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TALES OF THE DARKWORLD BOOK 4: RIDE THE LIGHTNING

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Tales of the Darkworld Book 4: Ride the Lightning
By Lex Valentine

Red dragon Emily Carrington found her mate in black dragon Vahid Delrey, but misunderstandings, painful secrets, and distrust keep them apart. Emily thinks Vahid doesn't want her. Vahid thinks Emily is a stuck up snob who could never truly love him. Both dragons hide crippling secrets from their pasts as their pain at being apart escalates. Emily falls for the strong, sexy black dragon and hides her need of him behind an icy facade. Vahid longs for Emily to need him but can't bring himself to mate with such a cold woman. When Emily's secret pain fetish threatens her life, Vahid must decide whether to save her or let her self-destructive ways rid him of the mate he never thought he'd love.

Ride the Lightning

Lex Valentine



PPB

Dedication

For Kenny
who loved me when no one did,
and 11 years ago took ownership of my heart.
Nothing will ever change that.

And for Dave2 and Vahid
who capture hearts without the aid
of whips and floggers... I think.

Special thanks to The Big Show (TBS)
for his expertise as a Dom and his
willingness to share it with me.

Author's Note:

The Tales books can stand alone, but read together provide the reader with a comprehensive view of the Antaeus family and the rest of the characters. The series spans ten books and I deliberately did not release them in chronological order.

Here's a mini-time line of the chronological order of events for the books that have been in the series thus far.

Ride the Lightning Part One

Fire Season, Ride the Lightning Parts Two and Three

Shifting Winds

Hot Water

Ride the Lightning epilogue

Shifting Winds epilogue

The bulk of *Ride the Lightning* takes place concurrently to *Fire Season*.

Urban Dictionary Definition of "ride the lightning"

a) To be executed by electrocution. Most commonly, the electric chair.

b) A harsher alternative meaning for "go with the flow." Going with the flow implies just going with whatever happens. Since lightning is so fast, deadly, etc., "riding the lightning" denotes a "fuck it all" mentality in which the person is so fed up, that they ultimately concede and just adapt or let themselves go to arbitrary circumstance, no matter how austere or violent it may be.

Prologue

Stepping into the spare but elegant interior of the exclusive BDSM club above the famous Paris nightclub Wicked Pleasures, every muscle in Vahid's body tensed. Deep in the core of his dragon heart, revulsion flared at what he was about to do. Still, his body and his psyche needed the release. He'd become too tense, too crabby, too pain-ridden. Without the release, the pain would become unbearable and his control would suffer.

Garrick Forrester appeared before Vahid had taken more than a few steps into the lobby. While the master had never done anything to make Vahid uncomfortable, the steel in his eyes was unnerving. Tall and angular, the Magia had run Beyond Pleasure for countless decades. Certainly, Vahid remembered hearing Garrick's name whispered when he'd spent a year living in France as an exchange student. His interest in BDSM had pretty much bloomed along with his puberty that year and he'd found out all he could about Beyond Pleasure and the Forrester brothers.

"Welcome back, Vahid." The low tones of Garrick's voice gave away his status as master. Casually commanding, but with a mesmerizing note that would have been beyond compelling to any submissive. The tone never worked on Vahid. He'd never been a sub.

Falling into step with Garrick, as the master turned and began to walk down a thickly carpeted corridor, Vahid noticed the unusual quiet of the club. Often, when he came to Beyond Pleasure, the crack of a whip and low moans could be heard.

"Slow night?" he asked the older man.

Garrick's dark grey eyes flicked over him. "New soundproofing," he replied with a slight smile.

Pushing open a door at the end of the corridor, Garrick ushered Vahid into a luxurious locker room. "Your things are where they usually are. You've been given the Red Room. I believe you know the way." Garrick raised a brow and Vahid nodded.

"Yes. I do. Thanks."

With a nod, Vahid turned away, crossing the room to his personal locker. Placing his palm on the front of the locker, he waited for the spell-lock to sense his presence and open the narrow metal door. It took a few seconds, but the door popped open and Vahid reached in, pulling out the trappings of his life as a Dominant.

He changed swiftly into the leather outfit he preferred when having a scene with a new sub. He reached for the whip's handle, letting it warm to his palm. He stepped out of the locker room and made his way to the red room. Because he'd been there countless times before, his feet automatically knew the path.

A few steps from the door, the strong scent of baby powder assailed his nose. Startled, he stopped in the center of the corridor, sniffing. The baby powder scent intensified and he stiffened. A mixture of astonishment and rage swept through him. Turning, he sought the direction of the scent. He twisted around and his gaze landed on a plain wood paneled door some eight feet away.

Silently, Garrick appeared again, his face set in harsh lines. He strode over to the door and pushed it open, moving with a speed that surprised Vahid. The instant the door cracked open, the scent of baby powder became overwhelming. Following Garrick into the room, Vahid saw a thickly muscled man dressed in a loin cloth and wielding a barbed cat o' nine tails. His sub hung

from chains attached to the leather cuffs on her wrists, her feet restrained by a spreader bar. Nearly naked, her back a mass of bloody ribbons, her blonde head lolled on her neck, indicating her unconsciousness. Fury streaked through him and he reached for the man's whip arm, but Garrick beat him to it.

The master of Beyond Pleasure ripped the whip from the man's hand and tossed it down, ordering, "Out! Do not show your face here again. It is your duty to know when your sub has had enough."

"She didn't use her safe word," the man whined, cowering away from Garrick.

"No excuses." Garrick's grim expression didn't change, and the man slunk out of the room.

Vahid strode over to the unconscious woman, carefully cupping her face in his hands and avoiding the mess that was her back. His chest tightened painfully as he stared down at her beautiful face and softly breathed her name. "Emily."

PART ONE
Three Years Ago
Chapter One

On the second day of the second week of her new job, Emily got a whiff of allspice. Her nose twitched as the scent grew stronger, smelling like a freshly baked pumpkin pie. She knew what day it was, but glanced at the calendar anyway. July third. Hot dogs and barbeque ribs season, not pumpkin pie.

Two deep voices rumbled in the corridor outside her office. She tensed. She had yet to meet her cousin and new boss, Sean Antaeus. They had corresponded and spoken on the phone numerous times over the past few years, but had never met. So far, she had met both of his brothers, but not his sister. The younger Antaeus men were highly intelligent, obviously talented, and beyond good looking. She could only imagine how gorgeous the oldest Antaeus was. Their dark beauty made her feel pale and insignificant.

Swallowing hard, she fought back her fear and self doubt, armoring herself with a cool façade. She stepped to her office door and peeked out. Two men stood about five feet from her door with their backs to her. Both had black hair. One was tall and lean with a hawk like profile. The other man seemed built like a tank. His head was some three or four inches below the tall man's yet his shoulders were just as wide if not wider. Emily could sense the thick muscles bunching and rippling beneath his clothes as he moved.

Riveted, she stared at them, the scent of allspice growing stronger by the second. Her pulse began to race and her heart pounded. Dear gods. Something inside her went completely haywire. The taller man spoke and his words caused her spine to stiffen.

"Have you met our new head of finance? Alfred swears she's a genius."

The shorter man snorted rudely. "I haven't met her, but her reputation precedes her," he replied in a nasty tone.

His voice wafted over her like a fingertip stroking her pulse points. She shivered. He had the most beautiful voice. It slipped along her skin like a silk shift, cool and rich, evocative... Something inside her snapped and she felt an insistent tugging as she breathed in the allspice scent. It came from him... the man with the voice... the shorter one...

"I've heard she could freeze the balls off a brass monkey," he went on. "No emotion. No personality. No tits."

A stabbing pain ripped through Emily's chest. The man whose rich scent roused every cell in her body thought she had no personality or emotion. She almost choked on the gall that rose in her throat. Thoughtless words. Cruel words. By the gods, he didn't even know her!

"Stop it, Vahid. That's no way to talk about a colleague you haven't even met yet," the tall man admonished sternly. "Listening to gossip doesn't become you either. You'll get farther in this world making your own judgment calls rather than relying on the observations of secretaries and clerks."

The muscular man made another rude sound. "Yeah, well, I've heard enough to know that Miss Emily Carrington from her rich, red dragon family is just as stuck up as I thought she'd be," he countered. "Maire dropped something in front of her and she just stepped over it and kept on

walking. What a fucking stick up her ass popsicle. She probably has no mate because no man's willing to risk sticking his cock into a block of dry ice."

The instant the man said 'mate', Emily froze. Pain exploded in her chest and her head. With a little cry, she turned from the door, pushing it shut and stumbling across the huge corner office to the plate glass window. She stared unseeingly at the coastline that stretched for miles in either direction. Her eyes filled with tears; she willed them back, struggling to regain the cool, haughty expression she usually hid behind.

The scent of allspice had been so strong! That alone should have given the truth away. The tugging in her chest. The way his voice sent her senses into a tailspin... The man in the corridor was her mate. Vahid—the shorter one who had been so scathing—not the tall one. The taller man must have been Sean Antaeus. The other man could only be his Chief Operating Officer, Vahid Delrey.

Emily drew a shuddering breath. She'd cultivated the cold, businesslike exterior for a reason. No one had ever penetrated her armor and discovered the reason for its presence. She had always thought one day she would meet her mate, and he would take one look at her and know what she hid in her heart, despite her icy exterior. She blinked back tears as her dreams shattered. Vahid Delrey might be her mate, but he had no clue who she was. He wasn't even open-minded enough to listen to his boss about her.

She stared out the window at the marine layer blanketing the coastline. She leaned her face against the glass, a chill settling into her. Her future lay with a man who would never appreciate her, never be able to see beyond the façade she showed the world. Why had Fate dealt her yet another painful blow? Didn't she warrant even one of her dreams coming true?

A knock sounded on her door and she forced the icy mask of her public demeanor into place as she swallowed her sobs and turned around. Sean and Vahid entered, polite smiles on their faces. Actually, Sean's smile was more than polite. The black dragon seemed especially pleased to meet her.

"You must be Emily," he said striding forward to shake her hand briskly. His amber eyes flashed with pleasure. "Alfred's told me so much about you. Welcome to Antaeus International."

"You're Sean Antaeus." She smiled, knowing the movement of her mouth didn't match the expression in her eyes. She kept herself firmly guarded against both men.

Her new boss nodded, ignoring her coolness. He gestured toward the shorter man. "This is Vahid Delrey, the Chief Operating Officer. Officially, I am your boss and you report to me. If I'm not available, you go to Vahid or my brother Declan," Sean told her.

She inclined her head, knowing that the movement seemed arrogant and regal. Her eyes met Vahid's and he murmured a greeting, as he raised his hand to meet hers. The instant their palms met, fire rippled through Emily, threatening her icy outward calm. Her dragon clawed at her, wanting Vahid. In his ink dark eyes, she saw a recognition, a spark. His warm fingers caressed her hand. She fought her dragon for control, ruthlessly taking it from the beast who wanted to pounce on Vahid and bathe him in her dragonfire.

"How nice to meet you, Mr. Delrey," she murmured and pulled her hand free of his.

A slightly bereft expression flickered in his eyes. "Vahid," he said absently, his nostrils flaring.

She wondered how she smelled to him. Every dragon's mate had a unique scent. For Emily, Vahid smelled of allspice. She could tell he'd scented her, knew she was his mate. She wished she knew how she smelled to him.

"Baby powder," he murmured softly as if he'd heard her thoughts.

She jerked, taking a step back. Turning her attention to Sean, she spent the next ten minutes discussing her new duties with him while Vahid stood just out of her range of vision, completely silent.

When they turned to leave, Vahid glanced at her, and she saw the question in his black eyes.

I'm not what you want or need, Vahid Delrey. You said it yourself. I have no tits, nor warmth. And no interest whatsoever in being the mate of a man with such narrow-minded views. On the other hand, you're going to have to learn to work with me no matter how much your dragon wants me. I'm just bitch enough to be amused watching you work on that.

Vahid's eyes widened as he heard her thoughts. Cruelly, she turned her back on him, and shut him out of her head, the shards of her shattered heart ripping at her from the inside. Now, that her dreams of one day finding happiness had been ground into dust, she had to figure out how to survive because she knew the pain of being without her mate would grow with each passing day.

As the door closed behind Vahid, Emily slumped against the cold glass of the big window. Palms and face pressed to the smooth coolness, she stared down a dozen floors to the street below. If she didn't think her dragon would shift and save her, she'd just jump.

She laughed softly. Today was nothing. She hurt, mostly from the loss of her illusions, but it was minor compared to what she now faced and what she had condemned Vahid to. In a few years, when the pain became unbearable, she might have to seek the option of suicide. It might be better than letting circumstances drive her slowly insane.

Pushing off from the glass, she went to her desk and pulled out her cell phone. She stared at the contact list, her chest aching. Then she dialed. Shaking, she fought for control as a click indicated that the call had been picked up on the other end.

"I didn't think I'd ever see you here again."

The man's voice was dispassionate, cool, yet held a note of curiosity.

"I just found my mate and blew him off," she said tersely, trying to keep her voice from shaking with fear and pain. "You'll be seeing a lot more of me now."

The man on the other end of the line sighed heavily, his regret palpable. "Em, I don't advise this. Make up with him and mate. You really don't want to travel this path."

The soft warning hardened Emily's resolve. "I was meant to fuck up my life. You already knew this about me, Dave," she growled harshly, a little laugh escaping her. "What's one more punishment in a lifetime of them?"

"Em, you're not thinking. This isn't right. You shouldn't come back here." Dave's voice sounded urgent.

"It's where I belong, Dave. I was wrong to think I could ever escape. I'm damaged goods and I always will be." Her voice was a soft whisper, a bare thread of sound. "Make sure there is someone who can accommodate me. I'll see you at seven."

Emily hung up and glanced out the window again. This time she could see her reflection, beautiful, cool, poised. Every inch the executive. Inside, her dragon moaned in pain.

Chapter Two

Far From Heaven's doorway had a road block in front of it. A road block named Dave Forrester. Tall, lanky, with a shock of black hair that matched the two-day stubble he affected on his cheeks and chin, Dave ran his BDSM club with an iron hand gloved in supple leather. Emily had known him for years. First, in Paris at Beyond Pleasure, and then later in California at Far From Heaven. When he'd first left Paris, she'd missed him tremendously.

A couple of years later, after Em's final break with her family had occurred, she headed to California herself, drawn there by Dave's presence and her cousin, Sean Antaeus's, offer of help. She went to college and worked for friends of Sean's in various cemetery related industries. She gathered work experience and several degrees until finally, Sean had asked her to work at Antaeus International.

Eager to pay him back for the doors he'd opened for her when she'd left her family, Emily had been happy to take the job he offered. Now, after what had happened that morning with Vahid, she wished she could crawl back to Paris where no one would question her icy demeanor.

With a tilt of her chin, she walked up to her oldest friend. "Let me in, Dave."

His jaw clenched for a moment. "What if I say no?"

"What if I just go down the road to the Hot House?" she countered.

Emotion flared in Dave's steel blue eyes at the mention of the other local BDSM club. "I'm sure you'd accomplish your goal of killing yourself there, Em."

Dave's implacable tone made Emily want to sigh. She didn't want to fight with him. She just wanted...oblivion. "Do you really think I have a death wish?"

The Magia snorted rudely. "You don't use a safe word even when you can, and should. So yeah, you have a death wish, darlin'."

Emily glared at him. She knew Dave was right and they were both aware that she knew. She decided to play dirty. "Then let me in, Dave," she said in a soft voice.

He gave in instantly, as she'd known he would. With an angry grunt, he spun away from her and pushed open the door of the club. The plush burgundy foyer emulated the entrance to an expensive restaurant. A formal coat check window to the left. A host station directly ahead. A few velvet and gilt chairs arranged comfortably around the walls of the small room. An unobtrusive door on the right.

Emily nodded at the man standing at the host podium. He returned her nod, but otherwise remained impassive. Dave unlocked his office door and ushered her inside. She tossed her bag down on the leather sofa and flung herself into the corner, her fingers automatically drumming on the arm.

"I don't know what to do with you anymore, Em. Why do you insist on destroying your life? Destroying yourself? You've come so far from your past. Why do you let it continue to poison you?" Dave paced across the office, flinging his hands out in exasperation.

She pondered his words for a moment. She knew she didn't have an answer. She'd asked herself those very questions repeatedly over the past twenty years to no avail. She had never been able to overcome the destructive triggers buried deep within her psyche. "Maybe I need help," she whispered, gnawing at her lower lip. "Although, I think it's just too late."

Dave whirled on her, marching across the Aubusson carpet to the sofa. "That is the problem! You've given up!" Hands on hips, blue eyes blazing, Doms didn't come any more formidable than David Forrester. "You are worth fighting for, Emily. This new problem, what is it exactly? Some kind of stupid misunderstanding?"

Emily felt herself poker up, her usual icy demeanor wrapping itself around her protectively. "It's none of your business," she intoned.

He made a rude gesture. "The hell it's not! You're my friend. One of the few genuine ones I have. How many times have Garrick and I saved you from going too far? We care about you, Emily. You are not alone. You are not unloved. The problem is that you believe you are and don't let people in."

"I let you and Garrick in." Only because they'd pushed, but she didn't say that. They already knew it.

"Oh, spare me," Dave spat angrily. "No one gets close to you unless they're willing to spend a decade forcing the issue."

Emily's stomach twisted. Dave's anger was understandable. She had given up the lifestyle six months before. She hadn't had a single urge to return to the club... until meeting Vahid Delrey had ripped open new wounds over the wounds of her past and left her soul bleeding.

Tears welled. All she wanted was peace. Whoever dished out karma had either forgotten she existed or took perverse delight in serving her all the bad stuff. She fought back the tears, but one escaped and she chided herself internally for it. A Carrington didn't show weakness.

Dave sat down on the sofa beside her and dragged her into his arms, pressing her face against his chambray shirt. "You know, it's okay to cry, Em. It's okay to be upset, feel hurt, and to grieve," he said into her hair as he stroked her back. "You don't let yourself do any of those things. It's not healthy."

A soft hiccupping laugh erupted from her throat. "I'm not healthy, Dave. You know this."

He hugged her tightly. "You've been healthier than ever since you stopped coming here. Unless..." He broke off and pushed her back, staring down into her eyes. "Have you been sneaking over to the Hot House?"

He had every right to ask her such a question. She'd been that duplicitous in the past. But this time, his question made her want to slap him.

"Of course not! I said I was done and I meant it. Life has been pretty peaceful these past few months." She twisted her fingers together in her lap. "I didn't ask for what happened today, Dave. I was happy without a mate."

She saw Dave's face cloud over and braced herself to give the explanation she knew he would demand.

"Tell me what happened."

Emily tried not to let her emotions get away from her as she quickly related the events of the day. She nearly made it to the end of her tale, but remembering the expression in Vahid's eyes as he'd left her office had tears welling. Dave pressed a tissue into her hands. She wiped her eyes and sat silently as Dave got up and began to pace again.

“Em, you need to patch things up with him,” he said finally. “Both of you are going to suffer horribly if you don’t. I think a reconciliation is within your power. What happened today was a misunderstanding. You just have to speak with him and smooth things over.”

She frowned up at him. “Why should I be the one who has to smooth things over? I didn’t say anything wrong or hurtful. He did!”

Dave shook his head. “Someone has to make the first move. He knows he was the one who screwed up. If he sees that you are willing to forgive, he’ll apologize.”

Emily hadn’t gotten that kind of vibe from Vahid, but she didn’t know the man so maybe she wasn’t giving him a chance. “Okay. Tomorrow, I’ll do as you say, but if he still doesn’t get it…”

She shook her head, knowing that if things didn’t work out with Vahid, she would feel worse. The expression on Dave’s face told her clearly that he understood.

“If your mate is a total asshole, I’ll expect you tomorrow night at seven,” he said with a sigh. “I understand your need to release your pain by giving total control of your body to another, but Em, it’s no long term solution to the problems you’ll face if you and your mate can’t work this out.”

Emily stood and picked up her bag. “There are other solutions if we can’t work it out,” she told him, her tone impassive.

Dave’s jaw tightened and he strode over to her, taking hold of her chin and tilting her face up to his. “That is not a solution, Emily. That is a selfish cop-out. Haven’t we already been over this?”

She jerked her chin from his grasp. “You’re the only one who gives a fuck if I die, Dave. How is it being selfish?” she snapped. “It’s hard to live with a past like mine. Finding peace is nearly impossible. The only hope I ever had was that one day I’d find my mate and his love would heal my pain. Now, it looks like that is lost to me too.”

Emily stalked to the door. She glanced back and found Dave staring at her with a mixture of anger and sympathy.

“Don’t give up yet, Em. Please. Just don’t give up,” he said quietly.

She rubbed her free hand over her eyes. The conversation, on top of everything else that had happened that day, left her exhausted. “I’m trying, Dave.” She opened the door. “I’ll call you tomorrow one way or the other.”

She drove home to her small apartment, trying not to think about anything. She parked in the underground garage and walked through the center courtyard of the small complex. As she unlocked her apartment door, she realized that the cozy little one bedroom place didn’t befit her new job and status as Vice President of Finance at Antaeus International. She would have to find something a bit more elegant and formal now in case she was expected to host some type of cocktail party.

Tossing her bag down on the coffee table she walked into the kitchen and poured herself a glass of port. She leaned against the chipped counter and gazed at the newspaper clipping on the refrigerator door. Yellowed at the edges, the article about new homes depicted a beautiful two-story home on a beachfront lot. The photo had been taken at sunset, the light golden and red on the water. Every light was on in the house and in the yard two children played while the parents sat on the front steps, the wife leaning against the husband’s shoulder as they watched the children.

For years, that image had been her ideal. She dreamed of having a similar life one day. All her hopes to make that dream come true hinged on finding her mate. She should be planning to buy a house like that, not a move to some cold, sterile, high-class condo where she could hold cocktail parties for business.

She really had no idea how Vahid would take any overture from her. Everything between them had gone so horribly wrong. But Dave was right. She had to try. Her whole future depended on it. If she was to have any hope of achieving the life she wanted so badly, she would have to try to patch things up with Vahid.

Emily finished her wine and went to bed without dinner. If she'd eaten, the food would have come right back up. As she lay in the dark, staring at the patterns on her ceiling from the moonlight streaming in the open window, she wondered what the next day would bring. A new life or a return to the old one, only this time, without the hope of a future.

Chapter Three

Vahid's muscles protested as he climbed the stairs from the parking garage to the lobby level of the high-rise building that housed Antaeus International. He hated moving and the past two days had been spent in a haze of carrying boxes as he moved in with his current girlfriend, co-worker, and boss's sister, Eden Antaeus. He wasn't in love with Eden, but he'd been hot for her a long time and they had a great relationship. She needed someone whom she felt comfortable with and so did he. She might not be what he needed or wanted in a mate, but she suited him well for this juncture of his life and career. He wasn't exactly ready for the responsibilities a mate represented anyway. All in all, perhaps what had happened between him and Emily had been for the best.

Oddly, Sean had been pretty tight-lipped on the subject of him moving in with Eden. When they'd first started dating, Sean hadn't had any problem with the relationship. When they'd first talked about moving in together, Sean hadn't seemed to care. Yet, in the last few days, Vahid had felt Sean's disapproval like a dark cloud that enveloped him and followed him everywhere. He knew a confrontation hovered on the horizon, but he just hadn't had the balls to face it head on by asking Sean what was wrong.

As he stepped onto the shiny granite floor of the lobby, the object of his thoughts came into view. Sean strode toward the bank of elevators, a fresh cup of coffee from the lobby vendor in hand. He slowed his pace as their eyes met. Vahid fell into step beside his boss and they stepped into the empty elevator together. Vahid decided he'd better get the inevitable out of the way while he had no audience.

"You're pissed at me for moving in with your sister."

Sean's brows rose. "Eden's sex life is really none of my business," he said smoothly and lifted his coffee cup to his lips.

"You're pissed at me about something. I can tell." Vahid knew it had to be about Eden. The timing was too perfect. Sean could deny it, but it seemed pretty undeniable to Vahid.

Sean's dark head dipped in a nod. "I am pissed at you, but not about Eden. She's not the only female relative I have, you know."

His boss's suave tone conveyed no anger, but Vahid knew him far too well. Sean Antaeus was more than just pissed. He was furious. "I don't know what else would have upset you," he replied, his brain scrambling to find another reason for Sean's ire.

"Although she doesn't want it known around the office, Emily is my cousin. She's the spitting image of my mother."

The ice in Sean's voice chilled Vahid. Usually, Sean in a snit didn't affect him. Today, fear crept in and took up residence in Vahid's bloodstream. "You're mad because of what I said about her before I met her."

That whole episode in the corridor outside Emily's office and then the meeting inside had been beyond surreal. He'd never had such an instantaneous reaction to a woman before. Her baby powder scent called to his dragon instantly. Prior to that moment, he'd only seen her at a distance, through the glass of the meeting room window, at the end of a corridor walking with Declan... She'd appeared tall, regal, cold as ice and just as haughty... But face to face, she'd knocked the bottom out of his world.

When her palm touched his, images of her naked, wrapped around his body, flashed through his mind. Her scent overpowered him and his dragon roared its approval of their newfound mate. But of course, everything had already been fucked up between them. His words came back to haunt him and the specter of his pending living arrangement with Eden left him unable to do anything more than let Emily dictate the tone of their relationship from that moment forward. He'd gone home and gotten blazingly drunk, the knowledge that he'd screwed up his future weighing on him heavily.

"Vahid, I'm furious that you're not trying to fix things with her. She's your goddamned mate. You're condemning the both of you to indescribable pain." Sean's harsh voice rattled the chrome of the elevator. Obviously, his dragon was on a very short leash.

"Me? What about her?" Outraged, Vahid didn't even stop to wonder how Sean had discovered that Emily was his mate. "She's not interested in having me for a mate. She just wants to rub my careless words in my face. She's a cold bitch who wouldn't know what to do with a man like me in a hundred years!"

A muscle twitched in Sean's jaw and his amber eyes flashed. "You need to stop acting like a teenager and man up, Vahid," he said in a cold tone. "The two of you belong together and you need to make some sort of overture toward her to fix what's gone wrong between you. Pointing fingers, assigning blame, and ignoring the fact that you're mates is childish, immature, and very irresponsible. Moving in with my sister after you knew you'd met your mate is just fucking stupid. I'd thought better of you."

The elevator doors opened onto the main floor of Antaeus International and the receptionist looked up at them with a bright smile. Sean replied curtly to her good morning as he stormed toward his office, leaving a shocked Vahid still standing in the elevator.

Making his way to his own office, Vahid wondered what the hell he should do. He never went against Sean. He owed the man more than he could ever repay. He owed him his soul. He hadn't meant to be so defensive, but somehow, Emily Carrington had messed with the comfortable balance he had going with his boss. Privately, he might wonder how a cold woman like Emily could handle a man of his temperament, but he shouldn't have voiced the thought to Sean especially since they were related.

With a heavy sigh, he pushed open his door and headed for the relative oblivion of work. Half an hour later, a knock on his door roused him from the reports he'd been reading. He looked up as Emily Carrington stepped into his office.

Today, she wore a power suit in black with a sky blue silk shirt. The slim skirt hugged her slender hips and long legs. Her pale blonde hair shone like silver in the florescent lighting, the silken strands caught back in a jeweled clip at the nape of her neck. His dragon stretched, rousing the instant her baby powder scent reached him. She appeared cool and collected and so very unlike any woman he'd ever been attracted to in the past. Yet his dragon salivated, nearly out of control at the barest glimpse and scent of her.

His gaze met Emily's and her honey colored eyes nearly floored him. Long lashed and wide, they appeared warmer than the bright amber of the Antaeus clan, and the expression in them drew him like a lodestone. Fear and uncertainty gazed out of the hazel depths despite the cool unemotional set of her beautiful face. In that instant, he wanted only to gather her into his arms and tell her everything would be okay. Cursing himself silently, he knew it wouldn't be okay. Everything was completely screwed up and he had no idea how to fix it.

“I-I...thought maybe... well, perhaps w-we could... I mean I thought maybe w-we could s-start ov...”

