

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

TAWNY TAYLOR



DRAGONS AND
DUNGEONS

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Dragon's and Dungeons

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DRAGONS AND DUNGEONS

Tawny Taylor

Acknowledgments

Thank you to my editor, Sue Ellen Gower, who has the patience of a saint and an eye sharper than a surgeon's scalpel.

And my husband, David, who may not have eighteen-inch biceps, but he has a heart ten times bigger than your average romance hero.

Chapter One

Kaya Cordova had read somewhere a long time ago that the devil was the most beautiful angel in heaven. That was, before he was booted out of paradise, of course. At the time—she was probably in grade school then—the significance of that statement had been lost to her. But now that she was staring straight into the eyes of what had to be Lucifer incarnate, she had no doubt of its validity.

Today the devil had taken the form of a six-foot something, sun-kissed blond, suntanned, muscular god in crisp, finely tailored clothes that fit him like a second skin. And unfortunately for Kaya, he had just entered the winning bid on the one item that she had desperately wanted. Damn. And damn.

The second the auctioneer acknowledged his victory, bidder number nine, as he was officially known at the private auction, gave Kaya a slightly gloating but wickedly sexy smile.

In contrast, she maintained her dignity, although she wasn't above sticking her tongue out at someone who had completely ruined her day, week, month. Naturally, as was her luck, the item she'd just lost to the incredibly yummy Mr. Nine, was the last item left to be auctioned. She'd held out, bidding conservatively on the earlier artifacts, accurately anticipating she'd need every penny of her budget to buy the last item, a piece of a large collection reportedly smuggled into the United States by an ex-United States Marine turned treasure hunter.

Everything she'd seen today was valuable, would potentially bring a small fortune for Kaya's boss, a woman who owned a shop that specialized in rare Asian antiquities. But that last piece, a copperplate imprinted with some form of ancient writing, Kaya had a feeling that was priceless.

Being half-Filipino on her mother's side, the fact that it had been found near the mouth of the Lumbang River in the Philippines by a man dredging for sand, and sold for pennies to the Marine back in the 1980s, made it even more intriguing. How old was the copperplate? What did the inscriptions mean? Was it real, or one of the many fakes that had been offered to Americans with deep pockets and the hunger to own a piece of international history?

Kaya grumbled at her loss as she reluctantly shuffled toward the exit, mindful of the winning bidder's unhurried gait. He strode like a proud peacock toward the cashier to pay for the artifact she wanted so badly her belly ached. If only she'd had another few thousand dollars to work with! Then again, that was probably for the better. Although no longer a novice buyer, she would've been tempted to keep bidding, forgetting what she'd learned ages ago—not to fall in love with something and bid beyond her budget. In this case it had been so tempting.

And speaking of tempting...

Her head turned and her gaze glued itself like a fly on flypaper to the man responsible for her temporary discouragement. Never mind what he'd purchased, the man himself was walking, talking temptation right down to his well-shod toes. If not for her strong sense of self-control, she would have done just about anything to run her fingers through those flirty blond curls, trace the line of his jaw with her tongue, maybe even nibble on one of those adorable earlobes. And don't get her started on the dimples! Dimples were her weakness.

"That man is trouble with a capital T." She sighed and forced herself to keep walking, even though she wasn't watching where she was going. After taking only a few steps, however, a high-pitched yelp made her stop.

"Sorry!" She apologized before she turned to look forward. She realized the instant she did that she'd slammed into the petite but friendly looking young woman who'd formerly occupied the seat next to her during the auction. "Oh! I'm so sorry," Kaya repeated, still slightly distracted. For some illogical but frustrating reason, even now her

gaze seemed to want to stray to the left where it would find Mr. Nine's slightly mocking smile and blue, blue eyes.

They were bluer than any eyes she'd ever seen. Very striking.

"It's all right. I've taken worse," the woman said, giving Kaya a friendly, not at all mocking smile. So unlike Mr. Nine's. "I took ballroom dance lessons with my cousin once. At thirteen, he was six-five and a hair shy of two-fifty. He broke two of my toes the first night." She tipped her head and glanced beyond Kaya. "That copperplate was something, wasn't it?"

"Yes it was, assuming it isn't a forgery," Kaya said, trying to hide her disappointment. "Since it hasn't been authenticated yet, I wasn't at liberty to bid any higher. There've been too many fakes coming out of the Philippines lately to risk it."

"I'm new to this sort of thing, so I'm hardly an expert, but that makes sense to me." The young woman offered her hand. "I'm Mary, by the way. Mary Stratford."

"Kaya Cordova." Kaya gave Mary's tiny hand a firm but relatively gentle shake. Standing as close as she was to the pretty, petite woman, she felt like a horse, all big and clumsy. It seemed like all it would take was a wrong move—or even a light breeze—and the little woman might shatter like glass into a gazillion pieces. "I'm not two-fifty, thank God, but I'm no lightweight either. I didn't break any bones, did I?" she motioned toward the foot she assumed she'd stomped on.

"Not a one." Mary followed the line of Kaya's fleeting gaze, from her foot to the cashier. "I'd pay good money to see the smug smile knocked off that man's face if he learned he just spent over twenty thousand on a worthless piece of industrial waste turned priceless artifact."

"For some reason, I don't believe we'll get the satisfaction. Besides, looking at his clothes, I have a feeling twenty thousand is nothing to him."

"Oh well," Mary said on a sigh. "As they say—the rich get richer. Speaking of rich, I've got to get to the airport. I'm off to Chicago to catch another auction. Sorry you didn't get this one, but you'll get the next."

"I hope you're right. Good luck in Chicago." Kaya pushed open the door and held it for Mary.

Mary gave her an over-the-shoulder thanks as she hurried out the door and into the soggy, cold late morning. She shuffled down the two front stairs to the ground level. Kaya followed Mary outside but stopped under the wooden overhang, not exactly eager to dash through the monsoon dumping water from the sky by the bucketful.

Thanks to the downpour, the air had chilled nearly twenty degrees to a crisp fifty-something. Because it had been a lot warmer earlier, Kaya was wearing only a light sweater over her lightweight, short-sleeved dress. That loosely crocheted garment wasn't going to offer even meager protection against the gale-force winds, any more than it was going to keep her dry. "Stupid Michigan weather. I wish it'd make up its mind and decide whether it's winter or summer," she muttered to herself, hugging her sweater around her body. "What's wrong with some transitional weather? Say a nice, comfortable sixty degrees?"

A particularly strong blast of wind that made her shiver and coated her face with a cold mist was the only response she received.

It was then that she decided she had two choices...either A—go back inside and wait out the storm, or B—make a run for it. Since she was expected back at the store in less than an hour, and the all-encompassing gloom didn't look like it was going to break before next week, she figured she had no choice but option B.

She just hoped the Dry Clean Only tag on her dress didn't mean the garment would shrink to toddler-sized when exposed to water. She'd had that happen once. And once should have been enough to keep her from buying Dry Clean Only clothes altogether. A grown woman with fairly ample curves wearing a dress that would fit your average four year old was not a pretty sight. Today, she'd have to take her chances.

Preparing to run into an icy-cold downpour was a lot like getting ready to dive into the Detroit River in the middle of January. It required a bit of time, some deep breaths, and a little bit of jogging in place to get the blood pumping, which were all good

reasons why she didn't make a habit of swimming in January or making mad dashes through thunderstorms to her car. For one thing, time was something she rarely possessed an excess of. Second, deep breathing made her dizzy and her hands numb. And third, running in three-inch heels was dangerous, especially in slick-soled three-inch heels that tended to slip on wet asphalt.

Thanks to the difficulty in running and a bit of reluctance—Kaya had never been the kind to dive into water, frigid or otherwise. She'd always been more the toe-in-the-water kind of girl—she hadn't made it more than a step or two away from the front door before a big, black limousine swooped around the corner and came to a skidding stop in front of her. Muddy water coated the lower half of her body and she prepared to give the passenger inside a good, nasty glare when the passenger door opened. Instead of some rich snob stepping out of the car like he was preparing to walk the red carpet, only an arm jutted out. A hand caught her dress at about hip level and yanked.

Out of instinct, she jumped backward and tipped her head to look down in the car, spying none other than sexy Mr. Nine grinning at her from the back seat.

"Hi there," he said, looking absolutely amazing in the dimly lit interior of the car. His dimples were on high beam, his smile too. "I'd like to give you a ride to your car."

She was grateful for the shelter of the overhang as she stood by the side of the car trying to pry her tongue loose from her throat. If she was going to stand there for a while, her jaws snapping open and closed like a possessed mousetrap, at least she wouldn't get drenched. Then again, the look Mr. Nine gave her, one of the flirty, render-a-girl-brainless varieties, made her so hot she was tempted to throw herself into the biggest puddle she could find for some relief.

After indulging in a sigh that finally knocked her tongue free, she shook her head. "Thanks, but no. I'm just parked over there, not more than twenty yards away."

"Are you sure I can't change your mind?"

I could think of one or two ways you could. "No, thanks. Although this storm is getting bad, I don't think I need an ark to get there yet. Appreciate the thought, though." She

tried to step further back from the car, fearful of getting her toes run over when it pulled away, but his firm grip on her dress kept her from backing too far. Puzzled, she gave him her best, practiced “what’s-up?” look.

“Please,” he answered. “I’d like to speak to you.”

“About what? What could you, the person who obviously got what he wanted, want to talk to me – the one who didn’t – about? I don’t have anything you want.”

Silent laughter making his eyes glittery, he mumbled something incoherent that made her blush then added, “About this.” Those two sweet dimples poked into his cheeks as his mouth curled into a naughty smile that made her knees all weak and trembly. He lifted a black case which she assumed held the copperplate.

“Yes, I know you have it. You bought it. What do you need me for?”

“Please. I have a few questions. And I promise, if you’re worried about getting into a car with a strange man, I’m not suggesting anything sinister and I’ve never been convicted of a crime.”

“Thanks for clarifying. Yes, I was worried you might be a crazed monster who entices women into your lair during our infamous Michigan downpours and then does unmentionable things to them.”

“Wow, you have me pegged already. Want to risk it anyway?” he joked. Those dimples became even deeper.

She chuckled to hide a near-swoon. Charmed almost out of her mind and curious about what he wanted, she looked into those big blues for some sign of subterfuge. What she saw was confusing but not threatening. But before she made her decision, he made it for her. When she reached down to smooth her windblown dress against her legs, he caught her by the wrist and yanked her inside. The door slammed the second she was in the car.

Alarmed, and feeling off balance, her body basically sprawled over his, her chest on his belly, her groin on his thigh, she glared up at him and shook a scolding finger. Funny little tingles and zaps buzzed through her body, like little bolts of static

electricity as she warned, "If you try anything funny, I'm outta here." Still not comfortable with the situation, although the position was growing on her, she gathered herself together, settled into the black leather seat, smoothed out her wrinkled dress and tried to fake a casual, confident air. "Hmm. This is cozy. I could get used to this."

"So could I."

So much for her confidence. It crumbled at the sound of those three little words. Then things went from bad to worse. When he winked then glanced meaningfully at her crossed legs, she just about died. Sure her face was as red as a stop sign, she tugged at her skirt, which was slowly inching up her thighs, no doubt the result of the drenching she'd received when the car pulled up. To keep him in his place—or at least attempt to—she gave him her best mean eyes, the ones she used regularly to intimidate any door-to-door salespeople who chose to ignore the "No Soliciting" sign plastered to her front door. "You, behave yourself."

"I'm doing my best to tame the beast, I swear. Here, I'll play polite host. Can I offer you something to drink?" he asked, motioning toward the minifridge.

"No, thanks. Call me silly, but I have this rule. No alcohol before noon." *And no alcohol while locked in a moving vehicle with a man who makes my head swim.*

He glanced at his watch then blinked wide-eyed at her, clearly trying to look innocent. It wasn't working. No sirree.

But it did make him look cute.

"Well, then, we'll just have to wait ten minutes." He pushed the intercom and asked the answering female voice to carry on.

"Carry on? What's that mean?" Kaya watched as the stretch limo did indeed carry on, gliding across the parking lot like it was floating rather than rolling on the road, past her car and onto the street. "Um, where are you taking me? I agreed to a ride to my car, not a tour of the city."

"We're...um, taking the scenic route." His crooked smile still firmly in place, he leaned forward and offered his hand. "Name's Jestin Draig."

Whew, being up close and personal to the body that possessed that wicked grin was doing some very interesting things to her, especially the parts south of her waistline. Shockwaves of awareness paraded up and down her spine like a marching band playing a Sousa march, which in turn made her inner girly parts start strutting to the beat, waving flags and tossing batons. “Jestin? Not Justin?”

Despite the parade going on in her body, she hesitated before taking his hand. Surely there was extreme danger in shaking hands with the devil. She’d never been the kind to embrace extreme danger, in any form, male included. Heck, just being in the car with him—a complete stranger—was a first for her. She stared at his hand, trying to decide what to do.

He cleared his throat, an action that naturally lured her gaze to his face. “And you are?”

That had been a good move on his part—making her look at his adorable face. Now, she was practically dumbstruck, again staring into impossibly blue eyes. It only took a few seconds for the playful twinkle in those eyes to melt her reservations almost completely. Her girly parts broke into a chant, *Go, team go!* and she reached for his hand. “Kaya Cordova.”

The instant her skin made contact with his, a blaze of searing heat shot up her arm. Taken off guard, she yanked her hand away, shoved up her sleeve and checked her skin for burns. She saw nothing, not even the slightest tint of pink but she sure felt something. Waves of heat were fanning out from her center like ripples on a pond. Her pussy throbbed as the heat thrust her into near orgasm. “What the heck was that?” She pushed her sleeve back down and tried to silence the rioting crowd inside her by fanning her face. The marching band kicked into high gear, playing a fast staccato. And the chanting girls were doing backflips and carrying on like the football team had just made the winning touchdown.

He answered her question with a couple of raised eyebrows that did nothing to help her suppress the ruckus in her body. Though it did confuse her. If she hadn’t been

nearly scorched to death by some mysterious electrical charge leaping between his hand and hers, what had that been? And why was she now a throbbing, wet, horny mess?

By his puzzled expression, she guessed it was fair to say he hadn't felt the same thing she did. Not to appear the fool, she pasted on as convincing an "I'm-okay-honest" smile, fanned her flaming face, and nodded toward his hand. "That's one heck of a grip you've got there, buddy. My, my."

She squirmed as her gaze met his and the heat churning deep in her belly dispersed in another wave. Some of it went down into her groin. Some of it settled at about nipple level in her chest, and the rest rose to her face. She shoved aside the notion of throwing herself on him and instead shed her sweater.

He glanced down at his hand, now resting on his knee instead of where she silently yearned for it to be—on hers, maybe even a little higher. "I didn't...did I hurt you?"

"Oh, no. I'm fine. Totally fine. Very fine. Yeppers. Just a little warm." She fanned her face again. "Do you have a thermostat back here? Might want to turn down the heat a few notches. I...er, get carsick." She wrinkled her nose, which gained her another brilliant smile from Jestin, which made those adorable dimples deeper, which of course sent the parade into high gear. Marching, cheering, flipping and twirling. "So, um. What did you want to talk to me about?"

He held up an index finger and glanced at his wristwatch again. "Well, what do you know?" His gaze met hers. "It's twelve-oh-one."

"Isn't that something?" she said, trying to sound dry. There wasn't a part of her that was dry, literally or figuratively, except maybe her mouth.

