood or violence.

In the bedroom he was greeted by the smell of sex. The comforter was bunched and wrinkled, with a small indentation in the center of the mattress where Carolyn and Mark had lain.

On a nightstand next to the bed were two empty wineglasses. As he bent to open the nightstand drawer, it brought his nose close to them.

He caught a whiff other than wine. A drug maybe?

Kirill carefully sniffed the rim of each glass, but the scent of whatever had been mixed with the wine was unfamiliar. Its presence troubled him. It could mean something. Or nothing. It wasn't uncommon for humans to use alcohol and drugs together for entertainment purposes.

The nightstand drawer contained sex toys. Items of bondage for the most part.

His cock stirred to life as he imagined Jazzlyn kneeling in front of him with her hands bound behind her back, her eyes pleading with him to give her permission to press her lips to his shaft.

A shudder of need accompanied the thought of her lying down and spreading her legs, her slit parted and wet as she willingly submitted to his desire to tether her to the bedposts.

Kirill closed the nightstand drawer and turned away, forcibly shutting his mind to the erotic fantasies cascading through it.

A second bedroom had been converted into an office. A photograph on the desk caught his attention. Mark stood on a boat dock with his arms around a woman. There was a faint resemblance to Jazzlyn, enough so Kirill knew he was looking at Caro.

Both she and Mark were smiling for the camera, seemingly happy and carefree. Fingerprints smudged the frame, as though it was often handled.

Kirill searched through the drawers. He found nothing that would either lead him to Jazzlyn's cousin or indicate whether she was in trouble or not. As he turned to leave his gaze caught on the picture. Impulsively he picked it up and took it with him, careful to touch only the portion that kept it upright.

At the front door he paused only long enough to use different sigils coupled with his will to engage the lock. Then he hurried to the car where Jazzlyn had the engine running.

"Anything?" she asked, pulling away from the curb.

"No signs of violence or trouble." His thoughts hesitated on the wineglass with its odd scent. He didn't want to alarm Jazzlyn, and yet without knowing more about her cousin, he couldn't determine whether or not the combination of wine and something else was significant or not.

"This is Carolyn?" he asked, tilting the picture so she could glance at it.

"Yes."

He watched Jazzlyn carefully for her reaction as he said, "There were wineglasses next to the bed. I thought perhaps there were traces of a chemical substance there, too."

Her shoulders sagged and a sigh escaped. Her scent spoke of frustration and disappointment, not alarm. "I don't think she's an addict. But it's not a stretch to believe she does recreational drugs. The club where she works attracts the kind of people who like to show off by flashings drugs along with their diamonds and rolls of walking-around cash."

Kirill cursed silently. His mate would be better off in the dragon's realm, away from this cousin and worries over her. If it were left to him, they'd leave as soon as he could get Jazzlyn alone and rake his mating spurs across her flesh. But since that wasn't an option, he would insist she think about her cousin *only* when there was action to be taken. And he would enforce his will with carnal demands that left no room for any emotion other than pleasure.

His body reacted to his silent pledge, his mind lingering on images of Jazzlyn naked beneath him. It took him a moment to realize they weren't heading in the direction of her apartment.

"We're returning to Inner Magick?" he guessed.

"Yes."

Jazzlyn's phone was on the seat next to her. She picked it up and called the half-elf, telling her about the encounter with Mark as well as the conversation with Carolyn.

Kirill wanted to be aggravated by Aislinn's interference. If not for her promise to Jazzlyn, then his mate would already be safely ensconced in his lair.

And yet...

Heated pleasure coursed through his bloodstream as various scenes from the day flickered through his mind. He had to admit that he was enjoying getting to know his mate while she was in her own world.

His gaze traveled over her. Leisurely. Possessively. Satisfaction curled around his cock as her nipples hardened to press against her thin blouse and a flush rose to her cheeks.

“Aislinn will meet us at the shop,” Jazzlyn said, closing the phone and trying not to think about just how obvious it was going to be that she and Kirill were already lovers.

*She'll expect it, an internal voice prompted. She was there when the mirror responded to your touch and Kirill's presence.*

Jazzlyn's palms grew damp on the steering wheel. If she didn't trust Aislinn, she'd have to give serious consideration to the idea she'd been hypnotized and today was all about how vulnerable she was to the power of suggestion. There was no way to explain today's events rationally—especially the event encompassing meeting Kirill and becoming intimate with him so quickly.

A flutter went through her belly. Heated desire slid from her channel as she remembered the way he'd used his mouth and tongue on her cunt, how he'd taken her on the bed and in the shower, making her believe while he did it that she really did belong to him.

“You're thinking about us together,” he said, closing the distance between them, his fingers brushing over a taut, aching nipple.

It felt so good. Distractingly good.

“Don't,” she said, her body screaming an entirely different thing. “I need to pay attention to my driving.”

His laugh was masculine and pleased. But he retreated, giving her space until they reached Inner Magick. Then he took her hand in his and escorted her into the shop.

As Aislinn locked the door behind them, Jazzlyn was drawn to the mirror. It was mounted on the wall above a display case containing beautifully crafted rune sets, some in stone and some in wood. They made her think of Alex's fetishes.

Kirill stood behind her, his hands on her sides, his image captured along with hers. Curiosity made her touch the heartmate stones. They remained cool and clear underneath her fingertips, he remained human instead of dragon.

Even so, she knew she hadn't imagined what happened earlier. Her creativity was limited to jewelry design, not flights of personal fantasy. Besides, too much had happened since stepping into Aislinn's shop the first time for her to pretend she still saw the world in exactly the same way.

Her eyes met Kirill's in the mirror and her pulse sped up. When Alexandria got back in town, she'd tell her about the mirror. Not that Alex would need an excuse to stop by, but maybe Aislinn would be interested in carrying some of her fetishes.

Aislinn joined them. "There's no need for it to react to your presence again, if that's what you're wondering about."

"I was," Jazzlyn said, and found she couldn't turn away without hesitantly mentioning the dragon image she'd seen when she first glimpsed Kirill.

Her voice didn't come out sounding completely natural, but Aislinn's flashed grin kept her from feeling self-conscious. "I'm not surprised. If I'd had the restoration finished earlier, before Marika and Xanthus sorted things out on their own, Kirill's relative would definitely have shown up as dragon too. Sophie's Severn would as well."

Aislinn led them to the back room where the music box sat on the table. Jazzlyn set the framed photograph next to it. "I'm not sure this will help, but it was in Mark's possession. From the smudges on the frame, it looks like he handled it a lot."

"My gift doesn't work on those who don't want to be found. But the fingerprints might be useful." A small smile appeared on Aislinn's face. "There are some advantages to being married to a detective. I'll ask Trace to find out what he can about Mark. Do you have a last name?"

"Robertie," Kirill said. "It appeared on several items in his office."



"I'm not going to ask for further details on how you saw it or how you came by the picture." Aislinn leaned in to examine it more closely. "Too bad they're blocking the boat's name and there's not enough background scenery to tell where it's being kept."

Her attention shifted to the music box. Her expression became somber as she lifted it off the table. She closed her eyes and, as before, the minutes seemed to creep by, stretching into anxious silence until it was broken by Aislinn saying, "She's alive. I think she might be in an exhausted sleep, possibly on the boat. Either that or she's rocking herself. The fear is intense, much stronger than it was before, but it's not crippling. I get the sense she believes she has time. She doesn't feel as though she's in immediate danger of being hurt or killed. Beyond that, her thoughts are too murky for me to pick up more."

With a sigh Aislinn opened her eyes and set the box back on the table. "I'm sorry. My gift works best when someone is terrified or dying and wants to be found and rescued. I wish I could do more. At the same time, I'm glad your cousin isn't in that particular situation. Trace should be here any minute—he ran to Starbucks."

Amusement replaced the weariness and worry on Aislinn's face. "For all his toughness, and despite being married to me, he gets very uptight about coming into the shop. He still prefers evidence that can be bagged, tagged and explained. When he gets here, I'll ask him to try to recover prints from the picture frame and check them out at the same time he's seeing if your cousin's boyfriend has a record or a boat registered to him. I'll call as soon as I know something, even if it's just to say Trace didn't come up with anything."

"Please call, regardless of how late it is," Jazzlyn said.

Aislinn stood. "I will."

Jazzlyn followed Aislinn's example but couldn't leave without saying, "You've been so generous with your time and your talent. I'd like... I don't know what I can do to repay you for it."

The laugh lines at the corners of Aislinn's eyes deepened. "You already have. You tested the mirror for me."

Jazzlyn couldn't think of a reply, though she imagined she was practically lit up from the inside with sexual satisfaction and hope. She couldn't prevent herself from casting a surreptitious glance at the mirror as they passed it on their way to the front door, just on the off chance it'd reflect something back, the way it'd shown Kirill's dragon nature.

"I consider myself in your debt," Kirill said at the shop entranceway, finding it surprisingly easy to say the words to Aislinn. Elves—even those who were half-breed or outcast—weren't known for their generosity, and yet she'd given freely of her gift without any expectation of gain.

He understood better why Xanthus' Drui mate had been drawn to work for Aislinn, and why she would desire to return and resume her duties at the shop. "Should you find yourself in need of collecting on the debt and can't easily find me, send word through Xanthus."

"I will," Aislinn said.

He nodded and turned away, welcoming the dusk and the rapidly approaching night. For the moment there was nothing more to be done for Carolyn, and he fully intended to keep the promise he'd made to himself.

Jazzlyn would think about her cousin *only* when there was action to be taken. Beginning now.

"Are you hungry?" he asked as they reached the car.