Emily's soft, stumbling words were overridden by the bang of his office door as it swung wide and hit the wall. His girlfriend strode into the room. Eden Antaeus had more confidence than any three AI executives combined. Tall, lushly curved with full breasts, a tiny waist and flared hips, her long legs had the lean muscles of a swimmer. Tanned and the epitome of vibrant health, her golden eyes shone as bright as the sun and her long black hair waved around a face filled with vivacity.

Beside the effervescence of Eden, Emily appeared carved from a block of marble. Elegant and willowy, her stillness seemed to come from an inner composure few people could command. However, Vahid knew that to an outsider Emily would appear to be a nightingale beside Eden's peacock.

“Hey, babe.”

Eden rounded the edge of his desk and planted a kiss on his lips. Vahid knew she wasn't posturing as some females did in front of other females, staking her claim on him. Eden just didn't think anything of being demonstrative if she felt like it.

“Eden, you've met Emily, haven't you?” he said, struggling to keep his voice from sounding as strangled as he felt.

Eden whipped around and flashed a brilliant smile at Emily, whose honey colored eyes went dark and opaque. The fear and uncertainty that been on display a moment before in her eyes, disappeared so quickly that Vahid wondered if it had ever really been there or was simply a product of his wishful thinking.

“My cousin!” She reached out and gave Emily a quick hug before stepping back. “Sean told me he'd hired you. You must be dead awesome because Sean's not into nepotism.”

Vahid watched as Emily's face arranged itself into a cool, pleasant expression. Remote, but with enough polite interest to keep Eden from thinking she didn't like her. An equally polite smile curved her sugar pink lips, but he noticed that it never reached those honey colored eyes.

“So I've heard. And I prefer not to trade on the relationship. I've asked Sean not to let that information out in the company,” Emily replied in a mild tone so devoid of emotion that Vahid instantly wondered what Eden thought of her coolly contained relative.

“I won't let the cat outta the bag. Dragon swear!”

Eden swiped two fingers across her hipbone in a gesture he'd seen a hundred times before. He knew Eden's dragon clan mark lay just inside her pelvic bone and she had a habit of using the old-fashioned dragon version of pinky swear. This time, however, the gesture made Vahid acutely aware of the fact that he had no idea where Emily's clan mark lay on her body.

“Hey, babe, can you stop and pick up some dessert on the way home? Something chocolate. I've got dinner all planned but I've no time to go to the bakery,” Eden said, reaching up to straighten his tie.

“Sure. I'll stop at that Jewish bakery you love,” he murmured, his heart thudding with alarm. Dear gods. He hadn't wanted Emily to find out about him and Eden in this manner. Not that he had any more tactful way of telling her.

Eden brushed a kiss along his jaw and he could see the ice forming on Emily. She turned away from his girlfriend's display of affection and the stiff set of her back told him everything he needed to know. If she had come to his office to try to make things right, he'd just nipped that in the bud, although he hadn't meant to.

"It was nice meeting you, Eden. I need to get back to my office. I have a department meeting to prepare for," Emily said in a soft voice, so devoid of emotion that Vahid decided the expression he'd seen earlier couldn't have been real.

The instant the door closed behind Emily, Vahid's dragon threw a temper tantrum, raking him with sharp claws that caused intense heartburn. Once before he'd let his dragon rule him and it had caused so much trouble that Vahid knew he wouldn't even have a life had Sean not saved him from the consequences of the dragon's actions.

"I like her. She's quiet, but I just have this sense that she is imminently capable," Eden told him, her hand stroking the front of his shirt absently.

"Would Sean hire anyone who wasn't?" Vahid forced a smile to his lips. Like Emily, he needed to put on a good face. He had a life beyond his mating troubles and it wouldn't do to trash that life especially when he'd spent so much time carefully constructing it. He hoped everything would work its way out because viable solutions just hadn't presented themselves to him. Being at a loss for ideas pissed him off and this time, in this situation, he had absolutely no one to blame but himself.

Chapter Four

The Dom held a cat o' nine tails in his inexperienced hand as he stripped the black leather vest and matching boy shorts from her. His rough palms stroked over her skin and she shuddered with revulsion. Her dragon paced inside her, aching with a pain Emily could no longer bear. The Dom grabbed her cuffed wrists and chained her, yanking her arms wide and above her head, so high only her toes had purchase on the wood floor.

Muscles stretched to the point of pain, Emily closed her eyes and waited for oblivion. The first bite of the knotted tails into her flesh felt like a release. Tears spilled from beneath her eyelids as her emotional pain sprang free. *More, more*, she cried silently. *Don't let me feel this anymore!*

The Dom continued to lash her, harsh, filthy words punctuating each strike. Emily shivered as pain flowed from her body and mind. Her dragon wept, bowing her head and taking the punishment. The scene wasn't any different than a hundred others before it, yet the hope her dragon stubbornly clung to for a half century seemed to finally have dissipated.

For years, nearly all of Emily's life, the lash had held sway over her, defining her life, her id, ego, and superego. Everything had a tie to the woman who bowed to the lash that punished her. For six whole months, she'd been freed of the punishment and had reveled in a life filled with hope and peace. Then she'd smelled allspice and Vahid Delrey had walked into her life, shredding the hope and dreams that still lurked within her.

A moan escaped her and the Dom lashed her harder, breaking the skin. The trickle of blood down her spine had a familiarity to it that comforted her as she let go of the pain in her heart. More moans ensued and the Dom whipped her harder, probably believing her moans to be sounds of enjoyment. The trickle of blood became a rivulet that grew with each blow as her skin ripped open and the barbs tore at her flesh.

Tears continued to pour down her cheeks. Emily barely felt the physical blows because her mental anguish consumed her. Despair swallowed her and her dragon, dragging them down into an abyss so dark and cold they could no longer feel. Consciousness hovered, wavering, ready to let go and drop her into the comforting arms of nothingness. Emily reached for that moment. She called up the vision of Eden kissing Vahid, touching him possessively, and let the pain roar from her as the edges of her vision went dark and she fell into oblivion.

When Emily awakened from the spell-induced sleep she'd been in, her body hurt. She wriggled her shoulders and felt the pull of skin healed by a Magia. She knew the sensation well. Dave and his older brother Garrick had healed her numerous times over the years. Still, she always awoke stiff and sore as if she'd been in a car accident or overdone it at the gym.

A hand appeared with a glass of orange juice as she pushed her way to a sitting position. She scraped back her long hair and glanced up at Dave, taking the glass from him.

"Thank you," she murmured. "For last night and this." She raised the glass and sipped from it. The orange juice slid down her throat, sweet and tart and wholly delicious.

"Em, this has to stop." Dave's words were soft and worry laden.

"It will when my dragon lets me give up," she told him. "Until then, this is the only release I have. I will hold out as long as I can before I avail myself of your club, Dave, but this isn't going to be easy and you know how it will eventually end."

Dave paced the room and she watched him with wary eyes. She was in his guest bedroom, so she knew he'd brought her there after healing the wounds left by the young, rough Dom.

"Why does this all have to end with your death? What is wrong with this asshole? And why the hell hasn't your cousin set him straight?" Dave complained, his voice laced with anger.

Emily shook her head. "I don't know. I just know that he's living with my cousin, the female one, and they are in a relationship. I can't touch that, Dave. And you know quite well that without my mate, I'm going to eventually go crazy and die anyway."

She sighed and finished the juice, setting the glass on the bedside table. "I'd rather my dragon lets me finish this my way rather than leave me to go mentally supernova."

Dave shot her a narrow-eyed, evil look. "Maybe he needs some sense beaten into him."

"Oh, no!" She slipped out of the bed, noting that she wore one of Dave's t-shirts. She stalked around the bed and grabbed his hard arm. "Promise me you will take no action against him, Dave. Promise me you'll leave him alone!"

A fierce frown settled on his angular face. "I don't want to promise," he growled, petulance in his voice. "I want to kick his ass, Em, however, I will acquiesce to your wishes. But I'm warning you, if he ever confronts me about you, I *will* kick his ass!"

Emily nodded. A promise from David Forrester was golden. He never broke them. "Okay. I'll accept that. Now, can we go out for breakfast? I'm not that interested in eating soy pancakes and granola for breakfast."

Dave quirked a brow at her. "Looking for a slab of dead cow, are you?" he teased.

A smile curved up the corners of her mouth. She and Dave had been teasing each other about eating meat from the day they'd met. Dave had been a vegetarian forever while Emily, in true dragon fashion, was proud to be a carnivore.

They dressed and Dave drove them to a pancake restaurant. Over plates of buckwheat pancakes and a small steak for Emily, they discussed her new job.

"I need a better place to live," she pouted. "What if I'm expected to host a cocktail party or something?"

Dave snorted in disgust. "Those should be held in a hotel or restaurant not in an employee's home. Why do you really want to move?"

She shrugged. "I guess I just need to pack up my illusions and dreams and move on to a different place where being the cold bitch all the time won't be so hard."

Dave's hands fiddled with the butter knife. "I can understand you needing a fresh start. So what are you gonna do? Rent or buy?"

"I was thinking of buying a condo," she told him, glancing up to find him staring at her.

"Not a house? The house you've wanted forever?"

"That house is for a family, not for some crazy career driven single woman," she chided gently. "A condo will suit me just fine."

Dave shook his head. "You won't be happy there. The environment is too sterile. Just buy the house you want, Em."

"No. Not until I have the life I want." She lifted her chin stubbornly. "Maybe there's a chance things will change. I'm saving the house for that day. Until then, it's condo hunting for me. Are you in?"

Reluctantly, Dave nodded. "Okay. I'll go with you. But I still think you should get the house you really want."

"Without the rest of the dream, the house is nothing." Emily firmly put thoughts of the photo on her refrigerator out of her head. "Let's go get a newspaper and look for open houses today. Maybe I can get this done in a weekend."

Dave groaned and tossed some money on the table as he stood. "I can't believe I just agreed to house hunt with a woman."

Emily flung an arm around him and hugged him, knowing that without Dave she would truly be alone in the world. "Consider it practice for when you meet your mate," she teased as they left the restaurant.

"I'll make a deal with you. If you don't mention *me* finding a mate, I won't mention your situation with *your* mate."

Emily stopped and looked up at her best friend. He had a disgruntled expression on his face. She smiled.

"Oh, that's right. Elizabeth Hurley is married, isn't she?" she joked and grinned when Dave's expression turned more disgruntled. He'd had a crush on the model turned actress for years. "Okay, you've got a deal."

"Good," he replied. "And no more Liz cracks either."

Emily rolled her eyes and got in the car. Her life might be fucked up, but she acknowledged that there were glimmers of good in it. Dave's friendship happened to be one of them.

By the time she walked into Sean's office on Monday, she'd found a condo and had made an offer. She'd been told her offer would probably be accepted before the week was out and escrow would probably close in a month. Having followed through on her decision to move, Emily felt better than she had since she'd met Vahid. However, one look at her boss's face told her that maybe her good mood wouldn't last.

Sean waved her in. "C'mon in, Emily. Close the door."

Cautiously, she took a seat across the desk from him, balancing her notepad on her lap. "Has something come up? This isn't our regularly scheduled meeting." She'd checked her calendar before coming to his office. Her regular weekly meeting with him wasn't until Friday morning.

"Put the pad away. This isn't business. You're working out wonderfully for us and I'm very glad I hired you," he said soothingly, his smile warm despite the cool, guarded expression in his eyes.

Emily set her pad and pen on the chair beside her. She folded her hands in her lap and waited calmly for Sean to tell her why he'd called her to his office. At least, that was how she appeared. Inside, her stomach began to churn.

"Emily, I know what happened between you and Vahid. I've already spoken to him."

Sean's words sent ice sluicing through her veins. He might be her cousin and her boss, but she wasn't used to people knowing her private business. She'd had to tell Sean her secrets when

she'd asked him to help her come to California. She hadn't told him everything but he did know how dysfunctional her family had been and why she'd had to escape them.

She opened her mouth to reply, but he cut her off. "No, let me get this off my chest." He took a long drink from his coffee mug then set it down with a loud clink. "Emily, you're my family. My father raised us to protect the women in our family. While Vahid has been a close friend since college and my right hand ever since I took over Antaeus International, you take precedence."

Wide-eyed with shock, Emily sat back in her chair hoping like hell her mouth wasn't hanging open. She blinked at Sean and he smiled again, this time letting it reach his amber eyes.

"Surprised you, did I?" He chuckled. "I surprised Vahid too. I told him he was stupid for moving in with my sister once he'd met you. I've urged him to fix things between you. However, this has to be a two-way street, Emily. You have to want this too."

She shifted uncomfortably beneath his hawk-like gaze. "Wanting everything to be okay doesn't take away the pain or the resentment between us," she said in a low voice. "Already he's done things and said things that make it exceedingly difficult for me to forgive and forget. Maybe in time..."

Sean sighed heavily and worry lit his eyes. "You don't have forever," he warned. "You will both start feeling the pain within a year if you aren't already. Within a few years, it will be nearly unmanageable. Are you sure you're willing to risk madness and death over a few slights?"

Emily stiffened. "They weren't a few slights, Sean. Vahid has some fundamental issues about being my mate. I can't and won't tolerate his arrogance. I deserve better. If it ends badly, so be it." She shrugged carelessly. "I'm prepared to accept the consequences of *my* actions. I don't think Vahid can say the same."

A sad expression settled on Sean's handsome face. "I fully realize he's being immature and irresponsible. I'm not sure he knows that yet, despite the fact that I've pointed it out to him."

She wished she'd been a fly on the wall when Sean had done that. She might feel a little better about the whole situation if she'd seen and heard Vahid being taken down a peg by her cousin. She mustered up a weak smile for Sean.

"I appreciate you going to bat for me, Sean, but this is between me and Vahid. I'll see it through to the end, one way or the other." She rose to her feet and gathered up her pad and pen. "If my work suffers because of this situation, I'll expect you to let me know just as you would any other employee. I don't want any favoritism. I'm here to work hard. Please don't cut me any slack."

Sean stood and walked to the door. His golden gaze held hers, an enigmatic expression in them. "I won't, Emily." He reached for the door knob, but didn't open the door. "You look just like my mother. Did I tell you that?"

She shook her head. "No, but my mother said that she and Isadora looked very alike so I figured there must be a resemblance."

"It's uncanny." He quirked a brow up and his smile returned. "Your temperaments are very different thought. You're very self-contained. My mother was...explosive."

The love in his voice told her that her cousin's home life had been a far cry from her own miserable childhood. "My mother said Izzy had a temper. As for me, I learned early on to keep my

emotions to myself. They weren't encouraged, or wanted, and showing them only brought me pain."

She reached out and brushed his hand aside to open the door. "Thank you for everything, Sean. I do appreciate it. Even if I really can't bring myself to show it."

As she walked away from her cousin, she felt his gaze burning a hole into her back. She straightened her shoulders and lifted her head higher. Show no weakness. Show no emotion. Show them all what a Carrington was made of, she thought bitterly, a vision of her father with his hand raised to strike flashing through her mind.

Maybe she should have changed her name to Balmont when she'd left home. Because in her experience, Carringtons inflicted pain. They never felt it themselves.

PART TWO

Present Day

Chapter Five

Gargoyle Lodge had very nice suites and Emily didn't have to share, something for which she was profoundly grateful. She didn't do well in close quarters with strangers, and most of her co-workers fell into that category. She kept her private life and her work very separate. Life just went that much smoother when she compartmentalized.

She'd been in a haze of professional euphoria lately, since she'd hired Garret Renquist away from Alfred Stone. Garret fit in perfectly with her plans for her department at Antaeus International, and her plans for herself. Her career and personal plans had shifted over the past three years as she tried to find a balance in her life.

She and Vahid had achieved a kind of armed truce in the office. The two years he'd spent living with her cousin Eden had been the hardest on her emotionally and yet, the easiest to deal with. While Vahid had a relationship with her cousin, nothing could happen between them. Emily's cold bitch façade took root and grew, throwing up a huge wall of silence and denial between them. Forty-eight months after she'd been hired, she and Vahid were still strangers. The cold war continued, but nothing overt and nothing personal ever again took place between them.

In the past year, since Eden left Vahid and the company, moving to New York to be a photographer, things had been difficult in a different way. Sadness and despair dogged her daily, but she managed it well enough with an occasional trip to Far From Heaven. Vahid had made no overtures to her since Eden's departure. Brian, one of the company's attorneys, had told her Vahid dated occasionally, but nothing as serious as it had been with Eden.

Even though she made no move to change their status, Emily wondered why Vahid didn't. In her experience, men were aggressive, dominant, wanting to imprint themselves on their females. She didn't understand why Vahid made no move toward her. The instant she'd heard Eden was gone, she'd waited for Vahid to approach her. A year later, she still waited.

She'd finally decided that the asshole just wasn't interested. She supposed she wasn't high enough on the Antaeus food chain to be what Vahid wanted. She hadn't originally thought him the type of guy who kissed ass to get ahead but over the years she'd found that he did indeed kiss her cousin Sean's ass, repeatedly and often. It irked her and made her wonder what the hell Sean had on the guy to turn him into a slaving flunky.

After spending three years learning to deal with the growing pain within her, fueled by her primal need to mate Vahid, she figured she could handle most anything. Yet, when Sean had announced the retreat, the thought of being in such close proximity to Vahid day and night for the better part of a week with no access to Far From Heaven sent a paralyzing fear through her.

The beauty of the lodge meant nothing to her. The fact that she couldn't just run to Dave's club when she felt overwhelmed with pain had her panicked. She'd managed the past three years only because she had an outlet. Now, she was trapped in the lodge with Vahid, and without her outlet. His scent dogged her every step and her senses were stretched to the utmost. She had no clue how she would survive the retreat, but somehow, she had to find a way.

Driving up to the lodge with Garret had felt good. She'd offered him a ride because she knew he hadn't been in the States very long, still lived in a hotel, and hadn't bought a car yet. As his new boss, she was duty bound to take care of him and this retreat had been sprung on them on his very first day at work.

At first, she'd been annoyed with Sean for messing with her new hire schedule. He liked to play these little power games and usually she could adapt, albeit with a twinge of irritation. Once she'd gotten past her annoyance at having her schedule for Garret disrupted, she realized what the retreat meant to her in terms of proximity to Vahid. Then, she'd felt the beginnings of pure panic. Luckily, having Garret drive up with her, and having him at her side during the retreat, eased some of those feelings. She could concentrate on him, getting him acclimated to the company, helping him fit in. She'd do her damndest to ignore Vahid the way he ignored her.

Their arrival had been easy. Emily didn't have to share a suite, but Garret shared with Holden Antaeus, the company General Consul. As the youngest of the Antaeus brothers, Holden seemed to be the golden boy who could do no wrong. A former college tennis star who'd been offered the chance to go pro, a Harvard law graduate at the top of his class, and an all-around nice guy, Holden did his job well and wasn't arrogant. Emily liked him a lot; although, she didn't usually have a lot of interaction with him. He worked more with the middle brother, Declan, same as Emily. As a straight shooter, Holden would take good care of Garret when he wasn't with Emily, easing his transition into the company.

Night had fallen in the mountains. Emily gazed out the huge bay window in her bedroom. Everything seemed so calm, so beautiful and soothing as twilight embraced the manicured gardens surrounding the lodge buildings. However, the peaceful scene before her was deceptive. The mountains could be a dangerous place. Inside the lodge, danger lurked as well. Perhaps not for the others, but certainly for her. Already, her control seemed tenuous. She turned away from the window and began to prepare for dinner.

Red and black. Power colors. Emily brushed her hair into a sleek golden spill across her shoulders. She stared at her reflection in the mirror. As usual, she checked to ensure that the collar of her red designer sweater adequately covered the nape of her neck. No sense in leaving herself open to questions she wouldn't, couldn't, answer.

She smoothed her hands over the sides of her black silk slacks. She appeared the epitome of business casual tonight. Except for her hair. Gathering the silky strands up in her hands, she contemplated twisting it into the sleek chignon she usually wore to work. For some reason, she couldn't bring herself to confine her hair again. The afternoon spent driving to the lodge in her convertible with Garret left her with the urge to set her hair free again. However, loose hair didn't fit her image as a professional so she compromised with a classic ponytail clipped with an expensive gold fastener. Ridiculously high-heeled sandals completed her outfit.

Slipping her keycard into her pocket, she left her suite and headed down to the private dining room assigned to Antaeus International. Peeping into the room, she noticed the staff bustling around setting up, and Vahid off to one side in conversation with a hotel employee. Her heart thudded in her chest. She ducked out before he saw her. Quickly, she crossed the lobby and entered the bar.

Her breath came in little gasps. The sight of Vahid in casual clothes always turned her inside out. Hell. Who was she kidding? The merest glimpse of him set her pulse rocketing and always had. She shivered, her nostrils flared wide and still filled with his allspice scent.

“What can I get you?”

Emily jerked, her eyes meeting the bartender's. Something in her expression must have given away her unsettled emotions because his impassive face warmed into a sympathetic smile. “Maybe a whisky, neat. Chivas?” he asked.

She wished like hell she could have a nice man like him for a mate. His broad shouldered frame and handsome face were only part of a very attractive package. Her dragon protested within her, needlessly pointing out that Vahid's shoulders were broader. With a sigh, she shook her head at the bartender.

“A glass of port. I'll need my head attached to my shoulders for now. Later, I may take you up on the Chivas.” She smiled at him as he turned away to grab a wine glass.

Sipping her wine and leaning against the bar, she cursed her habit of always being early. More than once in her tenure at Antaeus International her prompt arrival had left her alone in a room with Vahid. Somehow, in the office, it didn't seem to matter. But here at the lodge, in the wilds of the mountains, it bothered her fiercely. Without the office constraints to rein in her emotions, she had only to glance at Vahid to feel her body respond so strongly she could barely contain her dragon. The beast clawed her ruthlessly, roused by the sight and scent of her mate.

“Liquid fortification?”

Emily looked up from her wine glass. Her gaze collided with Sean's. A smile quirked up the corners of his mouth, but his amber eyes held a serious expression. She knew he was up to something. The whole retreat smacked of a Sean Antaeus *deux ex machina*, something he'd pulled out of his bag of tricks to force something to happen.

“Not likely. It's not nearly strong enough,” she said dryly. “Although, the thought of needing some makes me want to take the bartender up on his offer of Chivas.”

Amusement flickered on Sean's face. “If you're going down, best to go down swilling the good stuff.”

She shifted uncomfortably. Sean might be her cousin, but she wasn't comfortable with him because he knew the truth about her...all of it...from her past to who her mate was to where she spent her free time. He'd never been judgmental, had never been anything but supportive and caring, but she had never liked anyone knowing her truths. As her best friend, Dave knew it all too, but she didn't mind with him. The fact that Garrick knew unnerved her in the same way that Sean's knowing did.

“Em.”

Emily looked up into amber eyes that glowed just as her mother's always had.

“You don't have to be unhappy.”

She bit her lip and deliberately turned away from Sean's hawk-like gaze. She needed the Chivas a lot sooner than she'd planned, she thought as she began to shake.

“What purpose does this rift between you serve?”

Anger began to burn inside Emily. How dare Sean think that the problems between herself and Vahid were her fault? He spoke as if it was something she could rectify on her own.

“I don't know, Sean. Why don't you ask Vahid that question? I'm just a dumb blonde,” she replied icily and walked away from him, out of the bar and across the lobby to the ladies room.

She sank down on a chaise and swallowed the entire contents of her wine glass. Setting the glass on a low table with a shaking hand, she realized that the subject of Vahid tore her up inside much more, much faster, than it had in years. She wrapped her arms around her middle, hugging herself. The pain had grown incrementally over the past couple of years. She could only manage it by going to Far From Heaven weekly and sometimes more. At the moment, she had nothing to curb the rising agony that clawed its way to the surface of her emotions rather like the way her dragon raked her internally until she had to shift and let her free or risk having her take over at an inopportune moment.

The next four days would, in all likelihood, cause her more pain and discomfort than she'd ever had to deal with. Her dragon, Vahid, Sean, her pain... all wrapped together with the pretty bow of her new wunderkind employee Garret Renquist whom she could not abandon this weekend. She needed Garret. He held the key to her escape from the world of Antaeus International and Vahid.

She stood, her legs shaking slightly. Her mouth felt like sandpaper and she began to regret speaking so coldly to Sean. The gods knew she owed him, and in her own dysfunctional way she cared about him, too. Reaching for the handle of the door, she stepped out of the ladies room, intent on getting through the night.

The dining room held a dozen Antaeus managers, which meant she would not have to worry about being alone with Vahid. She headed for the bar in the corner, conscious of the fact that Vahid and Sean were both absent. Keeping her back to the room, she had the bartender give her a double Chivas on the rocks. She knocked back two double whiskeys and had a martini in her hand when she sensed Vahid's presence right before his scent hit her nose.

"What's wrong?"

The velvet of his tone belied the flat black stare he leveled on her when she turned.

Her chin tilted up at a belligerent angle. "Nothing that hasn't been wrong for a long time."

She had the immense satisfaction of seeing Vahid's jaw clench visibly.

"Getting drunk doesn't help the situation, Emily," he said in a low, gravelly tone. "We both owe Sean, and we should show him a little respect."

Emily's eyes opened wide in shock. She'd always known that Vahid kissed Sean's ass. She'd never known why exactly, but he defended Sean blindly so she figured whatever he owed her cousin was huge.

He started to reach for her drink and she jerked her arm out of his reach. "I'll show him the respect he's earned," she snarled, thinking of Sean's annoying words earlier.

"Emily..."

She sidled around the wall of his body and out of his reach. "Leave me alone, Vahid. I have a new employee to take care of," she said coldly and turned to make her way toward the door where Garret Renquist stood looking lost.

She spent the next half hour squiring Garret from group to group, studiously avoiding Vahid and Sean. She wasn't quite sure what she said to the green dragon, or how drunk she appeared, but she figured Garret would chalk up her behavior to the atmosphere. She wasn't the only manager to get blitzed although she was the only Vice President who did. During dinner, she picked at her food and drank as much wine as she possibly could. She could feel the waves of

Vahid's anger as she pushed her green beans all over her plate. He sat on the other side of Garret who seemed to be a victim of his own tension, staring down the table at Holden and Declan every chance he got.

When dinner finally finished, Emily stood up. Before she could muster a "Good night" to Garret, a hand clamped on her elbow with the fierceness of a dragon's claw. The scent of allspice filled her nostrils. She whimpered slightly as Vahid twisted her arm, pulling her against his body. The contact threw her already scattered defenses to the four winds. Lust swept through her, and instantly her thong dampened. Irritated, she tried to pull her arm away, but Vahid tightened his grip, dragging her along with him as he strode from the room.

Out in the lobby, he headed for a side door. The cool night air soothed Emily's hot cheeks, but made her head spin. She stumbled on an uneven patch of sidewalk as Vahid pulled her deep into the gardens.

"Gods! Why'd you have to get drunk, Emily?" he growled, his voice short with tension.

"I'm not that drunk," she lied.

Vahid snorted, smoke rolling from him in a big cloud. He tugged her along the path into a dark section of the garden then stepped off the sidewalk onto a woodchip strewn path.

Wobbly, half from all the alcohol she'd drank and half from her unsuitable designer footwear that wasn't meant for a dirt path, Emily tried to keep up with Vahid, all the while wondering just what the hell he was going to do. Kill her and bury the body?

A gurgle of hysterical amusement escaped her. Vahid's hand tightened its grip. "C'mon."

Just when she thought she'd snap a heel, he pulled her into a dark gazebo and shoved her down on a hard wooden seat. He paced the tiny space before her, his dark hair disheveled, his eyes stormy.

"None of this has to be as hard as you make it, Emily," he said gruffly.

Unbidden and uncharacteristically, tears sprang to her eyes. "Speak for yourself, asshole," she muttered as she fought back the tears and the lump in her throat. She knew from experience that the ache in her chest could only be assuaged in one way, but a trip to Far From Heaven wouldn't be possible for days. She hugged her arms around herself defensively. Being close to Vahid fucked with her head and her body. She wished she wasn't drunk now. She needed her wits about her.