"You'll have a drink with me then." It wasn't so much a question as a demand.

"I have to get to work. I doubt my boss'd be too happy having me come staggering in, reeking of alcohol."

"A small drink." Obviously not the kind to take no for an answer, he poured two glasses of wine and lifted one to her.

She waved it away. "I said, no thanks. Don't take this wrong but I have to ask, what's up with the wine? Do you prefer to talk business with soused women or are you just a control freak?"

"I'm sorry if I seem too pushy. I admit I've been told I have some control issues..."

"That's big of you to admit."

"...but the purchase of this particular artifact means a great deal to me and despite the fact that you were also hoping to buy it, I was thinking you might like to celebrate with me."

"Me? Celebrate with you? You don't even know me. I don't know you either." *But boy, would I like to!*

"If anyone, I assume you know the copperplate's value and might have a measure of respect for the significance of this purchase." He tried to hand her the glass again.

She shook her head, still refusing to accept it. "I'll give you that, but—"

"And as someone who has a great deal of respect for such antiquities, and a person of character," he added, emphasizing the last part. "I appreciate the fact that you have no hard feelings for having lost." With beseeching eyes, he offered her the glass for the third time. "Please?"

Who's saying I don't have hard feelings? "Um..." Good grief, he looked so darn sweet, like a little boy begging his mother for a puppy. What woman could resist? "Okay! Okay. Just spare me the puppy dog eyes, would you?" Besides, what would a single taste of wine do to her? A teeny, tiny sip would be safe. And although it broke her "No consuming any drinks she didn't serve herself" rule, she'd watched him pour it right in front of her. He had no reason to do anything crazy, like drug her. Besides, she was a plain-Jane, horse of a girl—so tall and big-boned for a Filipino woman—no way his type. He was just a lonely man, looking for someone to celebrate his victory with. It was kind of sad when she thought about it that way. She accepted the glass and took a sniff. It smelled strong. She wrinkled her nose and told herself it would have to be a very small taste.

Looking very pleased, he lifted his glass in a toast. "To Filipino copperplates."

"Yeah. Copperplates." She touched her glass to his, drank a small sip, surprised by the fact that she actually enjoyed the spicy but incredibly smooth flavor of the wine. Usually, she hated wine.

He watched her drink over the rim of his glass.

Oh, that was good. She smacked her lips, and just to make sure it tasted as good as she thought it had, she took a second sip before handing him the still half-full glass. "Okay. That's enough wine for me. So, if you'd like to get on with things, explain why you dragged me in here, I'd be mighty grateful." Before he set down her glass, she snatched it from him. "You know what? Think I'll take one more sip." She faked a cough and added in a raspy voice, "The dry air in the car's making me thirsty."

"Yes. Dry air." He watched her drink with laughing eyes then took it from her when she finished. "Are you sure you don't want more? This is an extraordinary vintage. I save it for special occasions."

"No, no. I'd better not. Despite my size, I'm a total lightweight when it comes to alcohol. If I drink any more, I'll be boring you with sob stories about my high-school days."

"That sounds rather pleasant, actually."

"Oh, don't get me started."

"Very well. Maybe another time."

Another time? There was going to be another time? That thought put the parade into overdrive. Things were getting real festive down below. Most notably, the fast but steady beat of the deep bass drum was thrumming in her pussy. The girls were doing triple backflips.

"I was hoping, since you had a keen interest in bidding on the copperplate, that you might know an individual who would be able to translate it? I can't even tell what language it's in, wouldn't know where to begin looking for someone."

All he wanted her for was her connections? Bummer! The parade came to a screeching halt, that is, all but the drum. That still beat at a steady pace down below.

Whoever was pounding on that drum was obviously not paying attention.

"You know, you didn't have to get me tipsy to ask for some help," she pointed out, trying not to sound as disappointed as she felt. "You should've saved your expensive bottle of wine for someone else. I'm afraid you wasted it. Whether I wanted to or not, I can't help you. At least not directly. I work for a woman who has a store in Birmingham. She's the one with the connections. I'm just the buyer."

"Hmm. What's the name of the store? Perhaps I should pay her a visit."

"You're welcome to go there anytime you like. It's open to the public, especially someone with..." *Gobs and gobs of cash.* "...an obvious appreciation for rare antiquities. The name of the store is Kim's Uniques. We're on Old Woodward, just north of Fifteen Mile road."

"Okay. I know where that is. I appreciate your help. Thank you."

"Not enough to let me buy that copperplate off you?" she joked.

"No, I'm afraid not." He reached forward and rapped gently on the window separating the driver from the passenger area, and the limousine turned up the auction house's driveway and into the parking lot.

Kaya shot Jestin a quick glance – who wouldn't? He was so fun to look at – then got out, ducking against the rain. Getting more drenched by the second, she fumbled with the door locks, cursing them for not being automatic. Finally, soaked to her skin, but at least back to normal with the exception of a slight tingle down below, she plopped into the driver's seat, started the car and flipped on the wipers.

The limousine, and its sexy passenger, were long gone.

Jestin watched the woman fumble with her door locks through the window, tempted to jump out, grab her again and drag her back to him, back into the car, back into his arms, back into his life.

Patience, he told himself. You must be patient.

That had been no ordinary woman. Human, yes. Common, far from it. He knew from the moment they'd first touched, from the blaze that had burned in his blood at the joining of their energies. She had felt it too. And her reaction to the wine—a formula that would make all women but one cough and sputter with disgust—had only affirmed his suspicions.

Kaya Cordova was his mate.

With mixed feelings, he told Bridgette his driver to take him home. He had preparations to make.

* * * * *

"I'm sorry I'm late—"

At hardly over four feet, and probably no less than eighty years of age, Kaya's boss, Mrs. Kim, could hardly be described as physically intimidating. But the little frail-looking woman knew how to work with what she had. She could give a person the nastiest glare this side of the Mississippi at the drop of a hat and it was said one of her mean-eyed stares could make grown men twice her size shake in their boots in fear. At the moment Kaya was at the receiving end of one of those stares.

"You know I have appointment every Friday. I had to cancel," Mrs. Kim said in broken English as she polished a tarnished silver picture frame with brisk movements. "To top it off, you come back a mess and empty-handed? What happen?"

"I'm very sorry, Mrs. Kim. It's raining like you wouldn't believe."

"Really?" Mrs. Kim asked, looking doubtful. She glanced out the door then shook her head. "Why you lie to me?"

"It isn't raining now?" Kaya took a look for herself, then, disgusted at the sight of a cloudless, brilliant blue sky that reminded her of a certain set of eyes, said, "I swear it was raining earlier. And regarding the auction, I really tried. I wanted to get one item in particular. A Filipino copperplate I know Mr. Vandenberg would've paid a small fortune for," Kaya said, referring to their best customer, a man whom she'd never met. "But I was outbid."

"Copperplate?" her boss repeated, still scrubbing.

"I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw it. It looked exactly like the one I saw on the net. Same odd-looking inscriptions, everything."

"You did not get it?"

"The price went sky high, higher than the budget you gave me for the entire auction."

Mrs. Kim set down the frame. "I must have it. You must get it for me. You know the one who bought it? Tell me his name. I bet he work for that Mr. Angus."

"No, I know Harry Angus' buyer and that wasn't him. I've never seen this guy before. I chased him down afterward. In fact that's why I was late. I went to him after the auction, tried to talk him into selling the copperplate to me, knowing you'd feel this way." So she was stretching the truth a smidge, but the subject of selling did come up. She had to cover her butt, get herself off Mrs. Kim's shit list. "Unfortunately, even though it seems he has no idea of what he has, he refused my offer."

"Did you get a card? I call him. He listen to me."

"All I have is a name—Jestin...something." Kaya anxiously rummaged through her brain, trying to recall his last name. She was bad with names anyway, but with the added distraction of his eyes, and smile, and those dimples, it was a lost cause. Outside of his first name, the rest had gone in one ear and out the other. "I can't remember his last name," she admitted.

Mrs. Kim mumbled something in Korean, something Kaya knew wasn't polite and she took that as her cue to go in the back and get to work on the books. She was less

than halfway through the payables when Mrs. Kim came back and parked herself in front of her desk. Kaya mentally prepared herself for a tongue-lashing.

"I give you big reward," her boss said.

"Reward? For what?"

"You get me copperplate. I give you big reward."

"You mean...like a bonus?" Mrs. Kim had never given her a bonus. Heck, Mrs. Kim had never given her a raise, not in three years, even though she'd made her craploads of money.

"Yes, bonus. How about..." The older woman eyed Kaya shrewdly. "Fifteen thousand?"

Kaya fought the urge to gasp. "Fifteen thousand dollars?" That was a windfall!

Fifteen thousand would pay for her grandmother to stay in the nursing home she loved for almost six months. That was huge, considering just this week Kaya had been trying to come up with a way to explain to Grandma why she had to move. Still lucid, but getting less so every day, Grandma didn't take bad news well. Even learning the evening's dinner menu didn't include chocolate cake caused an uproar. "The plate hasn't been authenticated yet."

"I trust your judgment."

"That's very kind but I'm certainly no expert—"

"I give you fifteen thousand if you can get it from man Jestin."

"I...I'll see what I can do. I'll need some time to find him, since I can't remember his name. Although I did mention the shop. He said he might come here—"

"You must not wait. He will sell it as soon as he discovers its worth. And I can't afford for that to happen. You must find him first." She shooed Kaya out from behind the desk, through the back stockroom, and out the shop's back door. "You go. Find him. I pay up to fifty thousand for the copperplate. No more. Make him say yes." She slammed the door before Kaya could respond.

After gaping for a few minutes at the closed door, Kaya turned and muttered, "Okay." She got in her car, shoved the key in the ignition, cranked the engine to life then said, "What now?"

And just then, a crack of thunder ripped through the sky and another downpour coated her car.

"Great. Just great. I'm on the hunt for a devil with dimples in the midst of a hurricane." Not knowing what else to do, Kaya pulled out of the parking lot and headed back toward the auction house. "I hope this storm's not an omen of what's to come." She flipped the wipers on high speed.

Chapter Two

"I'm sorry but that information is confidential," the woman seated behind the cashier's desk at the auction house said in answer to Kaya's question. "You understand I'd lose my job if I gave out our customer's names and addresses."

"Of course. I'm sorry. But I...he...Jestin asked me for some information about the copperplate he purchased today. I'd call him but he didn't give me a phone number."

"Yes, well, I'm sorry. I can't help you."

Kaya sighed. "Oh well. Hopefully, he'll be able to find someone to authenticate the plate on his own then. I located the gentleman who'd translated the original copperplate at the National Museum of the Philippines."

The woman looked less than impressed. "Is that so?"

"Couldn't you at least give me his last name? He told me but I'm such a nitwit I forgot."

"I'm sorry. No. If you'll excuse me?" Evidently, trying to get away before Kaya harassed her to death, the woman stood and shuffled out from behind the counter. "I have some work to do."

"That's fine. I'll just be going now. Though, if you would do me a tiny, tiny favor?" She didn't wait for the woman to agree to continue, "If Jestin whatever-his-last-name-is happens to call here, or come in for any reason, will you tell him Kaya Cordova from Kim's Uniques is looking for him?"

"Certainly." The woman disappeared behind a door.

Kaya stood in the lobby, the only things separating her from the information she needed—and possibly fifteen thousand dollars—were a four-foot counter and some

nerve. She looked to the right. She looked to the left. She looked up, searching for a security camera.

It was mighty quiet. There wasn't a soul in sight. And no camera either. What luck! What crappy security!

Go for it! a voice inside her head shouted. Before the screen shuts off and you have to punch in a password. No time to wait. Do it now.

Before she had time to rethink her options, or second-guess the wisdom of what she was about to do, she ducked behind the counter and knelt almost under the desk as she ran the mouse over the countertop, activating the computer screen.

Bingo! The woman hadn't signed out.

Kaya skimmed the registration list for Jestin's name, found it easily then repeated, "Draig, 1253 Lakeshore Drive," over and over as she hurried from the building. Luckily, no one stopped her as she made her hasty retreat.

Lakeshore Drive was at least an easy road to find. As its name suggested, it ran parallel to the shore of Lake Erie in the affluent town of Grosse Pointe Shores. The homes situated on the road were positively palatial. Owned by some of metro Detroit's more well-known bazillionaires, like business owners, descendants of Henry Ford and professional athletes, they were giant, beautiful, and intimidating.

Jestin's house was no exception.

A home that had to be the size of Kaya's house times five, it was enough to take her breath away. A red brick fence enclosed the house and surrounding land, an iron gate the only way onto the property. Naturally, it was locked.

Kaya pulled up to the gate's column and pushed the call button. A man's voice—not Jestin's—answered. "May I help you?"

"Hi. My name is Kaya Cordova," she said into the little metal speaker box. "I'd like to see Mr. Draig."

"One minute please."

Kaya toyed with her key ring as she waited for the man to determine whether or not she warranted a visit to the handsome and obviously extremely wealthy Jestin Draig.

Moments later, the gate swung open. Assuming that was an invitation to enter, Kaya drove up the tree-lined drive to the house, parked and walked the short distance to the front door.

If ever Kaya Cordova—humble buyer who very rarely rubbed shoulders with the rich and famous—felt out of place, it was the moment she stepped into Jestin's foyer.

She swallowed back a sigh of amazement, forced her gaping mouth to close before something unfortunate happened, and nodded as Mr. Gibbs, the elderly gentleman who let her in, motioned her to follow him into a dark, cozy study.

She took a seat in a huge leather chair and waited for Jestin to join her, thanking Mr. Gibbs before he left.

"What a pleasant surprise." Jestin's deep voice, smooth as satin and warm as hot chocolate, caressed her raw nerves.

Almost feeling at ease, she twisted her body to greet him with a big smile. "I was in the neighborhood and thought I'd stop by."

He had a pleasant smile on his face too. So pleasant, in fact, that her heart did a funny little hop in her chest and her cheeks flamed hot. "Glad you did." He took the chair next to hers, throwing a casual arm over the back. "Would you like a drink? Some more wine perhaps?" he asked, his eyes glittering with challenge and mischief.

"No, no thanks."

"Very well." He sat back and eyed her sharply for a moment. She couldn't help squirming under his assessing gaze. Not only did it make her feel exposed, but also incredibly turned on. Like grab-the-man-and-jump-his-bones turned on. As she struggled with the urge to either give in to the temptation or run like a great big chicken, he asked, "Would you care, then, to tell me the real reason you're here?"

"I have a feeling you know," she practically stuttered.

He leaned forward, looked her dead in the eyes and said, "Indulge me."

Her breath caught in her throat at the double entendre. The more liberal parts of her psyche and anatomy prepared to do just that as her mind screamed, "Whoa, Nelly!"

"I...I came to make you an offer on the copperplate," she said.

"Oh, that." He donned a reasonably convincing pout. "I'd hoped your visit was of a...more personal nature."

Me too. "I'm sorry to disappoint."

"No, no. Don't be sorry. I'm not. However, I will tell you I am not interested in your offer to purchase the plate. At least not at this time."

"I'm prepared to offer you a great deal of money."

"Which I appreciate."

"Thirty thousand."

He waved the figure away. "You must understand something about me."

"Okay, thirty-five."

"I do not do business with people I don't know personally. It's a practice I inherited from my father. My father was a very successful man," he added, meaningfully.

"I understand. Forty?"