"Starving."

"Then I will feed you dinner."

His cock hardened with the image of her taking pieces of fruit from his fingertips. "Do you know where Drake's Lair is?"

Her breath caught in surprise. "Yes."

Her scent grew nervous and uncertain in the tight confines of the car. "It's very exclusive."

Possessive feelings fired Kirill's blood, mixing with heady anticipation as he thought about her being in the presence of other dragon males as well as the Chalice of Enos. "You will be welcome there."

She rubbed her palms over the material of her skirt, a gesture that stirred every one of his protective instincts to life while at the same time was oddly endearing. "I'm not dressed for it."

Her tongue darted out to wet her lips, making his testicles tighten and burn. "We could go somewhere casual. Even a fast food place is fine with me. Then we could go back to my apartment."

Kirill could resist her suggestion only because of the Dragon's Cup and his desire to have her drink from it. But he couldn't resist the need to touch her.

He pulled her to him, anchoring her with an arm around her waist and fingers speared through her hair. "We will go to Drake's Lair."

He kissed her neck, biting it lightly as his lips moved upward to her ear. "After dinner you may choose where we go. Just know that I intend to pleasure you all night long."

"Okay," she said on a moan of surrender when he fucked his tongue into her ear canal.

It was a painful victory. His cock throbbed and wept in protest, urging him to free it and grant it relief.

Separating from her was difficult. Staying the course and not directing her to turn the car toward her apartment was a test of both his will and his endurance.

The drive qualified as torture on so many levels it was nearly unbearable. But bear it he did because once he took her to the dragon's realm, he didn't intend to bring her back to this one.

Her nervousness returned when they entered the club's parking lot. It was filled with expensive cars, makes and models so rare they made even the wealthiest human salivate to own them.

Dragons, Kirill thought, amusement wafting through him. His kind couldn't resist collecting, regardless of how unnatural it was to trap themselves in steel boxes.

Jazzlyn slowed the car to a crawl, passing several empty spaces as if afraid of damaging one of the parked toys if she tried to park next to it.

Kirill laughed. "Pull in next to the yellow car. If it suddenly moves into your path, I will make good on any damage caused."

Rather than calm her, his comment increased her agitation. The car slowed even further, something he wouldn't have thought possible without coming to a halt.

"You're wealthy." Her tone would have warned him of her misgivings and doubts even if her scent hadn't already done so.

"Very." By human standards.

"Where did it come from?"

"I'm a treasure hunter."

She dared a quick glance. "Seriously?"

"Yes. And you are my greatest treasure. Something I plan to demonstrate thoroughly after dinner."

Apparently he was getting better at saying the right thing to his mate. Heat rose to her face and her scent altered, reflecting anticipation and arousal.

She parked the car. He twined his fingers with hers as they stepped away from it.

Pride and pleasure filled him. Any who saw them together would know she belonged to him. Her body language announced it. More importantly, to the male dragons present, she smelled of sex and him.

Guards were posted at the front entrance of Drake's Lair, there to protect against the theft of the Dragon's Cup. Kirill didn't doubt for a moment that the fey were plotting to steal it.

When the males opened the doors, their gazes lingered on Jazzlyn. Their nostrils flared, causing the phantom rise of Kirill's neck crest and a low growl in his throat.

A snort of laughter escaped despite Jazzlyn's efforts to contain it. Drake's Lair. She should have guessed. Drake was another name for dragon.

She'd be willing to bet all the gems in her possession that the doormen sported dragon tattoos matching those embroidered on the lapels of their jackets, and that the *maître d'* who greeted them inside and showed them to a small private table in a plush dining room also had a tattoo matching the one on his tie.

No wonder Kirill had been so casual about coming here. No wonder he'd demurred each time she suggested he collect his car. He hadn't wanted her to question him in detail.

She suspected Drake's Lair was more than a club catering to the wealthy, especially given the show the doormen put on—ogling her as though they'd like to steal her away from Kirill, making her laugh and feel flattered at the same time.

Dragons! She just hoped they didn't expect her to start role-playing too.

She waited until after the waiter—sporting a dragon ring worth more than all her jewelry plus what she had in her checking account—delivered their wine and disappeared with their order. Then she asked the first of her questions. "So are all the members here dragons? Or are elves and faeries allowed in your club?"

Kirill's stunned expression was priceless. "You know?"

## Chapter Seven

Jazzlyn rolled her eyes. "I may be a total introvert, but I'm not entirely blind to the world around me. Every man I've seen is sporting a dragon. It leads me to the inescapable conclusion that this club is exclusive in more ways than just serving wealthy patrons."

"Ah," Kirill said. "I'm glad you're so observant. It will make things easier in the long run."

Amusement lurked in his voice, making her suspicious. Hearing him acknowledge a future together gave her a small thrill. And all of it fed her curiosity. "So are the colors significant? So far no two dragons have looked alike."

"They rarely do, though sometimes those sharing lair and ancestry are distinguishable only by subtle differences in shade or the presence of an extra color on their scales."

He sounded utterly serious, as if he were discussing coloration on *live* dragons instead of symbolic ones. It might have freaked her out if she hadn't spent the entire day with him and found him both dragonish and very endearing. "And the purpose of this club is?"

"Many and varied." He surprised her by standing and guiding her to her feet with a hand on her arm. "We have enough time for me to show you one purpose before our food arrives."

They retraced their route. But rather than angling for the front door, Kirill veered to the right and escorted her deeper into the club.

The opulence of the place didn't diminish. But the refined hush gave way to voices. The serenity yielded to the charged atmosphere of men gathering around tables loaded with gems and gold, poker chips and playing cards.

Gamblers. She remembered then how notorious the club was, how often it was raided and yet nothing ever seemed to come of it.

To a one the men glanced up at her, their expressions mirroring those the doormen had given her, and garnering the same response from Kirill. His grip tightened possessively and a low growl sounded in his throat.

*Dragons!* she thought, smiling secretly as it occurred to her that before Kirill, she'd never felt so feminine and desirable.

"This way," he said, urging her toward another section of the room. "What's your preference? Dice or roulette?"

"Roulette."

"Roulette it is then."

Kirill guided her to a table where a croupier with a dragon on his shirt stood waiting for his first customer. He abandoned his hold on her arm in favor of positioning her in front of him and anchoring her against his chest with both arms around her waist.

Jazzlyn's heart rate jumped into a running pace when a man appeared next to them and unobtrusively set down a rack containing gleaming gold pieces.

"Lady's choice," Kirill murmured, pressing a kiss to her neck.

She was beyond making more than just the most basic decision. "Red."

He casually lifted several of the gold pieces from the rack and set them on the table, sending shock rippling through Jazzlyn when she realized they were Krugerrands.

The shock was followed by dismay when the ball dropped neatly onto the black eight and the croupier raked in the solid gold coins.

It didn't get better from there. She won a few times, but Kirill casually tossed the recouped coins back out onto the table until there was nothing left.

If he hadn't been the one placing the bets—over her protests to be more conservative—it would have made her physically sick to lose so much money. Even so,

she couldn't let it pass without saying something. She turned in his arms and said, "I'm sorry. I'm not very good at this."

His smile warmed her all the way down to her toes. The kiss that followed had her melting against him.

"I prefer to be unlucky at games of chance, but lucky at love," he said, the purr in his voice tightening her nipples to hard points and sending liquid heat to her cunt lips.

Her channel spasmed. The need to be alone with him spiked through her. "Let's eat dinner."

His eyes darkened and flared with lust. "Let's."

He led her back to their table. The waiter arrived with their food almost as soon as they'd settled into their seats.

"I'm curious," she said a short time later, after they'd finished their meal and their plates had been taken away. "This place has been raided at least five times that I can remember. How do you get away with the gambling? I can't believe every cop, federal agent and judge involved is a dragon."

"Avoiding detection and prosecution is Pierce's area of expertise." Kirill's mouth curved up in a teasing smile. "He's our token Faerie, and co-owner of the club."

Jazzlyn laughed. "I assume you mean faerie as in fey and not gay."

Kirill's smile deepened. "The fey are often flexible in their sexuality, but in his case, I'm told he is quite happily mated to a female."

Their waiter returned with small flutes containing something called—not surprisingly—Dragon's Flame.

Kirill picked up his glass, his gaze traveling over her possessively. "To our future happiness."

Slick arousal wet her panties. His nostrils flared and the sudden image of him reaching under the table in intimate exploration made her clamp her legs together. She touched her glass to his then drank.



It was like swallowing fire.

When she could finally focus on her surroundings again, she thought spontaneous combustion had probably been a close call in her case. Every nerve ending tingled in hyperawareness. The feel of clothing against her skin was almost unbearable.

“Potent stuff,” she said, setting the glass down next to his empty one. “You can drink the rest of mine.”

“I have a better idea.” He signaled their waiter and a moment later a small plate of fruit was placed on the table. Mango, she thought as Kirill poured the Dragon’s Flame over it.

If she’d had any doubt as to just how flammable the drink was, it was extinguished when Kirill leaned forward, blowing on the dessert and setting it on fire.

*Dragons*, she thought yet again, enjoying the trick though she couldn’t figure out how he’d done it.

The flames licked and danced over the fruit, burning hot and fast before going out. Lust darkened Kirill’s eyes as he picked up a slice of mango and carried it to her mouth, starting a new fire, this one inside her.

She took the offered fruit, his fingers remaining against her lips, inviting her to lick them clean. Flushed need heightened the color in her cheeks. At the beginning of the day, she wouldn’t have been able to imagine herself doing something so wanton in public, but there was no way to resist the temptation to explore and wield her feminine power.