As if he'd heard her thoughts, which she knew wasn't possible because she shielded from him automatically, he stopped and speared her with an intense gaze, filled with an indefinable emotion. "Release your dragonfire," he whispered hoarsely. "Burn off the alcohol."

Emily shivered uncontrollably. Releasing her dragonfire would also heighten her sexual awareness of him, not that she needed it honed any sharper. And Vahid knew damn good and well what releasing her fire would do to her. He was tormenting her, she decided, although he didn't look like he was enjoying any of it.

"No." She refused on principle. She never did what Vahid told her to.

His hand shot out and grasped her ponytail, tugging it gently. "Yes. I want you sober."

"I'll just get drunk again the instant I'm back in the lodge," she sneered.

Vahid's eyes flashed in the darkness. "It's your career. Go ahead and flush it," he ground out. "But right here, right now, burn it off."

Feeling trapped, Emily jerked her head and Vahid released her hair. She stood on rubbery legs and turned away from him. Closing her eyes, she reached inside and connected with her dragon. Heat spiraled through her body and with a loud roar, her dragon pushed to the surface as she released her dragonfire in a huge fireball. The flames crackled and hissed for an instant and then the fire went out as she sucked back a deep breath. Clarity returned full force as the alcohol in her system burned away.

Vahid took a step closer to her. Their eyes met and sexual tension filled the air. Nostrils flared, Emily's senses came alive as her head filled with the scent of allspice. Her body remained hot, the scent of her arousal evident to them both. Her dragon clawed at her, wanting Vahid, wanting to mate him and turn loose her dragonfire on him.

Emily's breath hitched in her throat as Vahid took another step toward her. She retreated, taking step after step backward as he advanced. When her back slammed into the side of the gazebo, she turned her head away from him. He stepped into her personal space, his hard body brushing hers. His hand captured her chin, forcing her head around. Their eyes met. Emily's fear rose as she recognized the heat in Vahid's gaze.

"Oh, no," she whispered.

His fingers caressed the skin of her jaw as he held her chin immobile. "Oh, yes, Emily. For once, let go of that icy control and *feel*."

The fierce words, couched in a deceptively soft voice, had Emily shaking with need. "I feel, Vahid. I feel a helluva lot more than you will ever know."

"Then show me. Just fucking show me."

She opened her mouth to reply, but his lips closed over hers. As a first kiss, it fell flat in the romance department. However, what it lacked in romantic sweetness, it made up for in intensity. Emily couldn't remember ever being kissed so thoroughly. In fact, other than a few encounters that had left her sexually frustrated, her only good sexual experiences were Dominant/submissive scenes. She had no real experience with kissing and intimacy.

Vahid's lips were soft but firm. They moved on hers with an expertise that sent a spark of jealousy through her. He'd been with women he'd loved while she'd been with men who'd used her and used her pain against her. That thought became her last lucid one as heat flared within her body and turned her into a creature of sensation.

The wet lick of their tongues as they danced together made Emily's knees weak. Vahid's arms gathered her against his rock hard muscles. The arm around her waist felt like an iron band. Shuddering with reaction, lust, and overwhelming emotion, Emily collapsed against him, her heart thundering. She reached up and gripped the broad shoulders that she'd ached to touch from the moment she'd first seen them. His growl of satisfaction vibrated against her lips.

Emily grew lightheaded from the ferocity of Vahid's kisses. He held her mind and body in thrall as his lips and tongue demanded a response from her. With her composure cracked and her body in a frenzy of need, she had no choice but to submit to his desires. She wound her arms around his neck as he lifted her. Her eyes drifted shut, and she let her senses take over as he carried her to the bench. He sat down, keeping her wrapped against him.

Straddling Vahid's thick thighs, Emily felt her damp core press against the hard ridge of his cock. She whimpered again, wishing they were naked. As if he'd read her thoughts, he slipped his hands under her sweater, his fingers gliding up her sides, taking the cashmere with them. She

lowered her arms, freeing them from the sleeves. He pulled the material over her head, breaking their kiss for a brief moment before swooping in and taking her mouth again.

Awash with the need to mate him, Emily shivered in the cool air, her nipples hard points beneath the delicate lace of her bra. Vahid's fingers found the front clasp and popped it open. He spread his hands over her breasts, palming them and squeezing. Emily's shivers became full-blown shaking. Never had she had such a strong sexual reaction to a man. The feel of his hands on her naked flesh felt so right and so good that she had no choice but to give in to the emotions he roused in her. However, letting go of her control, letting Vahid take control, left her vulnerable and needy. When his hand pulled down the side zipper of her silk slacks, she wriggled on his lap, struggling to her feet.

As their mouths parted, she stared down at him, acutely aware that he could see her trembling, standing before him with her bra open and her pants undone. She stepped out of the designer heels and pushed the material of her slacks down her hips, uncaring that they landed on the dusty cement floor of the gazebo.

The sliver of pale pink lace that constituted her thong had drawn Vahid's eyes. His hands followed his gaze, smoothing over her hip bone where the head of her dragon clan mark lay. The deep shadows of the gazebo hid the details of their bodies, even though they both could see well in the dark. She knew Vahid could see her clan mark scrolling over her hip bone, but also knew that he might not be able to make out the exact design. He slipped his fingers under the edge of the thong and pulled it down.

The instant the lace hobbled her at the knees, she wriggled out of it and stepped forward, her inner thighs grazing the outside of Vahid's khaki covered ones. Smoke encircled them like fog. Emily tugged at the cotton covering Vahid's shoulders. He ripped the shirt open, buttons pinging off the concrete and wood of the gazebo. His muscular chest heaved with every heavy breath. She stared in awe at his powerful torso. A patch of hair spread across his pecs, the dark curls crisp.

With shaking hands, Emily reached out and sank her fingers into his chest hair. He groaned loudly and leaned forward, resting his forehead on her lower belly. His hands pressed her thighs farther apart and she cried out when his tongue swiped along her hairless slit, lapping at the cream that dampened her flesh. When he eased her lips apart and buried his mouth in her core, she had to bite back a wild shriek of pleasure.

Emily clung to Vahid as his mouth licked and sucked at her. The tip of his tongue flickered over her clit and she nearly passed out as she came. Her vision flickered as she shuddered, her flesh convulsing with pleasure. A huge puff of smoke escaped her nostrils and the screams that she swallowed emerged as uncontrollable moans. He lifted his mouth from her, but his fingers continued to stroke her, coaxing more cream from her body.

"P-please," she whispered, her voice shaking as much as her body. "I-I... need..."

Smoke poured from his nostrils, curling around her body. He didn't speak, but his fingers tore at his pants. She gripped his shoulders, knowing that if she let go, she would more than likely fall. He yanked his pants open and roughly shoved them and his briefs down, lifting his hips off the bench as he pushed the bunched up material to his calves.

Emily stared at the dark trail of hair from his navel to his groin. From neatly trimmed pubic hair, his thick erection rose, the slit at the head already weeping. Her dragon became insistent at the sight of his manhood, wanting to mate him and mark him as hers. Her brain rose from its sexual haze and battled her dragon, trying to protect her heart. She might not be able to hold off

her sexual attraction to Vahid, but she sure as hell had enough control—shredded though it might be—to not mate him. That path led to more pain and more than just a broken heart. It led to a broken spirit as well. There might not be a lot left of her, but she was determined that what little she had would not be owned and lacerated by Vahid Delrey.

His harsh breathing drew her attention from her inner struggles. Thick smoke enveloped them. The need to touch him, lick him, filled her to bursting. She bent, gripping his hard thighs, the hair roughened skin tickling her palms. Her mind conjured up images of sucking his big cock as he held her head. Moisture flooded her anew. She started to kneel between his thighs, her tongue flicking out along her bottom lip as she stared at the pre-cum decorating the blunt head of his penis.

Hard hands gripped her arms. “No.”

Her eyes met his. She blinked, trying to understand why he wouldn’t want her on her knees, supplicant, servicing him as any good sub would. He shook his dark head and she saw the sweat that beaded his hairline.

“I need to be inside you, Em. Not in your mouth, but your pussy.”

Vahid’s shaky words gave away the fragile control he had over himself. Emily moved her hands to his shoulders as she straddled his thighs, kneeling on the bench. Her wet flesh brushed his rigid cock and he groaned. His fingers bit into her hips as she slowly eased herself down onto him. She sucked in a breath, feeling an electrical charge go through her as he filled her. Her inner walls clung to his hardness, expanding slowly to accommodate his girth and length. A slight twinge of discomfort told her she’d never had a cock as big as his, but the sensation of being connected to him, to the man who was meant to be hers, overwhelmed everything else inside her.

Beneath her, Vahid’s hard body shook, wracked by shudders that plainly gave away his eagerness to be with her. Pressing her torso to his, her hips undulated as she wrapped her arms around his neck, her fingertips caressing the broad shoulders she so admired. With their gazes locked, Emily saw the truth deep in the inky depths of his eyes. He wanted her so much he didn’t care where they were, didn’t care about Sean or Antaeus International or the problems that had plagued their relationship from day one. At that exact moment, she knew he didn’t care about anything except touching her, kissing her, and thrusting within her wet heat until they both exploded with sensation.

He didn’t speak a word as his hips pressed upward, his cock pushing hard against her cervix. Her body shook just as uncontrollably as his. Even though they were not sharing thoughts, she could sense how out of control he was, and why. He wanted her just as much as she wanted him. Not touching, not mating, pained him, too. However, her instincts told her that he had far better control over his emotions than she had. She didn’t know what had finally pushed him over the edge and didn’t know how it would all end...and neither did she care. Only his body thrusting within hers mattered.

Vahid leaned forward his mouth capturing hers. Slow and intense, tongue sweeping in to master hers, the soul-drugging, passionate kisses turned her bones to jelly. Her tongue glided along his dragon fangs and he reciprocated, causing another rush of lust through her veins.

Rocking and grinding on him, she rubbed her breasts against his hair roughened chest, the stimulation to her already taut nipples sending zings of lust to her groin. The heat within her body spiraled to levels she’d never felt before and when his hands cupped her hips, his thumbs finding her swollen clit, she exploded into orgasm. He took her cries with his mouth, kissing her

deeply. She had the distinct notion that as mates, they had always been somewhat imprinted upon each others' souls. But now, the connection she felt to him as they moved together in a frenzied dance of lust, took that imprinting to a whole other level. No other man could give her what this one could.

Powered by passion, they moved together with growing urgency, the heat within their bodies rising to flashpoint. Emily's dragon lay just beneath the surface, barely leashed and demanding to mate Vahid. As lost to the moment and the man as she was, Emily knew she couldn't let go of her dragonfire again. That resolution hung by a very slender thread of control strengthened by fear.

Her body sang, held in thrall by the brush of his fingers against her clit, the wet flick of his tongue against the base of her throat, the thick, pulsing fire of his cock within her pussy. Vahid's hips thrust upward in a rapid rhythm that indicated his orgasm neared. Sweat beaded his shoulders and hairline. Emily's lower body flamed, every inch of her becoming an erogenous zone as yet another orgasm built in her overheated flesh. Vahid's mouth captured her nipple, sucking it hard, pain raking her as his hand pinched the other nipple, twisting it. White-hot heat, a mixture of pain and intense pleasure erupted within her as he battered her cervix and pulled at her nipples. She flushed from head to toe as she came, and lightheadedness took her breath away. Digging her fingers into his biceps, she struggled to stay conscious, a stray tear leaking from her eye to streak over her cheekbone and fall onto his heaving chest.

The instant her tear touched his flesh, he convulsed beneath her, a harsh cry escaping him. His cock convulsed and she felt the wet heat of his seed bathing the sensitive walls of her pussy. Never had sex been so fulfilling and intimate, so incredibly personal and emotional. She wanted to weep from the beauty and pleasure of it, and the sense that she would never again know such a wonderful closeness to another being.

Shaken to her soul, she collapsed on Vahid's heaving chest. Their damp skin slid together with a delicious friction that matched the spasms inside her pussy. The urge to kiss him and hold him and beg him to never let her go rose inside her, clamoring to be released. Overwrought by everything that had happened, numb with pain and pleasure and far more emotion than she could reasonably process, she clung to him, breathing in his allspice scent mingled with the scent of sweat, sex, cum, and the distinctive scent of dragonfire.

Smoke still lay about them thickly, having been discharged from them both as their passion rose and peaked. Emily's breath came in small hiccupping sobs and she noted dimly that Vahid's breath rushed audibly from his partially open mouth and flared nostrils. Her dragon preened, knowing they had satisfied their mate well.

A loud beeping shook Emily from her stupor. She drew a shuddering breath and lifted her head from Vahid's hard shoulder. She blinked dazedly as their eyes met. His expression became instantly shuttered.

"It's Sean. I need to go," he said gruffly.

Reality slammed into her like a hockey player with an illegal body check. She stumbled to her feet, her flesh separating from Vahid's with a wet friction that made every nerve in her body tingle. She stood naked in the gazebo, her lace bra dangling from her shoulders, her thighs damp and sticky. Stooping, she gathered up her clothes and backed into the shadowed corner of the small structure. Betrayal sluiced over her, icing her heart. Vahid had jumped at the chance to get away from her and what had happened between them. That fact eviscerated her already wounded soul.

Vahid stood and pulled up his trousers, trying to put his clothes to rights and turn off the beeping of his phone. Emily shivered, nausea rising, bile burning the back of her throat. She couldn't believe what she'd just done, couldn't believe she'd fucked him. She wouldn't use any other term for what they'd shared. There had been no intimacy, no caring. Only base sexual instincts that had them coupling like animals in the dirt.

She yanked on her slacks, uncaring that they were wrinkled and dusty. Her eyes searched the darkness for her thong but she couldn't see it anywhere.

"I have to go."

Vahid's harsh whisper broke the silence between them. Emily's head jerked up and their eyes met again. His guarded expression flicked at her raw nerves, setting her anger alight. She snorted, a puff of smoke and small flame erupting from her nostrils.

"Then go."

His expression shifted to one of discomfort. "I'll walk you back. It's dark and..."

She cut him off with an imperious curse. "Fuck that. I can take care of myself. Go! I don't need you."

She pulled her sweater on, turning away from him to search for her sandals. She picked them up and glanced over her shoulder. He was gone. For a moment, she stood staring into the darkness, wanting nothing more than to crumple to the ground and sob her heart out. Instead, she stepped out of the gazebo, carefully picking her way down the wood chip path in her bare feet, uncaring that her expensive silk slacks dragged in the dirt.

Emily entered the lodge through a side entrance and slipped up the stairs to her second floor suite without being seen. Inside her room, she leaned against the door, willing tears to come. Dave had said it was okay to grieve and she had just lost something very important, something worth grieving for... her future.

Chapter Six

Poking the egg yolk until it ran while pretending it was Vahid's guts didn't really make her feel any better. Food held a pretty low priority for her anyway. Nausea seemed to be her overriding sensation that morning which didn't bode well for the consumption of eggs and bacon.

Emily nibbled at a dry triangle of toast and breathed in the flowery scent of the pot of strong black tea she'd ordered. After trying unsuccessfully to wring healing tears from herself, she'd spent the night huddled in her bedroom's window seat, arms wrapped around her drawn-up knees. The chill of the bay window suited her, seeping into her bones and her soul.

By the time dawn streaked the sky, numbness had set in. She'd fucked Vahid. She couldn't even pretend that what had happened between them had any emotion to it other than anger and frustration. It hadn't been so bad in the heat of the moment. She'd reveled in his touch, but afterward, when the heat of their sexual frenzy died away, they both obviously had regrets. Bitterness wrapped itself around her as the clipping on her refrigerator became even less attainable.

After finishing her pot of tea, Emily dressed in armor. Steel grey slacks and a matching long sleeved mandarin necked shirt-jacket. She twisted her hair up with a pair of black lacquered chop sticks and applied minimal make up. The suit was casual but still a power suit, and when worn by a woman who excelled at keeping others at arm's length, it became a suit of armor.

She logged into the office network from her laptop and checked on the status of several projects, dealt with her email, and delegated some tasks. Delegation would come easier now that her own attempt at playing Machiavelli had paid off.

From her bedroom window, she'd seen Holden and Garret down at the tennis courts at dawn. Every time she thought of Garret, a sense of rightness settled over her. The instant she'd met him at Alfred Stone's office she'd known she wanted him for Antaeus International. Oddly enough, it hadn't taken much persuasion to get Sean and Alfred Stone on her side. Alfred agreed that it would be a perfect career move for the British financial whiz. Sean, who usually didn't like his executive apple cart turned upside down by anyone but him, had gone along with the whole thing as if it had been one of his usual manipulation games. Even better than Alfred and Sean falling in with her plans, Garret had. At the moment, her plans involving Garret were the only good thing in her life and she clung to them fiercely.

Glancing at her platinum watch, she realized the morning's seminar would start soon. She finished her email and shut down her laptop. With a leather covered legal pad in hand, she went down to the hotel's conference room. She peeked in the door and breathed a sigh of relief. No Vahid. No Sean.

She went inside and staked out a chair for herself and Garret. She set down her pad and looked up to find her new employee and Holden Antaeus entering the room. In a flash, she was at Garret's side, dragging him away from the General Consul. She liked Holden, but he didn't need to be hogging all of Garret's time, she thought a tad waspishly.

Garret smiled at her, his green eyes flashing warmly. For a split second, she wished her mate had been someone like him, someone she understood. Vahid kept her off balance because she couldn't ever get a bead on his emotions. Also, she knew Garret was bi-sexual, knew him to be the non-judgmental sort. Revealing her secrets to a man like him would never result in him turning from her in disgust. Telling Vahid was a crapshoot with very poor odds.

As she steered Garret toward their seats, the skin at the nape of her neck prickled and she glanced over her shoulder to find Vahid in a heated conversation with Declan Antaeus. She swallowed hard and schooled her face into impassivity. Holden walked up to his brother and Vahid. Emily could sense Vahid's irritation rising, and then he flashed a perfectly false smile at the brothers and slipped away, leaving the room.

Emily and Garret sat down. She noticed that Garret's eyes followed Holden and Declan as they walked toward the conference table. She looked down at her legal pad, picking up her pen and trying to appear focused on the day's agenda. However, every nerve in her body tuned itself to Vahid. Sean came in with the speaker and introduced him. Fifteen minutes into the motivational speech, her skin prickled again. Vahid slipped into the room, taking the empty seat beside Sean.

Throughout the morning's seminar, Emily took notes and appeared engaged by the speaker. In reality, Vahid's allspice scent played holy hell on her body and it took every ounce of her considerable *sang-froid* to stay in her seat and not crawl down the length of the table, ripping her clothes off as she went so that she could pounce naked on him the instant she reached him. When he and Sean commandeered Holden and Garret for lunch, Emily turned away from the restaurant, thinking she'd just call room service for a salad... or a bottle of vodka.

She pressed the button for the elevator, unable to stomach climbing even one flight of stairs.

"Em? Can we talk?"

The deep voice of Declan Antaeus had her head tipping back to meet his amber eyes. He towered over her despite the fact that she was a tall woman. His reserved attitude kept people from feeling overwhelmed by his physical presence and she wondered if he cultivated it for that very reason.

"Sure. Would you like to join me in my suite? I'm going to call room service and order a salad," she said as the elevator door opened.

"Sounds good to me."

Declan stepped into the elevator car with her. He didn't speak again until they were in her suite. He grabbed the room service menu, picked up the phone, and called in an order for the two of them. Emily sat on a leather chair, smiling wryly at the company's second in command. For all that Declan didn't play the master puppeteer like Sean, he could be every inch the autocrat too.

He hung up the phone and sat down on the sofa, in the corner closest to her. He leaned forward, elbows on knees, hands dangling between his long thighs. His direct gaze pinned her to her chair.

"What happened between you and Vahid?"

Declan's words were quiet and concerned, and they nearly cracked her hard won composure. She blinked rapidly as tears threatened. Looking away from her cousin's amber eyes, she cleared her throat, but her words still came out husky with the tears she held back.

"We've never gotten along."

Declan made a rude sound. She glanced at him and found him watching her with deep sympathy in his expression. "Don't bullshit me, Emily. What happened last night?"

She drew a deep breath, maintained her composure and said, "I drank too much." She twisted her hands in her lap, her agitation rising. She didn't want to tell Declan everything. She

didn't want to tell him anything. Yet she knew, when Declan Antaeus wanted to know something, he didn't stop digging until he had every scrap of information available.

"And?"

"It pissed off Vahid."

Her gaze fell away from his. She couldn't say anymore. Couldn't tell anyone what had really happened between her and Vahid. The wound was too new, too fresh, too raw...too different than all the others she'd endured in her life.

Leather creaked. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Declan sit back on the sofa.

"I know that, Em." He sighed heavily. "I can't help you, can't run interference for you, if I don't know what's happening between you."

Shock held her immobile for an instant. Declan wanted to *help* her? She raised her eyes to his. "No one has ever offered to help me before," she whispered, unnerved by his offer.

He sighed again. "You are family, Em. As much as you don't like it known, it's the truth. You are our blood. Any of us would do almost anything for you. Protecting you is in our genetic make up. We're supposed to protect our women," he explained, a note of frustration in his voice. "Our mother made it clear to us all that her sister was special. That makes you special. And seriously, Emily...you look so very much like the paintings of her in her youth that it's difficult for any of us to treat you as if you were just an employee."

Wide-eyed, she took in his words, heard the frustration behind them, and realized how much she had held herself aloof from the Antaeus family. "Until Sean told me, I didn't know I looked like her," she admitted. "I know I look a lot like my mother but it never occurred to me that I looked like my aunt too."

"The Balmont sisters were known for their beauty. For more than two centuries, Isadora and Tanya looked very much as you do now." Declan shrugged. "Red dragons are notorious for aging well. And I'm sure your father was angry as hell that you have little of his DNA and are not a green dragon."

At the mention of her father, Emily looked away from Declan. She would not, could not think of her father. After what had happened the night before with Vahid, thinking of her father would send her off the deep end.

"I appreciate you wanting to help, Declan, but there is very little you can do." She spoke the words softly, keeping her tone firm and unyielding.

Again, Declan sighed. "Okay. We'll play it your way for now, Em. Just realize that you are not alone. Whatever you need, you have only to ask."

Room service arrived then and saved Emily from what might have come next. She didn't know how to have a family, how to behave, how to act and react. Her family life had been so incredibly twisted and vile that she had always felt alone in the world. She had a small connection to her mother, but even that was weak. For years, her mother had let her suffer at the hands of her father and subsequently, Emily carried a lot of emotional baggage about both her parents.

Lunch chat centered around work, mostly about the takeover of an Australian company that had become a thorn in Declan's side. They discussed the problems and got so in depth with the issues that when it was time for them to start their afternoon strategy sessions with their assigned partners, Declan called Sean and had the scheduled changed. He and Emily headed to a small

conference room where they were joined by Holden and Garret. The session became a plan to light a fire under the dragging footsteps of the Australian company that currently had a major cash flow issue due to overexpansion, making it a prime target for an Antaeus International takeover bid.

Emily enjoyed working with Garret, showing him how their department worked with Declan's and Holden's departments to make a takeover happen. His eyes glowed with respect and admiration as she went over the financial details with him. Her pride swelled. Garret might be a whiz kid, but this area of finance wasn't as well known to him. The fact that he listened and learned quickly and respected her work and her opinion meant a lot to her. It also meant that when it came time to put her plans into motion, Garret would be ready to step up to the plate.

After the strategy session, Declan and Holden headed off to the business center of the lodge, leaving Emily alone with Garret. Biting back a sigh, she realized that she was dead tired. She hadn't slept in days and emotionally she had nothing left to give. Luckily, it wasn't a group dinner night, so she could stay in her suite and veg out, something she looked forward to. Not having to wear the armor or the icy façade would be nice for once.

"Don't let them eat you alive," she advised Garret as she noticed him watching the Antaeus brothers walking away. She raised her eyebrows. "I can see how much their business acumen turns you on. Just don't let them use you, Garret."

He smiled at her, reassurance alight in his green eyes. "I won't."

"Good." She patted his arm lightly, happy that her new employee seemed to be working out perfectly. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"You're not coming down to dinner?" Garret's expression seemed a little shocked.

She shook her head. "It's not a group dinner night. I'm going to visit the spa and call room service. If I don't spoil me, no one will," she told him, her voice tinged with bitterness as she recalled how Vahid had so easily walked away from her after they'd had sex. It had been the perfect moment to cuddle her, kiss her, and make her feel cherished, but instead her mate had left to kiss the boss's ass.

"You have a good night," she murmured, turning toward the elevator.

In her suite, Emily tossed off the trappings of her job and pulled on comfort clothes, pale pink velour jogging pants and a matching silk cami top. She slid her feet into flat white leather thong sandals and headed down to the lodge's spa. She needed the pampering, even if the sense of being spoiled came from people who were paid to make her feel that way.

She let them pluck and wax her, wrap her in mud and clay, fuss over her feet and toenails – abused by her trek barefoot through the garden the previous night – and wrap her hands in hot towels. Afterward, she sat in the hot tub, naked and alone, soft music playing in the background, a tray of champagne and chocolate within arm's reach. She nibbled some dark chocolate and ignored the champagne. As much as she wanted to sink into the oblivion of an alcoholic stupor, she feared it too much now.

The hot, swirling water teased her body, reminding her how Vahid had touched her the night before. Her pussy pulsed, aching. She needed him again. Needed him so much that it became a physical pain, an agony for which she had no cure. Far From Heaven would have assuaged the worst of it, but Dave's club was two hundred miles away.

With a groan, she heaved herself out of the tub and wrapped her body in the thick heated towel. An attendant rushed over to escort her to the spa pedicure station. Emily sat in the huge vibrating chair, as her fingernails and toenails were done. She gritted her teeth as the chair sent her pussy into spasms of delight. Her night of pampering had turned into a night of sexual torture. After the manicure and pedicure came a massage meant to relax her. Instead, the stroke of hands over her flesh made her think of Vahid touching her, his mouth following his hands...

By the time she returned to her suite, her body cried out for release. She kicked off her sandals and padded barefoot to the wet bar. Her toes and fingers were painted an icy, pale pink, the feminine color matching the pants and top she wore. Every inch of her felt sleek and gorgeously female. But there was no one to appreciate any of it. She opened a bottle of Scotch and poured herself a hefty draught, knocking it back in two quick swallows.

Head buzzing from the small, strong drink, Emily decided to power herself down. She'd barely eaten, hadn't slept, and had drunk far too much alcohol in the past twenty-four hours. Now, she needed the things that comforted her, otherwise her pain would interfere with her work. Determined not to let Vahid get the upper hand by remaining cool as she spiraled out of control, Emily called room service and ordered comfort food. Curled on the sofa, she ate tomato soup, a grilled cheese sandwich, and ice cream from a pint carton while watching a sappy pay-per-view movie on the plasma television.

Tears welled and rolled down her cheeks at the sad movie. She cried silently for more than an hour, far more than the movie warranted. She knew her pain and grief had finally caught up to her and overwhelmed her control. She snapped off the television and stripped off her velour pants, settling into the comfortable bed at an hour when most people were headed out to dinner. With her iPod on the saddest songs in her collection, she cried herself to sleep, hugging the pillow to her chest.

A couple hours later, after the iPod had clicked off, muffled curses woke her. Not even a splinter of moonlight seeped between the cracks of the drapes to relieve the darkness in the suite. The curses had come from the next room. Emily blinked hard. Her eyes felt heavy and swollen from crying and gritty from sleep. She rubbed them briskly and got up, determined to see who had invaded her space. Barefoot, wearing only a thong and the pink cami top, she tiptoed to the half-open bedroom door and peered into the sitting room. A large black shadow crouched before the door to the suite. Fear sent adrenaline coursing through her veins. Frantically, she tried to think of a weapon she could use against the intruder.

Before she could come up with something, the scent of allspice drifted toward her. Even as relief washed over her, anger fired her blood. What the fuck was Vahid doing in her suite?

She pushed open the bedroom door and stalked toward him, her eyes finding him unerringly despite the lack of light. He knelt on the floor, rubbing his shin vigorously. As she approached, he looked up, automatically rising to his full height.