"And so," he said, crossing his thick arms over his chest in a show of iron will. "I'd say you have two choices. Either you can give up trying to purchase the plate from me and leave now, or you can spend the evening with me and get to know me personally."

"Personally? Wait a minute," she drawled, wagging a finger at the suspicious glimmer she saw in his eyes. "Something sounds fishy here. You want me to get to know you personally?" She scooted forward in the chair, planted her hands on her hips and gave him a challenging glare. "Are you sure you're not just trying to get me to sleep with you?"

He had the nerve to laugh at her! “As I said, I do no business with strangers, and I assure you, many of my business associates are men. Would you make the same assumption if you were a male?”

She shrugged, trying not to look worried about the fact that she was rapidly losing control of these negotiations. She couldn’t afford to do that. But it was so hard to keep her mind on track with so much wicked temptation staring back at her. Especially when he kept showing off those dimples. “I might. For all I know, you could be homosexual.”

“I assure you I’m not homosexual.” He gave her one of the most sinful grins this side of Hades.

Her cheeks burned and her knees melted to the consistency of molten marshmallows. Worry stiffened her spine, reinforcing it, but only slightly. There was too much at stake here to be allowing a smile, a set of the cutest dimples on earth and a few naughty suggestions to mess with her mind. *Get it together, girl! You’re about to let the charmer wearing designer duds and a pair of killer dimples win round two.* “Then you aren’t telling me I have to sleep with you to buy the plate?”

“No. If you decide to sleep with me, it will be because you want to, not because you are coerced,” he said in a voice that had her almost ready to throw up the white flag in surrender. “I don’t have any respect for a man who must trick or force a woman into sleeping with him.”

For some reason, his last comment didn’t ease the worst of her worries. She’d learned a long time ago that sex and business didn’t mesh. She couldn’t afford to blow this deal, yet she wanted to sleep with him like she’d never wanted to sleep with a man before. And he hadn’t done anything more than bat his eyelashes, flash an occasional smile and toss a couple of suggestive comments her way. “Even so, this is an extremely unusual request and frankly, I don’t think it’s —”

“I would like to assure you that whatever we do—or don’t do—tonight would not be held against you in our negotiations. Along the same vein, sleeping with me will not make me lower my price. And so, the choice is yours. Spend a pleasant evening with

me, and have some chance of buying the plate, or refuse and have none.” He sat back and waited, his unwavering gaze on her face making it mighty difficult to think about anything but jumping into the nearest bed with him.

“Let me make sure I’ve got this straight. You want to spend the evening with me. Yet, anything I do during that time won’t help me. Nor will anything I refuse to do hurt me.”

“In a nutshell, yes.”

“Any catches—er, besides the obvious?”

“None. Oh, that is, unless you have a problem with being honest.”

“Oh?” She felt her cheeks flaming for the umpteenth time. She didn’t remember ever blushing so often in such a short span of time.

“I value honesty above all else, in both business and personal relationships and I intend to test your integrity tonight. No matter what question I ask, you must answer it truthfully.”

“All this to do a single deal?”

“That’s right.”

“And you expect complete honesty? Always?”

He nodded.

She swallowed a lump the size of a bowling ball in her throat. While she wasn’t one to lie constantly, she’d always been a firm believer in the benefits of the occasional white lie. This was especially true when it came to dealing with men, and in business. “I don’t know. Like I said, this is highly unusual. I need to think.”

“Take all the time you need.” He looked down at his watch.

Mrs. Kim’s promise of fifteen thousand dollars echoed in her head and she dropped her gaze to the floor to give herself some room to think. Would it be so bad to spend an evening with a rich, handsome man? Maybe even—gasp!—sleep with him just for the fun of it? It had been so long since she’d had sex, she’d almost forgotten what it felt like.

And she'd never slept with someone who looked like Jestin, or someone who possessed such an air of restrained power before. There was some kind of invisible force around him. She could practically see it.

She could get around the lying thing, she was pretty sure. Besides, he wouldn't know if she was lying. He couldn't read minds. No one could do that.

She nodded. "Very well. Only one evening?"

"Yes. Tonight. You will have dinner with me." He glanced at his watch again. "I prefer to dine early. Three o'clock."

"That's fine. I didn't have any lunch." She didn't add the reason why she'd missed her lunch break – specifically because he'd insisted on taking her for that little car ride.

"Excellent. Afterward, I always enjoy a spell in the steam room and then a massage. You will join me." Again, that was no question. It was a command.

His tone rankled her a bit but his expression did much to counteract its more unpleasant effects. Once more, she found herself fanning her heated face. Her spine felt soft, her insides flitty and fluttery.

Then, the thought of sitting in a hot steam room with a nude Jestin, the only thing between her body and his a few feet of terrycloth, skipped through her mind and her fluttery insides went all ascurry like leaves blown in a storm. A wave of hot shivers buzzed up and down her spine. Heat pooled in her groin, her empty pussy clenched.

No sooner did the words, "Very well," come out of her mouth than she was being led, her hand in his, up a flight of grand, sweeping stairs to the most opulent bedroom she'd ever seen.

She looked from their joined hands, to his handsome face, to the mammoth bed and muttered under her breath, "Ho boy. I have a feeling I'm in way over my head here."

"Only if you don't appreciate the more refined pleasures of the flesh," he whispered in her ear, his words and the caress of his hot breath on her neck sending a blanket of goose bumps down the left side of her body. Just before completely melting Kaya into a

puddle of goo by whispering any more smoldering words in her ear, he turned, strode across the room and opened the door to a large wardrobe. "I think you'll find everything you need in here. Perhaps you'd like to freshen up before dinner?"

Kaya stepped up behind him to take a look. Hanging on padded pink satin hangers were frilly, lacy garments of every color, some skimpier than others. "I see you've done this before. You're better stocked in lingerie than any woman I know. But my mother always told me not to wear another woman's undies. Ew."

"You'll find that none of the garments have been worn. They all still bear their sales tags. I had to guess your size. I hope they fit—"

"You bought all these for me?" She tugged at a long, white satin gown, ran her fingers down the smooth fabric, measuring its weight. It was pricey, not doubt about it. "After what? A ten-minute ride in your car? Doncha think that was just a smidge premature?"

"I knew you would come."

"My, my, my, aren't we full of ourselves?" she asked, sifting through the other garments. They were all absolutely gorgeous.

"No, I knew you wanted the plate. Besides, the security officer at the auction house called. If you had any aspirations of getting into the spy business, I suggest you consider something a little safer instead, preferably that doesn't involve keeping secrets, stealing information or performing any other covert operations. To put it bluntly, you stink at it."

She dropped her hand and lifted her guilty gaze to his face. "They saw me?" Her cheeks flamed hotter than they already were. "Why didn't they stop me?"

"Because I told them to let you go." He reached into the wardrobe and pulled out an ankle-length, white terrycloth robe. He handed it to her as she stood gape-mouthed, still trying to respond to his answer.

Finally, she opted to just close her mouth and nod.

"Have you ever had a massage?"

Still unable to speak, she shook her head.

"You may keep on your underclothes if it makes you feel more comfortable. And you may choose between a masseur or masseuse."

"I'm easy. Whatever. Just make it someone who's blind, if you could. That way they won't see anything that'll crack them up."

"I assure you anyone in my employ is a professional and would never laugh at any of my guests."

"Okay," she said reluctantly. "I'll take a woman then. A big-boned woman like me who has real boobs...and cellulite. I don't want a mannequin with a twenty-two-inch waist and perfect hair."

"I can manage that."

"Good. That makes me feel better." She waited for him to speak, but he simply pointed at the robe. "Oh! Do you want me to undress now? Before dinner?" She stood holding the robe to her chest, not sure if he expected her to shed her clothes right there on the spot, with him watching. She had no intention of doing so, if that was the case. Nor did she intend on wearing any of those sexy numbers he'd had the gall to buy for her. What...what nerve!

Nerve like steel. Muscles like steel too. She liked steel.

"You can change now if you like. I will be. I prefer to be comfortable when I eat. Also, I want you to know that even if you wear none of these tonight, I wish to give them to you as a gift. You will take them with you when you leave. I admit, I have a weakness for buying lovely things for women, particularly women who spark my interest as you have."

She sparked his interest? Big-boned Kaya Cordova? "I...I..."

“I will leave you to your preparations. There are some personal items in the bathroom, if you need them.” He motioned toward the nearby door. “I will return in a half hour.”

“Okay.”

The second he closed the door behind him, she made a mad dash for the bathroom. She stripped nude and turned on the tub’s tap then sat on the tiled deck and hung her legs over the side to give them a quick shave. Continuing north, she shaved her way up to her armpits, making sure she left every inch of skin silky smooth. Then she coated herself with the scented body lotion he’d so kindly supplied, put on a pair of clean, black lace undies and the matching bra—the man had guessed her sizes perfectly. She wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or not—and shrugged into the robe. After brushing her teeth, fixing her makeup and fooling with her hair, she returned to the bedroom.

He was waiting for her. He greeted her with a quick visual assessment and a smile that left her knees wobbly.

Chapter Three

Sitting in a chair with only a teeny, tiny towel wrapped around his hips, one arm curled over the top of the chair, the other draped over the padded armrest, Jestin was once again living, breathing temptation. Kaya's gaze flitted over his broad shoulders, wide chest and muscled stomach like a butterfly hopping from flower to flower. Finally, after skidding down his smooth-skinned legs, also corded with muscles, it found a resting place on his face.

"I trust everything is to your liking," he said.

"And how."

"I wasn't sure if you preferred any particular brands of lotion, shaving creams or toothpastes."

"Oh, that." Her face heated again with embarrassment. "No, I'm easy. Don't care much what brand it is, as long as it does the job."

"Very good. Are you ready?"

"Yes. But..." She let her words trail off. Surely he meant to put some clothes on before they went down to dinner.

He raised his eyebrows in question as he stood his full six-foot-something.

"That's what you call comfortable?" She motioned to his naked torso. "I mean, don't get me wrong, I appreciate comfort as much as the next girl, but most people prefer wearing clothes when they eat."

"I don't. In fact, normally I'd eat completely nude. I'm forgoing that pleasure for you." He offered his arm to her. "Shall we?"

She took a split second to admire the way the thick ropes of muscles of his arm flexed as he moved, before curling her hand around his forearm. "Okay. I just hope you don't spill anything hot on yourself. You could end up with a wicked burn."

"Wouldn't be the first time," he said with a twinkle in his eye. He led her down the main staircase to the ground level of the house, across the humongous foyer and down a hall to a grand dining room with deep burgundy walls and rich swathes of fabric dressing a line of windows along one wall. In the room's dead center stood a massive rectangular table fashioned out of dark wood that had to seat at least thirty people.

It was the most bizarre, most fascinating table she'd ever seen. In the place of legs in the four corners were four wooden sculptures of dragons. Their mouths were open, their hands holding opaline globes the size of softballs. Their tails curled up around their bodies to provide additional support to the tabletop that had to weigh a ton. Along the center of the tabletop ran a deep burgundy runner with a continuous line of unlit candles.

Jestin led her across the room, past the table to a door at the rear. They stepped into a smaller, more intimate room with gold walls, a single window and a round pedestal table. The only light in the room came from the five candles in the candelabra sitting in the table's center. Right away, Kaya spied the two place settings, complete with filled stemmed glasses and plates with those metal covers on them to keep the food warm.

Every cell in her body was aware of Jestin's nearness as he pulled out her chair for her. The sensitive skin at her nape tingled when his breath brushed oh-so softly against it like feathers. Stifling a shudder of cold-heat, she scooted her chair in and watched Jestin sit.

The soft candlelight did amazing things to his hair, turning it into a burnished golden color. It also made his face look harder. Deep shadows slashed under his cheeks, eyes and mouth, making him look mysterious, dangerous, despite the smile pulling at the corners of his lips.

He lifted his glass in a toast, and mesmerized, Kaya mirrored his action. “To new acquaintances,” he said, gently tapping his glass to hers.

She nodded in agreement then stole a single sip of the wine. It was very similar to the last one she’d tasted with him, in the limousine.

He set the glass on the table then nodded at someone or something behind her. His gaze was above her head level. Before she could turn around to see who it was, an arm reached around her side.

Startled, she jumped, lunging sideways.

The hand, which was attached to a black suit-bedecked arm, which was attached to Mr. Gibbs, lifted the silver cover on her plate. Then he stepped away silently, rounded the table and did the same for Jestin.

After she was relatively sure she wouldn’t have another surprise, for at least a little while, she glanced down at her plate.

The strange-looking food, which was totally foreign to her, was arranged in the deliberate manner she’d seen on those food shows on cable television. It looked like a little sculpture rather than something she’d want to eat. Not exactly eager to take a taste—she preferred plain old comfort foods like mashed potatoes and extra-crispy fried chicken—she lowered her head slightly to take a whiff.

Fish. She hated seafood.

“Is something wrong?” Jestin asked.

She jerked upright, blinking innocently. “No, no. Nothing’s wrong.” She tried on a convincing grin for size. Clearly it didn’t fit.

Jestin’s brows bunched together over the bridge of his nose. He eyed her speculatively, which made her squirm. “Are you certain? Do you have an objection to something on your plate?”

“No...” she said, not wanting to be rude. Her mother had always told her it wasn’t polite to complain to your host about the food.

Jestin's eyebrows rose. His gaze followed, lifting to where she assumed Mr. Gibbs was standing behind her. "Gibs?" he asked.

Mr. Gibbs answered. "I am afraid she is lying, sir."

"As I feared." He gave her a martyred look. "As I said, I expect complete honesty, Kaya, or we are wasting our time."

Kaya twisted her torso to give Mr. Gibbs a look. When Gibbs responded with nothing but an empty stare, she turned forward again. "What's he? Your lie detector-slash-butler?"

"Among other things. Gibbs has been in my employ for a long time. I trust his judgment." He added meaningfully, "A wise man knows who to trust."

"You really have a thing about trust, don't you?"

"I have my reasons. A man in my position must know who he can trust and who he can't."

"A man in your position? Are you like a spy or something? Would you have to kill me if you told me what you do?"

"Maybe." He winked. "No, I'm not a spy. But you could say I'm in the security business."

"Ah." She nodded. "Are you like a personal bodyguard to someone famous or more like a mall rent-a-cop?"

"Neither, actually. My work is a little more complicated than that. So," he said, forking a morsel of green stuff with yellow sauce into his mouth and chewing, "would you care to tell me what your objection is to the food?"

He wasn't going to let it rest, darn it. "I was trying to be polite, you know."

"Which I appreciate."

"And I can appreciate your need to determine who is trustworthy and who is not but I'm of the not-all-lies-are-equal mindset myself. When it comes to something insignificant—like my dislike of seafood—I think there's nothing wrong with telling a

little white lie.” She turned her body so she could give Mr. Gibbs another look. “It certainly doesn’t mean I’m not trustworthy, at least not in my book.”

“That may be so, but then you would walk away from my table hungry and that is unacceptable.” He nodded to Gibbs and the butler left the room.

Alone with Jestin at last. That realization gave birth to a flurry of contradicting emotions, along with a few stuttering heartbeats and a smattering of goose bumps. Why had he asked the butler to leave? Was he going to do something good? Or bad? She positioned herself so she was facing Jestin straight on again.