It would have been easy to blame her behavior on the Dragon’s Flame, but Jazzlyn didn’t. With Kirill she felt bold, confident, two words that had never applied to her except when it came to her jewelry making.

She slowly licked the fruit juice and residual drink from his fingers, her eyes never leaving his as she did it.

He offered another piece and she took it, sucking it into her mouth, imagining it was his cock and knowing by the expression on his face that he was imagining the same thing.

With each slice of mango she expanded on her sensual torment. Licking, sucking, caressing the tips of his fingers until he was panting slightly, his face taut.

“Let’s go,” he said, abruptly rising to his feet.

Instead of leaving the club, he led her toward a guarded alcove. Through the arched doorway she saw a jewel-encrusted chalice positioned on a velvet-lined pedestal like something belonging in a museum.

A blond man joined them as they stepped into the alcove, his shirtsleeves rolled up to reveal a gold and green dragon tattooed on his arm. Unlike the other men she’d encountered, he didn’t devour her with his eyes. Instead the corners of them crinkled in amusement as he directed his attention to Kirill. “I have to say, this is a surprise though I’d heard rumors of your hasty departure from Xanthus’ lair. You wish to offer the cup to your beautiful companion?”

Jazzlyn blushed at the compliment. Kirill’s growl ended with a yes.

The blond casually lifted the chalice from its pedestal and poured the flute of Dragon’s Flame he’d arrived with into it before passing the cup to Kirill.

“This is freely given, Hakon?” Kirill asked.

“Yes.”

Kirill drank from the cup then turned toward Jazzlyn. She had time to notice it was engraved with pictures, small images conveying a dragon story, before the rim was held to her mouth, and Kirill urged her to drink.

She guessed it was a club ritual. And because she sensed it was important to him, she obeyed, swallowing a fire that burned like lust and left her breathless, aching for Kirill to come inside her and quench the flames.

He placed the cup back on the pedestal. “My thanks,” he said to Hakon.

"You return home now?"

"No." The single word held a wealth of frustration. "Jazzlyn's cousin is in trouble. Until she can be found and delivered from danger, we must remain here."

"She's missing?"

"Yes."

"Have you visited Inner Magick? It's possible Aislinn might be able to help you find her."

Jazzlyn spoke up. "We're waiting for a call from her now. She's done what she can using her gift. There's a chance her husband can come up with a lead. It seems likely my cousin is on a boat, though we don't know its name yet."

Hakon frowned. "Then your cousin could be anywhere, including in international waters." He glanced at Kirill. "If you'd care to accept my hospitality for the night, I offer it. I keep a speedboat at the ready. Should the call arrive and you need to act on it, any of my men are capable of taking you out on the water if I'm not home."

Jazzlyn's hand curled around Kirill's arm. "I'd like to accept," she said, touched by Hakon's offer.

Kirill's hand covered hers. "Then we will. I believe I promised that after dinner you could choose where we go."

Hakon took a card from his pocket and scribbled directions on it. He passed it to Kirill, saying, "I'll call ahead and say you're expected. Arrive whenever it suits you."

They thanked Hakon and left the club, stepping out into a warm, star-filled night.

The surf pounded only a short distance away. The beach was a shrouded, romantic stretch of sand and privacy.

A shiver of anticipation slid through Jazzlyn, fantasy and opportunity merging. If only she was courageous enough to shake off a lifetime of shyness and go for it. She'd never made love under the stars.

Her cunt lips were swollen and flushed, urging her with each step she took to be bold and ask for what she wanted. At the back of her car, she halted, intensely aware of the way her clit pressed against her panties, a tiny imitation of the hard ridge at the front of Kirill's pants.

She put her palm on his chest, toying with his nipple through his shirt. "Before going to Hakon's, I'd like to walk on the beach."

"Just walk?" He enfolded her in his arms, nuzzled her neck, sucking and biting, his hand caressing her breast.

"Maybe more," she whispered.

He released her long enough for her to retrieve a blanket from the trunk of her car, then hand in hand they walked the distance to the beach, pausing to remove their shoes before stepping onto the sand.

They weren't the only couple to have been drawn to it, or to become lost in the private world of lovers. Two men embraced in the surf, the water swirling around them. A man and woman rolled and wrestled on the sand, her shirt parted and breasts free. The sight of them, combined with the sensuous in-and-out rhythm of the waves made Jazzlyn want to explore her newfound sexual confidence, to wield her feminine power in order to give Kirill pleasure.

She stopped and spread the blanket. When Kirill joined her on it, she pushed him to his back and made a show of removing her panties before she straddled him, her knees on either side of his hips, her skirt hiding her mound from him though he knew she was bare for him, ready for him.

"The moonlight agrees with you," he murmured, voice husky, eyes challenging her to do her worst now that she had him underneath her.

"You agree with me." She leaned down and touched her lips to his. "Very much. Now we're going to pretend I'm the dragon and you're my treasure."

His smile was an invitation to sin. He lay still as she slowly unbuttoned his shirt, parting it as she went, revealing him inch by inch. She paused to kiss the dragon tattoo, to trace its outline with her tongue.

Kirill growled in response and tangled his fingers in her hair. In the light cast by the moon, it was easy for her to imagine silvery scales and a dragon lover.

The tension in his body grew as she kissed downward toward the front of his pants. He vibrated with it, his fingers fisting and unfisting in her hair as though he were in a battle for his survival.

His hips jerked upward when her tongue darted into his navel. He moaned when she undid the top snap of his jeans, at the same time parting his zipper just enough to free the first inch of him.

“Don’t,” he said, but the lift of his hips made the word a lie, as did the glistening drops of arousal on his cock head.

She straightened so she could watch his expression as she used her forefinger to spread the moisture onto his shaft. His eyes blazed with lust. His hands now clutched the blanket, the muscles on his arms defined in stark relief.

There were faint ridges circling underneath the head of his cock. As she lingered, exploring them with her fingertips, they seemed to grow more pronounced.

The zipper gave and her channel clenched at the sight of him fully revealed. She couldn’t resist the urge to lean forward, to press her lips to him, kissing, lightly sucking where the ridges were darkening in color.

“Don’t,” he said again, shuddering as she caressed him with her tongue, his breathing growing more erratic and his tension mounting.

His skin was hot. His scent masculine. His taste reminded her of Dragon’s Flame and filled her with a fiery lust that would only be quenched by orgasm.

She took him in her mouth then, eyes closing so she could savor him as she sucked, her tongue going repeatedly to the subtle ridges. Striking. Licking. Tormenting.

He moaned and panted. He fought to escape her even as he continued to thrust and writhe in an agony of pleasure beneath her—until finally he grasped her arms and forced her mouth away from his cock.

When she was once again on her knees above him, his hand jerked her skirt upward. “Mount me,” he said, his voice raw with need.

She wouldn’t have thought it possible for him to get larger, but as his eyes devoured her exposed cunt, his penis thickened, lengthened, the moonlight playing over it so the ridges beneath its head looked raised and firm.

He took himself in hand then, holding his cock so she could impale herself on it. “Take what you’ve claimed belongs to you,” he growled, reminding her of her teasing comment, that she was the dragon and he was the treasure.

It was easy to obey him. She wanted nothing more than to feel him inside her.

As slowly as she’d unbuttoned his shirt, she moved into position above him, knowing by his expression that he could see her parted glistening folds, that he liked watching as she took him an inch at a time, as though he were the captured virgin and she was the dragon.

When he was fully seated, she paused, clenched on him. Her channel was like a hungry mouth, sucking, rippling on the hot, hard length of him.

His hips rose. His eyes closed. “Jazzlyn,” he said on a moan, his breath catching, begging with the sound of his need for her to fuck herself on him.

His desperation filled her with savage satisfaction and feminine delight. She couldn’t resist his plea. Didn’t want to deny either of them the pleasure of release.

She slid up and down on his hard cock. Slowly at first. Until his hands gripped her hips and his body thrashed beneath hers.

The angle of penetration rubbed her clit against him. Rendered her incapable of fighting the sharp edge of an orgasm that turned her sheath into a vise and caused him to shout as he emptied himself into her.

With a sigh she collapsed on top of him, the heat from his muscle-hard body soaking through her clothing, making her smile then laugh softly. "It may be night but at the moment I feel like a dragon sunning itself on a very large, very firm rock."

Kirill made a sound that was more rumbling purr than chuckle. He smoothed his hands over her back, petting her in a way that kept her stretched out on top of him, content to linger on the beach.

## **Chapter Eight**

In the darkness of the car, Jazzlyn shook her head as she stopped in front of wrought iron gates with elaborate welded dragons taking up much of their centers. A voice coming from a hidden speaker asked her to identify herself. Kirill answered for both of them and the gates swung open to allow her to proceed.

She expected a house. Instead she found a jungle of lush plants and an area to park.

"This is eccentric," she said, getting out of the car to the raucous call of tropical birds.

"Dragons like their privacy."

"The better to guard their treasure," she joked.

"True," Kirill said, pleased at how comfortable she was becoming with the idea of dragons.

He captured her hand and led her along a walkway canopied by plants that blocked much of the moonlight. Somewhere ahead of them an alligator bellowed, its call answered by another.

Jazzlyn pressed closer. "I can see how this layout would discourage thieves. Is your home like this?"

"No. I favor open space and a clear path to anyone who dares trespass."

She laughed at his answer. "Where do you live?"

He carried her hand to his mouth and pressed a kiss to it. "As soon as your cousin is safely recovered, I intend to take you there. Until then, it will remain a secret."