"What the hell are you doing here?" she hissed. "Get the fuck out!"

"Emily, I..."

"You what?" she interrupted, poking her finger into his chest and pushing him back against the wall. "You broke into my room, you... you... asshole!"

Vahid growled, smoke trailing from his nostrils. "I just wanted to..."

“What?” She barked at him, interrupting him once more. His presence in her room after how he’d treated her the night before made her blazingly angry.

“I wanted to make sure you were okay!” he burst out, grabbing her by the arms and spinning around so that she was pressed against the wall instead of him. “I know I ran out on you last night and I...”

“Arggh!” she exclaimed, losing complete control at his mention of running out on her.

She drew back her fist and punched him in the jaw. The solid impact sent pain arcing up her arm but she didn’t care. She pummeled his hard chest with both her fists until he wrapped his arms around her to stop the beating.

Pressed between the granite of his body and the cold unmoving wall behind her, Emily became acutely aware of her lack of clothing. The scrap of pink silk thong and matching cami top bared more of her than it covered. Vahid must have noticed her nakedness at the same moment. With a groan, he lowered his head and took her mouth in a devastating kiss.

Emily’s anger burst into flames of searing passion. Her arms locked around his neck, her hands fisting in his dark hair. Vahid’s t-shirt covered chest pressed against her, pinning her to the wall as he shoved up her cami, ripped off her thong, and yanked at the zipper on his jeans. Her moans became muffled sounds of rapture against his ravaging mouth. His kisses grew hotter, deeper, more insistent as he finally freed himself from the confines of his jeans. The hard heat of his cock rubbed Emily’s belly and her pussy creamed in response.

When his hands slid beneath her thighs, lifting her off the floor, she wrapped her legs around his hips. With a grunt and then a hissing intake of breath, Vahid slid his cock home within her wet sheath. For a brief moment, they were motionless. Emily could have sworn neither of them breathed. Her flesh pulsed around his, their bodies so in tune that it didn’t seem to matter what their brains did or thought or wanted. The primal instinct to couple with their mate overwhelmed all rational thought.

Smoke filled the room as they fucked each other. Thrusting mindlessly, bodies pressed together, sweat trickling, tongues flicking, mouths suckling... The sound of rough pants and mindless moans played like a symphony in Emily’s ears, underscored by the wet slap of flesh on flesh. Vahid nipped at her shoulders and the stiff buds of her nipples as his hips pistoned against her, pressing his cock ever deeper into her core. She clutched him with hands, legs, mouth and pussy, unwilling to give up even a moment of the exquisite ecstasy that had overtaken her body.

“Damn you! I can’t get you out of my head!” Vahid hissed as he licked the side of her neck, sucking and biting.

She knew he marked her skin, but she didn’t care. Digging her newly manicured nails into his taut buttocks, she growled, “Don’t talk. Just shut up and do this!”

She didn’t need to hear how bad he felt at being with her. She didn’t need to hear how he couldn’t help himself. She just wanted him to fuck her, to bring her the oblivion she normally couldn’t find outside of the BDSM clubs she frequented. She placed one hand over his where he squeezed her breast.

“Please, harder! Pinch them!” she urged roughly.

He responded with a vicious twist of her nipple that sent zings of torturous pleasure to her pussy. She cried out, her orgasm nearing. Vahid gripped her hips in iron fingers, his cock

thrusting relentlessly inside her, slamming her back against the wall with a thud. His pelvis ground against her and she spread herself wide for him. His pubic hair provided the friction she needed against her swollen clit as she rode him hard, pushing herself onto him, frantically reaching for the crest.

Vahid bit her nipple as one long finger slid between the globes of her ass to press past the tight pucker of her anus. With a muffled scream, Emily exploded. Clinging to his shoulders, racked with shudders so strong she could barely draw a breath, lights spiraling behind her closed eyelids, she rode him, rode the pleasure and prayed for the world to stop in that moment.

A wild, uncontrolled growl filled her ears as Vahid's cock swelled within her. Moments later, her lover came, her name on his lips as he went rigid, pushing her against the wall. Unexpectedly, as his cock pushed against her cervix, spilling his hot seed, another, deeper orgasm overtook her. With a gasp, she clutched him, holding him with frantic fingers as more pleasure than she had ever experienced rocketed along her nerve endings. She sucked in air, Vahid's voice urgent in her ears, fading swiftly as the darkness took her over and consciousness slipped away.

~ * * * ~

The instant Emily went limp in his arms, Vahid panicked, thinking he'd killed her. Pulling his still twitching cock from her body, he carried her into the bedroom and switched on the bedside lamp. Relief washed over him as he realized she still breathed. He sat on the edge of the mattress, his hand stroking over her hair and her shoulders, hoping to coax her back to consciousness. He couldn't believe what a damned monster he'd been. He'd fucked her so roughly, she'd lost consciousness.

He stared at her slight form, her skin so thin and pale he could trace the blue veins beneath. The silky pale pink camisole top she wore lay bunched beneath her armpits, putting her perfect breasts on display. Her nipples were still flushed a deep rose color and they pointed stiffly at him in an accusatory manner. A few bite marks marred her creamy skin along one side of her neck and both possessiveness and revulsion swept over him.

His eyes raked over her lower body, her limbs naked on the sheets, her thong missing. Briefly, he remembered finding her thong from the night before in his pants pocket. Not that he'd ever admit he had it. Her flat belly gave way to a smooth, newly waxed mound and long slender legs. He could still feel those legs wrapped around him. He bit back a groan, his eyes fixed on the pouting pink lips between her thighs. The flesh glistened wetly, still swollen and streaked with his seed. The possessiveness he'd felt seeing the marks on her neck returned a thousand fold.

Vahid took her slender wrist in his hand, checking her pulse. It didn't seem too fast or too slow. He brushed her silky hair back from her face. The skin along her jaw burned red from his beard stubbled kisses. Her lips lay full and flushed before him, for once without the pinched, disapproving frown he normally saw on her mouth.

He decided exhaustion had overtaken her. He knew she couldn't have slept the night before. The gods knew he hadn't. He'd tossed and turned, the scent of her strong on his flesh. For the first time in his life, he'd been unable to think of anything but the woman he'd been with. Never had sex affected him so greatly.

Looking at her now, as she went from unconsciousness into deep slumber, he wished life hadn't dealt them such a fucked up hand. He didn't know how to right things between them. Didn't know if he even wanted to. She was a major piece of work. Her cold, icy demeanor turned him off at the same time that her scent and her body drove him wild with lust.

He picked up the iPod that lay on her bed, listening to her playlist as he watched her sleep. Surprisingly, the songs were all sad, tear-jerkers about lost love. He looked down at her again, this time noting the puffy eyelids and tear stains on her cheeks. It dawned on him that she'd been crying prior to his arrival. The notion of the powerful and haughty Emily Carrington crying herself to sleep shocked him to the core.

He set aside the iPod and got up, righting his clothes and reaching for her bedding to tuck her in. As she curled into a ball on her side, he noticed the pale pink toenails and fingernails. Feminine. Far more feminine than he would ever have thought her to be. For the first time in all the time he'd known Emily, he wondered if he had pegged her wrong. Pink nails, pink clothing, sad, sappy songs, and tears just didn't fit his image of Miss Emily Carrington, Vice President of Finance.

He sat and watched her sleep for a half hour, pondering the mystery of his mate. No answers to their situation came readily to hand, so when his phone began to vibrate in his pocket, alerting him that Sean needed him, he almost left her suite without looking back. Then he remembered how he'd left her the night before and how he'd lied to the desk clerk to get a keycard to her room so he could leave her a note apologizing for his behavior. Since it was early, he'd thought she'd be at dinner. She'd startled him by stalking out of the bedroom like a queen, wearing barely any clothes. The moment she'd punched him, he'd been toast. His body took over, fueled by his dragon's needs, and fucking her became the only thing he wanted.

Walking out now, without waking her or leaving a note, would be beyond crude. He felt bad enough about his actions the night before. Now, he'd just compounded them by taking her against the wall like a rutting animal. The gods knew he just had no brains when it came to Emily. He became nothing but a slave to his inner dragon's sexual needs.

Vahid went to her desk and took out a hotel note pad. He left the note he'd already written about the previous night and wrote out a new one apologizing for the current night's bad behavior. As badly as he'd behaved and as prickly and stuck up as she was, he didn't think there would ever be a resolution to their mating issue. The thought made him ache as he left her room and headed up to Sean's. He'd always wanted a mate. Always wanted to be needed. Having someone like Emily for a mate made him feel as if the world had turned its back on him. She didn't need him. She didn't need anyone and that thought depressed the hell out of him.

Chapter Seven

Waking alone, fury instantly hit Emily. The fucking bastard had yet again fucked her and disappeared on her! Who the hell left an unconscious woman alone? She sat up, realizing that her skin still smelled of Vahid and felt sticky from sweat and semen. Yuck. Sleeping in that condition was just gross. Now, she was even more pissed off at Vahid for leaving her.

She kicked free of the covers and got up, stomping into the bathroom. She stood in the shower stall and let the hot water pound her body and soothe the aches. Unfortunately, it did nothing to ease her temper. She steamed just as much as the shower. She didn't have much time to soak, though. Since she'd passed out, she hadn't set her alarm and now she would have to hurry to be on time for the morning's event.

Instead of blow drying her hair, she stepped out on her balcony in a towel and let her dragonfire loose. Her skin prickled with awareness, her hair dried, and the bite marks Vahid had left on her partially healed. Storming back inside, the scent of smoke and brimstone lingering around her, Emily yanked on a black sweater and faded button fly jeans. Out of time, she couldn't do anything more than pull her hair back into a ponytail, slap on a few flicks of mascara and lip gloss, and slip her feet into black ballet flats.

In the elevator, she took several calming breaths. Even though the mock turtle-neck sweater hid the lingering remains of the bite marks at the base of her throat, the ones near her jaw line were still faintly visible. The scent of brimstone still clung to her too. She smiled grimly to herself. Vahid would know instantly she'd released her dragonfire. She hoped it would piss him off.

She marched into the room reserved for Antaeus International and found that Garret had yet to arrive. She blew out a long breath. At least, she wasn't late. She hated being late. As a child, every time she arrived late to the table, her father had told her that being late was a weakness. For years, he'd tried to beat that weakness out of her.

Shaking off her dark memories, Emily set her portfolio down on the table and glanced up to find Garret and Holden coming in. She shot over to Garret and flashed a good morning to Holden before dragging her employee away.

"Are you okay, Emily? You seem rather tense this morning." Garret's cultured British accent held worry.

"I'm fine," she soothed while steering him toward their seats.

Most of the staff came in then and seated themselves. Emily wondered where Vahid was. His absence irrationally increased her anger at him. When Sean arrived with Vahid in tow, she stiffened. Her mate looked like a thunderstorm about to happen. To everyone else, he might appear impassive, but she sensed the frustration and anger in him.

For a moment, she considered the new development. Apparently, having sex with your mate strengthened your bond with them. She seemed much more highly attuned to his moods. So far, none of his thoughts had bled out to her, but perhaps the more time they spent together, the more likely it would be.

Sean dropped a piece of paper in front of her. Emily stared at it, reading it twice before she realized the implications. Sean had scheduled a hike, a team-building hike, and he'd split everyone into groups. Garret and Holden were a group of two... and so were she and Vahid. Fury flashed through her.

Fucking bastards! She fought to keep her smoke under control.

The waiters began to serve breakfast as Emily sat and stewed. She pushed her food around on her plate and nibbled at a slice of bacon, trying to come up with a way to get out of the hike and failing. Rarely did anyone go against Sean's specific wishes and in a case like this, where they were all isolated away from the office, opting out was impossible. Her anger spiked again. After what had happened between her and Vahid the past two nights, she didn't want to even be in the same room with the bastard, let alone out on a nature trail with him. Only one thing seemed to be in her favor, she was no pampered city girl, having been born and raised on a huge country estate where she'd regularly hiked the grounds. She bet that asshole Vahid hadn't a clue how to handle himself in the wild.

Feeling the need to vent a little, she leaned toward Garret, filling his ears with pithy warnings about Vahid's ass kissing ways and how he told Sean everything. Like a good employee, Garret listened and nodded and made low, appropriate comments. She got the impression that perhaps he was only half-listening to her, but since his replies were completely appropriate she let it go. Once breakfast finished, Garret left with Holden and Emily looked around for Vahid. The room cleared out and she sighed. He'd already left.

"Are you okay?"

Sean's voice made her jump and she looked up into his amber eyes. "Yes, why?"

His forefinger flicked out, unerringly finding the slightly faded bite mark near her jaw. "I was worried when I saw that," he said softly.

An unexpected wave of heat rose in her and she knew her cheeks had flushed pink. "It's nothing," she replied, embarrassment pushing her to grab her ponytail, pulling it over her shoulder so that her hair hid the mark.

"Emily, you do know that I would never hire someone I thought was a bad person." Sean's voice and direct gaze held a seriousness she'd rarely seen from him when they were one on one. "Vahid is special and you are too. You both need to show each other who you really are. Hiding behind masks is wrong between mates."

Despite his kindly words, Emily's armor slid into place. She'd had her fill of talking about Vahid to the Antaeus clan. "I appreciate your concern, Sean. Truly. But he doesn't want to know who I am. And even if I were inclined to make him privy to my secrets, it wouldn't make him want me. It would disgust him."

"You're wrong, Emily. I know Vahid, and I know you. There is a reason you are mates. If you would both stop being so stubborn, you would see the truth," Sean said in a low voice, filled with gentle insistence. "You could never disgust him. *Talk* to the man."

Emily stared at her cousin in amazement. She could swear he was on the verge of *begging* her to give Vahid a chance. "Even you don't know the whole truth, cousin. And you should be glad that you don't. I'm too fucked up to be anyone's mate."

The words spilled unconsciously from her tongue, and the instant she'd said them, she wished them back. Sean's eyes filled with sympathy and fearing her reaction to his pity, she spun away from him and rushed to her suite. Changing her ballet flats for hiking boots, she grabbed a jacket and tried to figure out how to bring along a few bottles of water and a couple of granola bars.

Her head was in the wet bar refrigerator when the loud click of the door had her bolting into an upright position. Vahid stood in the doorway of the suite, a keycard in hand. She glared at him.

"Is that how you got in last night?" she demanded icily.

"Yes." Unrepentant, he put the keycard into the breast pocket of the flannel shirt he wore over his t-shirt.

"Fucking bastard," she muttered, pulling out several bottles of water. Arguing with him over his access to her suite would be pointless.

"You're such a bitch!" he ground out, frustration lacing his words. "Were my apologies not enough for you? Not written with the right words?"

"Apologies? Since when does an asshole like you apologize?" she snapped back at him.

For a moment, they glared at each other. Then Vahid stalked into her bedroom and returned with two folded slips of paper in his hand. "I left these on the desk next to your briefcase last night." He tossed the notes onto the counter next to her. "I know you have a lot of work on your plate so I assumed you would have seen the notes right away."

Emily licked her suddenly dry lips. He'd left her two notes? Vahid had never so much as glanced at her with softness in his expression, yet he'd left her two notes of apology? She gazed at the slips of paper, fear paralyzing her.

"I see you're not interested in any apology I might proffer."

His stiff words cut off her thoughts and she looked up at him, filled with confusion. Reaching for the notes, she said, "Why were you in my room last night?"

He sighed heavily and turned away from her. "I thought you were at dinner. I wanted to leave the first note. Then... after what happened between us... after you passed out... I-I..."

Vahid fell silent and Emily skirted around the bar stools and grabbed him by the arm. "You what?" she asked hoarsely, unable to stop herself.

"I watched you sleep. I felt awful. I didn't mean to hurt you, Emily. I'm sorry. I left you another apology note," he replied, his voice as raspy with emotion as hers.

His words rocked Emily's very foundations. The man who'd spent three years ignoring her when he should have been loving her had apologized. A sudden wave of lightheadedness came over her.

"You didn't hurt me physically," she whispered unable to look away from his dark gaze.

A dark frown settled on his face. "But Em, you passed out."

A frisson of pleasure skittered down her spine at his unconscious speaking of her nickname. At that moment, she could no more stop herself from reassuring him than she would have been able to stop a speeding train.

"Sexual pleasure is very rare for me," she confessed quietly. "I've had orgasms forced from me, but spontaneous pleasure like we shared the past two nights, orgasms so big and deep that they leave me shaking...that never happens to me, Vahid. My body is a vessel for the pleasure of others, not my own pleasure."

Confusion and something else, something speculative, gleamed in his eyes. For a moment, she wondered if she'd just given away her status as a submissive. Her early days in the lifestyle

had been with a man who impressed upon all his slaves that they existed solely for his pleasure and never theirs. Her life hadn't changed much from those days.

"Em, I..."

Vahid's soft words were cut off by the bark of Sean's voice from the open doorway. "Get on the trail, you two!"

Emily skittered away from Vahid and grabbed the bottles of water from the counter, leaving the notes lying there. Vahid held out a backpack to her and she dropped the bottles in followed by a handful of granola bars from the mini-kitchen. They left the room in silence, under the stern, watchful eyes of their boss.

Once they were outside, Vahid heaved a sigh. "Where the hell is this trail anyway?" he grouched.

Emily quirked a brow at him. "North of the gardens. The trail actually begins just above the gazebo we were at yesterday," she said, pointing to the trail map in her hand.

"Which way is north?" he asked, his head swiveling as he looked from one direction to another.

She smiled, shark-like. Apparently, Vahid didn't do nature. "How do you find your way to work if you don't know north from south or east or west?"

He turned toward her, his expression haughty. "GPS in my car. I just say where I'm headed. The car never gets lost."

Emily pushed past him and headed up the path toward the gazebo. "You're in big trouble if the apocalypse ever occurs," she called back to him. "Loss of technology will reduce you to be opted out in the survival of the fittest."

"And I suppose you'll make it just fine, Miss High and Mighty Carrington," he sniped as he jogged to catch up with her.

She laughed at him evilly. He could snipe at her all he wanted. She already knew he thought she was stuck up. However, looking at him, his expression so much like a disgruntled little boy, she couldn't help but be amused. He was totally out of his element and it tickled her to be able to best him for once.

She paused on the dirt path, waiting for him to join her. When he reached her side, she started walking again, trying not to look at the wood chip path that led toward the gazebo where they'd first had sex. She wanted to say it was making love, but knew that would be a stretch of the imagination she just couldn't make.

They walked in silence until they reached the actual hiking trail. Vahid paused and read the trail sign, his disgruntled expression turning to one of disgust. Emily just cocked one brow at him and sipped from her water bottle.

"What the hell does hiking have to do with team building?" he grumbled.

"Not a lot since you're rather clueless on the whole nature thing." A wry smile curved her lips. She couldn't stop feeling amused at Vahid's discomfiture. Apparently, he rarely left his own controlled environment.

"And I suppose you're perfectly fine up here on the mountain," he snapped, waving an arm at the pine trees and bushes.

Emily pointed her water bottle at his Converse sneakers. "You're so not a nature boy, Vahid. Just admit it," she said, her grin widening.

"You didn't answer me," he huffed.

Emily pointed to her feet. They were expensively shod in top of the line hiking boots that had obviously seen some serious use. She'd brought them along thinking maybe she'd be able to walk off her frustrations. When she'd discovered Garret liked hiking too, she'd been overjoyed. Having something else in common with him reinforced her conviction that he was the right person to bring her plans to fruition.

Vahid's expression darkened. "You look like such a prissy thing I would never have believed you capable of breaking a sweat let alone be into hiking."

Her eyes narrowed as she stared him down. "Well, let's see, Mr. Can't See Beyond the End of His Own Nose, I seem to recall a layer of sweat on both of us the past two nights. That would seem to negate your assumption that I'm the prissy type who never gets dirty." Her scornful words appeared to be a direct hit as his nostrils flared, his eyes blazed, and his mouth tightened with displeasure.

"Oh, fuck this," she muttered and spun away from him, charging up the trail.

Emily ignored Vahid as she walked briskly along the hiking trail. She heard him lumbering along behind her, complaining to himself about the slippery-soled sneakers. Her former amused sympathy had dissipated. Now, she really didn't care if he kept up with her or not. The pain inside her had begun to feel like razors shredding her flesh from the inside out. She knew something that would ease it for a short while, which put her on a mission to find a secluded area where she could shift.

Her dragon loved being on the mountain and setting her free for a short while would soothe the beast and help ease Emily's emotional pain. After an hour's walk up the increasingly steep trail, Emily found a break in the trees with a very slight glimpse of green beyond it. She left the path and set off into the woods seeking that tiny glimmer of green grass. Within minutes, she found it, a small glade surrounded thickly by pine trees and scattered with big granite boulders.

Stripping out of her jacket, she tossed it down and drew a deep breath, the crisp mountain air filling her lungs. Her dragon stretched too, knowing freedom was mere minutes away.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

Shit. How the hell had he kept up? She turned and found Vahid standing in the small clearing, chest heaving, pine needles in his hair, and an affronted expression on his face.

Kneeling, Emily unlaced her boots. She carefully took them off and put her socks inside them. Her emotions rocketed out of control inside her as her dragon paced, preparing to break free.

"Damn it, Emily! Why are you ignoring me?"

She walked toward him, unbuttoning her jeans. She paused and wriggled out of them, leaving her in pale pink panties and her sweater. She continued on toward him, pulling the sweater over her head and dropping it on the ground. Now, she wore nothing but panties. She could see flames leap to life in Vahid's eyes.

“Why shouldn’t I ignore you? Eden’s been gone a whole year. A whole year during which you’ve ignored *me*,” she said coolly. She pushed her fingers under the edge of her satin panties and pushed them down. She hoped his cock hurt like hell, and his conscience pricked him.

“Why the fuck are you naked?”

Emily ignored his frustrated growl and gathered her fire within her. “So I can do this...” She turned away and blew out a fireball. The heat rushed from her with a loud whoosh. The instant the flames died down, she broke into a run and shifted on the fly. She soared toward the sun, the air caressing her skin. She drew a deep, sobbing breath as she glanced down to find Vahid staring up at her dragon form.

Fuck him and the horse he rode in on, she thought bitterly. Her dragon was free.

Chapter Eight

The instant Emily's hips made that undulating move, sending her well-worn jeans to the ground, Vahid's cock shot to full attention. Hard, heated, throbbing attention. Seeing her nakedness in the stark sunlight stunned him. He fixated on her breasts, the pale pink nipples seeming to beckon him. Well, not him. Just his cock.

Frustration, both sexual and emotional, strangled him. The release of her fireball had him suddenly fighting to control the dragon within him. He looked away from her, struggling to maintain his composure as his dragon roared. By the time he looked back, she'd shifted.

His breath caught in his throat. The vermilion of her scales appeared gold tipped in the sunlight. He'd never seen a more magnificent red dragon. Her serpentine form spiraled up and up toward the sun with a grace that belied her dangerous moves.

With a gasp, he yanked at his clothes, fear making his heart pound. He recognized the swirling spins of her flight as a death spiral. The movement had started out as a battle move many centuries in the past. In calmer times, it was commonly used by dragons that had lost a mate and wanted to commit suicide. The death spiral consisted of a blind, spiraling flight toward the sun. The dragon flew higher and higher until lack of oxygen caused them to lose consciousness whereupon they fell thousands of feet to their death.

Vahid shifted and took to the sky, flying swiftly toward Emily. Fear made him drop his shields and for the first time since the day they'd met, he sought her thoughts with his own.

Emily! Em, please stop!

She either ignored him or hadn't heard him.

With grim determination, Vahid angled his flight path to intercept her. Mentally, he pushed at the shields that kept her thoughts from him.

Damn it, Em! What do you think you're doing?

He could feel her emotions, even though he couldn't get a fully formed thought from her. Waves of crippling pain came at him, so much that he had no doubt she had to be seeking an end to it. What he got from her second hand had him in serious knots. Both her pain and the suicide spiral shocked him. He'd never met anyone with the self-possession Emily had. He admitted to himself that he envied her that *sang-froid*. Nothing shook her or rattled her. His steadfast belief in her impenetrable composure led to his utter astonishment when she'd punched him. Who would have guessed that the icy, poised Emily Carrington had a helluva right hook?

He banked to his right, letting the wind and the sweep of his wings carry him beneath Emily. As he came up under her, he darted toward her at an angle and let his wing clip her hard, knocking her out of the tight spiral. For a moment, he thought he caught a snippet of thought from her.

Just let me go... you don't want me anyway...

Then her body lost momentum, dropping swiftly through the air. With a sense of horror, Vahid saw that she didn't even stretch out her wings to stop the fall. He roared, anger and fear sending his dragonfire racing through him. He dove toward her, claws extended. His body slammed into hers at a high velocity, sending them both spinning across the sky. Vahid felt his claws rip into her, and while he abhorred the thought of hurting her, he wasn't about to let her

fall to her death either. He clutched her tightly, his claws digging deep, seeking purchase through the armor of her scales as his wings beat furiously, working frantically to keep them both aloft.

He feared she would fight him, but instead, she went limp and the wash of her emotions hit him. Despair so dark it caused a physical ache in his gut battered at his shields. Somehow he maneuvered them both to the ground and she thudded limply onto the dirt. He stared down at her, afraid she might be unconscious. However, he saw that although her eyes were closed, great, silvery tears seeped from beneath the lids, rolling across her scaled snout into the dirt.

Vahid's heart clenched, sending pain spiking through his chest. He'd never seen a dragon in this state before. Her chest heaved and strange sounds emerged from her open mouth. It took a moment for him to recognize the strangled roars as sobbing. Then he noticed the wounds from his claws, her blood oozed from between her scales to pool beneath her body.

Shit! Em? Damn it, you need to shift. You're losing blood.

Don't care. Why did you save me? You should have let me go.

Despite the utter despair of her thoughts, a surge of triumph went through him as she answered him. *No, Em. You're my responsibility. I can't let you die.*

Oh, gods. Your responsibility? You think Sean will blame you if I kill myself?

Vahid stood over her protectively, unsure what to do as he watched her dragon form shudder convulsively. The silvery tears continued to fall, wetting the dirt beneath her head. Vaguely, he recalled reading that dragon's tears held magical properties. The random thought pushed him closer to panic. He didn't know what the hell to do about her.

As she lay sobbing, her wounds bleeding, her dragon form limp and weak on the ground, he tried to make sense of everything that had happened. She'd seemed so smug and superior on the trail, stalking along in that haughty, magnificent Emily fashion as he stumbled and slipped behind her in his inappropriate shoes. She'd seemed utterly frightened by his apology. Her confession about sexual pleasure stunned him. Her tears and display of femininity unmanned him. The contradictions she presented confused him. Yet, his dragon wanted her with a passion he'd never experienced before.

The intense sexual encounters they'd shared proved to Vahid that they were compatible in that area. However, her attitude and personality continued to rub him the wrong way, and her icy demeanor totally turned him off. Deep in his heart, he knew he couldn't live with such a calculating and cold woman. Still, the pain he'd felt coming from her during her death spiral didn't seem like the emotions of a woman with no heart.

Confused and worried, Vahid shifted to human form. He knew that being in human form around a dragon who wasn't in control could be dangerous, but he'd have to risk it. Maybe the show of trust would rouse her from the absolute despair that seemed to have sucked her very soul from her.

Kneeling beside her, he stroked his hands over her head and neck. The huge red scaled body rippled with shudders. He noticed that a couple of the claw wounds had stopped bleeding. Still, there was one in her soft belly that gushed with every sobbing breath she took. He stroked her face gently, the scales warm beneath his fingertips.

Em, please shift. You're losing blood.

Slowly, her eyes opened and the pain in the golden irises floored him. Her silvery tears spilled onto his hands and suddenly, he could hear the thudding of her heart, the sough of her breath in her lungs.

No. Let me go, Vahid. I don't want this anymore.

You're weak and distraught. You've barely slept in days. This is the wrong time to make any sort of decision. Shift, Em.