“You do not like sushi?” Jestin asked.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake. It’s only food. Why are you getting so obsessed?” When he didn’t respond, she added, “If I’m not mistaken, sushi’s not just fish, but raw fish.” She stifled a grimace of outright disgust and tried to paste an impassive expression on her face. “Eating raw meat of any kind is dangerous. I won’t touch meat that isn’t thoroughly cooked, even steak,” she said with a level voice.

“How unfortunate.” He slipped another forkful of the icky food between his lips. She watched as he slowly drew the fork’s empty tines from his mouth. He chewed slowly, visibly savoring the food’s flavor. His tongue darted out to lick away a bead of moisture clinging to the center of his bottom lip. She felt herself unconsciously mirroring his action. She even swallowed when he swallowed. She had to admit, he made raw fish look absolutely sinful. “Have you never tasted a steak cooked to perfection – still pink on the inside, seared and spiced on the outside?” Jestin asked.

“No. I prefer my steak with no pink whatsoever.”

“But a rare steak is so tender...” he stared into her eyes and she felt a few of her muscles getting soft, “...juicy and flavorful.”

There went a few more muscles. Pulverized to mush. She whimpered.

Gibbs snatched away her plate and replaced it with another one. He silently lifted the lid, revealing a thick filet and baked potato with the works. She looked up at Jestin’s face.

He smiled and motioned toward the plate. "Better?"

"Yes. Thank you, but I hope it wasn't too much trouble. I wouldn't have said anything if you hadn't made me."

"No, no. Don't worry. Just enjoy." He watched as she cut a small piece, checked to make sure it was cooked through then put it in her mouth.

A parade of spices marched over her tongue as she chewed. She felt herself smiling. She'd never tasted a steak that delicious. Never. It put her favorite steak house to shame. "Oh. Wow."

"Is that a good wow or bad?" he asked.

She swallowed and cut another piece, quickly filling her mouth again. "Definitely good. Very good," she said around the steak. Swallowing first, she added, "This is the most delicious steak I've ever tasted. I don't suppose you'd give me the recipe?"

"It's a family secret," he said, looking mysterious and amused and sexy. He leaned forward, his gaze riveted to hers and murmured, "I'm afraid I'd have to kill you if I told you."

She giggled as she finished her dinner. It wasn't easy eating when her innards were tied into knots and her throat felt like it was swollen shut from nerves. But she managed to eat a respectable amount. Gibbs took their plates away and replaced them with small bowls of ice cream. Chocolate therapy.

She loved this man, consumer of raw fish or not.

Jestin ate the ice cream in the most provocative way possible—tongue licking, lips smacking—and she swallowed a guffaw, instead wagging her finger at him and shaking her head in a show of disapproval.

"You are bad," she scolded.

"You have no idea how bad I am," he said in a low voice that hummed in her belly and made her feel all girly and soft. He stood and reached for her hand. "Shall I show you?"

She looked up into his sparkling eyes and nearly threw herself at his feet, shouting, *Hell yes!* Instead she gave him a light punch in the gut and stood. "You behave yourself, Mr. Naughty, or I'll tell Gibs to send you to your room for a time-out."

She caught the low rumble of Gibs' laughter and turned her head to look at him. He wore a severe poker face.

"I heard you," she said to Gibs. "You laughed and before I leave tonight, I'll make you pee your pants you'll be laughing so hard."

"I," the butler said with a less than enthused expression on his face, "look forward to seeing you try."

"Ha!" Jestin laughed. His face shone with such boyish delight, her knees nearly gave out. To keep herself erect, she gripped his arm and hung on. Naturally, the skin-to-skin contact only made things worse. A wave of warmth washed over her body as she tried to distract herself with thoughts about Gibs and how she'd make good on her promise. He was clearly a tough nut to crack.

Unfortunately, her efforts didn't help much. Feeling all jittery and girly, she let Jestin lead her up the stairs and down the hall. They passed through what looked like a workout room, but with some gear she'd never seen before, into a smaller area. A glass door on the back wall opened to the cedar-lined sauna room.

It was blazing hot in there, so hot, her face burned after only a few seconds. Knowing she wouldn't be able to stay in there for long, she glanced at Jestin as she took a seat on a towel-covered wooden bench.

He looked as cool as a proverbial cucumber, even as sweat poured from every pore of her body, making her feel slick and slimy. He smiled. "The heat rejuvenates me, gives me energy."

"It's draining mine. I'm afraid if I don't leave in a few seconds you'll be carrying me out."

"Just a minute more. Do you know all the health benefits of dry heat?"

"No."

"Heat helps keep your heart healthy, aids in weight loss—"

"Are you trying to tell me something?"

"Absolutely not!" He gave his head an emphatic shake. "It also helps keep your skin youthful by cleansing toxins."

"Great, so you're telling me I look old and am fat," she teased giving him the eye. "I'm dying here. I think I'd rather carry a few extra pounds and bags under my eyes than sit in this miserable heat for another minute." Barely clinging to consciousness, she watched him close his eyes. He looked so peaceful, so comfortable, so in control. Not even his hair seemed to be touched by the heat. The flirty curls were the same, silky and shiny. His golden skin didn't even look pink. It was as if the heat didn't touch him. "It's not fair. Looks like you haven't even broken a sweat yet while my makeup's melted off my face and my hair is a limp, sticky mess."

When he opened his eyes, she caught a strange violet flash in them, like a bolt of static in a darkened room. Then he stood and pushed open the door, taking her hand in his to lead her from the heat into the chill of the workout room.

"Follow me."

She followed, eyeballing the workout gear as she walked. "What is this stuff? Is it for Pilates or something? I don't see any weights."

"Not exactly," he said on a chuckle.

Now extremely curious, she stopped in front of a tall thing with what looked like Velcro wrist straps dangling from it. "Oh! I get it. They work on some kind of pulley system." To test her theory, she reached out and gave one of the wrist straps a sharp yank. It didn't budge. "Wow. You must be strong. The tension is set awfully high. I can't get it to budge even a little."

"Well, should you decide to put any of this equipment to use, I'd be glad to make some adjustments," he said, laughter making his voice uneven. "However, I think I should explain one thing to you. This equipment isn't for your traditional workout."

"My point, exactly. I'm hardly keen on the latest gym gear. I admit I avoid the gym like the plague, but this stuff doesn't look like anything I've ever seen in a gym before."

"That's because it isn't supposed to be in a gym."

"Huh?"

"This is a dungeon."

"Dungeon?" She took another look at the room and its furnishings. "First of all, didn't those go the way of dragons and princes on white stallions, eons ago? And aren't they supposed to be down in the bowels of the basement? Dark, spooky places where prisoners are kept? Why would you have a dungeon next to your bedroom?"

"It's not the kind of dungeon you're thinking of, though I was fond of those as well. They bring back such pleasant memories." He sighed.

"You've lost me."

"This is where my clan role-plays. This is where we play sexual bondage games."

Kaya felt her jaw drop but lacked the wherewithal to pull it up off the floor. Shock slammed through her body, reaching her brain last. "Bondage games? As in BDSM?" On the wake of shock rode profound fascination.

He nodded.

She felt his gaze on her as she hesitantly approached the same piece of equipment she'd touched earlier. It was tall and reminded her of stocks, or a cross. "What's this one for?" When he touched her shoulder, she shuddered, but not because she was scared. She was far from frightened.

"A slave would stand either facing the wall or this way," he eased her around until she was facing him and her chest was pressed against his solid bulk. "Would you like to try it?" At her silent response, a wide-eyed head-nod, he lifted her right arm and

wrapped the strap around it then did the same with her left. "As you see, the slave is now powerless to stop me from giving her any sort of pleasure I might like to. Like this." With no warning whatsoever, he tipped his head and slanted his mouth over hers. His lips feathered soft kisses on each corner of her mouth before hardening, making her heart skip a few beats and stealing her breath. When she opened her mouth to draw in a gulp of much needed air, his tongue dipped inside to stroke hers.

Instantly she found herself dizzy and weak with need. Her pussy throbbed with each pounding beat of her heart. Her knees softened. Her body tensed. And her self-control snapped. Just like that, she realized she would sleep with him. Tonight.

His kiss was hot and demanding and thorough and she quickly lost herself in it, in his flavor, in his spicy, masculine scent, and in the emotions they stirred in her. She felt such joy, such hunger, such need to relinquish all control to him, body and mind. The feelings swirled round and round inside her until they were all mixed up and she couldn't tell what was what anymore.

His tongue stroked hers, twisted, thrust, tasted. Drowning in swelling need, she met his fire with her own heat, silently pleading with him to take her. Her arms still tied out to the sides, leaving her hands useless yet itching to touch him, to pull him closer, she groaned in agony into their joined mouths.

She was going, going, gone. Her heart was pounding so hard, it was bound to leap from her chest. Her lungs were screaming for air she didn't have the ability to draw in. Just when she thought she'd die, he broke the kiss and pulled those wonderful lips, that magical tongue from her.

And she thought she'd known what agony was!

In those seconds, while she struggled to keep herself vertical, she thought back to all the times she'd done the safe thing, stuck her toe in the water to test it rather than just suck it up and dive in. What had her playing-it-safe, take-no-risks attitude gotten her? Had it spared her any pain? Maybe a little. Had it also stolen her chance to find

even fleeting bits of happiness? Of experiencing everything life had to offer – both good and bad?

It had! Her fears had been more powerful bindings than anything she'd find in a dungeon. They'd made her a prisoner. They'd caged her more effectively than any cement walls, or bars, or cell ever could.

It was time to break free, take a chance, live life. It was Jestin who had helped her see that.

"We're going to miss our massage," he said.

She puffed up her chest, pushing her breasts forward, and lifted her chin. "To hell with the massage."

The fingertip of his right index finger traced her jaw then slid lower, along her neck to her breastbone. It stopped where the deep v-shaped opening of her robe closed. "Then you wish to be here with me? I will say this again because I want you to be sure. You do not have to sleep with me if you are not certain it's what you want."

"Believe me, there isn't a part of me that isn't certain."

"Very well." Jestin looked as pleased as Kaya felt as he unfastened her wrists. Kaya shook her arms and rubbed her wrists when they were unbound. "We will go into the bedroom now."

"We will?" She took another look around. "But this place has promise and I'm intrigued, thanks to that sneak peek you gave me." When he gave her one of his trademark lifted-eyebrow "really?" looks, she amended her position. "Okay, okay, it's a little scary too. Maybe too scary. You don't get into pain or anything, do you?"

"Nothing you can't handle." He reached forward and raked his fingertips over her right breast through the rough cotton robe. Her nipple tingled and puckered, the reaction making her gasp in surprise. No man had ever stirred such overwhelming wanting in her body before. He smiled at her then caught her arms in his fists and dragged her closer until all her soft curves were pressed against his hard angles. He tipped his head and found the sweet spot on her neck. He nibbled and kissed in

between words. "You're not quite ready for the dungeon yet, don't have a respect for what it means to be here with me. But that doesn't mean things won't get hot. In fact, just in case I go a bit overboard, we'll have to come up with safe word before we start."

"Safe...word?" She let her eyelids shutter out the visual distractions and concentrated on the fire he was churning in her body with every touch and kiss. Goose bumps erupted over one side of her body as mind-blowing need pulsed through her veins. Her pussy burned to be filled, her body burned to be possessed, her spirit burned to be complete. Complete with this man, a man she hardly knew.

"Yes," he whispered. His hand slid into the opening of the robe and traced the cup of her lace bra. Her spine arched, pushing her breast into his palm. "Hmmm." His voice rumbled through her body like thunder on a still summer night. "Give me a word you would not normally say during lovemaking, something easy to remember and say."

Say? Talk? Think? How could she do any of those things with his hand closed over her breast, kneading it and grazing her sensitive nipples until she wanted to scream. And his mouth...the things he could do with his mouth. She was sure her neck would never be the same. "Like...ice cream?"

He unfastened the front clasp of her bra then closed his hand over her bared breast. His touch was like a brand, so fiery it left her reeling. "Yes, like ice cream," he murmured. As if he wanted to illustrate, he dropped to his knees, untied the belt of her robe and parted it. Then he ran his velvet tongue over her nipple as if he was licking an ice cream cone. Over and over until she swore her blood was on fire and her legs shook with the effort of standing. He scooped her up into his arms and carried her toward the door. "If I do something you don't like and you want me to stop, say ice cream and I'll stop."

"Okay," she whispered, wrapping an arm around his neck.

His soft hair tickled her arm as he turned his head to see where he was walking. But that was nothing compared to the other sensations her body was being pummeled with while he carried her.

She felt weightless in his arms. Small and powerless yet safe. There was something, some kind of energy that buzzed around him, humming just slightly in her ear. The sound seemed to seep into her pores and buzz through her bones like a low vibration, making her pussy throb until she thought she'd weep.

How are you doing this to me?

He opened the door to a huge, opulent bedroom with a bed that put a king-size bed to shame. It was giant, the size of a smaller bedroom all in itself. Low, it sat on some type of pedestal she couldn't see. It looked like it was hovering above the floor on air.

He lowered her onto it. The mattress was extremely soft and she sank into it, making her feel like she was lying on a cloud. When he climbed over top of her, she shivered.

Her body tight and ready, her pussy wet, burning for his touch, she didn't want to wait another second for him to fill her. "Please," she whispered. "Take me now."

In response, he silently helped her shed her robe. When she met his gaze, she swore she saw red and gold flames in his eyes, sparking, dancing, whirling.

Who are you? What are you?

She lay on her back, mesmerized by the sight of those flames until he pulled off the towel hiding his erection. Then her focus definitely went south.

His cock was huge, and quite clearly ready. It stood fully erect. Her fingers itched to trace the rim of the head. She ached with the need to take it into her mouth and taste him.

As if he could read her mind, he shook his head and pressed down on her shoulders. Then he scooted back toward her bottom and dropped his fiery gaze to her mound. "Open for me," he commanded, his tone resonating like a gong through her trembling body.

How are you doing this to me?

"You will have your answers soon, my sweet," he murmured. He used both hands to gently pull her bent knees apart until her pussy was open and exposed.

She once again shuttered out the world by closing her eyes, hardly able to sift through the intense sensations he stirred in her body through the other four senses. His touches left her skin aflame. His voice made her insides thrum. His sweet, spicy taste still lingered on her tongue. She drew his scent into her nostrils. It too was sweet and spicy like her favorite Thai food, and she couldn't get enough. She eagerly drank it in, breathing in deeply over and over until she was dizzy.

"I'm going to taste you now," she heard him say. But so lost in the rapture of those overwhelming sensations and the joy they brought, she hardly comprehended them.

She felt him push her knees back further, until they were so wide apart the muscles of her inner thighs burned with the stretch. His soft curls tickled her skin as he lowered his head. Then he touched her. One fleeting touch to her labia and she was nearly out of her mind with wanting. He parted her swollen lips and found her clit, flicking his tongue over it. She heard herself cry out. Each flick of his tongue was like the lick of flame. Balls of white light danced behind her closed eyelids. She shivered with fever as his tongue danced over her clit, carrying her closer to release with every stroke.

And then she was there, her body coiled tight like a spring, at the pinnacle of orgasm. She writhed under him, her pelvis gyrating with every thump of her racing heart. He stopped his oral onslaught on her pussy, traced a burning path up to her throat with his tongue and positioned himself over top of her, his hips between her thighs.

"This is the test," he whispered in her ear as he pressed the head of his cock against her empty pussy.

"Test?" she said, gasping for her next breath. She blinked her eyes open to stare up into his beautiful face.