Her response was another laugh. It left him pleased with his efforts in preparing his mate for what lay ahead. She didn't seem alarmed by the prospect of going to his home without knowing anything more about it.



They walked for several minutes before seeing Hakon's house. At his side, Jazzlyn's breath caught at the sight of glass stained with a variety of dragons in flight.

"You guys don't do anything in half measures, do you?" she said.

He chuckled. "The young dragons who've settled here are the most ostentatious about marking their territory."

Jazzlyn snorted at the comment, making him smile at having had the opportunity to impart more knowledge.

He led her past low stucco walls set above a sloping, shallow channel serving as a moat, its banks lined with alligators. "I hope he feeds them regularly," Jazzlyn said as the path they were on became a suspended bridge.

A door opened and Hakon stood backlit, shimmering for an instant in the gold and green of his dragon colors, his grin all too knowing. "Welcome to my home. I hadn't expected to arrive before you, but I'm glad I did. I'll show you to your suite as I imagine you'll want to retire early."

Kirill didn't deny Hakon's assertion. He'd endured having Jazzlyn in the presence of other males at Drake's Lair because it'd been necessary, but it would be a battle to remain civilized if she became friendly with Hakon in the cozy, intimate setting of a private residence.

"You have a beautiful home," Jazzlyn said as Hakon led them past high-ceilinged rooms done in bright, tropical colors and furnished with sofas and chairs crafted of light-colored wood.

Hakon stopped in front of an open doorway. "Thank you. This is your suite. Should you hear from Aislinn and need to contact me, there's a phone with a list of extensions in the sitting room. Contact security and they'll locate me immediately. There's a small refrigerator and a bar stocked with drinks, and if you grow hungry, dial the extension to the kitchen."

Kirill followed Jazzlyn into the room, his gaze going immediately to the large bed visible through the arched doorway. Hakon's chuckle made him turn back toward their host.

Emerald green eyes glittered with amusement. "I'll leave you now to enjoy the rest of your evening. Feel free to use the hot tub located on the balcony."

Kirill closed the door and caught up with Jazzlyn. Dragon instinct ruled, making it impossible not to wrap his arms around her and pull her to him in a primitive desire to ensure she still smelled of him.

He rubbed his cheek against the silk of her hair and inhaled deeply. Knowing there were other males in the vicinity had him fighting to keep the spurs at his wrists from descending.

He felt edgy, trapped in a form that didn't allow for the full protection and possession of his mate. He wanted nothing more than to rake the talons across her skin and send her into the unconsciousness that would allow him to return home with her.

A growl escaped. Her laugh eased him.

"Someone's feeling very dragonish again," she teased. "Not that I can blame you since we're surrounded by them."

Her comment startled him, until he noted the moonlight streaming through dragons of all colors set in the stained glass. At the moment he didn't find the effect soothing at all. It stirred his aggression and translated into a need to dominate his mate and ensure she was irrevocably and completely his.

His cock stood in full agreement. It was rigid and aching, throbbing with the need to be freed from the confining pants.

A spike of molten fire went through it as he relived those moments on the beach when she'd tormented him with her mouth. He'd lost control of the magic then, though thankfully in the darkness she hadn't realized she was seeing the reality and not a moon-induced fantasy.

Kirill kicked off his shoes. He wanted to order her to disrobe, then see to the removal of his clothing, but he didn't dare risk a repeat of what had happened on the beach. If she knelt at his feet, her mouth inches away from his cock—

A shudder went through him. He didn't know how much longer he could endure the restrictions imposed on him in this world.

"Again?" she murmured when her skirt fell to the ground after he'd freed it.

"And again and again," he said, punctuating his words with kisses. "A lifetime won't provide enough opportunities when it comes to making love to you."

He stripped her blouse off. It joined her skirt on the floor.

"I think I could say the same about you." Her hands went to his waistband, her fingers curling under to rub against his cock.

He savored her touch even as he fought to keep the ridges from rising and breaching the magic that held them beneath the smooth skin of his shaft.

"You want to know what's a turn-on for me?" she whispered, a hint of shyness in her voice.

He hardly dared ask for fear of what her answer would do to him. But he did. "What?"

"This," she said, maneuvering her hand so she could grasp his cock and rub her thumb over the swollen head. "You get wet for me the same way I get wet for you."

If her fingers weren't gripping his penis, her words would have driven him to his knees. He sought refuge in commanding her. "Take your bra and panties off, Jazzlyn. Now. So we can get into the hot tub."

She made no move to obey him. Instead she tormented him by looking through her eyelashes in sultry disobedience, her thumb continuing to caress his cock head.

Somewhere along the line he'd been too lenient with her, he told himself, though he didn't regret it. Not when her defiance aroused him, stirred his lust into a blazing inferno.

He stripped out of his shirt and opened his pants. She slid her hand up and down on his cock before slowly removing it from his penis. And still, she made no move to rid herself of panties and bra.

In the future she'd feel the sting of his hand across her buttocks for this type of challenge. At the moment, the desire to possess her overrode the desire to punish her.

He removed his pants and reached for her, pulling her against him aggressively. His hands smoothed over the silky nothingness of her panties. "If we were home I'd spank you for your refusal to obey."

She shivered, the deepening of her scent and the stab of her nipples against his chest telling him the idea appealed to her.

*"If you could catch me,"* she said, her lips curving into a provocative smile.

He peeled her panties down to join the clothing on the floor, panting as his cock came into contact with her heated, bare cunt. "Even with a running start, you wouldn't escape me, Jazzlyn."

"You sound very sure of yourself. But I bet I could render you completely incapable of administering any kind of discipline."

Her fingers found his nipples, tightened on them in small punishment for his easy confidence. Fire shot straight to his cock and additional moisture beaded on its head. She rubbed against him, spreading heated scent and arousal onto her skin as well as his.

It was more than he could stand. A challenge and invitation he couldn't leave unanswered.

He stripped her out of her bra and swung her into his arms. She laughed, eyes full of feminine knowledge and newfound power as he stalked to the hot tub.

Sliding into the water heightened his desire. It lapped at his cock, caressed, made him think of Jazzlyn's mouth and channel.

He set her on her feet, never allowing her skin to lose contact with his.

"I like this," she said, her arms going around his neck, her legs going around his waist as he sat, submerging them in water up to their shoulders.

Her lips begged for his kiss and he found her impossible to resist. He claimed what she offered, his hands roaming her back, sliding over her satiny buttocks as his tongue rubbed and twined with hers.

He wanted her desperately, craved her as he'd never craved anything else. But he knew the next time his cock was held in the tight fist of her channel, he wouldn't be able to keep the talons from descending and filling with serum. He wouldn't be able to prevent himself from raking them across her flesh, and she would be unconscious until morning when it happened.

She tensed when his fingertips traced the cleft of her ass, giving birth to a dark, carnal urge. "You're virgin here?" he asked, cock throbbing in anticipation of her response.

The blush that rushed to her cheeks was answer enough. The way she clamped down nervously when he traced the tight rosette of her anus confirmed it.

He hadn't thought it possible to grow more aroused, but knowing he'd be the first, the last to take her in every way a male could take his female caused his blood to heat and his dragon instincts to roar to life.

His gaze roamed the hot tub, a subconscious guess that proved accurate when he saw the ornate dragon perched at the edge. He reached for it, pressed, and was rewarded with a silky stream of warm lubricant.

"It's dangerous to tease a male dragon about his prowess, especially when he's been counting the moments until he could position his female underneath him and make her completely his."

She smiled against his lips, totally unrepentant. "Have me now then," she said, tempting him mercilessly by rubbing her cunt and stiffened clit against his penis.

It was all he could do not to lift her and bring her down on his cock. Only the threat of his mating talons descending from their hidden sheaths gave him the ability to resist her.

“I’ll have you here next,” he growled, stroking, breaching her virgin opening with his fingertip as an arm around her waist kept her from escaping.

She shuddered against him, her buttocks tightening as if to force him away from her back entrance. But the throb of her clit against his cock and her breathless “Kir” told him she wasn’t horrified or repulsed by what he intended.

Before the feel of her bare cunt and hardened knob caused him to lose control, he stood and set her on her feet. “Turn around and grab the edge of the hot tub. Then spread your legs so I can prepare you.”

Her eyes darkened and her lips parted. She remained where he’d placed her and watched him gather more lubricant on fingers.

He spread some of it on his cock, giving her a moment to think, to anticipate having him slide into her virgin entrance. It excited him to have her gaze linger and admire his human form. It made him ache to stand in front of her as dragon, both of them knowing he’d soon cover her body and thrust inside her, his wings spread and quivering in ecstasy as he did it.

She lowered her eyes and turned, bent over and grasped the edge of the tub. In challenge or in shyness, she parted her legs only enough for him to glimpse her wet folds and glistening slit.

He caressed her buttock with his palm while the fingers of his other hand clamped mercilessly on his cock to keep from closing the distance and shoving it inside her. By the Great Shared Ancestor, she delighted him.

“Will you defy me and earn a spanking where your cries might bring an audience?” he asked, the thought of others watching as he disciplined then took his mate feeding the flames of both aggression and lust. “Or will you obey?”

It was sweet torture to see her shiver, then part her legs in silent acceptance of his will. He tormented himself by trailing his fingers between her swollen cunt lips, gathering the slick evidence of her arousal and using it to lubricate her back entrance.

Molten heat streaked through Jazzlyn, flaring to life where his fingers traveled along the crease of her ass, circling the tight rosette then slipping inside. There was something wickedly thrilling in his threats of punishment, in letting him take her this way.