It's not a decision. It's what I feel and want. I don't want to be here anymore. I don't want to feel this pain anymore. Everything I've ever wanted is denied me. I can't be denied this too. Let me go. Her eyes closed and another sob wracked her. *Just let me go, Vahid.*

He didn't know what to do. She defied him at every turn, even weak and sobbing as she was now. Had she been one of his subs...His hands stilled on her scales as a thought occurred to him. He drew in a sharp breath.

"Emily. I command you to shift." He spoke in a voice used only during a domination scene. The quiet force caused her to shudder violently and then go unnaturally still.

"Look at me," he commanded.

The dragon eyes opened again, golden irises wary, the elongated pupils mere slits.

"You will obey me, Emily." Vahid put every ounce of dominant force he could muster into his words.

Some unfathomable emotion flickered in her eyes and then her body began to shimmer, her red-gold scales dissolving beneath his hands into the satiny skin of her throat. Relief swept over him, soothing his panic. She lay on her back, tears still slipping from the corners of her eyes, rolling down into the tangled mass of her pale hair.

Vahid raked his eyes over her, not that he knew what the hell he was looking for in terms of injuries, but he needed to make some sort of assessment as to her well-being. He doubted anything had been broken since he'd stopped her fall, but she would have sustained some bruises and the punctures and gouges from his claws. He glanced at his hands. Blood stained his fingers and involuntarily he curled them into fists.

As he looked her over, he saw blood streaking her torso. He tried to turn her over but she resisted, a flare of wide-eyed panic in her eyes. He stopped and stroked a hand over her hair.

"Sssh. Let me check your injuries. I wasn't very gentle with you, I'm afraid," he murmured.

"I'm okay."

The hoarse whisper sounded weak to his ears, but he stopped trying to turn her onto her side. He glanced down at her belly where the worst of her wounds had seemed to be. The deep gouge that had bled so badly had healed itself during the shift to the point that it was now a long, angry red scratch across her lower abdomen. It oozed only a little blood and already looked far better than the wound that had ripped her scales.

"I'm sorry I hurt you, but I couldn't let you complete the spiral." Vahid didn't know what to say to her and his apology felt stiff and awkward. The fear inside him hadn't completely gone away. A shudder went through him as a vision of her death spiral flitted through his thoughts. He never, ever wanted to see such a thing again. The thought of any dragon committing suicide made

him sick to his stomach. The horrifying sight of Emily trying to end her life would probably never leave him.

“You’d be free. You should have let me go.”

Her eyes had closed, but the tears still seeped from beneath her lids. Her weak voice rasped like sandpaper on silk.

“Em, a death spiral is no answer to our problems.” He couldn’t bring himself to actually say the word suicide to her. He could still barely believe she’d tried it. Her strength and determination had always drawn him, despite the fact that it had also annoyed the hell out of him. Now, she’d revealed a vulnerability he wouldn’t ever have believed she had.

“You think you know, but you don’t. No one does. No one ever will...”

Her faint whisper almost seemed directed at herself, but Vahid knew it was meant for him. Before he could reply, she spoke again, her voice stronger, with a hint of her usual cool distance.

“Can we go now? I need a shower.”

Vahid snatched his hands from her shoulders where he’d been stroking her soft skin rhythmically. Rising to his feet, he gathered up her clothes and brought them to her. She sat up and took them, avoiding his gaze. Even though she wouldn’t look at him, he saw the dark despair in her eyes and it shook him to his core.

He turned away and began to dress. When he finished, he peeked over his shoulder at her and found her struggling to rise to her feet, her jeans around her ankles. Instinctively, he rushed to her side and gently gripped her elbows, helping her. She kept her head down, refusing to look at him, but he saw her teeth sink into her lower lip as she pulled up her jeans and buttoned them.

Emily took a couple of steps away from him and he could plainly see that her faltering steps were unsteady. He strode across the grass and grabbed his backpack, unzipping it as he crossed over to her. He pulled out a granola bar and a bottle of water, pressing them into her hands as he urged her toward a large boulder. She sat down gingerly and ripped open the bar’s wrapper, taking a slow, deliberate bite.

Vahid opened her water bottle and stood watching her closely as she ate the bar and sipped her water. To his relief, her tears had finally dried and after she finished the food and water, color began to seep back into her cheeks.

“Will you be okay to walk back down?” he asked quietly.

Her head jerked up and he saw a flash of raw emotion in her golden eyes before her usual cool arrogance took over. “I’m fine.”

She walked ahead of him down the mountain. He saw that her steps were much slower than they had been on their climb up the trail, but she didn’t seem as wobbly. They made it back to the lodge without further incident, and without speaking. Vahid’s instincts told him to take her up to her suite and put her in the tub. Still silent, he steered her toward the elevator and when they reached her door he opened it with his keycard. Emily didn’t even acknowledge his actions.

He herded her toward the bathroom and pressed her gently down on the toilet seat. As he filled the huge Jacuzzi tub, he heard her undressing behind him. When he turned off the taps, he felt her presence beside him. One slender hand gripped his shoulder for balance as she climbed into the tub.

Emily sank into the warm water and Vahid noted the fine tremor in her limbs. The visible signs of her exhaustion wrenched at him. She sat silently in the water, her eyes closed, her only movement the slight rise and fall of her perfect breasts as she breathed. Vahid rolled up his shirt sleeves and reached for the shower gel he found on the counter, squirting a generous dollop onto a thick sponge. The slightly spicy floral scent that he'd smelled on her skin the night before enveloped him as he began to lather her body gently. Dirt and blood washed away, leaving her skin luminous which made the raw, angry scratch on her abdomen appear more vicious.

Vahid got up and looked for her shampoo, finding it in the shower. He grabbed it and her conditioner and returned to his position kneeling beside the tub. Carefully, he rinsed her hair and washed it with the coconut scented shampoo, then conditioned it. His cock roused as he combed his fingers through the silky strands of her hair, dislodging all the tangles with the slippery conditioner. Even darkened by the water and conditioner, her hair shone like the palest moonlight.

He felt like an asshole for being aroused by the feel of her hair in his hands. Still, his awareness of her was a two-way street they both traveled. Since touching her tears, he'd become acutely aware of her heartbeat and breaths. He had the distinct sense that she'd become more attuned to him too.

She sighed as he rinsed her hair. When he finished, she opened her eyes. Her irises were elongated, a sign of arousal. His cock jerked inside his jeans.

"Are you going to touch me?" she asked quietly.

He wound a wet lock of hair around his forefinger. "I am touching you."

"Not there. Here." She reached for his hand and dragged it to her breast. The nipple beaded against his palm. He sucked in a harsh breath.

"Emily..."

Her golden eyes fired and he started to reach for her with his free hand, but then he caught sight of the ragged angry scratch on her abdomen. He pulled his hands from her and stood up, knowing that she could see his erection straining the front of his jeans.

"I have to go," he growled in a low, rough tone, unconsciously echoing his words from the night at the gazebo.

Emily went very still. The water stopped rippling. Reluctantly, he sought her eyes. They'd gone opaque, the fire extinguished. He cursed himself. Not one thing had he ever been able to do right when it came to his mate. He didn't want to have sex with her and hurt her any more than he already had when he'd dug his claws into her on the mountain. And yet, the chill in her eyes gave him the distinct impression that he had wounded her deeply.

"Then go."

Ice dripped from the two words. It was the second time she'd said them to him since they'd arrived at the lodge. Anger rose within him. Why the fuck couldn't she see that he was doing the right thing? He was protecting her from himself and instead of being sweetly grateful, she'd turned back into the stone-hearted bitch of AI. Once more, she'd given him the sense that things would never work out between them.

“You are such a ball buster, Emily. You can’t even appreciate it when someone does the right thing by you.” With a frustrated growl, he strode to the bathroom door. “I’ll see you in the morning. Get some rest.”

He left her without a single backward glance. Once he got to his own suite, he opened a bottle of Scotch and poured himself a glass, taking it into his bathroom. He stripped off his clothes and turned on the shower, setting the temperature to cold. He downed the alcohol, hoping it would help erase the feel of her skin beneath his fingertips and the sight of her falling from the sky from the inside of his eyelids. As he stepped under the cold spray, he acknowledged that his hope was hopeless.

Chapter Nine

Lying seemed like the best answer to Emily. Not wanting to be alone, needing the presence of someone to keep her from falling into the depths of despair over Vahid and the events of the day, Emily called Garret. He sounded distracted despite his cautious, soothing words. She hated manufacturing a reason to drag him to her suite. Telling Garret that Vahid had viciously criticized one of her investments brought out his protective instincts and natural urge to defend his department's decisions. She tried to pretend to herself that she had the right to test her new employee in such a manner, but she knew her words and motivation for the lie they were.

She and Garret spent several hours going over the investment portfolios and Garret said all the right things to soothe her and give her confidence in his abilities. Emily knew she'd made the right choice for her successor. Her situation with Vahid had unraveled more rapidly than she had anticipated, and she was thankful she'd hired Garret. When it came time for her to walk away from Antaeus International, she wouldn't leave her responsibilities hanging. The department she'd worked so hard to build and the family who had taken her in would not be left in the lurch upon her death.

Not long after Garret left to return to his suite, Declan showed up. The instant Emily saw him she longed for a drink, but knew she needed to keep her wits about her. The set of her cousin's jaw told her all was not well with their Australian takeover. Despite the ache in her heart and the throbbing of the claw mark on her belly, Emily pulled herself together and put on her executive face. Business was business and it waited for no one, least of all a woman with a death wish.

She and Declan met Sean at Holden and Garret's suite. For the next few hours, Emily lost herself in work. The fact that Vahid wasn't there helped keep her on task and free of the worst of her pain. By three a.m., it became clear to everyone that the Australian company would be a major pain in ass. The instant Sean lost his temper, Emily knew she'd be heading to Sydney within days. She looked at Declan and saw the resignation in his expression. He too knew the trip was inevitable.

When Emily finally went to bed, exhaustion took over. So many nights with very little sleep had left her groggy and weepy. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she closed her eyes. Then, her dragon dragged her into the depths of slumber and she knew nothing more until the next morning.

Dressed in plain navy colored slacks and a cream colored sweater, her hair twisted up in her trademark chignon, Emily walked into the buffet brunch with her armor firmly in place. Her emotions had been dammed up behind the wall of her poise and while she knew that she risked a breakdown at some point soon, she didn't want it to happen at the retreat where Vahid would find out.

Luckily, she had already sat down with Holden and Garret and the seminar was about to start when Vahid slipped into his seat. Sean and Declan were conspicuously missing. Partway through the seminar, they came in and Emily sensed the tension that instantly rocked the room. She knew half of it came from Vahid.

Since her death spiral, she'd been able to feel some of his emotions leaking out. His determination to hold himself aloof from her seemed uppermost in his mind and it depressed her. When the seminar finished, the staff filed out to attend the next seminar, but Sean indicated that she, Declan, Holden, Garret, and Vahid remain behind. His words, when they came, were nearly a relief. She, Holden, and Declan were to take the company jet to Australia the next day. She sensed

Vahid's relief over her imminent departure and her heart sank. So much for ever being able to patch things up with her mate.

The emotions she'd gotten from Vahid since her spiral were not ones to inspire confidence in a woman. He didn't want to deal with her. He wanted a buffer between them and the Australia trip filled him with a sense of satisfaction and relief. Emily felt relief too, for now she knew how little he cared for her. What little hope still lived within her fizzled away.

When the Antaeus brothers left, Emily had to sit with Garret and Vahid and go over the details of running the finance department during her absence. Her mate's coolness, his refusal to meet her eyes, told her everything she needed to know. Vahid had always had a reputation for looking people in the eyes so directly and intently that it drove them crazy. His avoidance of her gaze spoke volumes to her. She could sense that despite their sexual attraction and the scorching hot sex they'd enjoyed, he still didn't want her for a mate. His reluctance sealed her fate and depression set in.

Vahid spoke in a flat, unemotional tone, mostly to Garret. Every now and again, Garret tried to draw her into the conversation by asking her questions directly, but Vahid blocked him at every turn, overriding every question and comment. She'd effectively been shut out, from her work with Garret and from the possibility of a life with Vahid.

Once everything had been settled to Vahid's satisfaction, Emily escaped and left him with Garret. In her room, she tossed her things haphazardly into her bags. Sweeping the room for her belongings, she came across the two folded notes Vahid had written to her. She'd not read them yet, but looking at them lying on the counter, her heart began to ache. Why the hell had he bothered to write her an apology if he didn't want her? Today, he apparently didn't give a flying fuck about her feelings so the damned notes didn't make a lick of sense to her.

Blinking back tears, unable to bring herself to open them, read them, and invite more pain into her heart, she picked up the notes and slipped them into her purse. The drive home became an attempt at numbing her mind. She pondered the advisability of going to Far From Heaven that evening and decided against it. Instead, she went home and dealt with email and work matters, falling into bed exhausted.

Near dawn, she dreamed of the death spiral. In her dream, Vahid's big black dragon form hovered in the air as she tumbled from the sky toward the ground. He laughed as she fell, his thoughts viciously pleased.

Good! You're going to die. Fall, Emily! Set me free! I don't want you...

She awoke with a sob, her body jackknifing into a sitting position. Her head throbbed and her dragon roared unhappily within her. She thought of slipping outside and completing the spiral now, in the half-light of pre-dawn while Vahid would be asleep and too far away to interfere. She shivered, torn between duty and despair.

As she settled back onto her mattress, she stared at the ceiling, making the biggest decision of her life. She would finish this takeover with Declan and it would be her last job for the company. She thought about driving out to Dave's to say goodbye before she left, but she knew he would guess her plans.

The thought of never seeing him again filled her with sadness. He had been a good friend. The best friend ever. He didn't deserve an email goodbye, but she couldn't risk going to see him. Couldn't risk having her resolve tested.

Unable to sleep, she got up and began to prepare her condo for her trip. She bagged up all the food and took it out to the trash. She cleaned every room and carefully put away all her dirty clothes from the retreat. She went through her safe and made sure all her legal documents were in order. She would email the combination to Dave when she said goodbye.

While changing purses, she came across the two notes from Vahid. With shaking hands she opened the first one.

Emily,

I'm so sorry I left you so abruptly. It was an unconscionable thing to do, and I'm sorry. But I'm not sorry I made love to you.

Vahid

She stared at the slip of paper, her heart thundering. He hadn't called it fucking and he'd apologized. Tears began to slip down her cheeks and she opened the second note.

Emily,

I can't find the words to tell you how sorry I am that I hurt you. I didn't mean to take you so roughly. I doubt you'll want to see my face when you wake up so I'm going back to my room, but please know that I never meant to hurt you.

Vahid

Emily didn't know what to think. Had she lost an opportunity by not reading the notes sooner? She didn't think so because Vahid had been just as prickly with her as ever. She stared at the dark slashes of his writing. *I'm not sorry I made love to you. I never meant to hurt you.* His words ripped at her fragile control. Despite the hope that flickered in her briefly as she'd read the notes, she remembered how glad he seemed that she would be going away on this trip. He might say he wasn't sorry about what had happened between them but his actions were not those of a man who wanted to be with her, either. She put the notes in her desk and turned her back on them. Ultimately, they didn't make any difference at all to their situation and her decision. All they'd done was pierce her heart one more time.

After she packed for her trip, she went into the kitchen to put her dirty coffee cup in the dishwasher. She leaned against the counter and stared at the newspaper clipping on the stainless steel of the refrigerator. The house and happy family had been a beautiful dream, but now she knew it for what it truly was, just a dream, a wish her heart had made. It wasn't anything that would ever come true for her.

With one last look at the condo and the clipping on the refrigerator, she turned and left. The company limo waited downstairs for her and Declan wouldn't want her to lag. She didn't want to screw up the last thing she did for Antaeus International.

Declan had dark glasses on and deep grooves bracketed his mouth. His tension filled the passenger compartment of the limo. Emily huddled in the corner, instinctively wrapping her arms around herself.

"You look like shit." Declan's voice held a gruffness she'd never heard before.

"Ditto," she told him coolly.

One dark brow rose above the blacked out glasses. "I haven't slept. Sean's a tough taskmaster."

"I know, but he's fair and I appreciate everything he's done for me." Pain laced her words and she hoped Declan didn't notice.

He whipped off his glasses, his amber eyes raking over her shrewdly. "You sound like you're about to tender your resignation."

She smiled weakly at him. She should have known she couldn't hide much from Declan. "I can't go anywhere yet," she hedged. "Garret isn't ready to take over for me. He's still too new."

Declan snorted. "You and I both know that Garret is fully capable of stepping into your formidable shoes, not that he'd like wearing stilettos."

Emily grimaced. "He's not very feminine," she admitted. "I'm sure he'd hate my Jimmy Choos."

Declan's lips twitched and he fell silent. When the limo stopped at Holden's building, Emily looked up. Holden and Garret stood at the curb, completely engrossed in each other. She frowned, her eyes shifting to Declan as the two men proceeded to embrace in such a heated manner she wondered that the metal of the car didn't melt.

"Dear gods. How did I not notice?" she murmured, feeling foolish.

Declan gazed at her speculatively. "You had your own stuff going on."

Her eyes widened as she wondered just how much Declan knew. Remembering how close Vahid was to Sean, she wondered just how much all the Antaeus brothers knew of her dealings with her mate. She rubbed her belly where the claw mark ached faintly.

"Maybe you should consider mating Vahid soon. Worry about all the little shit afterward, Em," he advised softly.

Her cousin's kind words unleashed the pain she'd been damming up inside her. Tears welled and she held them back by sheer force of will. "It's not that easy," she rasped through the lump in her throat.

"Fuck!"

Declan's angry hiss made her head jerk up in astonishment. Outside the limo, a woman confronted Holden while Garret withdrew from them. Emily blinked as a vicious resentment rose like bile in her throat. Bitter thoughts filled her mind. Why couldn't life go smoothly for once? Why did everything good become tainted?

"Gods. What the fuck else can go wrong?" Declan muttered running his hands through his dark hair. With another curse, he opened the car door and got out.

Emily watched as Holden spoke to Garret. Her new employee's face had a stony expression. When he turned away from Holden and went inside, Emily's heart ached for her cousin. Declan spoke to Holden, throwing an arm around his brother's shoulders and herding him toward the limo.

Staring at Holden's unhappy face, Emily's emotions threatened to break the dam that had been holding them at bay. Everything that had happened between her and Vahid over the past few days, the past three years, more than threatened her control. The raw ache inside her ripped her control to shreds. In that moment, she saw how badly she had deteriorated emotionally. The cold, hard facts of her suicide attempt and cleaning out her apartment in preparation for not returning home hit her like a bucket of ice water. Everything was over.

She gazed at Holden, knowing that her emotions were on display because she had no way to contain them any longer. His startled face blurred as she tried to blink back tears and control the trembling of her lips.

“Make it right, Holden,” she whispered as Declan got in and the limo pulled away. “You can’t lose your mate. The pain is...indescribable.”

She rubbed her chest where the ache inside her threatened to rip her apart. Her dragon protested her acceptance that Vahid was lost to them now. “Do whatever it takes to make things right between you. You both deserve to be happy like Sean and Careen. Not like me and...”

She broke off and looked away from them as her tears spilled over. She swiped at her eyes. “Not like me,” she finished gruffly. Unable to face her cousins without her composure in place, she looked away, staring blindly out the window.

“She’s right. You have to make it up to him.” Declan spoke softly to his brother, sympathy rife in his voice. “I know you’ll figure out a way to get past this. He loves you and you love him. All the screaming harpies in the world can’t change that.”

Emily wished her problems with Vahid could be solved as easily as just dismissing some scheming woman. As they sped toward the airport, she huddled against the door of the limo, tears slipping down her cheeks. Her dragon rocked inside her, wracked with pain and unhappy that Emily had given up. She sniffled, wiping at the tears. Even during the worst of her beatings, she’d never given up. However, nothing in her life had prepared her for the loss of her mate. And nothing had hit her harder than the fact that he just didn’t want her.

When she stepped onto the company jet, her hip began to burn. Her clan mark felt hot as if the lightning bolt in the dragon’s mouth had come alive. She’d ridden the lightning twice, experienced the rocketing pleasure that only Vahid could bring her. It had been the highlight of her life, as sorry as that seemed. She had known her mate and loved him, experienced his care for her if only for the briefest of moments. In truth, it was more than she’d expected to receive from him when they’d first met, and everything had fallen apart.

She took a seat in a dark corner of the plane’s cabin, away from Holden and Declan. Her tears fell freely now as she acknowledged that she loved Vahid. How it had crept up on her, how he had crept into her heart, she didn’t know. But he had. And now, all the hope in the world wouldn’t bring her happiness – or the man she loved.

Chapter Ten

The instant Vahid stepped into Sean's office, he knew his boss was pissed. Nearly two weeks had passed since Emily had left for Australia. Eleven days that Vahid had spent working long hours and drinking far more than he usually did.

"Sit down," Sean ordered, his amber eyes hard.

Vahid took the chair opposite the man to whom he owed his life. Sean practically trembled with rage and Vahid swallowed hard. He couldn't for the life of him figure out what he'd screwed up so badly to make Sean this angry.

Pushing out of his chair, Sean began to pace in front of the huge wall of glass behind his desk. "I've known you a long time, Vahid, and I appreciate your loyalty to me and this company," he said in tight voice. "But I have to question your personal code of ethics when you put this company before everything else."

"What!" Vahid gasped, outraged. He'd devoted his entire life to Antaeus International, and to Sean personally. He wouldn't have a life or a career without Sean and he'd tried to repay him the best way he could, by devoting himself to the company. He didn't understand how that could be ethically wrong.

Sean turned and speared him with a stare Vahid had seen directed at others in the past, but never at him. "You have a mate. It is inherent in every dragon that their mate comes before everything. My siblings and I live by that unspoken code. It is a huge disappointment to me that you do not. For more than three years, I've waited for you to own up to your responsibilities to Emily and make some effort at resolving the discord that began with your careless words."

Vahid swallowed hard. As much as he wanted to protest and deny Sean's words, he knew the man was right. He should never have let the situation deteriorate. He should have swallowed his pride the first day. And when Emily had shown up in his office the following day, offering to resolve the issue, he shouldn't have let his situation with Eden ride. He knew Eden wouldn't ever have held it against him. Dragons didn't mess with mating bonds.

He was a Dom and yet not once had he taken control of the situation with Emily. He'd let his emotions and fear dictate his reactions to her. When he remembered what had happened at the retreat, he acknowledged that her suicide attempt was entirely his fault. Had Sean known about that incident, Vahid would probably have found himself beaten to a bloody pulp.

"As of today, you're on vacation," Sean told him as he sat down at his desk. His hard amber gaze caught and held Vahid's. "You need to go away somewhere and figure out what the hell you're going to do to fix this mess."

"What about Emily?" he blurted and wished like hell he'd kept his mouth shut the instant he spoke because Sean's eyes darkened.

"Declan is sending her home. The trip has been rough on her and he's worried about her state of mind. He gave her time off too." Sean placed his palms flat on the desk and leaned toward Vahid. "My suggestion to you would be to find her and fix this."

The finality in Sean's voice told Vahid clearly that the man wouldn't take any more of the game playing he and Emily had been doing. Deep inside, Vahid was glad Sean had brought everything to a head. He got up and headed toward the door.

"Vahid."

He turned and found Sean's speculative gaze on him. "Emily always makes her travel plans through Renee if she's not using the corporate jet. Don't fuck this up."

A ray of hope speared through Vahid's gloom as he strode back to his office and shut himself in. He picked up the desk phone and dialed Renee's extension in personnel.

"What can I do for you, Vahid? Would you like me to book you a flight? Sean's already given me your vacation form." As the Personnel Manager's assistant, Renee Cole had her fingers on the pulse of all things AI.

"First, I want to know where Emily's going," he asked smoothly, hoping his words didn't sound strained.

"Ahhh." Smugness filled Renee's voice. "Paris. She's staying at the Four Seasons."

Vahid closed his eyes thankfully. The gods were smiling on him. "When does she arrive?"

"Tomorrow evening at five."

Shutting down his computer and reaching for his cell phone in a flurry of activity, Vahid told her, "I'm leaving the office now. Get me on a flight that arrives no later than tomorrow morning. Email the flight information to me. I'll get it on my phone."

"Actually, Sean already had me book you a flight. The details are already in your email and you'll be there late tonight, far in advance of Emily." The smugness in Renee's voice increased. "Better hurry. Traffic at LAX sucks."

He heard her chuckling as he put the phone down and bolted out of his office, one eye on the email he brought up with a flick of his thumb on the screen of his phone. Shit! He barely had time to run home and get to the airport. Luckily, he didn't need to take much with him because he owned a house in the suburbs of Paris, fully stocked with whatever he might need.

By the time Vahid stumbled into his Paris house, jet lag had his head pounding and nerves had his guts twisted in a knot. The only thing he could manage to do was gulp down a couple of aspirins with a glass of wine and prop himself up in the shower for fifteen minutes to let the heat knock the kinks out of his stiff muscles. He stumbled to bed and let exhaustion claim him.

Twenty-four hours after Sean had chewed his ass out, Vahid sat in the French sunshine eating fresh beignets and drinking insanely strong coffee. In his head, he tried to plan how to approach Emily. As troubled as their relationship had been - not that many people would have called it a relationship - Vahid knew he needed to put his prejudices away and try to work things out with her. It didn't matter how angry she had made him. The important thing was how hot she made him. He figured if he focused on how great they were sexually, maybe he'd forget how much they argued.

Remembering her pain washing over him like a tsunami when he'd stopped her from committing suicide, Vahid admitted that the situation had become more than untenable. It was bloody dangerous. Every cell in his body protested the possibility of Emily's death. Every night since he'd stopped her death spiral, he dreamed of it, terror stalking his sleep. Tension coiled within him as he thought of how easy it would be for her to end it all far from home, far from anyone who would even try to save her... far from him.

He pushed away the remnants of his breakfast, his stomach suddenly protesting. Inside, his dragon paced, annoyed at his mental vacillations. The beast knew the answer to all things Emily, and Vahid decided he'd best give in, for all their sakes.

Mine! the beast roared in his head.

"Yeah, buddy. I know. She belongs to us. And it's high time she toed our line," he said grimly, checking his watch.

He had a lot to do before heading to the Four Seasons to corner Emily. The tension within him needed a release so he'd called Beyond Pleasure and booked himself an hour of relaxation with a slave who would follow his every command. A slave very unlike the red dragon he contemplated tying himself to forever.

Since he'd been with his mate sexually, no other woman had so much as made his cock twitch. Even though he already ached to fuck Emily again, an hour of whip play would prime him even more yet imbue him with the serenity he craved, the serenity that came only from mastering another. In order to deal with Emily, he needed every ounce of control at his disposal.

The situation at the retreat had spun out of control from the outset. This time, his determination held his anger in check. By the time their forced vacation was done, his mate would be mastered if he had to drag her to Beyond Pleasure to do it.

~ * * ~

Sean's shot missed the hole. By a lot. With a growl, he looked up at his two best friends.

"I know, I know. My concentration is shot." He put away his club and stripped off his gloves, done for the afternoon. Golf usually relaxed him, but not this time. The only thing that might work was a fifth of Scotch and a deep tissue massage.

Marius Granville made the shot easily and Alfred Stone clapped softly. "You win again, Marius. I swear you never bring any money with you anymore. Sean and I always have to buy you lunch," Alfred complained good-naturedly.

The tall, blond vampire coolly raised one brow as he slid his club into the bag. "That's because you and the dragon wonder boy over there always have some emotional BS cooking," Marius replied. "My siblings have their shit together. I don't have to worry about them."

Alfred rolled his eyes as he hefted his bag into the golf cart. "Just wait, Marius. Your sister is not as together as you think. Your time will come."

The vampire shook his head. "I'm not going to let Colin and Lys drive me crazy the way you and Sean let your siblings do." He turned to look at Sean expectantly. "Which one is it this time?"

Sean got into back seat of the cart, letting Marius do the driving. "None of them."

"Then who has your concentration in knots?" Marius asked.

"His cousin," Alfred offered helpfully.

Marius nodded as he steered the cart toward the clubhouse. "The beautiful Emily who looks like your mother. What happened?"

Sean sighed heavily. "Declan thinks she's gone off the deep end. He swears she's not coming back to California."