"If your spirit is strong enough and you are able to accept what most people believe is impossible, then when we join, you will have your answers. You will see me as I truly am."

Despite being nearly blind with need, she reached up and ran her fingers over the smooth skin of his shoulders. It was cool under her touch. Soft as satin. "I don't understand."

"Whatever you see, you must not be afraid. It is me and I will not hurt you. Not ever. Do you believe me?"

A little scared, curious and overwhelmed, she looked into his eyes, searching their sapphire depths for answers to her doubts.

"Take my strength, draw from it if you must, if you feel yourself being overcome. I want you to." And with that, he pulled back his hips and then drove his cock deep into her pussy.

A primal roar burst up from her chest, shot out her mouth at the raw joy and wonder of their joining. As he thrust in a second time, it felt as though she'd been thrown into a blaze, a giant inferno that licked at her skin but didn't burn her. Words that weren't hers, thoughts she hadn't thought, feelings she didn't have coursed through her, binding themselves to her soul. They echoed in her head and pulled at her heart. Joy, sorrow, pain, elation, hope, fear, they churned inside her, growing stronger with every second that ticked by until hot tears seeped from her closed eyes and burned her cheeks.

"That's it, my love. Accept me. Accept all of me and we will grow together. You must trust me, open yourself up to me," she heard him say as his body drove hers to the edge of bliss. Fingers pulled and pinched at her nipples. Teeth grazed the skin of her neck. His cock filled her completely. She pulled her legs back further and tipped her hips up, changing the angle of his thrusts until she found just the right position.

She felt his weight lift from her body, felt the chill of the air on her skin. Then felt the pressure of a fingertip on her clit, drawing tight circles over it until her mind was numb and her body screaming for fulfillment.

Once more she was there, on the verge of orgasm. Her chest and stomach warmed, her insides tied into tight knots. Her hands clenched into tight fists, reaching for him. She wanted to feel his weight and heat as she came, needed to feel it pressing against her. Her arms trembling, she reached up, pulled him down until his chest was heavy on hers, and gave herself over to release, letting it sweep through her in a furious blaze.

When the heat eased, she blinked open her eyes.

And sheer terror shot through her body. "Ice cream! Ice cream, ice cream!"

Chapter Four

The air over her body shimmered and for a brief second or two, the man who had formerly looked like the epitome of California hunk was now about ten feet tall, red – as in red like the color of an Irish setter – and covered with scales. His – no, *its* – face was like a lizard's, with a long snout and sharp teeth the size of her pinky finger, pointed ears and the most bizarre eyes. They were still blue but instead of round pupils, the centers were oblong and vertical like a cat's. A puff of smoke billowed from its nostrils as Kaya let out a full-blown scream.

The air shimmered again, like she was looking through sparkling water and the monster vanished, replaced by Jestin's scrumptious bod. She shook her head, rubbed her eyes and blinked several times. All that did was clear her vision a smidge, allowing her to watch the image shift back and forth several more times from man to monster, monster to man with crystal clarity. What the hell was going on?

Then, as her pussy spasmed, she realized he was still inside her. That...whatever he was. She glanced down, following the wide line of his chest and abdomen to where his body met hers. Even now, his gigantic cock was thrusting in and out of her. For a brief instant, his body was coated in scales. That sight made her scream again. She jerked away from him, crab walking backward.

Look into my eyes, Kaya, his familiar voice echoed in her head. Remember what I said? It's still me, Jestin. Your spirit is strong if you're seeing me as I truly am. I would like to mark you now, if you will let me.

She shook her head against the words rumbling through her body. "You're not marking me with anything until I know what the hell is going on. Is this some kind of joke? Because if it is, it's not funny." Her fingers found the edge of the mattress and she spun around on her bottom, flung her feet over the edge and jumped to her feet. She

snatched up a throw from the floor, and in a wild sprint for the door, wrapped it around herself. The second she burst out into the hall, she ran smack dab into Gibs, who didn't look surprised to see her.

"Looks like I didn't have to work hard to get that laugh outta you, did I? Joke's on me. Har-de-har-har. I'm outta here. You and Jestin can have your laugh now. Sick bastards!" She shoved her way around Gibs, heading toward the bedroom where she'd left her purse and clothes.

Unfortunately, Jestin followed her. He stood in the doorway, still morphing back and forth from man to beast, watching her gather her things in her arms. The only thing stopping her from leaving was his body blocking the doorway. "No, Kaya. This is no joke. This is real. I am real. Touch me and you will know the truth."

"Nuh-uh! I'm not getting any closer to you than I have to. I'm not strong and this is insanity. I can't be seeing...what I think I'm seeing. You can't be — I can't be — Oh hell! Just let me leave."

The man-monster didn't move. It stood very still, still changing back and forth from one form to another, as she slowly backed away. Her heart pounding so hard she could hear it, she checked the room for another exit. But her gaze kept leaping back to Jestin, taking in every detail of its alternating gorgeous and hideous forms. In its latter state, it sported short arms, hook-shaped digits with long claws, powerful rear legs and tail. The only thing that even slightly resembled the man she knew as Jestin was the beautiful golden mane of hair running down his neck and back. And in a blink he was back to being the beautiful man she knew.

"Trust yourself if you cannot trust me. Believe what your heart is telling you," he challenged.

She ran to the window to see if she might risk jumping. She was only two stories up, but couldn't get the window to open. "What the fuck?" she said, her back turned to him while she continued fighting with the window. "Are these windows nailed shut?

Shit! If this is what I get for deciding to cut loose a little and take some chances, then I think I was better off hiding in my cave, watching everyone else take all the risks."

"You don't believe that."

"Wanna bet?"

Once again, he changed into the monster. *I would like to ask you a single question. If you answer honestly, you will have no choice but to see the truth.* The monster took one step toward her. Thanks to his huge size, that one step left her cowering in the corner, nose to chest with it.

"If I answer your question, will you let me leave?"

The monster nodded its giant lizard head. A forked tongue jutted out of its mouth, wagged up and down above her head a couple times like a snake's tongue then disappeared back in its mouth. *If that is your wish.*

She shuddered. "Fine. Ask away. I want to get the hell out of here." Hell was for sure the operative word, since she figured that thing had to have escaped the very bowels of it somehow.

"Are you lonely? Have you been searching for something—someone—to fill a void in your life?"

"Yes, but I was thinking about getting a dog. Dogs don't break your heart. They don't cheat on you, or act like they can't live without you one minute and then like they couldn't give a shit whether you lived or died the next. Dogs are loyal and trustworthy and love you even if you forget their birthday. You feed them, you take them for a walk and they love you. End of story."

"Are you afraid to trust? Afraid of me?" it asked, its lips curling back, displaying a single row of razor-like teeth. It bent its neck so its face was inches from hers and his hot, sulfur-smelling breath burned her cheeks and nose.

"Heh, yeah. You look like something out of a sci-fi film," she said, her gaze fixed to those teeth. When it wagged its tongue in front of her nose again, like a lizard looking

for its next meal, she said, "Are you going to eat me? Please don't eat me. Oh God." She searched the tiny bit of space between it and her, frantically looking for a clear escape route. Her breath sawed in and out of her lungs in quick, shallow pants and her heart thudded in her ears. Her knees turned to marshmallow and she wondered if she'd be able to make it across the room if she tried to run.

"No, I'm not going to eat you. Remember what I said about my strength?"

Hot tears burned at her eyes but she blinked them away. "Yes, but—"

"Take my hand." It lifted a giant claw-tipped paw.

"No." She shook her head. There was absolutely no way she could touch that...thing. That monster, uglier than anything she'd ever seen in a horror flick.

"Please." It nodded again. Light shimmered around it like an iridescent cloud, red and gold and blue. "Take my hand and conquer your fear." Slowly, it reached toward her, its digits curling and uncurling as its paw drew closer, closer to her hand.

She stood frozen like a deer caught in headlights, unable to budge from blinding panic. Then his scale-covered skin brushed against hers and instantly she felt a charge of electricity zap through her body like thousands of volts of pure, raw power. It buzzed up her spine, through her head then down to her toes. She briefly thought about yanking her hand away but something stopped her.

Take my strength, draw from it if you must. I will not hurt you.

Her hand shaking, she closed her fingers one at a time around one of his digits and drew in a slow breath. A single eye blink later, a warm sensation seeped up her arm and spread through her body, slowing her racing heart rate. Her trembling stopped. Her knees returned to normal.

"Very good," he said.

As she watched, a mist swirled around the creature like a fog caught in a brisk wind. As the cloud cleared, she saw Jestin, the man, had returned to her and by some

miracle she wasn't so anxious to run like a scared ninny from the house. In fact, for some in inexplicable reason, she felt eager to get closer to him.

This is insanity!

Why did it feel like she'd never take another breath if she couldn't take it with him? Why did she want nothing more than to mold her body to his, sink into his embrace and shut her eyes to the monster she'd seen him become? She'd never been so forgiving in the past when it came to men. She'd dumped men for much more trivial matters—like a love of seventies classic rock music. Ozzy Osborne? Gag! Why was she now not only able but willing to accept Jestin, despite the fact that he either had played the nastiest trick on her ever, or was some kind of freak of nature?

Maybe it was because he'd trusted her enough to show his ugly side to her, instead of putting on airs and pretending he was perfect, like people usually did when they started a new relationship. Or maybe it was because of the power she could practically see shimmering around him and the way it made her feel—safe, cared for. Then again, maybe it was because she was mentally unstable.

Blinking back tears of confusion, she reached forward and reluctantly caught a lock of golden hair in her fingertips. "Was it a trick?"

"No."

That almost made her feel better. At least he hadn't tried to scare her on purpose, though that left only one frightening option. It was real. "Which one is really you—the monster or the man?"

"They both are. Although you alone can see me in my true form, and only when we are most open to each other—at the moment of climax."

"I don't understand. How could this be? Giant lizards don't exist. At least not in Michigan." Shaking, she released the curl and wrapped her arms around herself.

"Come to me. Let me explain." He drew her into his arms. She fought him for only a second then gratefully fell into his embrace, thankful for the small measure of comfort she found there. Confused, scared, she pressed her cheek to his chest and listened to the

slow, steady thump of his heart and the soft whoosh of his breath. He walked her to the bed, sat and positioned her on his lap, capturing her chin in his hand and forcing her to look into his eyes. "I am from an ancient bloodline, one humans think had gone the way of dinosaurs eons ago. In truth, despite their efforts to kill us off completely, we have survived, and continue to increase in strength and number, because we are superior to humans."

"You speak of humans like you're not one," she said, stating the obvious.

"I'm not. I'm an Immortal. What most humans would call a dragon."

"A dragon," she repeated, not sure if she should check herself into the nearest hospital for some major drugs or accept what she'd seen as something more than a hallucination. If she hadn't seen it with her own eyes, hadn't seen the monster that looked exactly like the dragons in the Asian artwork she'd studied in art school, hadn't smelled the scent of sulfur on his breath, hadn't felt the hard ridges of his scaled skin with her own hands, there was no way she'd believe it. As it was and since her senses had never deceived her, she had no choice but to accept the impossible and believe him.

Those adorable dimples poked into his cheeks as his lips pulled into a warm, encouraging smile. His eyes sparkled. "You have passed the second test, have proven yourself strong enough in spirit and thus worthy to be my mate."

"I have," she said, not sure if she was happy about that or not. There was something, she supposed, to being married to a powerful dragon-man who was gorgeous, would live forever, knew how to make her melt like an ice cube on asphalt in July, and had enough money to feed a small nation. But...but when she imagined her dream man, scales, a forked tongue and a six foot long tail had never been among the attributes she'd visualized. "This is very fast. Like I said, I was thinking about buying a puppy, not finding a 'mate'."

He stroked her thigh while he held her. "I understand your ambivalence." He kissed a tingly, tickly trail down her shoulder and arm, making it increasingly hard to

remember why she wasn't so sold on the idea of becoming his mate. "I will give you as much time as you need to make your decision."

His promise of patience eased some of her worries but she was still bothered by the truckload of questions rumbling through her brain, not to mention all the tingles and hot flashes his strokes and kisses were birthing. She gently lifted his hand from her thigh. "Thanks. For not pushing me."

"I would never force you to make a decision you're not ready for."

"I appreciate that. In fact, I wish everyone thought that way. I dated a guy once. We were going out for oh, maybe six months and then he threw the 'M' word at me."

"'M' word?"

"Marriage. Then he proceeded to give me a deadline and told me if I didn't have an answer by that deadline, we were done."

"And?"

"I told him I didn't need any more time to think about it. And I left."

He chuckled and she marveled in how deeply she felt the gentle rumbles in her belly, and how the sparkles in his eyes made her all happy and warm inside. Those feelings almost shoved away the lingering doubts, but not entirely. She was never one to make a decision of any kind based on emotion. That was plain foolish.

Facts. She needed facts. Lots of them.

Still, that didn't mean there was anything wrong with having a little innocent fun while she gathered facts, she reminded herself. She could do both concurrently. She was a very adept multitasker. She released his hand, letting it go about its business making her all tingly and hot again. It dutifully carried on.

"I'm not saying I'm agreeing to anything. But I do have some questions," she said. "Like would...would we have children? And would they be...like...you?" she asked, tipping her head back so he could get the sweet spot right below her ear. Oh yeah, that was the one. She shivered, and not because she was scared anymore, and completely

forgot what she'd been saying. "This isn't fair," she mumbled, not trying to stop him. "You're using your sex appeal to your advantage. And it's working...and here's the kicker, I know you're doing it and I'm letting you because I like it."

"Then I will stop." The hand that had been on her thigh swooped up her body, resting on her tummy while the other one rested at the side of her face. He traced her bottom lip with his thumb. "Yes, you would carry my children. And the pregnancy would be normal, our babies will appear human at birth. There will be only the slightest birthmark to reveal their true nature. Female offspring remain in human form all their lives. The males, however, go through The Change during adolescence, in their late teens."

She was slightly disappointed that he'd taken her half-joking comment about his sex appeal seriously, but also relieved, since she was now a little more capable of thinking, comprehending the facts he was providing to her. "And even though I'm human, the children would be immortal like you?"

"Yes. They are immune to the effects of aging beyond adolescence as well as to all human diseases." He combed his fingers through her hair, capturing a lock and pressing it to his lips. That familiar naughty glimmer sparked in his eyes.

"I see." She squirmed in his lap. Although his words were confusing and her brain felt like it had been scrambled and fried in a pan over high heat, there were other parts of her that seemed to know on a gut level that this was right and that she belonged with Jestin Draig, the dragon-man. "I hate to sound self-involved or shallow or anything but what about me? You and our children would remain young and healthy and I'd become an old hag. I mean, why would you want a stooped old biddy for a wife?"

"With the completion of our Joining, you would become somewhat immortal."

"Somewhat?"

"As long as I remain alive, you would not age. However, you could still die from other causes."

"Interesting. I could live with that, but one last question."

"Go ahead."

"Are there any other Mrs. Jestin Draigs running around the world? I mean, you say you've lived a long time and I'm not so naïve to think you haven't had other women, what with that setup down the hall. But I'm so *not* interested in being a member of a harem. Heck, I can't handle sharing a bathroom with another woman, let alone sharing a man."

He released the tendril of hair and rested both hands on her shoulders. "No. There is no other Mrs. Jestin Draig. Not any longer." His fingers walked up her neck to slide around the back of her head. He traced her lower lip with his thumb. "I was Joined once before. A very long time ago. But my mate died...in a tragic accident." Deep pain darkened his eyes.