Her imagination was alive with images of a chase that ended in a spanking, followed by fierce lovemaking. They were dark fantasies, ones she'd never explored, just as she'd never dreamed of letting a man press his cock to the puckered opening of her anus.

His touch was possessive, sure, as he prepared her. She closed her eyes and the sensations grew stronger, hot pain joining to dark pleasure.

Her clit throbbed. Her nipples were tight. If she didn't need to grasp the rim of the hot tub, she'd try to gain a measure of relief by touching herself.

A moan escaped when the head of his penis touched her back opening. The image of him coating himself with lubricant, his hand moving up and down on his shaft made her channel clench.

Despite wanting him, she tensed when he tried to enter her. "Easy, beloved," he said, kissing the spot where her neck met her shoulder.

His words and the purr of his voice melted her. They lodged in her heart.

She wanted to be his beloved. Somewhere in the course of the day, she'd come to believe in heartmate stones and him.

His fingers found her clit and drove all thought away. Fire raced to the soles of her feet, to her nipples. It filled her anus as he worked the smooth hot steel of his cock into her, burning her with erotic heat.

She could feel him shaking, trembling with need and the desire to go slowly so his claiming would bring only pleasure. His care heightened her desire, making her rock backward.

Her internal muscles rippled around the thick heat of him. He panted, seemingly unable to stop himself from thrusting, quick shallow digs that were devastating in their intensity.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he said, his arm tightening around her waist, the fingers on her clit doing the same.

Exquisite agony scorched through her. “I need more,” she said, pressing backward, intentionally clamping down hard on his cock.

He was a throbbing presence that filled more than her anus. It felt as though his heart beat deep inside her and was completely in sync with her own.

“Please, Kir.”

He couldn’t deny her, not when he burned with the same hunger.

Shallow thrusts became harder ones. Each made in concert with the squeeze and tug of his fingers on her engorged clit.

The husky sounds of her pleasure made control impossible. And even when his wrists began to tingle and burn, the talons on the verge of descending, he couldn’t stop.

Instinct drove him closer, so as much skin as possible touched. His nipples rubbed against her back. His lips caressed her shoulder.

The need to fully claim her built until there was no fighting it any longer. His teeth marked her shoulder as the talons finally slid free to drag across her belly, piercing skin and delivering the serum.

She screamed in orgasm, and the knowledge that the other males would hear it and know what it meant, amplified the ecstasy of his own release. He came in a series of lava-hot waves. Each one making him cry out, his semen forced from him in savage spasms.



It left him lightheaded, in danger of slipping into the same unconsciousness she'd succumbed to. Dragon pride was the only thing that gave him the strength to carry Jazzlyn to the bathroom.

He bathed and dried her, finding it deeply satisfying to care for her so intimately. Then he took care of his own needs before settling into bed with her.

Satisfaction purred through Kirill as he watched his mate sleep. She was irrevocably his now, her body adjusting so in the future, when they both desired it, she would grow heavy with his young.

He cupped her breast possessively, his purr deepening when she murmured, welcoming his touch even in the depth of serum-induced unconsciousness. He leaned in, nuzzled her nipple, licked over it as his hand slid downward, briefly pausing on the light scratches left by his mating talons, before slipping lower to cover her mound.

*His.* Every inch of her, every minute of her life now belonged to him. And he would treasure her above anything else he possessed. Always.

He pressed his chest to her back, snuggling close and tight in a nest of bedclothing and heated skin. With any luck, this business with her cousin would be done tomorrow and he would take her to his lair.

Contentment settled on him. His thoughts wandered over the events of day. There was nothing about it he would change, including Aislinn's interference. Because of it he'd lingered here and not only gotten a chance to imprint himself on his mate, but to prepare her for the existence of dragons.

Confronting reality would still be a shock to her. There was no way to avoid it. But unlike the sacrificed and stolen virgins of long ago, Jazzlyn wouldn't die of fright or throw herself from a rocky ledge at finding herself in his lair.

His heart wouldn't let him believe she could ever be terrified of him. Not when she'd teased and taunted him, tormented him and claimed him as thoroughly as he'd claimed her.

He pressed an adoring kiss to her shoulder. After they returned, he'd suggest she examine the gems he kept deep in the hidden part of his lair. He'd encourage her to choose several of them as a gift for the half-elf. Xanthus could deliver them and see to gathering Jazzlyn's things at the same time.

In fact, he'd ask Xanthus to purchase duplicate tools so Jazzlyn could have two work areas. One would be set up in the open section, where he enjoyed stretching out during the daylight hours and guarding his territory against trespass and poaching. The other would be in an internal chamber. There were several that would be suitable once they were cleared of treasure.

The sound of music interrupted his planning. He recognized its source immediately and slid from the bed to answer Jazzlyn's phone.

"Is Jazzlyn there?" Aislinn asked.

"She sleeps." His cock stirred in remembered pleasure at having her orgasm around it violently when he raked her with his talons.

Aislinn didn't suggest he wake his mate, but then the shopkeeper would know what a dragon's serum did to a human female. "Trace has a lead on where Mark might be. Nothing certain yet, but hopefully there will be by morning. I wanted to let Jazzlyn know."

"I will tell her."

"Something else came up while Trace was looking into this. There have been three restraining orders filed against Mark. The first was in California. The second was in Nevada. The last in Texas."

Kirill frowned, not liking the news though he didn't completely understand it. "These restraining orders were put in place to keep Mark from doing something?"

"From having contact with women he'd been going out with." There was a slight hesitation on the other end of the line. "Trace was able to find two of the women. They both told him the same thing. At first Mark was attentive and wonderful, but as the relationship progressed he got more and more controlling and possessive until they'd

ended up feeling cut off from their friends and family. When they broke things off with him, or tried to, he refused to stop calling them or showing up in person and acting as if nothing had changed. It unnerved them to the point they filed for restraining orders. The woman in Nevada is officially declared a missing person. The police suspect Mark had something to do with her disappearance, but there's no proof."

Aislinn's description of the human male's behavior sent uneasiness rippling through Kirill. His gaze swept over his unconscious mate and he told himself it was only worry for her that left him feeling unsettled and out of sorts.

He would make certain Jazzlyn had no further contact with Mark. It was too dangerous.

"Will the police involve themselves in this?" he asked.

"Not without probable cause. Carolyn isn't officially missing and hasn't filed any kind of complaint against Mark. The most the police could do is approach Mark and ask to be allowed on the boat, if that's where he is. Without a warrant, if he says no, they can't insist."

"I am at Hakon's estate. If Mark is located, I will ask for Hakon to help me handle this matter."

"I'll call again as soon as I know something more."

"My thanks again for your aid." He ended the call and placed the phone on the nightstand as he rejoined Jazzlyn in bed.

He slid his arms around her waist, pulling her back against his chest and kissing her shoulder. Despite the pleasure he felt at holding her, tension knotted his stomach at what the morning might bring.

## **Chapter Nine**

Jazzlyn woke to dragons in flight, their beauty turning the white of the bedding into a kaleidoscope of color. The stained glass had been breathtaking in the moonlight, but with the sunlight streaming through it, every exquisite detail was revealed.

“You’re awake,” Kirill said, his arm tightening around her waist, his lips administering small kisses to the place he’d bitten her in the hot tub.

She could hear a wealth of satisfaction in his voice at having fucked her so thoroughly she passed out in the throes of orgasm.

Against her buttocks, his hard cock expressed its desire for an encore.

Her phone rang before they could act on it.

She scrambled to answer and ended up lying across Kirill in the process. It was Aislinn. “I’ve got an address for you.”

“Hold on a second.”

Kirill grunted when she left the bed to scrounge for pen and paper. “I’m ready.”

Aislinn recited an address before saying, “There’s no way to know if Mark has Carolyn there or not. The house belongs to an uncle. Trace wasn’t able to contact him though he did have a patrol car swing by first thing this morning and then a few minutes ago. According to them, none of Mark’s registered vehicles were there on either visit. Neither was your cousin’s. The boat wasn’t there on the initial visit, but it’s there now. No one answered the door and they can’t get close enough to the boat to look inside it.

“Trace thought it’d be better not to have the police approach from the water for fear it could spook Mark if he’s watching from inside the house. I’m at the shop now. I tried another reading and got even less than before, murky darkness and the feeling of subtle

movement, like being on a boat. Trace is trying to find out if Mark might have rented another boat."

Jazzlyn's stomach cramped as she remembered Kirill returning from his search of Mark's house and mentioning traces of a chemical substance along with the wineglasses. She'd jumped to the conclusion it was a party drug, but what if it wasn't?

"Do you think Carolyn's drugged with something that's knocked her out to keep her quiet?"

"It's possible." There was a hesitation. "Did Kirill pass on the other information?"

Jazzlyn glanced at him. He was up and seemingly content to wait until the last moment before tugging on his clothes.

"Not yet. I'll have him tell me while we're in the car."

"You'll let me know what you find?"

"Yes. Of course."

Jazzlyn nervously rolled her phone between her hands as she repeated what Aislinn told her. "I feel guilty for thinking the worst of Caro. I should have guessed he'd drugged her. He must have let her come out of it long enough to make the phone call, then dosed her again. That's probably why he said it'd take a couple hours before I heard from her."

Kirill closed the distance between them, pulling her flush against his chest and stroking her back. "It would have changed nothing. Even now we don't know the full truth of your cousin's circumstances."

Jazzlyn slipped her arms around his waist. "I'm so glad I have you."

His laugh was a satisfied purr. "You can demonstrate your gratitude later."