Alfred turned in his seat, his face alarmed. "Death spiral?"

With a shrug, Sean shook his head. "Who knows? She doesn't let anyone get close to her, Alfred. She scares the shit out of me. Declan and I both have a feeling that this is going to end badly."

“Didn’t you set Vahid straight? I mean, the man owes you. Normally, he spends his days kissing your ass,” Marius pointed out.

Sean flipped him off in the rear view mirror. The vampire chuckled.

“I tried. I gave him an ultimatum about fixing what went wrong between them, but they are both so volatile there are no guarantees.” A frustrated growl escaped Sean. “I should have taken your advice and talked to Eden three years ago when she first got involved with Vahid. Maybe she would have listened to me.”

Alfred’s head bobbed. “Maybe, but more than likely she would have gotten pissed at your interference. Emily and Vahid’s mating was meant to play out this way despite how much pain and aggravation it’s caused.”

“You know, I understand that things have to happen in order for us to appreciate our mates, but what these two have been through just seems over the top.” Sean stared at the green rolling hills, frowning unhappily.

Marius steered the cart over the manicured lawns with efficient twists of his wrists. “Neither of them understands unconditional love. They never received it, nor gave it. Their expectations are limited by their experiences,” he reminded them.

Alfred nodded his agreement. “Vahid doesn’t remember his parents. He’s always been alone with no one to love or love him. Emily’s parents didn’t care about her. She needs someone who will love her and care for her. He needs someone to love him, need him,”

“Unconditionally,” Sean said on a long sigh.

Silence reigned for a few minutes, each of them lost in thought. Finally, Sean looked up, pinning Alfred with a glare. “What if they don’t make it, Al? What if she spirals and Vahid’s not there to save her?” he demanded. “What the hell happens then?”

“Then all our plans were for naught. We can’t win every time, Sean. Sometimes, shit happens,” Alfred said in a sad, worried voice.

Marius pulled the cart up to their cars and they got out, loading their golf bags into the vehicles. Then they piled back in and drove up to the clubhouse for lunch. As they walked to their usual table, Sean let out another growl.

“I can’t just sit here and wonder, Alfred. I need to do something.”

They sat down and Alfred leaned back in his chair, his expression thoughtful. “Lemme call Beyond Pleasure. Maybe Garrick can help.”

“*Someone* needs to help them. This is a mess and if I lose one of them, I’ll lose the other. My company will suffer. My conscience will suffer. My family will suffer. And Careen will be pissed as hell at you for dragging me into these matings, Al,” he explained in an urgent tone.

Alfred reached for his cell phone. “Don’t get all bent out of shape, Sean. We have time. Your boy is on his way to her now. I rather think he’s not going to let her get away.”

Marius smiled then. “There’s a lot more to Vahid than people think. He won’t let her escape.”

Sean watched Alfred dial the phone. “He better not. She deserves to be happy and so does he. And I deserve a good night’s sleep,” he grumbled.

“I rather think you’ll get it, Sean. Just have patience,” Alfred told him as a voice on the other end of the line answered.

Sean and Marius listened in as Alfred spoke to Garrick Forrester.

“Garrick, I’m going to ask you to break a confidence. But before you say no, just hear me out.”

Alfred filled Garrick in on Emily and Vahid. When the call ended, the three friends looked at each other and smiled.

“Drinks are on me,” Alfred said. “I think this one’s in the bag.”

PART THREE

Chapter Eleven

Nothing ever seemed to go as he planned when it came to his mate, Vahid thought as he touched her face with shaking fingers. The scent of blood and baby powder hung heavy in the small private dungeon at Beyond Pleasure.

“Emily.” Vahid breathed her name softly as he tried to rouse her.

Garrick stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. “Don’t. She’ll be in a lot of pain. Let me heal her,” he said in a low tone.

The master used his magic to release Emily’s bonds, catching her easily as she slumped, her stomach landing perfectly on his shoulder. Vahid’s lips tightened. As much as he didn’t like how Garrick took control and handled Emily, he knew it was the only way. The raw meat of her back oozed blood steadily. The fury he’d banked as he’d touched her returned full-force. He shook with the urge to kill the man who had whipped her.

Following Garrick into a private area of the club, Vahid’s eyes never left his mate. So much had passed between them in the past few years. Things that made him wince with the recollection of his own immature behavior. It had been nearly three years since the day he’d fucked up his life by spouting off about her before even meeting her. He knew the two years he’d spent living with Eden had eaten away at Emily. How could it not? His acid thoughts reminded him Eden wasn’t his mate. Emily was, but he’d never once treated her as such. Stupid. He’d been so fucking stupid, pissing away three years of his and Emily’s lives.

Seeing her unconscious and beaten bloody had not only lit his fury at the man who’d hurt her, but at himself as well. Obviously, all this time, she’d needed someone, needed him. But he hadn’t been there for her. Now, part of him yearned to take care of her, cherish her. The other part of him raged that he wasn’t worthy.

For most of his life, he’d had a deep seated need to be needed. Being an orphan with no permanent home, no one to love or love him, had left him with a driving urge to nurture and protect. Even his job as Vice President of Operations was all about his need. He took care of the underpinnings of the company. He made sure people got paid and things worked the way they were supposed to. The day to day operations of the company made it possible for Declan, Emily, Holden, and Sean to do what they did best. AI needed him.

As he watched Garrick arrange his mate on a soft damask sofa, he realized that Emily had needed him too, but he’d been too blind to see it. The one person in the world he should have taken care of, and he’d turned his back on her, leaving her to seek oblivion at the end of a whip. He vowed silently that it would never happen again. Everything that had gone wrong between them would be fixed. He couldn’t watch from the sidelines as she killed herself. He’d heard the bastard who’d beaten her...she’d not used her safe word. The implications chilled him to the bone.

Garrick knelt on the floor beside Emily’s limp body; his outstretched hands glowed slightly as he murmured under his breath. Vahid stepped closer until he could hear the arcane words of the Magia’s incantation. Before his eyes, the rivulets of blood slowed and disappeared. The raw flesh of Emily’s back began to heal. Ten minutes later, Garrick passed his hand over her and the dried blood disappeared.

Vahid stared in shock at his mate's back. High up on her spine, starting at the C7 vertebrae, a strange tattoo with an eye marked her skin. White scar tissue also marred her back, some of the scars so deep and thick that Vahid knew they came from being beaten viciously, repeatedly, for a span of many years. And finally, on the curve of her buttock, curling around her hip lay her clan mark, a delicate serpentine dragon with a lightning bolt in its mouth. He rubbed his own hip in the very same spot. His clan mark lay in almost the same place, in a very similar pattern but without the lightning bolt.

Garrick looked up, his steel colored eyes catching Vahid's movement. Self-consciously, Vahid dropped his hand.

"I knew who you were the first time I saw your clan mark," he said quietly. "It was too coincidental. I've seen hers repeatedly over the years. Two marks so very similar usually only have one meaning."

Vahid nodded stiffly. "She is my mate." The master's words sunk in and an icy wash of anger laced fear flooded him. "She's been coming here for years."

He didn't phrase the words as a question, but Garrick answered it as such. "Long before she met you," he acknowledged. "Here and my brother's club in California."

The strange sense that he had absolutely no idea who Emily was permeated his every pore. "Far From Heaven?"

Garrick inclined his head as he stroked his palm over Emily's back, causing the new pink scars to grow more healed and whiter with each pass. "When Dave went to California, he opened Far From Heaven. He and Emily are very good friends."

Despite the fact that Garrick's words were cool and unemotional, Vahid's fury flared anew. "How good?" he asked harshly, jealousy firing his blood.

The master sighed, the sound slightly annoyed. "I said friends, Vahid. They have never been anything but friends." Garrick's tone told Vahid that he wasn't pleased.

Vahid wasn't pleased either. "How the hell did this happen to her?" he asked in a low voice, fighting to keep control of his cart wheeling emotions. "Don't you monitor the inexperienced Doms? Don't you watch out for Emily?"

Garrick's eyes flashed with silver fire, but Vahid didn't care. The wizard could fry his ass with a wand and he would still ask the question. If Garrick and Dave cared about Emily, how could they allow Doms to hurt her in their clubs?

"Dave and I try to watch her closely, but some nights it's just too busy and we lose her on the floor of the club," Garrick admitted. "Other times, like tonight, we become distracted by other patrons or situations brewing. You walked in the door not an hour after Emily, and I shifted my focus from her to you. It's my fault her Dom wasn't stopped sooner."

Vahid's jaw tightened as his teeth clenched. He drew an audible breath and forced himself to calm. "He is not her Dom," he said with quiet force. "Emily is *mine*."

Garrick's brows rose at his show of possessiveness. "You have a funny way of showing that."

Anger flared briefly, but then banked. Vahid knew Garrick spoke the truth. The Magia had no business apologizing. Everything that had happened to Emily happened because he was a total and complete asshat.

"It's not your fault, Garrick. It's mine. She wouldn't be here if I hadn't fucked up from the day I met her. I wish I knew how to fix it all. I don't deserve her, but I have to save her from her death wish"

They sat in silence for a few minutes and finally the master said, "I have no right to tell you her secrets, but Dave and I care about her. Things have gone too far, and you should know the truth."

The Magia's eyes glowed with an uncanny light as he touched a thick white scar low on Emily's back. "We cannot save her. We've only staved off the inevitable. Only you have the power to save her from destruction, Vahid."

Goose bumps rose on his skin as his blood turned to ice. "She won't speak a safe word. She's inviting them to go too far," he murmured, a mixture of fear and outrage swirling within him. "How long has she been like this?" Part of his fear was the notion that she had been trying to kill herself in this manner since the day they met. Guilt raked him with razor sharp claws.

Garrick shook his head. "It's not about you, Vahid. She's been this way a long time. The situation with you just pushed her over the edge." He pulled a soft blanket over Emily's healed, naked back. "I need to go back to the beginning and tell you the whole story. Go change. After I tell you what you need to know, you should take her out of here. I'll get her things for you."

"Aren't they at her hotel?" he asked as he rose to his feet.

"No. She came here straight from the airport," Garrick replied.

With a nod, Vahid left the private office and went to the locker room to change. As he buttoned his jeans, he noticed the slight tremor of his fingers. He'd been shocked right out of his complacent rut. Despite his own pain, he'd had no urgency to fix the situation between them until Sean had forced it on him. Now, he'd been knocked on his ass by the sight of Emily naked, bloody, and unconscious. For a moment, at first glance, she'd looked dead and he never again wanted to feel the fear that had lashed him in that moment. Now, the urge to fix everything between them raged inside him.

While it was true, if she died he would be released from the hell he'd been in for three years, he acknowledged to himself that it was no solution. He loved her. He loved her with every breath he drew. Her proud demeanor. Her strength and determination under fire. Her classic beauty and sharp intelligence. No one had ever stood up to him and defied him as she had, and he loved her for it. He needed to tell her that and make up for all his stupid actions over the past three years. He would give her the moon if only she would give him a chance.

Returning to Garrick's office, he found a suitcase, a laptop, and a carryon bag near the door. He recognized the Antaeus International logo on the laptop case. She had to have come there straight from her flight from Australia. Her need had been so great, she hadn't even been able to get settled in her hotel first.

A gritty sound reached his ears and he realized it was his back teeth grinding. Looking at the sofa, he found Emily now lying on her side, sleeping. His eyes tracked across the room to where Garrick stood drinking what looked like Scotch.

"Want one?" the Magia asked.

Vahid shook his head. "I'm driving. I have a house in the suburbs. I'll take Emily there. How long will she sleep?"

“Hours. Probably long into the morning. Part of the healing process is that we have to put them under a sleep spell. They sleep deeply for hours to aid the magic-accelerated healing,” Garrick explained.

Taking a chair near where Emily’s head lay at the end of the sofa, Vahid stretched out one hand and fingered her silky blonde hair. Without shifting his gaze away from his mate, he said, “Start at the beginning.”

Garrick carried his glass with him across the room. Leaning an arm on the mantle, he stared off into space for a few moments. “Emily’s family is very old and very proud. Her mother is sister to Sean Antaeus’ mother, but Emily never traded on that relationship other than to ask Sean to help her network. When Alfred Stone told Sean about Em’s past, they made every effort to get her to move to California where Sean could help her.”

Vahid stared at Garrick in surprise. “How the hell would Alfred know Emily’s past?” he asked, wondering how everyone but him seemed privy to his mate’s secrets.

Garrick’s brows rose. “Alfred is Magia. There are a lot of things he knows.” The wizard sighed. “Emily’s father didn’t believe in education for women. Emily is brilliant, you know. She devised ways to learn despite her father. When he discovered that she knew how to read, he beat her. She was eight.”

The anger banked inside Vahid began to simmer. Now, he had someone he could direct it at. He drew a steadying breath. “Go on.”

“Her father kept devising reasons to beat her after that. For ten years, until her escape at eighteen, that man beat her regularly, punishing her for being intelligent and wanting to learn. Or at least, that is what he told Em.” Garrick’s eyes narrowed to slits. “The fucker was a sadist, Vahid. The stories she told us... Dave and I wanted to kill him. If he wasn’t dead already, we would have devised a way to torture and kill him for what he put her through. She has control issues. She thinks she has to be punished whenever something goes wrong in her life. Her head is all out of whack when it comes to men, sex, control, punishment, and pain.”

The Magia walked over to the sofa and stood staring down at Emily’s unmoving form. “For years, she dreamed that her mate would look at her and know that she was essentially a good person, a kind-hearted person, who needed to be loved and cherished and never punished again. She thought he would look at her and know the pain she’s been through and want to take it all away from her. Instead, she met you.”

Guilt and pain exploded inside Vahid as he realized what his vicious words had done to Emily. He looked up at Garrick. Not one iota of blame lay in the man’s eyes. Shock rippled through him. “I’m sorry,” he whispered hoarsely, his fingers stroking Emily’s head. “It was a stupid careless mistake. I hadn’t even met her yet.”

Garrick nodded. “I know. Dave told me. He tried to talk her out of her mindset, but she’s stubborn and has very little self-esteem. He did get her to agree to try to talk things out with you, but you’d already put yourself into a relationship with Sean’s sister and Emily wouldn’t touch that. Everything that has happened between you has eaten away at her soul.”

Vahid clenched his hands into fists to stop their shaking. “What’s the weird tattoo on her back?” he asked, trying for a slight diversion so he could regain control over his emotions.

For a brief moment, rage flared in the wizard's eyes. "Before she came to Beyond Pleasure, she belonged to another club. New to Paris, new to the scene, with few inhibitions and a yen for extreme pain, she ended up being collared by a man who had no business having subs and slaves."

Garrick's eyes flashed again as he went on. "Guerlain had the tattoo placed on her as a sign of his ownership. The eye is his eye, always watching her whether she is with him or not. Dave saved her life when Guerlain beat her for some infraction and chained her to the gate of his mansion as an example to the others. It was storming, lightning strikes all around. Dave got her down from the gate and brought her here. She was ill for a solid month afterward. When she awoke, she told us her clan mark had acquired the lightning bolt. We figured that somehow, she had been hit and survived, although we couldn't imagine how it had happened. Later, Dave tried to get her to remove the tattoo, but she refused."

Bile rose in Vahid's throat. He'd never heard such a horrendous story of abuse and mistreatment. To know that Emily had endured these things from a very young age rocked him to the core. He now understood her haughty, icy demeanor. She feared letting anyone close to her. People who should have loved her and cared for her had abused her. She had little faith in people, in masters, any longer. And his actions and behavior had made everything worse.

In his head, he heard her rough whisper from the last time they'd been together at the lodge. "You think you know, but you don't. No one does. No one ever will..." He didn't know. He would never have guessed that her life had held so much pain.

His fingers wound through her silky blonde hair. The scent of baby powder filled his nostrils. As he stared down at her unconscious form, a knot formed in his chest. An ache deeper than any he'd ever felt spread behind his breastbone. He alone had the power to save her now.

Raising his head, Vahid met Garrick's eyes. "Her self-destructive ways, do you think I can overcome them?" he asked hoarsely, needing the Magia's help, but unsure how to ask for it.

"You have to try. Show her love. Show her you care, that you are different than every other man in her life," Garrick urged. "She wants to be with you. Wants you to love her. I don't know what happened between you recently, but it broke her heart all over again. You have to fix this, Vahid. Otherwise, she will be dead before the year is out."

Something snapped inside him. The thought of her dead and in her grave while his life continued, left his stomach heaving. At the lodge, he'd thought Emily Carrington the farthest thing from a perfect mate. Now, he knew her secrets. He knew the truth. No one suited him more perfectly than she did. He yearned to be needed, and the gods knew no one needed someone to care for her and cherish her more than Emily Carrington.

"I'm going to take her home now. Can you have someone bring my car around and load up her belongings?" he asked roughly, feeling tears scratch his throat. He stroked her hair, dipping beneath the edge of the blanket to stroke her skin soothingly. She sighed in her sleep and Vahid ached to hold her in his arms, but he knew he had to get her home first.

Carrying her down to the car, Vahid noticed that she seemed to weigh no more than a child. He'd already seen the shadow of her rib cage while Garrick healed her. She'd lost weight during the weeks she'd been in Australia. The last time they'd had sex, at the lodge, he'd supported her full weight and it was considerably more than now. The woman in his arms was disturbingly fragile.

He placed her on the backseat and Garrick bound her with a spell that kept her from rolling off the seat while he drove. His house in the suburbs lay on an isolated tract of land. The house still looked like the old stone farmhouse it once was. The interior had been gutted and redone. Vahid didn't think Emily would find anything to dislike about the place.

Carrying his unconscious mate into the house, Vahid headed straight for the master suite. It never even occurred to him to put her in another room. She belonged to him and the only bed she would grace would be his. He eased her naked body into the king-sized bed and gently pulled the blanket from her so he could tuck her between the sheets. His fingers brushed over the old scar tissue. The ridges beneath his fingertips made him ache. He moved his hand and brushed her silky hair back from her face.

A woman as beautiful as Emily had no business knowing so much pain and fear. *His* woman had no business knowing pain and fear. Resolve hardened within him as he stared down at her lying in the bed he'd occupied only hours before. He had a chance to make up for his mistakes, his shitty behavior, and his even worse attitude. She wouldn't be going anywhere until he'd had the opportunity to apologize and show her how much he cared.

Drawing a shaky breath, Vahid acknowledged to himself that he loved her beyond anything else in the realm. Her defiance had always put his hackles up and roused his resentment, but now that he knew why she hid behind that haughty exterior, he had no qualms dropping his own anger. He fully understood the whispered words Garrick had dropped into his ear before he'd driven away from Beyond Pleasure with Emily. He had to heal her, do whatever it took to make it so.

Boldly, he stroked his hand down her back. During those hurried, frenzied, searingly passionate embraces they'd shared, he hadn't once seen her bare back or the ink at the base of her neck. The thick white scars and the strange tattoo surprised him, and angered him. He had to make up for what other men had done to her.

Vahid skimmed his hand over her, stopping to remove the leather cuffs around her wrists. He'd never been free to touch her or look at her and his fingers trembled. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been filled with this much fear. As his hands learned Emily's body, his heart thudded with growing apprehension. He had a lot to overcome and a lot of work ahead of him to right all the wrongs that had been done to her.

Easing her onto her back, he watched her hair spill over his pillow. Too much had gone wrong. Too many wrong impressions and harsh words had passed between them. He had this one last chance to change everything for them both. The violet shadows beneath her eyes, the pronounced hollows of her cheeks, the tight lines around her pink lips, the skin stretched over a prominent ribcage, and the clearly visible knobs of her spine, all told him of her suffering. She'd been wracked with pain while in Australia. He could tell she'd not been eating and the pain had etched itself clearly on her beautiful face.

Vahid touched her face gently and she nuzzled his palm in her sleep, his name a faint murmur on her lips. His heart turned over, pain radiating outward from the center of his chest. Kicking off his shoes, he crawled onto the bed with her and took her in his arms, holding her tightly against him.

"Oh, Em. Why didn't you tell me the truth? Why did you let me think you were so cold?" he whispered into her hair as he held her.

She rubbed her face against his chest, pressing herself against him as she slept. Vahid reached around her to his watch and set the alarm. He didn't want her to awaken to find herself not only in his bed but with her naked body pressed to his. Even though he was still clothed, he just had the sense that she wouldn't be very amenable to anything if she awoke in his arms. He had to show her he respected and cared for her, which meant being by her side when she awoke, but not in bed with her.

Meanwhile, he would take a couple of hours for himself while she still lay under Garrick's sleep spell. He would hold her and touch her, kiss her, and give free rein to the feelings that had been bottled inside him for the past three years. He loved her and finally, he had the chance to tell her and show her even if she was unconscious. He figured it would be a practice session for when she woke up, because he fully intended to tell her when she awoke. He would fight tooth and nail to save her from her past and have her for his own.

His eyes drifted closed as he caressed her back and pressed his lips to her hair. Her baby powder scent filled his heart and mind and his dragon lay content within him, pleased to be with their mate.

"When you wake up, Em, I promise you that everything will be different," he whispered. "I will fight to have you, to keep you. I may not really be worthy of you, but I'll be damned if I'll let anyone else have you or let you get away from me. We belong together. You belong to me. And what's mine, I cherish. Already you fill every space within my heart and soul. I learn from my mistakes and these past three years have been the biggest mistake of my life. I promise to spend the rest of my life making them up to you. And it will be my very great pleasure to show you how much you are loved and wanted."

Her hands crept up his chest as she snuggled against him, his words apparently soothing her even in sleep. She lay pressed to him, her face regaining color, and her lines of stress easing. Vahid closed his eyes and savored the feel of her body against his. If he had anything to say about it, they would never again spend another night apart... so long as they both drew breath.

Chapter Twelve

Contentment filled every iota of her soul. She sensed it the instant consciousness began to return. The scent of allspice lay heavy in the air. She knew what that meant, but for once, bitterness and pain eluded her. Cracking open her eyes, she gazed upon a field of white. White pillows. White sheets. White walls. White gauzy curtains. Pale wood furniture in clean Scandinavian design lines. She loved it, but it certainly didn't seem like the sort of bedroom Vahid Delrey would have. Not that she really knew anything about him.

Full consciousness returned and she realized she lay on her stomach in the center of the most comfortable bed she'd ever been in. Turning her head to the other side of the pillow, she saw Vahid sprawled in a rocking chair beside the bed, watching her with enigmatic black eyes. The instant he saw that her eyes were open, he got up and sat on the edge of the mattress, brushing her hair back from her face.

"How do you feel?"

The softness of his husky voice rippled over her, matching the caressing stroke of his fingertips over her hair, face, and shoulders. His touch left heat in its wake, not sexual heat, but the heat of affection and worry. They might each be shielding their thoughts, but the strength of his emotions still leaked out to her.

"Who are you and what did you do with my asshole mate?" she whispered, licking at her dry lips.

Vahid smiled, a warm quirk of his lips that caused her heartbeat to accelerate. "He's still here. Licking his wounds because I kicked his ass."

Emily shifted in the bed, rolling onto her back so she could look up at him. A frown wrinkled his brow.

"Does your back hurt at all?" he asked, worry clouding his eyes as they scanned her.

His words revealed his knowledge of what had happened to her. That made her nervous, as well as cautious. On top of that, she realized she'd been on her stomach, which meant Vahid had seen her back, scars, tattoo, and all. "I'm fine," she assured him guardedly. "How did you know?"

"About your back?" One black brow rose questioningly. When she nodded, he said, "I was there."

Shock streaked through her, and she stiffened beneath the light comforter. "Garrick called you." A twinge of anger spiked at the thought that Garrick had betrayed her confidence and called Vahid to take care of her.

He shook his head. "You misunderstand. I found you before he did. I was headed to the Red Room and scented you. Garrick appeared just as I opened the door and found that bastard abusing you." Vahid's words were flat and emotionless, but his eyes flashed with rage.

The implications of his words settled into her brain and her eyes widened in shock. "You're a Dom," she whispered, unable to stop the flicker of fear rising within her.

He bent and pressed a soft kiss to her forehead. "Yes. But I would never hurt you, Em. Not like that. Not ever like that," he vowed.

She swallowed hard, unsure how much to tell him. Finally, after several seconds of silence she said, "You don't know me, Vahid. Who I am will disgust you. *I* disgust me."

"You're wrong, Em. I do know who you are." His dark eyes held hers steadily, a light growing in their depths. His hand cupped the side of her face, his thumb stroking her jaw line rhythmically. "You're a brilliant executive. As much of a financial whiz as Garret. You're a supremely confident, educated, intelligent, and accomplished woman. You're a great manager. You take care of your staff and are always fair. You're one of the hardest workers I know. You do your homework and commit yourself wholeheartedly to causes you believe in."

He leaned closer, his hard thigh pressing against her body through the thin coverlet. "You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen," he said softly. "Your hair is the color and texture of corn silk. Your eyes glow like the rarest of topazes. I'm not sure how I missed that you're a sub, but seeing you in cuffs, imagining you in a collar – in *my* collar – sent a wave of excitement and longing through me."

Emily shivered at the emotion in his deep voice. She'd never heard Vahid sound like this before. The façade he wore to the office was gone. In its place was the man who had first made love her in the gazebo, the man who had been eager to touch her and be with her, who hadn't cared where they were, who was so overcome by her that he couldn't stop himself...

"Emily, as a sub you must be magnificent and any master would be proud to have you. And there is nothing about you that disgusts me from your prickly attitude to your lightning anger to the fact that you have some sort of pain fetish that drives you to silence when you should be speaking your safe word."

His tone became a little harsh as he spoke her secret aloud, and her shivers turned to trembling. "I'm not... normal, Vahid." She spoke so softly she could barely hear her own words.

Both of his hands framed her face, his touch so gentle she ached to melt into him. "Of course you are, Emily. Your perceptions are just skewed by the pain you've had to endure for so long."

Her heart skipped a beat. What could he mean? she thought, panicked. He had to mean the growing pain they'd both had to endure since they'd met but not mated. He couldn't mean the pain in her past. He couldn't have found out her greatest secret. Vahid might be Sean's right hand, but her cousin would never spill her secrets. He'd sworn on his mother's grave...

"Em," he groaned her name softly. "You don't know what it did to me to see you hanging unconscious and bloody last night. To see your scars and know the pain you've endured. Why would you not speak your safe word?"

Unable to turn her head away because he cupped her face in his hands, she closed her eyes. "Because something inside me seeks oblivion whether permanently or only for a short while. I told you. I'm not normal. You should have just left me there." She swallowed the lump in her throat, tears welling inside her. "Maybe then you would have been free today instead of still tied to me."

An angry growl rumbled from him and she lifted her eyelids. Night dark eyes blazed down at her. Vahid's face showed anger and something more, an indefinable emotion that set her heart racing.

"Maybe I don't want to be free, Em. Maybe I don't consider being tied to you a bad thing," he said harshly.

Her tears rose to the surface and spilled over before she could stop them. "Everything that's happened between us has been bad, Vahid," she whispered, her voice a rough croak that hurt her throat. "I'm so sorry. I never meant to ruin your life."

His hands shifted from her face to her shoulders and he shook her gently, but with an insistence that brooked no quarter. "You haven't ruined anything. There is still time to fix what's gone wrong. And it's not your fault anyway. It's mine."

With a deep, pain-filled groan, he pulled her against him, cradling her against his chest. "Let me in, Em. Let me love you," he whispered urgently, his lips caressing her temple. "I need you to want me and need me. When I thought you didn't, it killed me inside."

Tears ran unchecked down her face as she reached for him, wrapping her arms around him as she trembled in his hold. "I'm scared, Vahid. All I know is pain and I'm tired. So tired of being me. So tired of living this life. I can't drag you down into this cesspool. You deserve a mate who isn't damaged."

"You're not as damaged as you think, my love. Just let me in. Let me show you how good life can be," he whispered.

She tilted her head back, still cradled in his arms. "If this goes wrong, Vahid, you will hate me even more, and I can't bear it. Don't you see that I am broken? I cannot bear another disappointment..."

"Hate you? I could never hate you," he growled fiercely. "I won't give up on you! You are mine! I don't want another mate. I just want you, Em. Just you."