Wishing she could comfort him but knowing she couldn't, that there was nothing she could say or do that would lift the weight of his sorrow in the slightest, she laced her fingers through his and whispered, "I'm very sorry."

"I wanted to die with Anelise. A part of me did, which was why, up until now, I never considered taking another mate."

Not knowing what to say, wanting to ask him why now and why her but afraid to, she nodded and ran her hands down his arms, following them to his shoulders. She leaned into him again, resting her head against his chest.

"I will explain one other thing to you, so that you have all the information necessary to make your decision."

She nodded against him.

"Our people are Guardians. That is our role in the world. Much like in the fairy tales you probably read as a child, we protect things—not usually princesses in high towers—but magical artifacts that would threaten any of the Immortals. There would be some danger—"

"Danger? But you are immortal. What could threaten you?" she asked, suddenly worried for his safety. She straightened up and waited anxiously for his answer.

"Each species has its weakness. They can be destroyed. For the red dragon, my people, it takes the spell spoken by a powerful mage. The spell has been lost to the humans for centuries, so at the moment we are safe."

She wanted to sag against him with relief. The thought of him being destroyed, even if he was scary in his other form, it was simply too much for her to imagine. "That's good to hear. But you said each species. There are other types of immortals?"

"Many different bloodlines, yes. There are the Lamiae, commonly known as the muses, several different clans of vampires including the Ancient Ones and Wissenshaft, and a variety of shapeshifters."

"I thought all those things didn't exist."

"They exist. And as my mate, you will likely meet many of them, which is why I wanted to mention them to you."

"I...see," she muttered. She felt like she'd walked into the *Twilight Zone*, or fallen through a hole and landed in a different world, a world she'd never known existed, with strange beings and bizarre rules.

"Of course, the biggest danger to you would come from your own, from humans. And that is if they were to ever learn of my true nature. Even if they could not destroy me, they would try. And their methods would be deadly to you and to any other humans who happened to be in the way."

"Is that what happened to your wife...how she...?"

"Yes." He blinked several times then continued in a softer voice, "Fortunately, the only way any human would learn what I am is if you told them." He caught her face between his palms, forcing her to meet his gaze. "So again, I challenge you to search your heart. If you make the wrong decision, a great many lives, including your own, could be at stake. I shouldn't have told you so much and I've put my clan members at risk by putting our secrets in your trust so soon."

"I swear I won't tell a soul. Not even my priest."

"You see now why trust is so important to me?"

"I do. But you will give me time to think about this whole mate thing, right? I mean, this is a lot more complicated than deciding what breed of puppy to buy and that's taken me months. Even now, it's a draw between a cute little cocker spaniel or an Irish setter."

"I vote for the Irish setter," he said with a grin.

"Why did I know you'd say that?" She gave him a soft slug in the belly.

"Seriously now..." He let his hands fall away from her. "Take as much time as you need. Also, understand that the process of taking a mate isn't a simple one. There are several stages. If you were to change your mind, you could do so at any point up until the final Joining."

"Okay."

He eased her to her feet, stood and helped her find her clothes, then strode past her. "I will leave you to make your decision." He opened the door and stood in the doorway again. "Gibs will help you carry your clothes to your car."

"Okay. Thanks for the beautiful gifts. I never expected..." She paused. "But one thing I was hoping for—" She hesitated for a moment then continued, "I hate to bring this up now, after everything that's happened. Everything we've talked about. What about the plate? You said you would consider selling it, if..." She let her words trail off again.

"Yes, I did." He looked pained as he nodded slowly.

"If it means someone or something is threatened by your selling it, you don't have to."

"No, no. I must keep my word. But will you give me the same consideration I have given you? Will you come back tomorrow? Spend another evening with me? Give me a chance to consider my terms for the sale?"

Give him the same consideration? Oh, this guy was good. Nothing like heaping on the guilt to make her walk away empty-handed even though he'd told her he would sell it after only one night. "Sure. I'll play along for one more night. After tonight, I'm anxious to see what other surprises you have in store for me. A little scared too."

"Thank you." He gave her a gentle kiss on the lips that made her insides melt like warm butter. "'Til tomorrow. Seven?"

"Yes. Seven'll be fine." She left later with a car full of sexy lingerie, a brain full of confusing thoughts and no plate for Mrs. Kim. Yet, she was in good spirits.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Kim didn't share her sunny outlook when Kaya returned to work the next morning and let her know she'd found the buyer and was close to cutting a deal with him for the copperplate. Although Mrs. Kim allowed Kaya to remain at work for the day, she badgered her with a zillion questions about who the buyer was, where he lived, what kind of demands he was making. Kaya kept her answers as vague as possible and kept busy until quitting time. She left, making Mrs. Kim a departing promise that she'd return the next day with the plate in hand or not return at all.

Finally, Mrs. Kim seemed pleased.

Now the pressure was really on. Not only would she lose out on the biggest bonus of her career, but her job as well. She had to do whatever it took to convince Jestin to part with the copperplate. Anything.

Or become his mate tomorrow. A dragon's mate. An Immortal. After having known him for maybe thirty-six hours. Faster than it had taken her to pick out the paint for her living room.

* * * * *

"Forgive me for saying this. You've made a terrible mistake, sir."

Jestin sighed as he ceased pacing for a second before resuming the useless motion again. It wasn't like it would bring her back to him any quicker. Yet he couldn't bear to

stand still. And sitting at his desk and concentrating on his work was damn near impossible. "Gibs, you must trust me," he said with confidence he didn't feel.

"As I recall, that's not in my job description."

"Neither is nagging me but you do that often enough." Jestin gave his servant and dearest friend a smile to soften the blow of his words. "You know I'd be lost without your nagging, my friend. Promise me you'll never stop."

"You have my word. But what will you do if the woman does not come back? You told her a great deal more than —"

"I had to. She was scared senseless. She will be back. I am certain."

"Is that so? You are certain? Then you are pacing to get some exercise? I give you thirty to one odds she doesn't show."

"Thirty to one? You're mad but who am I to not take advantage of a madman?" Jestin accepted the wager with a handshake. "Don't you see? She is the one. I thought I could keep things casual, not go through with the final Joining. But now..."

"Then God help you."

Jestin purposefully ignored his friend's jab. "I didn't want this. I didn't want another mate. You know how I was after Anelise died. Yet now that I have seen Kaya, talked to her, tasted her, I cannot fathom the idea of existing without her. I know I am right. She drank the wine with no ill effects, she saw me in my base form. Two tests passed and the third —"

"She lied," Gibs pointed out.

"About fish. She answered the most important question truthfully, the one about being lonely and needing someone in her life. Thus she has passed the third test and must merely accept my true form to move to step four."

"I do not think you should've told her everything. She knows too much. You gave her too many reasons not to return."

"Which is wise. When she does come to me, I will know she has done so knowing everything."

"Nearly," Gibbs corrected.

"Nearly. I only left out a minor detail."

"She may not find it so minor."

"I will deal with it when the time comes. She wasn't ready to hear it. But tonight when she comes to me, she will have passed the fourth test—having embraced my nature freely. That leaves only two tests remaining. She should be more ready by then."

"You are going too quickly. This should take time—weeks, even months. What if she fails to take the final step? You know the risk to yourself, your people, all of the Immortals. She could reveal your secret, lead your enemies to you. Think what would happen if they found the treasures you have locked away here. With the copperplate alone, they could destroy all the Guardians, which would mean the end for all the Immortals."

"I am aware of that. She could destroy us, yes. But she won't. I'm confident she'll keep our secret. Besides, I'm not convinced she knows what mysteries the copperplate holds, or even has the means to have it translated to find out what they are. But if she does, I have faith she'll return it to me."

"The risk is too great. Anelise was a different sort. She was steadfast, loyal from the beginning. And she was strong."

"And so is Kaya. She will prove so tonight."

"I hope you're right."

"I know I'm right."

"How can you know someone you met just over thirty-six hours ago?" Gibbs shook his head. "I will go make the final preparations for your dinner."

"Just make sure her steak is cooked well. She will need a full stomach tonight to face what I have in store for her."

"Too much information, sir." Gibs disappeared through a doorway at the end of the hall, leaving Jestin to pace in peace.

When she didn't arrive at seven on the dot, he told himself she was probably being held up in traffic. When she didn't arrive at five after, he told himself there was probably an accident somewhere causing her delay.

When she still hadn't arrived by five-to-eight, he had no choice but to accept the fact that she wasn't coming and when he did that, he realized exactly how disappointed he was. His mood darkened to the shade of coal. Familiar darkness coiled inside of him, snuffing out the small flickers of light Kaya had ignited the night before. The light he had sworn he'd never again enjoy.

At five after eight, Gibs entered the room with a glum expression that suited Jestin's mood perfectly.

"Why would you look so down, my friend?" Jestin asked. "You were right. You won our wager."

"She has arrived. She is waiting for you in the dining room."

Jestin really had to work hard at not giving loose with a mighty whoop that would echo off every floor, wall and ceiling in his massive home. How much respect would his mate have for a man who shouted like a gleeful boy at her arrival? Instead, he cleared his throat, straightened his tie and smoothed his pant legs. "Very well. Thank you, Gibs. I will join her shortly. As soon as I conclude my business here."

Gibs took in the empty room, clear desk and phone resting quietly in its cradle, smiled slightly and said, "As you wish, sir." He left, closing the door behind him.

Jestin made her wait fifteen minutes before he joined her in the main dining room for dinner. It took every one of those minutes to get his racing heart to slow down, his palms to dry and his breathing to find its natural rhythm. She looked uneasy as he entered. When he stepped near, the sharp tang of her fear stung his nose. She was afraid, yet she came back. He respected her for that. It was a sure sign of strength.

Looking very small in the high-backed dining chair, she tilted her head to look him in the eye. The angle made her eyes look enormous, her heart-shaped face adorable, her thick lashes a mile long, her lips full and tempting. "I apologize for being late. I didn't get out of the store until almost six-thirty and then there was an accident on I-94. Traffic was backed up for miles."

"No need to explain." He scooped up her hand in his, lifted it to his mouth and, staring into eyes the shade of ebony, pressed a kiss to the back of her hand.

She blinked and a hint of pink touched her cheeks. When she dropped her gaze to the salad sitting before her, he released her hand and took his seat next to her, at the head of the table.

"I'm afraid your steak is probably as tough as shoe leather by now," he said after forcing himself to take a bite or two of salad. Vegetables were far from his favorite. Not to mention the fact that the food wasn't moving through his system as it should, thanks to his insides being tied into knots. There were so many things he wanted to share with his Kaya. His mate. Would she let him? Would she get over her fear and learn to trust him?

"That's okay. It's my fault for being late. To be honest, I'm not really hungry. I ate a snack at the store before I left."

"Neither am I," he admitted. "Would you like to retire to the study?"

She looked relieved as she nodded. "Yes. That sounds great. But I'm not insulting anyone by not eating, am I?"

He stood, took her hand in his and waited for her. "Absolutely not, as long as you tell me you're not hungry."

"Believe me, eating is the last thing I have on my mind at the moment," she said as he led her down the hall.

"Hmmm. And if I asked what is foremost on your mind, would you answer truthfully?"

"I would if I knew. Can't say my mind's exactly clear at the moment. It's kind of bogged down with a bunch of things."

"That answer is truthful enough for me." He pushed open the study's door and held it for her, following her into the room and closing the door behind him. He went to the small bar at the rear of the room. "Drink?"

"Just water, thanks."

He poured two glasses of ice water and handed her one, joining her on the settee. After he emptied his glass, he took hers and set them both on the side table. His gaze settled on her lips, tinted an iridescent, glossy pink that reminded him of the roses in his garden.

"I'm...I couldn't stop thinking about you last night," she said meekly.

His insides did a few somersaults yet he forced himself to maintain a sedate expression. "Is that so?"

She blinked as she lowered her gaze to her hands, which were sitting restlessly in her lap. "I came here yesterday wanting to buy the copperplate, and I still do. But I also want to know more. About you."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes. The whole dragon thing is a little hard to deal with at first but after a few...oh, hours or so...I think I got over it. Mostly."

"You are still afraid."

"A little." Still looking down, fiddling with the hem of her top, she nodded.

He lifted her chin with an index finger until she met his gaze. He read so many things in her eyes—indecision, fear, curiosity, to name a few. The others were too vague to identify. "Yet you came here tonight."

"I didn't want to. I mean, I was scared poopless but honestly I had no choice."

"And I have no choice but to do this." He leaned in, molding his body to hers, and kissed her until his cock ached with the need to plunge into her sweet wetness. She

kissed him back with equal heat, her tongue meeting his every thrust with one of her own. Her fingers dug into the flesh of his shoulders, the slight sting of her fingernails a welcome addition to the already overwhelming flurry of sensations battering him. Sounds, tastes, scents, touches. Sweet, hot, soft, tantalizing. They swirled around inside him like a maelstrom. He felt his control crumbling, quickly. His cock strained against his pants, his balls tightened until the skin of his upper thighs burned. Flames licked every inch of his body as overwhelming need blasted through him.

No woman had ever done that to him with just a kiss.

His heartbeat an irregular stutter in his ears, his every muscle a tight knot, he broke the kiss and fell backward against cushions almost as soft as Kaya's gentle curves. "If you are to be with me, and I believe you want to be, you will accept me as your Master."

She looked back at him with heavy-lidded eyes. "I don't know what that means. This is all so confusing. I'm not sure I'm ready."

"Would you like me to explain? Would you like to learn?" He waited for her answer, unable to draw in his next breath until she spoke.

"Yes," she whispered.

"I will show you then. We will go as slowly as you need." So happy he swore he might jump up and down and give a mighty whoop, he stroked her cheek with the back of his knuckles. Her skin was like fine silk. "First, you will address me as Master."

"Okay. Master." The words sounded stilted, awkward coming from her mouth. She grimaced slightly.

"Very good. It will take some time to get used to all this, I understand. But I want you to try. I promise, you'll be pleased with the results."

She gave him a weak smile. "Okay."

"And this is important," he continued, encouraged by her response. "I know it'll be hard but it's vital. When we are in the dungeon, you must promise to respect me, to

always be honest with me, and to trust me, from this moment on. Can you make those promises to me?"

"That's a lot. I mean, I can try. I'm not sure..." Her gaze darkened then dropped to the floor. "This is so strange...complicated."

Wishing to soothe her, to take away every one of her fears, he ran his hands down her arms. "And I promise to protect you, cherish you and trust you with my very life. Always. No matter where we are."

She didn't speak for a long time. Seconds passed with the unsteady thump of his heart. One, two, three. Finally, she lifted her gaze and looked him in the eye. "Please. Teach me. What do I do first?"

"Kneel before me like this." He gently coaxed her to kneel with slight pressure on her shoulders. "This is how you show me you are ready to listen, to do my bidding." She looked up at him with wide eyes for a moment then lowered them in a natural show of subservience that made his heart swell. He would serve this woman, his mate, Kaya Cordova, for the rest of his days. He would show her the joy that came from conquering her fears and make her every fantasy come true.

"That is very good." He scooped her into his arms and carried her to his dungeon. The training would commence. Immediately. "Now you will see what it means to relinquish complete control."

He felt her slight shudder as he entered the dungeon.

"You will trust me," he said, setting her on her feet.

"Okay."