He rubbed his cheek against hers. "If I could bear the thought of leaving you in another male's care, I'd insist you remain here while I investigate the house and the boat."

“As if I’d let you go by yourself.” She emphasized her point with a pinch to his very firm buttock.

“You dare to challenge me again after the events of last evening?”

Jazzlyn laughed. “Somehow being fucked so well that I passed out isn’t exactly a deterrent.” She turned her head and placed a kiss in the hollow of his neck. “Not to challenge your masculinity or anything, but I’d feel better if Hakon came with us.”

“If he accompanies us, you’ll stay in the car where I won’t have to worry for your safety?”

As much as she wished she could be a kick-ass heroine when the need arose, she knew she’d be more hindrance than help. “Yes.”

“Good.” His lips covered hers and his kiss was deep and long, praising and possessing and promising all at the same time.

They dressed quickly and sought out Hakon. He said, “I suggest you and Jazzlyn go by car while I approach on the water. If you desire, I can send one of my men with you so Jazzlyn will remain guarded while we investigate the house and the boat.”

Kirill suppressed a growl. He felt the phantom flaring of his neck crest though the amusement lurking in Hakon’s eyes belied the offer of protection for Jazzlyn.

A human was no match for one dragon, much less two. The only reason he’d agreed to Hakon’s presence at all was because it gained Jazzlyn’s compliance without an argument.

“Additional protection won’t be necessary,” Kirill said, hand curling possessively around Jazzlyn’s upper arm. “I’ll protect her from any threat found in the house.”

Hakon’s lips curved into a smile. “Shall we exchange phone numbers before we head out? I’ll get there faster by boat but will wait for you to arrive so we can coordinate our search.”

Jazzlyn recited her number then input Hakon's before passing her phone to Kirill as they went to the door. In the daylight they could clearly see the huge alligators lying along the sandy banks and basking in the sun.

"Lazy cousins," Hakon joked before jogging around the side of the house, disappearing in what Kirill assumed was the direction of his private dock.

Kirill's hand slid down Jazzlyn's arm. Their fingers entwined as they hurried through jungle foliage, their progress marked by bird calls.

Just as they reached her car, Kirill heard the sound of a powerful engine roar to life. "Hakon's on his way."

Jazzlyn's hand tightened on his. "I hope this isn't a dead end. If it is —"

"We will still find her."

By the Great Shared Ancestor he wanted to be done with this.

They traveled in tense silence. And when they got to their destination, he directed Jazzlyn to drive past the house.

There were no obvious signs of occupancy. No vehicles or lights. The place looked dark and ill-kept, the landscaping untended.

Adobe walls served as a fence preventing trespass. A gate allowed a view of the waterway a short distance behind the house and the private dock extending into it.

"The boat's there," Jazzlyn said. "What about Hakon?"

"Nearby, I'm sure. I'll call him in a moment."

Kirill scanned the area. He didn't like the idea of Jazzlyn being anywhere near the house, and yet he liked the thought of her being out of sight and further away even less.

"Park across the street from the gate," he directed. A touch of his hand to the front door, accompanied by the same incantation he'd used yesterday and he'd know if this house was empty of humans or not. The answer would determine whether he joined Hakon on the boat, or waited for Hakon to deal with the situation there while he dealt with the one in the house.

Jazzlyn parked the car and turned off the engine. He contacted Hakon.

“How do you wish to proceed?” Hakon asked, deferring to Kirill despite the fact he was a dragon prince and an inhabitant of this realm.

“Let me determine if there is anyone in the house first.”

“I’m at the mouth of the waterway. I can see the boat from here. I’ll wait on the line while you check the house.”

Kirill gave a low growl at the loss of privacy. But its loss didn’t stop him from touching his lips to Jazzlyn’s.

Her fingers tangled in his hair for a second, her mouth clinging to his after an all-too-brief kiss. “Please be careful, Kir.”

“Stay here, beloved. Stay safe.”

On the other end of the line, Kirill could have sworn he heard Hakon sing, “Another one bites the dust.”

He ignored the other male in favor of hurrying to get this task behind him so he could take Jazzlyn home.

At the door it took less than a minute to learn the house was exactly as it appeared to be, unoccupied. Kirill headed toward the gate, speaking into the phone as he did so. “I’ll meet you on the dock.”

In the distance there was the rev of a boat’s engine.

He slipped Jazzlyn’s phone into his pocket and used the same commonly known sigils accompanied by dragon will to unlock the gate. It was impossible to pass through it without a glance back at the car.

Jazzlyn’s worried expression was pain and pleasure both. He’d never guessed at the emotions having a mate would lay bare.

He forced himself to move forward, telling himself the sooner it was done, the sooner he’d return to her. Hakon’s boat was already gliding smoothly alongside the dock, one of his men at the wheel.



Hakon jumped to the dock, cautious despite the innate confidence of their kind. Kirill joined him, both of them watching for movement at the curtain-covered windows of the power yacht.

When there was none, Kirill edged forward, touching the boat's hull. With Hakon crouched next to him, he spoke the spell words, using his left hand for adding the intricate, gestured patterns.

This time an electric thrill jolted through him. "There's a female inside. No one else."

"Nice trick," Hakon said, both of them standing and climbing onto the boat's deck. "Perhaps you'll be willing to teach it to me."

Kirill could do no less given Hakon's hospitality and aid, as well as the generosity he and Malik and Severn demonstrated in sharing the Dragon's Cup. "I intend to leave this realm as quickly as possible. Visit me in my lair and I will teach you the spell."

Hakon chuckled. "Considering your newly mated status, I will allow some time to pass before approaching."

The door to the cabin gave under Hakon's will. They entered, their good spirits disappearing in a heartbeat at the sight greeting them.

Carolyn was gagged, her arms bound to her sides then tethered by locked cable to a metal loop set in the wall. She didn't stir when the cabin filled with the sound of their curses at finding her held captive in such a manner. Her breathing remained deep and rhythmic as they freed her.

Movement in the side-view mirror made Jazzlyn glance away from the boat just long enough to see the rear end of a car disappear behind a row of shrubbery in a neighboring driveway. She had a brief worry that her presence and the open gate would elicit a call to the police, but dismissed it. They would be gone in a matter of minutes.

Hakon must have seen something from his position on the water. It was the only explanation she could come up with for Kirill abandoning his plan to enter the house.

Her fingernails dug into her palms as she waited for them to emerge from the cabin of the power yacht. "Please, please let her be there," she whispered, terrified that if Caro wasn't, then she was dead and at the bottom of the ocean somewhere.

She didn't know how much longer she could stand waiting. Every second dragged yet her heart raced as though she were running. How long did it take to search such a small space?

Her breath caught in her throat when Kirill emerged, Caro in his arms. Without conscious thought Jazzlyn left the car and hurried to the gate.

Hakon followed Kirill onto the deck, then onto the dock, his smile reassuring Jazzlyn even as he called out, "She's unconscious but appears unharmed otherwise."

Jazzlyn rushed toward them, heart beating loudly in her ears, relief freeing her tears.

Through the blur of them she saw both Hakon's and Kirill's expression change to something deadly an instant before she was grabbed from behind, jerked to a painful halt by a hand in her hair.

There was no time for her to react as a forearm locked against her throat with a force that made breathing difficult. The cold metal barrel of a gun touched her temple.

Fear clawed through her. Terror for herself. For Carolyn and Kirill and Hakon.

Even before he spoke, she knew who stood behind her. "You've got something of mine," Mark said. "And I've got something of yours. I see no reason why we can't trade."

Kirill silently handed Carolyn to Hakon, gauging the distance between himself and the man who dared to threaten his mate. There would be no negotiation.

By the laws of the Covenant, he was entitled to end this man's life. The manner he intended was not strictly allowed, but this human left him little choice and he didn't fear Hakon calling attention to the breach.

The only thing he did fear was Jazzlyn's reaction, Jazzlyn's horror or terror. But it couldn't be helped. He approached slowly, waiting only long enough for Mark to turn the barrel of the gun toward him.

A deep breath. A sharp focused exhale and flame erupted from his mouth and nose.

It roared across the distance with such force and fury it struck almost instantaneously, rendering Mark into a fine ash and burning away Jazzlyn's clothing, his fire recognizing his mate and incapable of harming her.

"Beautiful," Hakon murmured, and Kirill acted instantly, possessively, dragon instinct ruling.

He surged forward, closing the distance to where Jazzlyn stood with a shell-shocked expression, unwilling to allow her time to back away in terror or try to flee from him, unwilling to let a male of his kind look upon her naked body. The talons at his wrists dropped from their hidden sheaths and filled with serum. There was the slightest flicker in her eyes, as if perhaps she'd noted them, and then he was there, arms around her, the sharp tips piercing her back, sending her into unconsciousness.

Kirill lifted and cradled Jazzlyn in his arms, positioning her so her breasts and mound wouldn't be on display before turning. The dragon male Kirill had seen piloting the speedboat a short while earlier now stood at Hakon's side.

"I'll have Jazzlyn's cousin taken to Inner Magick," Hakon said, casually shifting the burden in his arms to the other male. "Aislinn is in the best position to come up with a plausible tale when Carolyn regains consciousness. I assume you intend to leave for the portal now and return to your lair with your mate."

It had been his intention. Always. From the first moment he'd glimpsed Jazzlyn in the sorcerer's mirror so many centuries ago, he'd planned on claiming her and keeping her guarded.

It was still his intention. And yet he couldn't escape the similarities as he stood holding her in his arms, just as Hakon's man held Carolyn, who'd been rendered unconscious and taken away against her will.