His mouth claimed hers roughly, filled with determination and possession. She shivered, burrowing closer to his body, needing him with a desperation she'd never fully realized. When she moaned against his mouth, the kiss gentled. His hands swept over her with a tenderness that filled her heart with awe. No one had ever touched her with tenderness. No one except her mother.

The tears continued to fall from her eyes as she kissed him back. He wanted her to need him, and by the gods she did! She could never go back and be the woman she'd been before. Her control had been shattered, her armor battered and broken.

Vahid broke the kiss, his chest heaving as he stared down at her. Emily gazed up into his dark eyes and for the first time noticed the intense emotion there. Her breath caught in her throat and her nails dug into his back.

With a groan, he said, "I love you, Emily."

Emily wondered if she would shatter into a million pieces, she felt that fragile, the moment felt that fragile. The dreams she'd left tacked to her refrigerator door suddenly came screaming into focus. She stared at him, frozen in shock, barely able to breathe.

"Em?"

A huge sob escaped her. "Oh, gods." She clutched him tightly, knowing somewhere in the back of her mind that her nails were scoring his skin. "Vahid, I love you so much! I thought... I didn't... I just..."

His lips turned up in a smile of such pure happiness that she felt lightheaded from shock. And then she burst into tears. Not the silent, pain filled tears she'd experienced since meeting him, but loud, noisy, gut-wrenching sobs of relief. She drenched his t-shirt as he held her close,

kissing whatever part of her he could reach. The sweetness of his hands and lips seeped into her soul, warming her and healing the wounds she'd never realized still existed inside her.

"Oh, Emily," he whispered. "You are mine and I will never let you go. I'm sorry for everything that's passed between us, but from now on, I promise to always take care of you."

She wiped her eyes and nose on his shirt, then raised her head. "I'm not," she said huskily, burrowing her hands beneath his t-shirt and pushing it up. When he let go of her and stripped it off, tossing it to the floor, she rubbed her hands over his strong chest, possessiveness growing within her.

"Not what?" he asked, confusion and rising lust in his dark gaze.

Emily smiled, her forefinger circling one flat male nipple. "Not sorry for everything that happened between us. No one has ever made me come as hard as you have," she admitted, her gaze holding his boldly.

Vahid groaned and captured her mouth with his. Her tongue flicked at his lips, inviting his tongue to come out to play. She rubbed her naked breasts against his chest and felt him stiffen, pulling his mouth from hers.

"Em, baby, you've been hurt and you haven't been taking care of yourself." He broke off on a groan as she bent her head and licked his nipple. "I don't think we should do this right now."

"I think you need to stop thinking," she purred, happiness spilling through her like sunlight through a window. "I'm fine."

Vahid was hers and she was his. Such a simple thing that meant everything to her. She wanted their feelings cemented in the time-honored way. She wanted her mate to love her physically. She wanted to mate him and feel their souls merge and know that they would be together forever.

He caught her hands in his to still their wandering caresses. He raised them to his lips and kissed her fingertips, his dark eyes glowing with love. Emily's heart skittered for a moment, then thundered as the reality of his emotions began to sink in.

She pulled a hand free and stroked the side of his face, the freedom to touch him filling her heart with wonder and happiness. "You think I'm fragile, and maybe I am, but to heal, I need to know that I belong to you. I need to know that you are mine and that you aren't ever going away," she said quietly. "I need to know that the dreams I'd given up on are truly mine."

Leaning closer, she kissed him gently, moving her mouth on his with a sweetness that had always been inside her, waiting only for her mate to release it. She relaxed against him and his arms enfolded her, holding her close to him. A sense of belonging wrapped itself around her and she let the last bit of her armor fall away.

Oh, Em. I never realized. I never knew. You're more than I ever dreamed of having in a mate.

The most amazing sensations buffeted her body and mind as she opened herself fully to Vahid. She didn't think she'd ever feel alone again. His thoughts opened to her and enveloped her in the warmth of his emotions.

There is so much I want to share with you, Vahid.

His lips caressed her temple. *I want to know everything, Em. But first, I need to make sure you're okay. Let me fix you a bath and some breakfast.*

I don't want to eat. I want you to make love to me.

Vahid pulled her arms from around his neck and pushed back from her, his hand stroking her hair. *I will. Just not quite yet. Humor me. You scared the shit out of me last night. I need to ensure you're okay. My dragon may be dying to mate you, but even he needs reassurance that Garrick healed you.*

Emily bit her lip. Happiness suffused her, but she knew that there would still be things they needed to work through. Strong fingers cupped her chin and she lifted her gaze to meet his.

"Em. We're through the worst of it. We can get through anything together," he told her in a firm voice. "Don't ever think you can't tell me something. I know I haven't been very accepting of you in the past, but all the misunderstandings are gone now. I know what I feel in my heart. I love you. Nothing you could ever do or say will change that."

The urge to tell him everything, rose within her. As much as it would hurt to tell her secrets, she needed to have the air cleared between them and start with a clean slate. If he could accept her and not be disgusted by her, then truly a miracle would have occurred.

"The miracle is that I didn't lose you because of my stupidity," he said softly, wrapping a lock of her hair around his finger. "Every night I'm awakened by the nightmare of your death spiral, the sight of your blood gushing from your ripped scales..."

Her hands dropped to her lap and one finger traced over her belly. "I have a scar," she whispered with a shudder. "I have a lot of scars, Vahid. They're so ugly."

He leaned in and kissed her hard. "They are badges of courage and bravery. And the one from my claws is not your fault," he told her.

"It is my fault. I tried to kill myself." She stared at him calmly, accepting the blame for everything that had gone wrong that day on the mountain.

Vahid shook his head. "None of it would have happened had I just done what I needed to do in the beginning. I should have sucked it up and apologized for what I'd said before I met you. I should have told Eden I'd met my mate. Instead, I turned my back on you and excused it by saying you were a cold bitch who didn't care anyway. I was wrong, Emily. I never gave you the chance you deserved."

She touched his hand with her fingers, marveling that she had the right to touch him whenever she wanted. "No more blame. We were both at fault, but it's over now."

"It is." Vahid stood up, his hand reaching out to stroke over her hair. "I've been waiting for Garrick's sleep spell to wear off so I can spoil you. I'm going to draw you a hot bath now and while you're soaking, I'll make breakfast."

Emily brows winged up. "You cook?"

He laughed and the sound sent shock waves down her spine. She didn't think she'd ever heard him laugh before.

"If I didn't know how to cook, I'd be skinny and starving or fat from fast food burgers," he said with a grin. "Besides, who do you think kept Sean fed in college?"

Vahid walked into the bathroom and she heard the water come on. Carefully, she scooted to the edge of the bed and let her feet drop to the smooth wood floor. She looked around the bedroom, liking how the huge bed sat in the center of the room instead of up against a wall.

“Don’t even think about standing up.”

Vahid’s gruff words had her head swiveling around. He padded in from the bathroom, barefoot, bare-chested, his jeans low on his lean hips, the top button undone. She eyed his button-fly, wondering what he wore beneath the denim.

“Nothing.”

She blinked at him in surprise and he scooped her up in his arms carrying her into the bathroom. Her eyes widened at the size of the white tiled room.

“What is this? Heaven?” she joked. “Everything is so white.”

Her mate lowered her carefully into the big tub. Hot water covered her up to her neck and clouds of steam rose around her, filling the air with the spicy scent of black currents and vanilla. She sighed and leaned her head back on a poofy white plastic pillow.

“It looks like Heaven, feels like Heaven, and smells like Heaven.” She smiled at him, not moving from her languorous pose. “That must make you a God.”

Vahid sat on the edge of the tub and leaned down, his mouth hovering over hers. “I don’t know about that, but I know what it makes you... an angel.”

He nibbled her lips, catching her lower lip between his teeth. She shivered, her eyes never leaving his. When he finally kissed her, she thought her bones had melted. Sweet, hot, intense, he was far more than she had ever imagined.

“You’re corny, but I love it,” she murmured when he lifted his head.

“You love *me*. Big difference. At least, in my book.” He stood up. “You relax. I’m going to make some breakfast.”

The instant he left the room, Emily’s heart sank and doubts flooded in. She’d lived with fear nearly her entire life. She didn’t know how to handle happiness, and she didn’t trust that she wouldn’t fuck it all up.

She wriggled in the tub. The water soothed her body. Vahid seemed to instinctively know what she needed, but she had difficulty accepting that too. He’d been an asshole for three long years. And he had the ability to hurt her as no one had before. A lethal combination for the wounding of her soul, she thought.

By the time Vahid returned with a heated towel in his hands, she’d shredded three nails while worrying. The look he gave her told her that he knew just what had been going through her head. His words confirmed it.

“You shut me out. That means you’re stressing. C’mon. Out of the tub.”

When she stood up, he wrapped the towel around her and lifted her out. Standing on the bathmat with the towel binding her arms to her body, and Vahid’s arms holding her tightly to his chest, she had no choice but to listen to his lecture.

“Emily, we’ve worked together a long time. Just for a moment, forget all the personal shit between us. When we’re in an executive meeting and I promise to do something, do I do it?” he asked bluntly.

“Yes,” she admitted reluctantly.

He stared down at her, his expression stern. "At the office, professional to professional, do you trust my word?"

"Yes."

He tipped her chin up and forced her to look at him. "I promised you that I would never hurt you the way other Doms have. I promised to always take care of you. I am the same man you trust in the office and while I admit I've been a total prick when dealing with you, I would never intentionally hurt you."

His words rang with truth and honesty and his dark eyes held hers steadily. Slowly, she lowered her shields a little and let him into her thoughts.

I'm sorry. It's hard to make the fear go away. Maybe you should have made love to me when I wanted you to. I would be a lot more amenable after one of those spectacular orgasms.

Vahid's lips curved into a smile. *Spectacular, huh?*

That's a very tame word to describe how you made me feel, she confessed.

His eyes clouded and a small frown knit his brow. *I was rough with you. I bit you and marked your skin. And both times, I left you abruptly. I'm not proud of my actions. I'm a total bastard.*

I'll forgive you on one condition. She squirmed until she got her arms free of the towel. Her fingers found the button fly of his jeans and with one tug, she popped open all the buttons. *Forget about breakfast. Make love to me. Show me who I belong to. I need this. I need you.*

Emily slid her hands into Vahid's jeans and pushed them down. They fell to the floor with the towel. For the first time, nothing lay between them, not one stitch of clothing. She marveled at the hard planes of his shoulders. She'd always admired them, but naked, his tanned skin dark against the backdrop of unrelieved white tiles, he looked magnificent.

She sucked in a harsh breath, her nipples beading painfully as they rubbed his chest. He threaded his hands into her damp hair and bent to kiss her neck. Her senses shifted to overdrive as she stared at the paleness of her hands on his skin. As her blood fired, her dragon pushed toward the surface, enveloping Emily in a rush of base emotions and sensations.

Let her out.

She shivered, knowing that the thought came from Vahid's inner dragon. The beast called to her and her instincts pushed her to obey, but she held them off. An issue of trust hung in the balance and it had to be resolved before mating.

Emily stroked her hands over Vahid's warm skin, her palms molding the curves and planes of his muscles. Never had she been able to touch a lover with such freedom. Always, she had been restrained by cuffs or ropes or chains. She loved the texture of his skin and let her lips trail after her fingertips, learning his body by touch and taste.

When he nipped the base of her throat, she tipped her head back, her moan breaking the silence in the room. The sound seemed to spur him to action. He swept her up in his arms and carried her to the huge white bed she'd awakened in. He laid her on the sheets, sweeping the coverlet away before he followed her down, covering her body with his.

For an instant, a vision flickered through her head of their entwined bodies, naked and writhing on the white sheets. The carnality of the vision made her quiver with need.

Vahid's knee pressed her thighs apart and he settled his body between them. He licked her breast bone and stroked his hands over her hip. The dragon clan mark on her hip bone burned when he touched it. She rubbed her hands up his arms, feeling the strength in his biceps. His masculine beauty turned her on almost as much as her ability to touch him freely did.

"This time is for you Em," he rasped, his voice thick with desire.

He pulled away from her and pushed her thighs apart, burying his face in the wet flesh he'd exposed. Emily screamed.

Chapter Thirteen

For a split second, Vahid froze in fear.

Oh, no, no, no, no, no! Don't stop!

He smiled and rubbed her wet labia. Her swollen pink flesh unfurled as he stroked her with his fingertips. Her head thrashed on the pillows, encouraging him.

Vahid smiled to himself. Between her lust-filled thoughts, her exquisite body, and the overwhelming scent of her arousal, he could barely contain himself. His dragon wanted to mate her and figure out the trust issue later. He could barely keep himself from plunging his aching cock balls deep into her. But, as he'd told her, this first one was solely for her.

Rubbing his thumb in her thick cream, he blew lightly on her exposed flesh. Her body undulated, lifting her hips closer to his mouth. He blew into her core and she moaned, her legs shifting restlessly.

More! Oh, give me more! she begged.

Vahid flicked his tongue over her labia and she jerked.

"Ohhhhhh!" The long moan clearly declared her arousal and made him smile, not that she could see his face.

"Come on, baby," he murmured. "Show me how much you want me."

Her fingers fisted in his hair and tugged lightly. "You tease!"

He was. He admitted it. But teasing her felt so good. Feeling her body respond to him made him feel on top of the world. A soaring sense of triumph filled him as he slid his finger deep inside her pussy. Her slick walls clamped down on him and he imagined how it would feel on his cock. The thought almost unmanned him.

Slipping another finger inside her, he stroked her a few times. Her skin flushed pink and more moans issued from her mouth. With a smile, he leaned forward and flicked his tongue over her clit. She stiffened. He sucked the little bud into his mouth, letting his teeth lightly scrape it.

She screamed again, but this time it accompanied a full blown orgasm. Her pussy milked his fingers. Her hands scrambled on the sheets. Her limbs writhed. He watched as her torso bucked up off the sheet, jerking, making the mounds of her breasts jiggle as she came.

The pink flush didn't subside even when she collapsed on the mattress. Her hands reached for him and Vahid let her pull him up. He deliberately slid his body against hers, knowing that it would serve to set her senses alight. Leaning over her, he pressed his thick cock against her belly.

I want you. You are mine, Emily.

Her fingers dug into his shoulders. "Yes. Oh, yes, Vahid," she moaned.

Trapping her head between his forearms, he bent down and kissed her, his tongue sweeping into her mouth. Her arousal flared as she tasted herself on his tongue. He could feel it in the way her body moved urgently against him. Expecting her thoughts to be jumbled by passion, he was surprised at their lucidness.

Fuck me, Vahid. I need you deep inside me.

He shook his head. *Not until you say the words. The right words because what happens between you and me when we're naked like this could never be fucking, Emily.*

Oh, Gods. Please make love to me. I love you so much!

Vahid shifted his hips, letting the head of his cock slide against her pussy. She sobbed aloud.

Look at me, he commanded.

Her eyes opened. The hazel-gold irises seemed glazed, but excitement, wonder, and fear swirled in their depths.

His hips surged forward, his cock pressing into her tight pussy. His heart spilled over with love for her. Possessiveness and triumph jockeyed for position in his head. *You. Are. Mine.*

Another sob escaped her. "I am. I belong to you. I always have."

He eased back, and then pushed into her again, almost losing control when her slick channel gripped him. He pulled her legs up around his hips and eased his knees farther apart to help leverage deeper strokes.

Emily's hips rose to meet each thrust, her thighs squeezing him. He bent his head and sucked on a tight nipple, tugging it hard. She squirmed under him, the thoughts she projected filled with lust. Discovering how sensitive her nipples were pleased him. He stored away every bit of information he gathered.

Rocking against her, his cock gliding within her wet pussy, Vahid pushed them both higher, their bodies burning as they neared orgasm. His dragon roared its pleasure and his clan mark felt like a brand on his hip. He caressed her mark and she cried out, her body going rigid. His cock slammed into her and she convulsed, screaming his name.

"Vahid! Gods, I love you!"

He'd never seen a more beautiful sight than Emily's face contorted in pleasure as she came. He pumped into her two more times and felt his cock explode, his hot cum filling her. Dropping his head into the crook of her neck, he moaned her name.

"Emily. Oh, Em." He shuddered as another ripple of pleasure went down his spine. "I adore you."

He tried not to let his weight squish her into the mattress, but for a couple of minutes he just couldn't move. Her hands stroked over his shoulders and back. The disjointed thoughts he got from her told him that she loved touching him, loved his shoulders for some reason. He sighed in satisfaction. The gods must have been smiling on him because he knew that the first step toward gaining Emily's trust had been accomplished.

He rolled to his side and pulled her into his arms, holding her close so he could nuzzle her temple. He'd made love to her, showing her how patient and thoughtful he could be, putting her pleasure before his own, cherishing her. Watching her explode twice had filled him with a satisfaction he'd never experienced before. He clearly remembered her saying that orgasms had been forced from her body in the past and that her body had been a vessel for the pleasure of others, not her own pleasure. He'd thought it odd at the time, but had forgotten it in the emotional overdose of that day. Now, he wondered just exactly what she'd meant by that remark.

Have you ever been in a relationship with a man, Em? he asked cautiously.

She stirred against him, a little shiver going through her. He reached down and pulled the coverlet over them.

Of course, I have. Dave is my best friend.

He sensed that she had begun to block some of her thoughts from him. That worried him. She could be so damned self-contained sometimes that he couldn't get a bead on her. He needed her to be as open as possible. When he had to guess what she thought and felt, he screwed things up royally. And the gods knew there was no more room for screw ups where Emily Carrington was concerned.

Not friendships. Sexual relationships, he clarified.

She shifted again and her discomfort with the question gave him the answer long before she did.

Yes. You know I was Guerlain's slave. She rolled her shoulders and although he couldn't see it at the moment, he remembered exactly what the tattoo with Guerlain's eye looked like.

Not a Dominant/submissive relationship either. An intimate relationship - emotional, sexual, boyfriend/girlfriend kind of stuff, he explained patiently. He knew what her answer would be. He felt it in his bones. However, he needed to hear it from her own lips, or brain in this case, since they were sharing thoughts.

Not really.

Her insecurity swept over him and he instantly wanted to right all the wrongs that had been done to her in her lifetime.

Does that matter?

Worried golden eyes looked up at him, traces of fear lurking in their depths. Vahid kissed her leisurely, soft kisses without tongue, sweet kisses of love and temptation.

It matters in the sense that this is all new for you. You have no experience with intimacy, do you?

"No." Her single word answer held more fear than her eyes did and Vahid's heart ached for her.

"Emily, you are my mate. The relationship I hope to have with you will be made up of many things. Yes, I'd like to be your master, but the Dominant/Submissive part of our relationship can be worked out later," he said, choosing his words carefully. "First, we need to learn to be lovers and mates. We need to learn how to be a couple. The time off Sean gave us will help us build our relationship. Trust is important and so is the truth."

Emily sighed and rubbed her face against his chest. "I understand, but it's new for me, and I'm afraid."

He kissed her mouth again, loving how she tasted, loving the freedom to caress her and express his feelings for her. "Just don't shut me out, Em. We can't make it work if we shut each other out," he said softly. "We have to talk about everything."

"Okay. I'll try. It's hard though. I do love you, but my thoughts and emotions have been locked inside me my entire life. I don't know how to let them out. And the pain of the last three years didn't help," she whispered in a forlorn voice.

"We'll do this together, Em. I promise you we can get through this and build a life together. You just have to promise me to always try and never give up."

He looked into her eyes and saw the fear begin to dissipate. A tentative smile curved her pink lips and love turned him into a besotted fool who thought he gazed upon the most beautiful girl in the world.

"I'm not," she protested in a whisper.

He smiled at her, loving how unaffected she was beneath the icy exterior that she wore like armor. "You are to me." He smoothed his hands over her back and down to cup her firm buttocks. "Gods, I love touching you. All these years you've looked so untouchable, so unapproachable. I can't believe how wrong I was about you, but I am so very glad I was."

"I wasn't untouchable in the gazebo or against the wall," she reminded him with a faint blush.

His heart began to thud heavily in his chest at the memory and his dragon rose from its sated stupor. "No, you weren't. I would never have imagined such a naughty, feminine woman lay behind that executive armor of yours," he said with a teasing chuckle. "Pink thongs, pink toenails... You know, they matched the pink of your..."

Emily clapped a hand over his mouth stopping his words. He grinned behind her fingers. Her face flamed, and he loved it. He pulled her hand down. "Let me up, I need to finish making breakfast. You need to eat something," he told her, using his most commanding tone. "You're way too thin. You must have weighed twenty pounds more at the lodge and I'm determined you'll gain it back in the next two weeks."

Vahid sat up and stared down at her. Lying flat on her back in the center of the white bed, her pale hair spilling across the pillows, her cheeks and nipples bright pink, she looked like a queen. A rather lusty and seductive queen. He thought about forgetting breakfast again.

She made a face at him. "You have the craziest thoughts," she protested. "You act like I'm some movie star or something. I'm not that attractive."

"Maybe you are to me." He got up and walked over to the closet, going inside to look for a pair of sweats. When he came out, Emily sat on the side of the bed in all her naked glory. His breath caught in his throat. However, when she looked up at him with darkened eyes, his heart skipped a beat. The fear had returned.

"Vahid, where am I?" she asked with a frown.

It dawned on him how disorienting it must be for her to not have a clue where she was or how she'd gotten there. He crossed the room to her side, handing her one of his t-shirts. She stood up and put it on. It came to her hips.

He sighed as he eyed her bare pussy beneath the shirt. "Well, that idea didn't work. You're too tall," he said with a shake of his head. "Your things are in the closet." He gestured toward the walk-in closet he'd just come out of.

She touched his arm. "But where am I?"

"This is my house. It's in the suburbs. It used to be a farmhouse, but I gutted it a few years back."

Relief lit her eyes. "Okay. I just didn't want to be traipsing around some Paris hotel with all my girly bits hanging out."

She started to turn toward the closet but he caught her arm. "You can walk naked through the whole house as far as I'm concerned. You're my mate, that makes this your house too, Em. If you want to let your girly bits hang out, go for it. I'm certainly not going to stop you."

He leered at her, wiggling his eyebrows. She laughed and the sound struck him dumb with emotion. For a moment, he tried to recall if he'd ever heard her really laugh before.

She walked toward the closet saying over her shoulder, "Probably not. I've never been very happy. In fact, I don't think I've ever been happy. What I feel now is amazing."

She disappeared into the closet and Vahid headed down to the kitchen. He put away the eggs he'd taken out earlier and reached for steaks instead. By the time he smelled Emily's distinct baby powder scent, the bacon wrapped filets had been grilled, a sauce simmered in a pan on the stove, and he was forking fluffy wild rice onto the plates. Vahid turned off the sauce, put freshly steamed asparagus onto the plates and topped each with creamy hollandaise sauce.

Emily padded closer. She still wore his t-shirt, but her long legs were hidden inside UCLA Bruin sweatpants and her hair had been brushed and pulled into a ponytail. She took a deep breath and an expression of ecstasy settled in her eyes. She hopped onto a stool at the long kitchen counter.

"By the gods! That smells like dinner at Morton's," she breathed in awe.

Vahid grabbed the warm plate with a dish towel and set it before her. Her mouth fell open. "Fork. Knife. Now," she muttered.

With a chuckle, he handed her cutlery and picked up his own plate, taking the stool beside her. He watched as she cut into her filet and took a bite. Her earlier orgasmic expression returned as she chewed and swallowed.

"I'm in love," she moaned. She forked some asparagus into her mouth and her eyes rolled up in her head. "This really *is* Heaven."

Vahid could barely eat. Her enthusiasm for food enthralled him especially when she cleaned her plate and started on his. He never would have guessed such a slender woman could eat so much meat.

"I'm a dragon. What do you expect?" she asked, waving her fork at him, the fork that held the last bit of asparagus from his plate.

After she'd eaten her lunch and his, she cleaned up, stating that it was only fair since he'd cooked. She poked around the huge country kitchen but didn't seem all that interested in it other than knowing where the food was. He gave her a tour of the house next. She seemed to like it a lot which eased one of his worries.

They ended up on the thick carpet of his office, in front of the blazing fireplace. The crisp autumn day had turned cold and they'd had to put on socks. Vahid had taken his t-shirt from Emily to cover his bare chest and had wrapped her in one of his sweatshirts. She laughed when she saw the logo on the front.

"Oh, this won't do at all. I feel like a traitor."

He tumbled her to the carpet and leaned over her, slipping his hands beneath the loose sweatshirt. "I won't tell if you don't tell," he murmured wickedly as his fingers found her nipples.

She arched into his hands. "I'm a Bruin! I could never tell a living soul that I once wore a USC sweatshirt."

Vahid pushed up the shirt a little so he could nibble at her navel. "I won't tell anyone my mate went to UCLA. They'd kick me out of the Trojan Alumni association," he teased.

"I can't believe you and Sean went to USC." Emily's fingers traced his jaw. "Sean doesn't have a single diploma in his office."

"He didn't graduate," Vahid confessed. When she blinked at him in shock he nodded. "It's true. His sister took off for Scotland his senior year. He left to take over the company and never looked back. Once I graduated, he asked me to come to work for him. When I agreed, he handed me a 'signing bonus' and a plane ticket to France. He knew I'd been here as an exchange student and loved it. By the time I got home, I was ready to work and AI has been my life ever since. I think I've only managed a couple of vacations since then. On the last one, I bought this place."

"Holy shit. I never knew that about Sean." She grimaced then. "Of course, I've kept myself apart from them and tried to act like they weren't family. When I first came to AI three years ago, it seemed like the right thing to do. Now, it just seems stupid."

"You look like their mother," he told her.

She nodded her agreement. "Our mothers were uncannily alike in looks, but night and day in temperament. I wish I'd known my Aunt Isadora."

"Sean's stories of her are always amazing. I wished I'd had a mother like her."

Emily snuggled up to his chest. "Where are your parents?" she asked quietly.

Vahid sighed. "Dead. I was little when it happened. I grew up in foster homes and earned myself a scholarship to USC by playing baseball." He shrugged. "I never liked the game but I was good at it. Dragons seem to be natural athletes."

"I wonder about the whole nurture thing sometimes. Not having parents doesn't seem to affect how you'll turn out." She looked thoughtful for a long moment, her eyes on the fire. "The gods know that even though I had parents, they never nurtured me."

Vahid waited to feel her pain. He could tell that she wasn't shielding her emotions and thoughts from him. But the pain never came. Instead, he felt a blank sort of acceptance of how it had all played out.

"My father was a sick bastard. My mother loved him more than anything in the world so despite the fact that she loved me, she loved him more. She never once stopped him from hurting me. I think she felt that if she did, she would lose him, and she couldn't bear that."

Emily looked up at him with solemn eyes, darkened to the color of honey. "I love you, but I am not my mother. I would die before I let a man take away my principles and ethics."

Vahid's heart ached for her. She'd been through so much, he could barely believe she'd lived through it all. His fingers stilled on her flesh as he felt her emotions stirring. He'd wanted her to trust him enough to tell him her secrets and now she had begun to. He tried to brace himself because he knew what she had to tell him would make him angry and heartsick for her. But, the secrets needed to be shared, if they were to have any future together.

Chapter Fourteen

Emily glanced up at him through her lashes and a shiver went through her. "I gather you know where my scars came from."

Rage flashed for a moment in his eyes, replaced by concern. "Garrick told me the basics because he wanted me to save you. He said that he and his brother had tried but the only one who could truly reach you was your mate." He swallowed visibly as dark emotions flickered across his face. "He said no one could save you, but me."

Having Vahid know what happened to her in the past, what her father had done, didn't bother her too much. There were other things that bothered her more. "My father was cruel," she admitted in a low whisper. "But other people were worse."

She felt Vahid stiffen. "The tattoo," he growled.

Emily nodded. "Stefan Guerlain used me. He collared me almost the moment I appeared on the scene. I didn't know Dave and Garrick then. I didn't know how to be a sub. Guerlain is the one who trained me. His subs are not allowed a safe word."