"Master," he said firmly. "Remember, you must address me as Master when we are in the dungeon."

"Yes, Master."

"Obey me and you will receive rewards beyond your wildest dreams."

"I...I will?"

He gave her a slow nod. “Undress.”

Chapter Five

"I want you to understand what will happen before we get started," Jestin said as his steamy gaze followed her motions.

Getting hotter by the second, despite the couple of reservations that stubbornly refused to release their chokehold on her, she peeled off her top first then pushed her skirt down over her hips. Her heart was beating so fast she swore it was about to explode, and her hands were shaking so bad it was almost impossible to use them.

She'd spent all last night reading, thinking, struggling to understand her feelings. She'd come to a couple of conclusions. First, the easy one. She had to get the plate from him because it was what her boss needed, it was what she'd promised. It would save her job, no matter what happened between them. And second—but somewhat unrelated to the first—she'd explore what it meant to be a dragon's mate. Despite her natural inclination to rebel against another person's attempt to control her, there was something about Jestin, about this, that felt right. Natural. Exciting and fulfilling too. By the end of the night, and after reading so much she'd grown bleary-eyed, she'd become convinced she was about to learn a great deal, about Jestin, about dragons, but also more importantly about herself. That made her both nervous and excited at the same time.

"I've...never done anything like this." She fumbled with her clothes, dropping them on the floor.

"I understand." He swept up the dropped garments and set them aside then closed his warm hands around her upper arms. "I will show you some patience. However, you won't want to push me by being impertinent or mocking. I know how you like to joke and tease. And I adore you for the carefree, joy-filled, independent woman you are. But this isn't the place for auditioning a standup routine or engaging in a battle of wills. To

do so would bring terrible consequences. You would be mocking my feelings for you, my affection for you, and commitment to making you happy and keeping you safe. I will not tolerate it.” He released one arm so he could unfasten the front hook of her bra. Then he used both hands to slide the shoulder straps down her arms before closing a warm palm over her breast. His gaze still locked to her face, he said heavily, “Remember—a reward is far more enjoyable than punishment.”

“I understand, Master.” Between her jittery nerves, the promise she caught in his voice and the way his fingers pinched and pulled at her nipple, she was already close to dropping at his feet. She nodded.

“Your panties. Take them off but leave on your stockings and shoes. I am pleased with your choice of thigh-high stockings over those wretched pantyhose. For that, you will receive a reward as well.”

Every cell in her body jumped up and down with glee. “Yes, Master.” She pushed her panties down over her hips and let them slide down her thighs until they dropped to her feet. She was about to kick them off when he shook his head.

“You will bend over and take them off properly. Knees straight. Feet shoulder width apart. Your ass this way.” He positioned her so her rear end was right in front of him and he had a clear view of her most secret places when she bent over to tug the bit of lace off her ankles. She managed to get them off without falling over—a real feat considering both her position and nerves. Feeling quite proud of herself, she tried to stand up, but he stopped her with a firm hand on her back. “You will remain like this until I return.”

“Yes, Master,” she said, not particularly comfortable in the position he had left her in—it hardly brought light to her more favorable assets—but not wanting to displease him. A reward sounded a heck of a lot more fun than punishment, although she’d always found the idea of being spanked sexy. She hoped he’d spank her sometime.

She couldn’t see him leave but she heard him. She also heard the squeak of door hinges as he opened and closed a door. Had he left the room? Left her bent over like a

jogger stretching for a run? A soft shuffle of feet on the wood floor suggested otherwise. And the prickles of awareness skipping up her spine when he returned to his position behind her confirmed her suspicion. Evidently, he'd only opened a closet or bathroom door.

A heartbeat later, two warm, large hands cupped her ass cheeks and kneaded them until her pussy simmered and slickness coated her inner thighs. She heard him inhale deeply. "Very nice. I can smell your desire and that pleases me. You may stand now."

Her head swam a little when she straightened up. She wasn't sure if her dizziness was the result of the position she'd been in or from the pleasure he'd given her already, with only a gentle massage of her ass.

"Turn around, slave," he commanded in a soft but firm voice.

She did as he asked, puzzled by what he was holding. It looked like a gold, bejeweled collar, like the kind the rich and famous in Hollywood might buy for their little froufy dogs from some overpriced specialty shop. While the collar was pretty – the thing had to have a bazillion diamonds and rubies on it, along with several little silver rings – she wasn't sure what the heck she was supposed to do with it.

Was it for her future pet? That had to be it. A collar for her soon-to-buy Irish setter. How thoughtful! Although it was quite large around for a puppy and certainly a bit glitzy for a setter. They were more sporty dogs than fussy in her opinion.

"This is for you." Looking quite pleased with his gift, he unfastened the buckle and dodged her lifted hands to wrap the collar around her neck. "You will wear it whenever we are in the dungeon." He fastened the buckle.

"Oh! It's for me? Not a...oh, my." She lifted her hands to her neck and fingered the facets of the jewels. "I'm...gee, thanks. It's...er, lovely."

"You are my slave. We would not want to have any of my fellow clan members mistaking you for a free woman. I will admit, and I don't expect you'd be surprised to know, I've brought free women to my dungeon in the past. But never again."

A twinge of jealousy tied her insides into a knot, even though she knew she had no right to feel that way. What he did in the past was in the past. She knew he was no virgin. "No? Um...can I ask? Your clan will be here? In the dungeon?"

"I will explain this only because you are new to being a slave and I care about you enough to want you to understand." He traced the line of the collar then let his finger drop lower to the valley between her breasts. "My fellow clansmen do come here. And they would devour you if they had the chance. Literally."

She shuddered as a half dozen images, each one more bizarre than the next flashed through her mind. "Oh."

"And now you will show me your gratitude for my gift, which is an outward sign of my love for you."

"Love?" She stood frozen as her mind tried to wrap itself around that word. How could he love her already? After only one day? "Love?" she repeated again.

"Love is not a feeling. It is a decision, a commitment. And I have decided I will love you as my slave, my mate," he explained, pushing gently on her knees until she was facing him, kneeling. "With my love comes the promise that I will always put your needs and feelings before my own, to always treat you with respect and caring, to be faithful and kind."

Her kneecaps ground into the hard wood floor and she grimaced slightly.

"What is the matter, slave?"

"Sorry, Master. Floor's hard on the knees. I have bad knees."

"This way." He took her hands and pulled until she was standing then led her to a thing with two low, narrow pads close to the ground and a higher one in between. "This is a prayer bench," he explained. "Kneel here." He pointed at one of the low pads. "Facing me."

"Um...like this? I'm not joking. Is it time to pray? Now...er, Master?" Although it was awkward getting into position, because her feet tended to hit the other low pad,

she was surprised by how soft the cushions were. She clasped her hands together in front of her chest.

"Better?" he asked.

"Yes. Much better. Thank you, Master. Will you be leading the prayer or me?"

"Neither." He pulled off his shirt and she watched, marveling at the beauty of his body, the lines of developed muscles coating his shoulders, arms and chest. When he moved, those scrumptious muscles bunched and stretched. What a lovely sight! It certainly inspired her to say a few words to whatever god had created him. "Would you like to serve your master and receive great rewards in return?"

Great rewards? He'd made a lot of promises of rewards today. She was sure ready to see what that was all about. Tingles skittered up her spine. She imagined him parting her legs wide and pushing his cock deep inside her pussy. A lump completely closed off her throat.

"Kaya, have you ever wanted to be tied up? Forced by a dark stranger?"

"I don't know. I never thought about it."

"What are your darkest fantasies?" His fingertip traced the line of her throat then continued lower. He pinched her left nipple and gave it a sharp tug that made her gasp. Her empty pussy clenched, warm juices dripping down her inner thighs. "You will know, the beauty of being a slave is in both the giving and in the receiving." His other hand cupped her chin and lifted it. Her gaze snapped to his eyes and froze there for a moment then slid south to rest on his broad, smooth chest. She ached to reach out and trace the lines of his pecs, to feel his satin-smooth skin under her fingertips. "Like I said before, when you please your master, you receive pleasure beyond your wildest dreams. I will make your darkest fantasies come true." When he didn't continue, she glanced up. His smile was more wicked now than it had ever been. She trembled, her whole body tense with expectation. He licked his lips then continued, "I'm guessing you'd like to be bent over and fucked from behind. That way, you can touch yourself

and come over and over. Is that true, Kaya? Would you like me to bend you over and fuck you from behind?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"And just before you come, would you like me to push my finger into your ass?"

"Oh, yes." Almost ready to come before he'd done more than pull on her nipple, she trembled. "Please."

"You will show me your gratitude first." He unbuckled his belt and unzipped his pants. "You will take my cock in your mouth."

"Yes."

"Would you like to do that?"

"Oh, yes, Master." She could barely remain upright thanks to the trembling his naughty talk was causing. Knowing herself, she'd always held the notion that her mind had as much to do with good sex as her body. Jestin was clearly a master of brain-stroking. She'd never been so ready with so little actual foreplay.

He removed both his pants and underwear, standing before her in all his glory. His skin was deeply tanned all over and smooth-shaven like a swimmer's. His cock was very large, erect. His balls hung heavily behind it.

He gripped his cock in his fist and gave it a couple of strokes and she nearly crumpled over, boneless and weak. Did he have any idea of what he was doing to her? "Open your mouth, slave. Take my cock in your mouth and show me how grateful you are for my gift."

She thrust her tongue out first and took several shy swipes across the head as Jestin held it to her mouth, his hand still wrapped around the base, sliding up and back. She licked round and round then opened wide to take him into her mouth. His flesh felt hot against her tongue. It tasted sweet and spicy, wonderful. As he pulled out, she caught a droplet of pre-come seeping out with the tip of her tongue. Then he plunged back in, fucking her mouth with shallow in and out thrusts.

"Touch yourself," he commanded. One of his hands was in her hair, holding her head still as he pumped his delicious cock in and out of her mouth. The other slid up and down the shaft of his cock. "Damn it, you feel good. Touch yourself."

She reached between her legs with one hand and found her clit. It was supersensitive and she gasped at the first stroke. She reached up and laid her other hand on Jestin's lower belly, just above his cock. She felt the muscles under his skin trembling and moaned around a mouthful of cock. She quickened the pace of the circles she drew around her clit until her stomach coiled into a tight knot too.

Jestin abruptly pulled his cock from her mouth and demanded gruffly, "Turn around."

She stood up and knelt back down, resting her stomach on the high cushion. She felt the heat of his thighs against the back of her legs, even though his skin didn't touch hers. She moaned as he parted her labia with his fingers and pressed two inside. His knuckles scraped against the sensitive upper wall of her canal as his other hand alternatively slapped and kneaded her ass.

"You are such a good slave, Kaya. You are learning so quickly. You deserve a lifetime of rewards, each one greater than the last. I know you will serve me faithfully, and you have my promise that I will live my life dedicated to giving you every pleasure you desire." With his sweet words still echoing in the room, he thrust his cock deep inside her.

The first stroke sent bliss sweeping through her body. Her pussy stretched to accommodate his size then gripped him tightly, increasing her pleasure. The second stroke took her breath away. The third sent her careening toward release. She groaned and tossed her head from side to side.

"Have you ever let a lover push you to your threshold then pull you back, over and over until you couldn't take it anymore? Let him take complete control?"

"No," her answer was a pleading whisper. "Please." She shook all over, so close to orgasm she could feel the grip of release tightening deep in her belly.

He stopped moving inside her but didn't pull out. His hands stroked her back. Sweet butterfly kisses coated her shoulders, giving birth to a flock of goose bumps. She was shivering cold and hot at the same time and ready to lose complete control, to hand it over to Jestin, the man whose words caressed her mind with as much tenderness and raw sensuality as his hands did her body.

She was there with him, not a single cell in her body wanting anything more than to share this bliss with him, to join him in an intense release that she suspected would shake her to her very soul. Her fear was gone. Her reservations burned away by the blaze consuming her body. "I will give you your release in a moment," his rough voice shook as he spoke, suggesting he was as close to she was to losing control. "Trust me."

"I do. In all ways."

"You are not afraid anymore?"

"Not of you."

He pulled his cock from her and pulled on her shoulders, easing her around to face him. "I know I promised you I would fuck you the other way, but I will give you the choice. Would you rather face away from me, or toward me? As before, when I climax, you will see me as I truly am."

"I will see the dragon?"

"Yes."

"I wish to face you."

His smile was so brilliant it brought tears to her eyes. He led her to another piece of furniture that looked a lot like a weight bench and lowered her onto her back. "Kaya, you make it so easy to love you." He eased her knees apart and with his fiery, heavy-lidded gaze fixed to hers, buried his cock deep inside her again. His lips parted slightly as a soft sigh slipped between them. Overcome with joy, she smiled and let her eyelids shutter out the distraction of sight, wanting to relish every touch, every sound, every scent until they found release and the dragon reappeared. He left her there in the dark world filled with the soft thwack, thwack of his groin striking her with every inward

thrust, with the combined scents of man, dragon and desire, with the bliss of his intimate strokes inside her body. "Come for me. Take your release."

Tense pleasure gripped her body, pulling it into tight, shuddering coils. Her heavy breaths sounded hollow in her ears, muffling but not completely drowning out the sweet words Jestin continued to whisper to her. And then she was there again, and before she could say a word, she gave herself over to it, to the climax that pulsed through her body like waves on the sea. She gasped and jerked as the waves battered her, over and over, until they slowly subsided to little ripples. Hot tears streamed down her cheeks. She cried out, "Jestin!"

"I'm here, baby."

When she opened her eyes, the air before her shimmered and the dragon stood before her, mighty and powerful and beautiful. In awe, she stared until a moment later Jestin was back, smiling at her, his face and chest flushed.

"Next time. I promise," he said between heaving breaths.

"Next time?"

"You will have it your way."

"What are you talking about? I just did."

He gathered her into his arms, and their bodies still joined, he held her in a tight embrace that made her feel strong and safe and loved. This was right. She was ready to take the final steps, to become Jestin's mate forever.

* * * * *

After lying in bed for hours with Jestin, she eventually looked at the clock. It was late, or rather, early. Early morning. She had little more than an hour to get ready for work.

"I should get going."

"Stay here with me." He hugged her tighter to him.

"I have to go to work. No one's going to pay my bills for me." She unenthusiastically peeled his arm off her and sat up. He watched her dress from the bed, all rumpled and sexy and tempting. It took every ounce of willpower she possessed not to jump back into bed with him and go for round three, or was it four for the night?

Once she was fully dressed, she reluctantly brought up the one subject she'd avoided all night. "I need to ask you about the copperplate."

"Yes, I said I would consider my terms and I have. I will sell it to you for what I paid, not a penny more."

"You will?" Kaya couldn't believe her ears. She hadn't even told him yet that she had made her decision, that she would be his mate forever.

Would there be a hitch? There was always a hitch. Would he tell her she couldn't give it to Mrs. Kim? Would he ask her to hide it? "You'll give it to me and I can do what I like with it?"

"Yes," he said, sounding slightly defeated. "In fact, I trust you to make the payment later and will have Gibs bring it down to your car. You may do whatever you like with it."

"That's it?" she repeated, wanting to make sure she understood. "You're going to give it to me just like that?"

"Yes, you expected me not to?"

"I expected something, some terms. A word of caution, maybe."

"I will ask for only one thing—you deliver the payment to me personally tomorrow. Those are my terms."