Kirill's stomach knotted with the same uneasiness it had when Aislinn described the human's possessive behavior. It was different with dragons, he wanted to argue. He loved Jazzlyn, had no thought but to cherish her. And yet hadn't the human he'd turned into ash probably said the same to himself?

Every instinct screamed for Kirill to take Jazzlyn to the dragon realm. But looking down at his mate, he knew he couldn't do it. Not like this. Not without it being her choice.

She *would* choose him. He refused to believe otherwise now that the shock and fury at seeing her taken hostage had passed.

But she'd want to know her cousin was safe. She'd want to know she could return to her world to visit family and perhaps sell the jewelry she crafted.

A frustrated growl escaped, deep and heartfelt as he found himself making the very choice he'd faulted Xanthus for. One he'd sworn he'd never make.

"I will wait in Jazzlyn's apartment for her to awaken," he said. "Tell Aislinn what's transpired and that as soon as Jazzlyn regains consciousness we'll visit Carolyn if she's still at Inner Magick."

Hakon's eyebrows rose. His emerald green eyes glittered with amusement. To the man at his side he said, "Now you better understand why I don't get emotionally involved with human females. No matter how fragile and innocent they appear, in the end they rule as thoroughly as a female of our kind, though the truth of it is often masked by pleasure."

## Chapter Ten

Jazzlyn woke with a gasp. Fear and smoky confusion buffeted her, assaulting her with wild, improbable images that made her sit bolt upright in bed, her heart pounding so hard she had an instant to wonder if she was on the verge of a heart attack.

“Easy, beloved,” Kir said, the rustle of sheets preceding his sitting and kissing her shoulder.

It took her a second to notice they were in her apartment, naked in her bed. Her pulse slowed. Had it all been a dream, then?

Reason said it must be. But how could it be?

They’d made love on the beach. She knew that was real.

They’d gone to Hakon’s home. She hadn’t imagined its beauty, the dragons cast in stained glass, the tropical plants and bellowing alligators. The hot tub.

Her buttocks clenched in remembrance of Kirill sliding between them, taking her in a way she’d never fantasized about being taken.

She’d passed out from the pleasure of it. And then she’d woken up to a call from Aislinn.

They’d gone to rescue Carolyn. And then...

Her heart began thundering again, like a caged thing. She could almost feel the cold steel pressed against her temple. The flames licking over her like a lover’s caress.

A small internal voice urged her to *believe*, reminded her of Kirill’s face in the mirror. Man and dragon. Heartmate.

The rational part of her mind shied away in denial, claimed all the talk and teasing, all the images of dragons she’d encountered lately had lodged themselves into her

psyche. There had to be another explanation, like a struggle that ended in her being injured.

Tentatively she reached up and touched her head, looking for a bump, something to explain the loss of time, the wild improbable truth whispering through her.

Kirill's arm slid around her waist, pulling her onto his lap. She looked down at his wrist and shivered, seeing the image of a sharp talon there rather than smooth skin.

*Impossible*, she told herself. And yet as her gaze lingered, she saw the twin scratches on her belly and remembered those final moments in the hot tub. The way he'd pressed his chest to her back, as if he wanted to cover every possible inch of her body with his. The way his teeth gripped her shoulder, possessive, dominant, his arms holding her to him as streaks of pleasure burned across her belly, joining those exploding through her as she clamped down on his penis in violent, shuddering orgasm.

Arousal slid from her channel and onto Kirill's thighs. "You test my control, beloved," he whispered, nuzzling her ear, kissing its outer shell. "Every instinct I possess urges me to take you to my home and keep you there, whether you want to go or not, whether you accept what I am or not."

Her stomach knotted despite the heat blossoming in her chest. She turned sideways in his arms, wanting to see his face, to watch his expression as she touched trembling fingers to the tattoo above his nipple and forced the question out, "A dragon?"

She felt foolish saying it. Some small rational part of her mind still clung to the belief that the world was the way she'd always viewed it, despite all the evidence to the contrary, despite the mirror and Aislinn's acceptance of Kirill appearing as both man and dragon in it, her casual acknowledgement that Sophie's mate and Kirill's relative would appear the same way.

"No mere human could have reduced your cousin's captor to ash."

Jazzlyn shuddered, felt again the phantom fury of flames as they'd engulfed her. Remembered now that she'd looked down to find herself naked. Understood that it

wasn't a sleight of hand that had created a flaming dessert of the mangos when he breathed over them at Drake's Lair, it was dragon fire.

There'd been other hints of the truth, things she'd dismissed. The purring. His speaking of dragons as though they actually existed. The way he'd looked in the moonlight, making her think of shimmering silver scales.

"Where's Carolyn?" she asked, giving herself some mental breathing room before delving further into the truth of what Kirill was.

"At her mother's house. All is well. I spoke with Aislinn a short while ago. Carolyn woke and was told you'd hired men to find and rescue her."

"What was she told about Mark?"

"Only that he wouldn't trouble her any longer. She was apparently content not to question his fate. She left a message asking you to contact her. She said she'd remain at her mother's house until she heard from you. Aislinn told her you were unavailable because you were seeing to the payment of the men who rescued her."

Uncertainty made Jazzlyn ask, "And what do I owe you?"

He growled, low and familiar, and very dragonlike. "A question like that begs for a punishment. You're my mate. There is nothing I wouldn't do for you."

His hand slid downward, pushing away the sheet to settle possessively on her mound. Her clit pressed against his palm. Her cunt lips parted and his thighs grew wetter as arousal gushed from her slit with the intimate contact.

Jazzlyn couldn't stop a moan of pleasure from escaping. How could she be afraid to face and accept the truth when her heart and body and soul all believed she and Kirill belonged together?

"If you're really a...a dragon, show me," she said before her courage deserted her.

He tumbled them back onto the bed, pinning her wrists to the mattress above her head with one hand while the other continued to cup her mound. "I'll show you what I

can, what remains true even in this second form. To see the rest of it, to see my first form and belong to me in all ways, you must leave your world for mine."

Her mouth went dry. For in instant white noise engulfed her as her rational mind took control again. "If I leave with you, will I be able to come home?"

He growled again. Nipped her earlobe in sharp rebuke. "Your home is with me. But if you wish to come back here, you may as long as I accompany you."

She let out the breath she hadn't realized she was holding. "Show me," she whispered, "so I'll know it's all true." *So I'll know I'm not going crazy.*

His mate was going to be the death of him, Kirill thought, letting his grip on the magic ease just enough so the spurs descended.

Jazzlyn's breath caught. "I wasn't imagining things then."

He let more of the magic go, revealing his penis. Her gaze shifted lower and remained riveted on his rapidly hardening length. Her scent deepened and grew more lush as he became fully engorged, his true size and the ridges circling beneath his cock head completely visible.

"No wonder it feels so incredible when you're inside me."

His groan was mingled with a painful laugh. "The pleasure comes from being heartmates."

Her eyes lifted to his then. "You believe in the mirror and the heartmate stones?"

"I believe you're mine. Totally, completely, irrevocable. For all time."

He took her bottom lip between his teeth and sucked as his fingers toyed with her clit. He reveled in the way she was soon panting, writhing, struggling to free her hands even as her legs parted in invitation for him to take her.

"Let me touch you, Kir. Let me feel you inside me now that I know the truth."

"When we're in my world. Say you'll come home with me."

Her hips canted, trying to coax his fingers into entering her. "You don't play fair."



“All is fair when it comes to a dragon male claiming the most precious of treasures, a human mate. If I have you now, I won’t be able to stop myself from using the talons and sending you into unconsciousness again.”

Her eyes widened slightly, as if he’d confirmed something she’d guessed. “Where is your world? How do we get there?”

“Trust me. Let me surprise you.” *Let me take you there and mount you as both dragon and man.*

Her face flushed as though she’d heard the unspoken thought. “Yes,” she whispered. “I’ll go with you.”

It took a supreme effort of will to press the magic back in place, to appear as a normal human.

“The damage is already done,” she said, rubbing her lips against his. “I need to call Caro first.”

“Of course.”

He rolled away from her and got to his feet, avoiding her touch because he knew that’s all it would take for him to forget his intentions and join his body to hers. Doing so would delay them further, something he couldn’t tolerate, not when she’d agreed to go with him willingly, not when he ached to see his dragon image tattooed on her skin by magic after she passed through the portal.

“Hurry,” he said, forcing himself into a shirt and pants as an added protection, though her continued nakedness made his cock scream against its confinement. “And get dressed.”

Her laugh was full of female mischief and pride. She obeyed him, but not without teasing and tormenting by sliding on sheer panties and bra so slowly that by the time they covered her, he was actively fantasizing about sending his fire to rid her of the scraps of material.

He gripped his cock through the torturous pants, not bothering to hide his growls from her as she put on skirt and blouse. "It appears you've already forgotten last night's lesson," he said. "I'll remind you again. It's dangerous to tease a male dragon, especially when he is counting the moments until he can position his female underneath him."

Jazzlyn shivered and looked away, hearing in his voice his intent to mount her in what he called his first form. She found the thought of it wickedly erotic, especially now, after seeing the ridges on his cock and knowing how much they added to the pleasure of having him inside her.

She sat on the bed, clamping her thighs together though it was too late. Her panties were already wet from fantasizing about being with Kirill, from watching as he held himself in check with a fist around his jeans-covered cock.

He joined her on the bed, lying down on his side and curling around her, his fingers like living fire as they traced her spinal column. "Mine," he said, and she didn't deny it.

Her cell phone was on top of the small dresser next to the bed. She picked it up and punched in her aunt's phone number. Carolyn answered immediately, asking, "Is everything okay?"