"Those are terms I can agree to." She didn't know whether to shake his hand or hug him. She opted for a hug and was extremely glad she did the moment he pulled her to him.

Bazillion-year-old fire-breathing dragon or not, the man knew how to hold a woman.

Chapter Six

Kaya wasted no time getting the copperplate back to the store, and to the relative safety of Mrs. Kim's built-in safe. The case tucked under her arm, she raced into the building, shut and locked the back door and shuffled down the back hall toward the front of the store. She heard Mrs. Kim's voice up ahead and the rumble of a man's voice. Just before she reached the back entry to the store, she halted when she heard Mrs. Kim say the word "plate."

"You must get it, no matter the cost. Have you no idea what it holds?" The man's voice rose slightly with anger. "It holds the key to the most powerful spell on the planet."

"Yes, I know. I sent Kaya with offer. I expect her to return with the copperplate today. She promise."

"You should have taken care of this yourself. It is too important and if the gentleman knows what he has, he will not part with it easily."

"But if he is not mage, what could it do for him?"

"If he is one of the red dragons, he will protect it with his life. The spell would strip all his people of their human disguises and they could then be easily destroyed. In their dragon forms, they are easily killed."

Kaya gasped and looked down at the black case snugged under her arm. Why would Jestin hand over the one thing that could mean the destruction of his entire race? Was the man wrong? He had to be.

Still, she wasn't about to take that chance. She whirled around on her heel. Unfortunately, she bumped into the swinging door as she turned. A quick look over her shoulder told her both Mrs. Kim and the man had heard her.

And a man running toward her at full speed told her he'd seen her too.

Not taking the time to think, she did what came naturally—she ran. Zigged and zagged around boxes of antiques lining both sides of the narrow hallway to the back door. The man was on her heels within seconds.

Then the deadbolt on the back door did her in. It stuck, as usual. And before she could get it to twist open, the man snatched the case out from under her arm.

“Why were you running?” he asked in a powerful voice that suggested he knew the answer.

Still trying to disengage the lock, she shrugged her shoulders. “I just remembered I’d left my lights on. Don’t want the battery to go dead.”

“So it had nothing to do with this?” He held up the case.

She finally unfastened the lock and turned to face him. “Oh no. Not at all.” She aimed for nonchalance in her expression. “Thanks for holding it for me so I could get the lock.”

There were a lot of things Kaya had done in her life, like go to college, buy her own home and pay her taxes. But there were a lot more things she’d never done. She’d never risked life and limb for anyone. She’d never gone parasailing, bungee jumping or white-water rafting and she’d never broken the law.

She figured she was about to do at least a couple of those in the near future. Kaya Cordova would play it safe no more!

When Mrs. Kim lumbered up and spoke to the man she called Mr. Vandenberg, Kaya took advantage of his shift in attention, snatched the case which still rightfully belonged to Jestin and barreled through the door. With a shouting, furious, very large and intimidating man on her heels, she dashed to her car, locked the doors, started it and burned rubber out of there.

She even ran a red light to make sure she wouldn’t be followed, and thus she did at least two things on that list in the span of only a few minutes.

There was only one place to go—back to Jestin’s house.

Thanks to her nerves being wound tighter than a coiled spring that was ready to snap, it was hell driving the speed limit. But because she couldn't be sure whether Mrs. Kim had called the police or not, Kaya didn't want to take any chances at being pulled over. As a result, it took her over an hour to get to Jestin's. By the time she was sitting at the gate, buzzing to be let in, she was shaking from head to toe. After being let inside, she parked the car, clutched the case to her chest and ran to the front door. It opened before she reached it. Mr. Gibbs gave her a friendly smile and said, "This way, please. Mr. Draig is in a meeting. He wasn't expecting you quite so soon."

"Could you please tell him it's urgent? I need to talk to him."

"Very well." He motioned for her to take a seat in the library. She felt very warm and safe in the huge leather chair. "Can I get you something to drink while you're waiting?"

"No. Thanks. But if you could, please tell him it's important."

"Yes, miss." Mr. Gibbs left, leaving her to shake and panic all by herself, not a good thing. Her mind jumped from one horrific thought to another— What if that man did something to Mrs. Kim? What if they called the police and reported her as a thief? What if she went home and was greeted by a SWAT team?

By the time Jestin strolled into the room, looking cool as a cucumber, she was an absolute mess.

She couldn't wait for him to wander his way across the room and so she jumped up and ran to him, the case still in her arms and thrust it at him. "I can't believe you gave this thing to me! Why? Why'd you do that? Are you suicidal? I don't get it." She resisted the urge to clobber him with it when he didn't take it from her.

In answer, he lifted both eyebrows.

"That's it? You're just going to look at me like I'm nuts?"

"Why have you returned this to me? Isn't it what you wanted?"

"It was until I found out what the copperplate says."

"You found that out already? From whom? What did you learn?"

"There was a man at the store, talking to Mrs. Kim when I came in. He said it had some kind of spell on it, a spell that would mean the destruction of the red dragons. That's you. That's your people. Was he right or did I just do something stupid that probably cost my job, maybe even my freedom?"

"He was right. Was his name Vandenberg?"

"Yes. I've never met him before but he's purchased a lot of things from us."

"Yes, I know. He is becoming something of a threat to the Immortals although this is as close as he'd gotten to gaining possession of something that could've done some serious damage."

"Well, aren't you going to stop him? What if he comes after me? What if he gets the plate?"

"There's still no guarantee he has the power to invoke the spell. As a Guardian, I must do my job but I must do it quietly, under the radar – so to speak. I will continue to watch him but I will not do anything covert to stop him. As far as I know, he merely has a collection of relatively powerless trinkets. Nothing of real value."

"But you almost handed over something that could've caused real harm. You don't know how powerful the man is."

"True."

"Why then? Why did you do it?"

"I had no choice. I had to put my faith – and my life – in your hands. It is the next step."

"Yeah well, here. Glad I passed. But now I have some madman collector after me and I am probably jobless. Do those count as steps of some kind?"

He smiled.

"Don't tell me. Losing one's livelihood is step, what? Six? Seven? I've lost count."

He gave her a few innocent blinks. "We do seem to be clocking a new record. Only one step remains." He pulled her into the kind of embrace she'd come to expect from him. Warm, protective, gentle but firm.

Her knees turned to marshmallow and her fiery rage cooled.

She tipped her head up to give him a half-hearted dose of mean eyes. "Will you at least tell me what the final one is so I'm not caught by surprise again? And what will I do about my job? My bills? My criminal record? My grandmother! The poor woman'll be out on the street faster than the jury can say, 'Guilty'."

His laughter rumbled through her body making her insides tingle. "I will consider telling you. However, I believe you are overreacting. You won't have a criminal record because you didn't break any laws—at least none that I know of." He kissed her nose. "Did you?"

"I ran a few lights."

"That's nothing."

"Nothing! I've never gotten so much as a parking ticket before."

"Ah, but you're no longer that fearful—"

"Law abiding."

"—overly cautious woman you once were. I'd say you are uniquely qualified to work for me. The next items I need to buy are being auctioned in Chicago. A spear and a harp that can be used to destroy the Lamiae. What do you say?" His hands slid down her sides until they rested on her hips. He pulled until her mound was pressed firmly against his leg. "I cannot possibly attend all the auctions throughout the world. Will you be my representative? Help me locate artifacts and attend auctions on my behalf? I promise the pay's good—at least double what you were making at your last position." He moved his leg so it rubbed her pussy through her clothes, making her all weak and warm.

Double? Double! That would give her plenty to live on plus pay her grandmother's nursing home bills. Thrilled beyond words, she said, "Wow! I don't know what to say. That's a very generous offer." She added, meaningfully, "Will I get benefits?"

"Absolutely. But I warn you, you must learn your place in my organization. I will not tolerate your stepping out of ranks." He winked. "At least not during business hours." He glanced at his watch, twisted the itty-bitty knob on the side. "Gee, look at that. It's exactly six-oh-one. Quitting time already."

"Wow, where did the day go?" she teased.

He took her hand in his and led her up the stairs and down the main hallway. He opened the door to the dungeon and said, "I don't have to tell you the consequences of insubordination."

She clapped her hands in delight then sobered her expression. "Oh dear. I suppose calling you my hunky, spunky dragon-boy would be considered stepping out of ranks?"

"It certainly would."

"And the punishment?"

His grin literally reached from one ear to the other, bringing back the California-boy beauty she'd admired so much the first time she'd met him, at the auction. Two deep dimples poked into his cheeks, making her all warm and weak in the knees. "Well, since we're still on this side of the doorway it'll be slight. How do you feel about...floggers?"

"Never met one personally, but I have an open mind, my widdle dragon-poo."

He gave her an exaggerated sigh and martyred look. "And thus your training continues. First rule, which you seemed to have forgotten already, you will call me Master."

"We're not in the dungeon yet," she pointed out with a smile.

He led her into the room and straight to the kneeling thingy, eased her down until she was on her knees and bent over, her stomach and chest resting on the raised part, her rear end up in the air. "Naturally, for your insolence, you will feel the sting of my flogger on your bare flesh."

"Yes, Master," she said, not bothering to hide the shudder of delight rippling through her body.

He reached up her dress, flipped the skirt over her back, and yanked down her panties. He tugged her knees wide apart so that her bottom was exposed, her pussy open wide. Her breathing came fast and ragged as her spine tensed in anticipation of the first strike. He walked away, strolling slowly toward a cabinet in the far corner of the room, and she tipped her shoulders to watch him.

"You will remain in position, head down, Kaya, or you will taste the sting of my wrath." His tone was firm but far from terrifying.

"Yes, Master," she said, lowering her shoulders.

He returned a moment later. She felt him near her, even though in her position she couldn't see him. It was the way the air crackled, like static electricity, all around him. The little snaps made her skin tingle and gave her goose bumps too, both very delightful effects.

"Did I hear mocking in your voice?" he whispered.

"Oh, no, Master. Not mocking. I remember what you said. I would never dare to mock you. Not in here."

"Good." In reward, she received a light smack from the flogger. The fringes struck her bare bottom with a slightly stinging whap that made her yip in surprise. Oh, she had no idea how sexy and exciting being spanked could be. Her pussy was already burning with the need to be filled. She arched her back, thrusting her rear end up as high as she could, hoping he'd do it again.

The second strike was slightly harder than the first but equally pleasurable. And the third and fourth made her whimper with need.

“What you do to me,” he murmured.

The kisses that followed were soft, gentle and incredibly erotic. They cooled each of her burning cheeks. Then, she felt his fingertips as he pulled her ass cheeks apart. One finger delved into her crack, sliding slick up and down until just the tip pressed into her tight hole while another slid down to her pussy. Barely able to remain kneeling, thanks to her trembling muscles, she groaned.

“Shall we go for the final step tonight, love? Will you join with me for eternity?”

Thanks to his intimate strokes, the kisses he trailed down her spine, the heat he stirred in her body, it was easy to tell him she’d made her decision. “Yes, oh yes.”

She wanted to be his, in all ways, to learn to submit to him sexually, to fall asleep in his powerful arms at night, to stand by his side as Guardian, to live life as she’d never done before.

“Show me how to please you, to make you as happy as you’ve made me,” she begged.

“It will take time, my sweet. I will show you as you are ready. For today, learn this—I will always do what is best for you because I cannot do anything else. I wish for you to trust me, always.” As he spoke the last word, he pushed two fingers into her pussy and one into her ass simultaneously, making her see stars. With increasingly swift strokes, he brought her to a swift but mind-blowing climax that left her breathless and dizzy and aching for his cock.

He gently helped her up and led her to what looked like a chair suspended from the ceiling. After gently securing her legs and arms in position, he removed his pants and wedged his hips between her thighs.

“After tonight, we will become one in every way. We will breathe for each other, laugh for each other, cry for each other and live for each other. Your body will become mine, mine will become yours and you will know no more loneliness, no more fear, no more doubt. But it is painful.”

"You never mentioned pain. Pain like a little spanking or pain like shoving bamboo under my fingernails?"

"You must surrender your soul to me. You must die."

Her heart skipped one, two, three beats. "Die? But I thought I would become immortal."

"Yes, you will. But immortality comes with a price. You pay with your mortality, with your life. But as I've said before, nothing will happen until you are ready. I will wait for your word. Until then, we will learn about each other, share in each other's bliss. It is as it should be." And then in a single thrust, he drove into her, stealing her breath and mind. All that existed was him. His cock moving within her, his fingertips digging into her thighs, his breath warming her chest, the sound of his breathing and gentle words in her ears.

This time, as she climaxed, she opened her eyes and marveled in the sight of him shifting back and forth from man to beast. He awed her. Such a powerful, beautiful creature. And he had chosen her, the woman who had, until she'd met him, lived a slave to her fears.

The woman who had been afraid to take any risk now had the courage of ten women. As she was swept away on the waves of passion, she cried out without the slightest bit of fear, "Yes, my love! Yes! I am yours. Join with me."

"And so you will be." Jestin tipped his head and pressed a hot kiss on her chest, several inches above her left nipple. Instantly white-hot flames seared her flesh, leaping and churning through her whole body. She trembled and cried out against jagged blades of pain scissoring along her spine, making her weak. Her senses dimmed until there was nothing but silent, empty blackness. And then an explosion of colors blasted at her eyes. Scents so strong her nose burned shot up her nostrils, and touches so intense they felt like punches battered her skin. Her lungs burned for air and she dragged in a deep breath, blinked her tearing eyes and cried out, "Oh God!" The taste of sulfur soured her mouth.

It is done. You are mine now, and I am yours. We are bound by the soul. His thoughts echoed in her head.

Slowly, she found her way out from under the mountain of sensations to look at him. Although the colors, scents and touches didn't return to their normal state, they eased to at least the point of no longer being excruciating. She still heard even the smallest sound as clear as can be. And her vision was sharper, colors brighter. Scents pummeled her nose and she inhaled, trying to sort them out. And as her body adjusted, she realized with joy that something else had happened in that moment when they'd fused.

She could feel him inside. Could hear his thoughts as he worried about her. Could feel his emotions as he struggled with guilt, fear and bliss. He was a very real part of her now, and she him. The best part yet—she would have an eternity to share his joy and pain. And he hers.

She'd made a deal with one golden-haired devil and would never again face anything alone, not fear, nor joy, nor sorrow.

Her very own devil with dimples.

The End

About the Author

Nothing exciting happens in Tawny Taylor's life, unless you count giving the cat a flea dip—a cat can make some fascinating sounds when immersed chin-deep in insecticide—or chasing after a houseful of upchucking kids during flu season. She doesn't travel the world or employ a staff of personal servants. She's not even built like a runway model. She's just your run-of-the-mill, pleasantly plump Detroit suburban mom and wife.

That's why she writes, for the sheer joy of it. She doesn't need to escape, mind you. Despite being run-of-the-mill, her life is wonderful. She just likes to add some...zip.

Her heroines might resemble herself, or her next door neighbor (sorry Sue) but they are sure to be memorable (she hopes!). And her heroes—inspired by movie stars, her favorite television actors or her husband—are fully capable of delivering one hot happily-ever-after after another. Combined, the characters and plots she weaves bring countless hours of enjoyment to Tawny...and she hopes to readers too!

In the end, that's all that matters to Tawny, bringing a little bit of zip to someone else's life.

Tawny welcomes mail from readers. You can write to her c/o Ellora's Cave Publishing at 1056 Home Ave., Akron, OH 44310-3502.

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