"Yes."

"Thanks. I mean it."

"When you didn't show up for Nana's birthday party I couldn't shake the feeling something was wrong."

"You're probably the only one who did worry about me."

"Worry is what I do," Jazzlyn said, echoes of their last fight whispering through her mind.

"I'm sorry for what I said that day in the restaurant." Carolyn's voice was subdued. "Go ahead and say 'I told you so.' I deserve it."

A lot of responses flickered through Jazzlyn's mind. She bit her bottom lip to keep from suggesting counseling again.

Only Carolyn could alter the course of her life. Change came with making different choices, but also from taking action, from following through. Jazzlyn had a deeper understanding of it now.

Going to Inner Magick had been a big step for her, *hard* for her because approaching people she didn't know well and asking for help was a challenge. But she'd grown as a result of forcing herself out of her comfort zone. She felt stronger, more confident because of it.

Her gaze slid to Kir and she smiled. It also didn't hurt that there'd been some positive reinforcement along the way.

"I'm just glad you're safe." Jazzlyn said, standing, ready to put thoughts of Carolyn's life aside in favor of concentrating on her own.

"Me too, obviously. Your friend Aislinn told me about the restraining orders and the woman in Nevada who's missing. I'd like to think I wouldn't have ended up permanently missing, but self-delusion is beyond me at the moment."

Carolyn gave a weak laugh. "Actually, this a wake-up call, not that I needed it. I'd already sort of figured it out for myself."

Jazzlyn sat back down abruptly. "Really?"

She winced at the hopefulness in her voice.

"Really. That's why I wanted to meet you for lunch. I intended to tell you about a shrink I met at a party, a woman. We talked some casually, mainly about men. She gave me her card. I met with her once and decided it was something I wanted to keep doing, only I wanted to go into it without a boyfriend. To kind of clear the slate, you know."

Jazzlyn could easily guess the sequence of events. "So you told Mark you didn't want to see him anymore and it set him off?"

"I actually said I needed some space to figure out some things in my life and wanted to stop going out for a little while. I wasn't ready to give him up, at least not emotionally. In my head I figured I wouldn't know if he was different than the other guys until I put some distance between us.

"Looking back on it, it's easy to guess one of his past girlfriends said the same thing to him, about needing space, or something like it. At the time Mark seemed okay with it.

"I didn't see any harm in spending one last night at his place... Well you know how that story ended."

"Happily," Jazzlyn said, her voice firm.

*For you and for me*, she thought, warmth flooding her as Kirill sat up and began placing tender kisses on her neck.

She remained on the phone for a minute more, mainly to assure herself Carolyn was really, finally, going to be okay.

Kirill's hands were on her breasts by the time the call ended, cupping and kneading, sending delicious pleasure and liquid heat to pool in her belly and cunt.

"Have you changed your mind about leaving?" Jazzlyn teased, covering his hands with hers, loving his touch. Needing it.

"You tempt me unbearably," he murmured, hugging her more tightly against him. "Don't expect to leave our bed for several weeks."

She couldn't stop herself. "Not even for a game of chase."

He shuddered and his breathing quickened. She knew what was in his mind. Remembered all too well their conversation at Hakon's.

She grew wetter imagining Kirill catching her, spanking her, fucking her. She could hardly believe she was the same person who'd had such difficulty entering Inner Magick.

"Let's go," he said, voice strained, conveying the same desperate hunger for her as she felt for him.

The long drive to an old, weather-beaten house along the coast helped bank the fires, turning heightened desire into heightened anticipation and curiosity. When they got out of the car, he took her hand, escorting her to the front door.

There were symbols carved into the frame. Kirill's fingers danced over them, as if somehow they were a magical combination lock and he was keying in the code.

The click of the door unlocking seemed to confirm it. But the sound of it sent a wave of sudden nervousness through Jazzlyn, making her wonder if she could really handle this.

Kirill turned and touched his lips to hers as if to feed her courage and reassurance. She felt his tension and in his eyes she read his fear that she would lose her nerve and not be able to accept *all* of him.

"I'm ready," she said on a shaky breath.

He led her into a sparsely furnished living room, then down an equally bare hallway. They stopped in front of another closed door. It had symbols carved in the frame, too, and a small slot set in the wall next to it.

There was a waiting feel to the house, an expectant hush. Kirill touched the glyphs, his movements sure and quick though Jazzlyn couldn't tell if they were the same ones he'd used at the front door.

For no reason at all as far as she could tell, the hairs on the back of her neck rose. But it was her jaw that nearly dropped when Kirill put his hand in the pocket of his jeans and pulled out a fortune in gems.

"And I thought the bulge in your pants was all you," she teased, the words tumbling out of the person she was coming to think of as the new Jazzlyn.

Kir's laugh was husky and ultramasculine. He tangled a hand in her hair and drew her face close to his. "Tell me which you prefer. These, with their cold beauty. Or the fire of the family jewels I've already shared with you."

She laughed. "I think I need to weigh the possible answers before I decide."

She cupped her hand under the one he held the gems in, then slid her other hand between legs. "Mmm," she said, rubbing him, taking his measure. "I think the family jewels win."

Growl and groan merged. His hips bucked, sending an answering throb through her clit.

"Behave," he said, stepping away from her and pushing the gems through the slot in the wall.

There was no sound of a latch yielding. This time the door simply slid open, revealing a room in total darkness. What sunlight entered the other parts of the house through windows didn't cross the threshold here.

"Ready, beloved?" Kirill asked, reclaiming Jazzlyn's hand and carrying it to his lips.

She took a deep steadying breath. "Ready."

They stepped in and the door closed immediately. In less than a heartbeat, less than the blink of an eye, one reality folded completely into another and they stood in the middle of a stone building with window-like openings in the rock.

A cold breeze swept through, its source the snowcapped mountains visible in the distance. Kirill squeezed her hand and she turned toward him. "I must leave this chamber before shifting into my first form. Otherwise I won't be able to pass through the doorway."

She nodded her understanding and allowed him to lead her to the opening meant to serve as a door. She'd known by the view that they must be high up, but it didn't keep her from experiencing pure terror when Kirill stepped out onto the outer platform and she saw just how far it was to the ground below.

He'd have to carry her. That much was obvious.

She trusted him not to drop her. But despite believing in him completely, she couldn't stop shaking.

*I can use my mating talons to render you unconscious,* he said, the shock of hearing him speak directly into her mind shattering her fear.

*We can talk this way?*

He purred in satisfaction, then answered by grasping the neckline of her blouse and pulling it downward far enough to reveal the dragon above her breast, a smaller version of the one on his chest. *Our mating bond is sealed. As long as we are in the same realm, we are only a thought away from one another. Are you ready for me to carry you home?*

Yes.

The air shimmered silver and blue. And then he was standing there, a creature of fantasy. He was bigger, bulkier than in his human form, and yet when their eyes met, she saw Kirill, the possessiveness and tenderness, with a hint of worry thrown in.

Jazzlyn took another steadying breath and stepped out onto ledge. She put her hand on his chest and found the silver scales warm and smooth. And very, very real.

"I'm one of those people who closes their eyes and hangs on to the safety bar on rollercoaster rides. It might take awhile to change that, but I'd rather stay conscious for this."

*Good,* Kirill said, his heart swelling with love and pride at her bravery.

Rather than linger and allow instinctive human fear to return and make her tremble again, he clutched her to his chest and launched them from the ledge.

A small whimper was the only sound that escaped Jazzlyn, though he heard the thunder of her heart. *The lair is close,* he told her, anxious to get there, his need for her building with each beat of his wings.

*As long as I don't open my eyes, I'll be okay.*

In an effort to make her transition easier, he willed himself into his human form as soon as he landed. He carried her into the outer chamber, setting her on her feet next to the pile of gems serving as his daybed.

She opened her eyes then, and laughed in surprised delight, all traces of fear gone. "Don't ask me to make a choice between these and the family jewels," she teased, acknowledging his nakedness with a slow perusal of his body.

"Jazzlyn," he growled, more than willing to return to their earlier play. Now that she was here, in his lair, he craved an intimate connection so desperately it was all he could do not to pounce.

"Disrobe," he told her, remembering how she'd tormented him by slowly putting on her clothes before calling Carolyn.

Jazzlyn remembered it too. She remembered more. His threats. His promise to demonstrate how dangerous it was to tease a male dragon.

Her scent gave her away. It was heady, a lush perfume that made his cock leak in preparation for mounting her.

Rather than command her again, he sent his fire. It caressed every inch of her, burning away her clothing and leaving her bare, ready for her mate.

She'd been shell-shocked before. But now, in his lair, her nipples were hard points and her inner thighs glistened.

*You know what I want. Get on your hands and knees.*

She blushed, something he found adorable in her. If she'd denied him, he would never have forced her. But when she turned her back to him and did as he commanded, parting her thighs to reveal her wet slit, he acknowledged to himself that he might claim to be the master of his human mate, but he was a slave to his feelings and need for her.



He covered her body with his, the magic construct of his second form dissolving as soon as his cock found her opening. She gasped as his human arms gave way to dragon limbs, but her scent signaled her acceptance.

*Mine*, he said, thrusting all the way in.

*Mine*, she echoed, her channel rippling along his length, sending ecstasy shimmering through him as she staked her own claim.

## **About the Author**

Jory has been writing since childhood and has never outgrown being a daydreamer. When she's not hunched over her computer, lost in the muse and conjuring up new heroes and heroines, she can usually be found reading, riding her horses, or hiking with her dogs.

Jory welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

### *Tell Us What You Think*

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