When she peeked up at him, his grim expression made her tremble. "Unconscionable!" He shook his head, his mouth set in harsh lines, his eyes filled with banked fury.

"So Dave and Garrick say." She sighed and reached for him, unable to tell the rest of her story if she had to look in his eyes. Laying her cheek against his chest, she closed her eyes and listened to the beat of his heart for a moment. His arms wrapped around her, holding her close, his hands stroking soothingly over her back.

"According to Dave, I learned everything wrong because Guerlain is not a Dom; he's a monster. Dave and Garrick spent years trying to retrain me, but sometimes..." She broke off and swallowed hard. Telling Vahid her failings had to be the hardest thing she'd ever attempted to do. She didn't want him to see how flawed she was. She wanted him to be proud of his mate.

She swallowed again and her voice came out in a faint whisper. "I'm a bad sub. I sometimes forget what they've taught me. I rarely speak my safe word. I seek oblivion rather than seek to please my master. I disobey so that I might be punished. I am damaged, and I do not truly belong in the lifestyle. Dave and Garrick tolerate my presence in their clubs because they do not want me to go someplace where I would be taken advantage of in the way Guerlain did."

Shaken by her confession, by acknowledging the truth within her, she waited for Vahid's response. Silence met her ears for long moments. Finally, he gently pressed her away from him. Fear lashed her as he tipped her chin up so she could look at him. His expression held a seriousness she recognized from work. The intensity in his eyes and demeanor held her enthralled.

"As my mate, Emily, you do not have to be my sub. We don't have to have a Dom/sub relationship. I'm perfectly happy to just be your mate, your lover, your husband. You can leave the lifestyle behind."

The notion of being more than a sub held some appeal but it wasn't nearly as interesting to her as his other words. "My husband?" she breathed, astonished.

He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her slowly, a smile on his lips. "I said I wouldn't let you go. I'm going to bind you to me in every way I can," he promised with a grin. "By mating

you, marrying you, and filling that flat belly of yours with my children. You aren't going anywhere without me ever again."

"Is that a proposal?" she demanded, wanting everything clear between them now that she'd pretty much told him her secrets.

Vahid chuckled, the sound rumbling in his broad chest. "It's a promise. When the time is right, I'll give you a ring."

The man who had been an asshole for three years had suddenly turned into a prince. She couldn't speak. Her life had been turned upside down in the past few hours. When she'd left for Australia, she'd had every intention of not returning. Now, gazing into Vahid's ink dark eyes, a whole new world opened for her.

Emily threw her arms around him and hugged him tightly. His scent filled her nostrils and the heat of his big body warmed her right through her heart into her soul. She had no words with which to express her joy. She just clung to him, wishing she could burrow into his skin and be part of him.

"You *are* part of me. You always will be."

Vahid's soft words resonated within her. He sounded so sure of himself. So sure of the emotion that arced between them. She envied him that confidence.

Pushing up his shirt, she brushed her lips across his hard chest. The taste of his skin exploded on her tongue and made her want more. She shifted her weight, pressing him down on the lush carpet as she rose above him. He groaned when her mouth found his nipple, her tongue flicking over the hardening nub. Sprawled atop him, her pelvis pressed to his, the swelling of his cock became her immediate focus.

Naked. I want you naked.

Emily pushed at his t-shirt and pulled at his sweat pants. When he lay naked before her, the firelight gilding his tanned skin, she sighed contentedly. Kneeling with her knees outside his, she stroked her hands over his hair roughened thighs. He had a strong body, thick with muscle. Esthetically, she recognized that physically they were about as opposite as they could be. Vahid's dark, earthy, heavily muscled physicality was the polar opposite of her own, pale, ethereal, willowy frame.

She stripped off her clothes and this time when her hands traveled his thighs, she had a destination in mind. Vahid groaned as her fingers wrapped around his erection. His pleasure at her touch pleased her. She stroked him slowly, trying to hide her hesitancy.

"Em, you can't do anything wrong. However you touch me, I feel pleasure."

Vahid's quiet reassurance made her face flame. "Is it so obvious that I don't know what to do in a situation like this?" she whispered painfully.

His hand encircled her wrist, guiding the motion of her hand. "Just do what you want, what feels good, what feels right."

"I've never been able to do that. I've always been *told* what to do." She bit her lip. "I like touching you. It feels good. It...excites me."

He grinned. "Exciting you is important to me, so you just touch as much as you want."

Emily stroked his cock more boldly as her free hand explored his balls. Unlike most of the men she'd been with, he kept himself neatly trimmed and waxed, something she liked. When a bead of clear fluid appeared on the head of his cock, she leaned forward and lapped it up. Vahid's cock jerked and she sensed how much he enjoyed the feel of her tongue on him.

She licked the length of his erection as he moaned and writhed beneath her hands and mouth. Keeping her thoughts hidden from him, she recalled all the blow jobs she'd given in her life. They felt mechanical, unmotivated, orchestrated by the man commanding her. They had all been merely tasks she'd had to perform for her master. With Vahid, she wanted to touch and taste him. Licking him gave her incredible pleasure.

Flooded with alien sensations and emotions as she took his cock into her mouth, Emily acknowledged to herself that in many ways, Vahid would be her first real lover. Her sex life had never been about intimacy and emotion. It had been solely about the Dominant/submissive relationship. And until Dave had taken her away from Guerlain, she hadn't known that everything she believed about the D/s dynamic was wrong.

Putting away her thoughts of the past, Emily concentrated on her mate. She loved being with him and giving free rein to her emotions and sexual urges was an amazing experience. Easing her shields down, her senses came alive as Vahid's emotions wrapped around her, his thoughts mingling with hers.

He cupped her head in one hand, watching her as she sucked him. She relaxed her throat, making swallowing motions so that she milked his thick length. Meanwhile, her tongue swirled along his shaft, teasing the throbbing veins.

Gods, Em. Your mouth is fantastic.

Her head bobbed as she sucked him, her mouth loving his hard flesh. Her fingers gently squeezed and pulled his balls. His love and lust rolled over her as she serviced him, his emotions spurring her on. As his passion spiraled out of control, his hips thrust upward, pushing his cock into her mouth. His thoughts became incoherent bits that she only vaguely caught as she worked his thick cock with her lips, tongue, mouth, and throat.

Emily felt the tightness of his balls as they pulled up and knew his orgasm neared. Pre-cum flowed onto her tongue as she sucked and slurped his straining shaft. When his hips began to thrust quickly and his hand fisted convulsively in her hair, she knew he was about to come.

Shit! Emily, I'm gonna come. He groaned loudly. "Baby, you don't have to swallow..." he panted.

Shhh. I love you, Vahid. She quieted him by stroking her palm over his thigh and up to his hard abs and pecs.

He grabbed her hand, squeezing it as he began to shake. *I love you too, Em. My beautiful Emily...*

The first hot spurt of his cum in her throat was accompanied by a moan of such sheer bliss that Emily barely stopped herself from grinning. The grin would have ruined the rhythm of her renewed sucking as she swallowed every drop of her mate's ejaculate.

When Vahid's grip on her hand eased, and his cock began to lose its tumescence, Emily lifted her head, her tongue flicking over his sensitive head as it slid from her mouth. She gazed at his

powerful body, lax and replete, the golden bars of light from the fire sliding over his sweat sheened muscles. She didn't think she'd ever seen a more beautiful man.

"Only my mate would think I'm beautiful," he said with a chuckle. "Beautiful is Holden or Garret, not me."

Emily crawled up onto his body, rubbing herself against him. "They are boys and you're a man. At least, that's how they appear to me." She kissed his chin. "They're too pretty. You have a masculine beauty that has nothing to do with prettiness and everything to do with physical power."

Taking her courage in hand, she touched his shoulders, stroking and rubbing the hard planes and muscles. "You have the widest shoulders I've ever seen. Your body is like a coiled spring, filled with controlled power. I can't resist you. No one has ever turned me on as you have."

In a single easy move, Vahid turned them so that he was above her, nestled between her thighs. She wrapped her arms around the shoulders she loved and pulled him down until their mouths met. The hot kiss escalated instantly as they opened their lips and their tongues twirled together. His hands roamed her body and a twinge of self-consciousness spiked inside her.

Vahid broke the kiss, staring down into her eyes. "You have nothing to worry about. You're the most exquisite woman I've ever been with. Your breasts fit my palms perfectly. I love the feel of your long legs around me. And you're light enough that I can lift you and fuck you against the wall if I want."

His indulgent smile warmed her heart. Still, she remembered what a striking couple he and her cousin Eden had been. Both of them were dark and exotic looking while she seemed pale and washed out beside them.

"Eden has a different kind of beauty. She has a sultry sexuality that oozes from her pores. She walks into a room and every man in the place wants to fuck her. It's a very primal thing." Vahid pressed a hard kiss to her lips. "You, on the other hand, walk into a room with your classic elegance and cool beauty and every man in the room wonders how they could light your fire. Your beauty is very esthetic and cerebral. Men look at you and try to figure out what it would take to crack your composure and make you scream. With Eden, they just want to have fun. With you, they would do anything to possess you... and they envy the man who does."

"That would be you," she murmured, stroking her hand over his dark hair.

"Yes, it would. Now, you know why I have all these muscles. Nature knew who my mate was and knew I'd probably have to intimidate all the men who seek to possess you." His eyes gleamed with amusement, but beneath it, she saw a deadly serious light.

"I see no one but you." She kissed his mouth. "I want no one but you."

His hands swept over her nakedness, leaving goose flesh in their wake as her body came alive. Emily writhed beneath his touch as he kissed and licked her neck and throat. When his lips covered her nipple, she cried out. Her pussy creamed as he sucked firmly on the hardened pink tip of her breast.

"Oooohhhh," she moaned, her senses awash with sexual heat.

Vahid switched to the other breast, sucking the nipple and grazing its tip with his teeth. He slipped a hand beneath her knee, lifting it then moving his hand lower. He rubbed his fingertips along her swollen labia, testing her slickness and driving her crazy with lust.

"I can't wait to put nipple clamps on you. You're so responsive," he murmured.

In the past, whatever had been done to her had been done for the pleasure of another. The thought of Vahid placing nipple clamps on her made her shiver. Somehow, she knew it would drive her wild. His primary objective would be her pleasure. He would control it, control her responses, control her body. And she would love every second of it.

He took her mouth in a fierce kiss as his fingers pressed into her pussy. He stroked her a few times, stirring the banked passion within her. Emily had never felt so aroused. Each time with Vahid seemed to push her body beyond the previous level of excitement.

She sucked in a breath as he pushed her thighs apart. He bent his head and she braced herself for the bolt of lightning that she knew would hit the instant his tongue touched her pussy. The tip of his tongue circled her clit and she cried out as a flood of sensation shot through her.

"Oh, gods!" Her words sounded wild and uncontrolled, matching how he made her body feel.

Vahid played her body and emotions masterfully. He licked and sucked her flesh, stoking his fingers into her tight pussy, pressing her G-spot, and driving her nearly insane with pleasure. Repeatedly, he brought her close to orgasm, only to back off and then build her passion once more. By the time he let her come, his tongue dancing over her clit as his fingers fucked her pussy, her breath came in sobs and her body shook convulsively.

The pleasure flashed through her body and her nerve endings crackled with sensation. She cried out his name, her hands reaching for him, needing him to hold her. Instantly, he was there, his body pressed against her, his lips and hands soothing the tension from her as he murmured words of love in her ear.

When she came down from the orgasmic high, she nuzzled his throat murmuring, "This is a dream, isn't it? Nothing could feel that good in real life."

"Oh, but it can," he told her.

Vahid stood and bent to pick her up. He carried her into the bedroom and deposited her in the big white bed, getting in beside her. They cuddled beneath the coverlet and dozed, sexual satiation making them groggy.

They spent the day in bed. Emily loved it. They talked and joked. They argued and made love. She'd never had such a wonderful day. After dinner, which Vahid cooked, they showered and went back to bed. She settled onto her pillow feeling the soft ache of muscles she rarely used. A huge yawn escaped her as Vahid used the remote to turn on soft classical music and turn off the lights.

He pulled her close and she moved her head to his shoulder, her eyes drifting shut as exhaustion swept over her. For the first time in her life, she felt content.

"I love you, my Em."

Vahid's soft whisper penetrated her sleepy fog and she realized something far more important than her sense of contentment. For the first time since she was a small child, she felt loved.

Chapter Fifteen

Hard arms held her in a cocoon of warmth. Emily smiled without opening her eyes. She'd never slept with a man before. Sleeping with Vahid had been a piece of cake though. He didn't hog the covers, didn't push her off the mattress, didn't steal her pillow, trap her hair, or snore... He did, however, throw his arms and legs over her, pinning her to the mattress. He cuddled her and nuzzled her in his sleep, as if he couldn't stop himself from touching her. And he did poke her in the hip with his morning wood.

She loved it.

She loved it more when he nudged her onto her side, lifted her leg, and pressed his cock into her from behind. The quiet, half-asleep sex warmed her soul. The fiery sex against the shower wall afterward had her wide awake in minutes and did far more than warm her. It set her senses on fire.

He made her eat a big breakfast, bitching about the knobs of her spine and the weight she'd lost in Australia. When he discovered she'd never visited the catacombs, the Eiffel Tower, or Pere Lachaise Cemetery, he took her on a tour of Paris.

"How can you have lived here for years and never been?" he frowned.

She shrugged. "Slaves don't sightsee. I belonged to Guerlain. He didn't allow us off his property."

His frown deepened and she felt his anger although he tamped it down almost right away. They spent the day acting like American tourists. They tramped through the catacombs and had lunch at a sidewalk café. They made a sweet old lady from New Orleans take their photo together at the top of the Eiffel Tower. Later, Vahid made dinner, Emily made dessert, and they had a food fight that ended with them making love on the kitchen counter.

The next day, they took a picnic lunch and spent the day exploring the cemetery, snapping photos of each other at the graves of the famous like Oscar Wilde, Edith Piaf, and Jim Morrison. That night Emily made dinner while Vahid watched a football game from the states.

They passed an entire week getting to know each other and learning to be lovers. Emily had never been so happy. Vahid turned out to be so much more than she'd thought he was. They'd gone out to dinner one night with Garrick and watching Vahid with Dave's brother gave her some insight into how he would behave when he met her best friend. She still had some nervousness about that event, but she didn't fear it anymore. At least, she didn't fear Vahid meeting Dave. She still had some worries about Dave kicking Vahid's ass for the events of the last three years.

She'd been at Vahid's house for just over a week when something happened to upset the apple cart of her newfound bliss. They were supposed to take a ride on the Orient Express that day, but Vahid got a phone call from Sean. The next thing Emily knew, their plans had been canceled and Vahid spent the day in his office dealing with something for their boss, despite the fact that they were both on vacation. A vacation Sean had forced on them.

Left to her own devices with no work of her own to do, Emily stewed. Sean's hold on Vahid had her curious. For some reason, although Vahid kept his thoughts open to her most of the time, anything to do with Sean seemed to be off limits.

She'd spent the past week telling Vahid all her secrets. He knew about her father's beatings and how, once she'd hit puberty, he'd found even more excuses to strip her and punish her. She'd

told him about her discovery that the beatings aroused her father, and how she'd left home immediately. She told him of the cruel things Guerlain had done to her, making her have sex with women and with any man he felt like giving her to. She even told Vahid the degrading things she'd been subjected to like the time Guerlain had taken all her clothes and made her sleep and eat with his dogs. Still, he would not tell her why he kissed her cousin's ass.

By the time Vahid emerged from his office, Emily had worked herself into a fine rage. They had promised to tell each other all their secrets and while she had complied, he still held back something. All his talk of trust meant nothing if he couldn't confide in her about Sean. No matter what the secret was, she wouldn't hate him so she didn't know why he continued to keep it to himself.

He flopped down on the sofa beside her, picking up her hand and kissing the palm. "I'm sorry, love."

She glared at him. "Are you really?"

He frowned, obviously unsure why she was so pissed. "Yes. I promise to make it up to you."

She pulled her hand from his, her brows rising. "You promised we'd share all our secrets too, but obviously, you still have a secret," she said in a cold voice. "Why don't you tell me why you kiss Sean's ass so much?"

Vahid's thoughts and emotions closed off from her instantly, fueling her fury. "I can't tell you that yet," he replied stiffly.

Emily stood up. "Then I don't see how we can have a relationship. You want me to be open and honest yet you hold yourself back from me. How is that okay?"

Vahid sighed with frustration. "I didn't say I'd never tell you."

"But you won't tell me now, which means you don't trust me. If you don't trust me, how the hell can you say you love me, Vahid?"

She deliberately kept her shields down, letting him feel her anger and pain as she stalked across the room. "This is so fucked," she snarled, storming toward the door.

He came after her, catching her arm as she stepped out onto the flagstone terrace at the back of the house. "What the hell, Em? It's just one fucking thing! How does my silence on this subject constitute me not loving you?"

She jerked her arm from his grasp and began stripping off her clothes. "It's a trust issue, Vahid. You courted my trust by promising to share everything with me. Then you didn't share everything. How the fuck can I trust you now?"

Naked, she turned toward the grassy expanse of the yard beyond the terrace. He grabbed her arm again. "You're my mate. I love you, Emily. We can get past this."

Again, she jerked her arm from his hold. "You're not my mate! You're just a fucking asshole! The same asshole who ignored me and left me in pain for three years while he fucked my cousin!"

He paled and recoiled as she threw the hateful words at him. With a hiss, she turned and ran, shifting on the fly as she had once before in his presence. This time she didn't hurtle toward the sun in a death spiral. She headed away from the city and out into the countryside, flying as fast as she could away from Vahid.

She flew low across the fields for a long time. Her anger abated somewhat the farther she got from Vahid's house. Flying in shifted form always seemed to put the human part of her life into perspective.

So Vahid didn't want to tell her his big secret yet. Well, that didn't mean he wouldn't tell her someday. And the secret had to do with Sean, which meant she had an advantage. If she had to, to save her relationship, she would make Sean spill the beans. Since her cousin apparently wanted her to get together with Vahid, he'd either tell her, or kick his friend's ass and make him confess. Sean wasn't the type to let a secret split them up.

She had just about convinced herself to go home when a dark shadow fell over her. Since the sky had very few clouds and the sun was out, Emily knew it couldn't be storm clouds. She tipped her head up, expecting to see an airplane. Instead, she saw a black dragon.

Go home, Emily!

She bristled at Vahid's imperious tone. Even though she'd been about to go home, she now turned in the opposite direction.

You don't get to tell me what to do, Vahid. You don't want to be my mate. You don't want to share yourself with me.

She flew a little faster. Since his dragon form was much larger than hers, he had to work to keep up.

I have shared myself with you! Just not this one thing...

You promised we'd share all our secrets. You know the vilest things about me. How turned on my father got by beating me. You know the disgusting things Guerlain did to me... But you can't tell me one fucking secret that has to do with my own cousin.

She turned away from him, banking to her left and catching an updraft. He followed, pushing closer to her until their wingtips were inches apart.

I will tell you! Just not yet. I wanted us to know each other a little better... a little longer...

What? Her head whipped around and she glared at him before swinging her body away from his. *You asked me for absolute trust and then aren't willing to give it yourself? You are such an asshole!*

He swooped after her, coming in too close. His wingtip brushed hers and she wobbled.

Watch it, mister! she warned. *You're no aerialist! You're going to crash us both.*

No sooner had the thought left her head than he deliberately clipped her. She lost her updraft, lost her balance, and went tumbling through the sky toward a large haystack.

Motherfucker!

She'd managed to backpedal a little so her landing in the haystack wasn't nearly as hard as it might have been. She rolled out of the hay and got to her feet, shaking herself all over. Hay went flying. Then something heavy hit her hard in the back. The impact lifted her off the ground and tossed her down in the dirt several feet away.

Emily stood up slowly, sputtering and spitting out dirt. A low growl met her ears. Behind her stood a very big, very enraged Vahid, his scales glinting like dark steel. In human form, he stood

only a few inches taller than her and when she wore heels they were often eye to eye. In dragon form, he totally dwarfed her.

What's gotten into you? I could have gotten hurt, you know. She started inching away from him, trying to figure out how many inches she needed to affect her escape.

With a growl, he rushed her, his big black body hitting her hard and knocking her to the ground.

Hey! What's wrong with you? Get off me! she ordered, trying to hit him with her tail and dislodge the grip he had on her shoulders.

No.

He used his superior strength to push her down, holding her with his claws and weight.

Vahid! What are you doing? Let me up! She tried to wriggle out from under him, but he had her pinned perfectly. As she struggled futilely, she felt it. Something thick and hard poking her in the thigh. She froze, lifting her snout to the sky. She sniffed. Holy shit. He was completely aroused.

Once she'd figured out it was his unsheathed dragon cock poking her thigh, her own arousal hit her like a wrecking ball between the eyes. She shuddered. Being in shifted form heightened her senses and made her more primal in her responses. That included her ability to be aroused sexually.

Shut up, Emily. You've pushed me too far this time. He growled loudly, the sound just a half-step away from a roar. *You want to know why I kiss Sean's ass? Why I would do anything for him? Do you?*

He nipped her shoulder and she shuddered again. His aggressiveness turned her on. She practically writhed beneath him, dying for him to rub that huge dragon cock on her. She moaned.

I wouldn't be here with you if it weren't for Sean. He believed in me and fought for me, otherwise I would be locked up forever as a murderer!

What? Holy hell! Vahid, what...?

He nipped her again, this time on the back of the neck. *The beast got free when I was training to be a Dom. He was really rough on the slave I was with. I don't remember everything that happened, but I woke up with a dead slave and no clue what had happened. Sean came looking for me and found me with the dead slave. He suspected something besides my roughness had killed her. He snuck me out of the club and then gathered the clues needed so that the cops would know who really killed her.*

Once more he nipped her, but this time it was accompanied by the feel of his cock rubbing against her wet labia. She moaned again. Her brain cells melted rapidly.

I owe Sean my life. A little ass kissing is nothing to me compared to my freedom. If it weren't for him, I wouldn't even be here with you.

Emily shifted her tail out of the way and presented him with her wet pussy. He snorted, streams of smoke spewing from his nostrils.

Please... please.

If her words had been aloud, they would have been mewls. Horrible begging sounds of need. His aggression and dominance over her set her senses on fire. She lay face down in the dirt as he rubbed his cock on her and she loved it. The combined scent of their arousal made her shiver.

Don't ever say I'm not your mate. Don't ever push me like that again, Emily. Is that clear?

The commanding tone made her pussy clench. She braved a slight movement backward, rubbing herself on him.

Yes, master.

He butted her shoulder with his big head, hard enough to push her forward, making her body rock unsteadily. He pushed her down and grabbed the back of her neck in his mouth. He held her there and she knew that if she struggled, his fangs would pierce her flesh. His huge body covered hers and she panted, smoke rolling from her in big puffs.

An exquisite sensation spread through her body as his cock pressed into her wet opening. She'd never had sex in shifted form before, but she'd heard it could be far more exciting. As Vahid pushed himself into her, his cock so big it hurt a little, all her scales seemed to stand on end and pleasure ripped through her. He thrust into her aggressively and she responded in kind, both of them moaning in muted roars as their smoke encircled them.

Her dragon form shuddered, her pleasure pushing quickly toward its peak. Heat flared inside her as his claws gripped her tightly, his body thrusting uncontrollably into hers. Mindless ecstasy took hold of her and she could sense Vahid felt the same. Molten heat and rapidly approaching rapture gripped them in a primal dance of lust. They coupled frenziedly, the rough sex escalating quickly until, with a wild roar, Vahid captured her snout in his mouth, his dragonfire bursting from him.

The hot gush of his seed in her pussy pushed her over the edge and she bucked convulsively as her orgasm hit her. She released her own dragonfire a split second behind him. The flames engulfed them, heat licking along her veins as the fire inside her mingled with the fire he gave her. Their thoughts melded as they burned hotter and hotter and he continued to thrust into her, both of them locked in a moment of exquisite sensation they never wanted to end.

As the flames died away, Emily found herself pressed to the dirt of a hay field, Vahid still throbbing within her as his body covered her from behind. With a moan, her shaky legs gave out and she sprawled in the dirt. Vahid landed on top of her, his heavy body wracked with shudders. After a moment, he pulled his cock free of her pussy and slumped beside her, their sweaty bodies still touching. They lay still and panting, smoke swirling around them for long minutes.

The aftermath left them both limp and dazed.

Emily groaned and rolled over in the dirt. *Oh gods. Did we just...?*

Yeah, I think so. Vahid's massive chest still rumbled with his elevated breathing.

Oh.

Weakly, he lifted his head so he could look at her. *Is that all you have to say for yourself? You were pretty vocal before.*

You fucked all the words right out of me. A feeble laugh escaped her and she wriggled a little, trying to discover if she felt any different. Her scales itched like hell, but that could have been the dirt and hay.

That's not fucking, Emily. Even in human form, it's not fucking. Mating could never be just fucking.

His tone seemed a little smug to her, but his words whipped her right out of her sexual haze. *Oh, gods. You said the M word. We really did do it, didn't we?*

This time, his smug tone was obvious. *Yes. You knew it would happen. Why are you so shocked?*

Cause we did it in shifted form. She'd never in a million years have figured herself for a woman who'd mate in dragon form. Her heart thudded in her chest as her childhood biology lessons came back to her. Dragons had built in birth control. Only mated dragons could get pregnant and sex in shifted form gave the couple a much higher likelihood of conception. *Oh, gods. What if I'm knocked up now?*

Apparently, the thought had already occurred to Vahid. Her words didn't elicit a single surprised thought. He stretched out his neck and nuzzled her contentedly. *I can't think of anything more wonderful.*

I can.

His shock reverberated through her. *What the hell could be more wonderful than us having a baby?* he demanded.

A shower. You fucked me in the dirt, Vahid. The ick factor began rising within her the longer she lay in the dirt with his cum sticking to her scales.

He nipped her neck. *It was not fucking!*

Emily sighed. *Can we go home now? I need a bath and I want to see my clan mark.*

Vahid got to his feet and shook himself. A cloud of dust rose in the air. Emily coughed. He nudged her with his huge head, urging her to her feet. Once upright, she swayed a little.

Are you okay? he asked worriedly.

Nothing a little soap and water and steak won't fix.

Vahid bumped her head with his again. It dawned on her that the action was a caress. Affection and amusement warred within her.

You're always hungry, he grumbled. *I feed you way more than I ever fed Sean.*

She snorted and a cloud of smoke streamed from her nostrils. *Look at it this way, at least the solution to my PMS will always be simple for you. Just give me a hunk of meat and go away.*

He roared and it took her a second to realize the sound was a laugh. She bumped his head with hers then took off at a lope, letting her wings catch the wind and lift her from the ground. When she looked back, she found him close behind.

Shifting back to human form in Vahid's yard turned out to be pretty ugly. They were covered in dirt and the cum that streaked Emily's legs had dried stiffly.

"Oh, gross. I don't even want to walk into that gorgeous whiter than white house like this." She grimaced and wiped at the dirt on her arm, smearing it more. "Do you have a garden hose?"

Vahid picked some straw out of his hair. "Yes, but the water will be ice cold."

"No shit, Sherlock," she grumbled. "We'll just have to suck it up. Where is it?"

Vahid got the hose and Emily took it from him. "Don't scream like a little girl when the shrinkage occurs," she warned and sprayed him.

He yelped, but stood still as she rinsed the worst of the dirt off him. Then she took a deep breath and turned the hose on herself. Her nipples went diamond hard and goose bumps the size of eggs rose on her skin. She shivered but continued until she'd sluiced off all the dirt. When she turned off the hose, she began to shake.

A warm towel enveloped her and for a moment, her eyes closed in sheer bliss. She grabbed the ends of the towel and twisted it around her, turning to find Vahid standing behind her with towels around his neck and hips.

"There were some in the dryer," he offered with a little smile.

"Thank the gods," she said as they padded into the house.

After wiping off their feet, they headed straight into the bathroom. Forgoing the huge tub, Emily ditched her towel and got into the shower, letting the six heads pour delicious hot water all over her. She moaned in delight. Washing had never felt so good.

When she got out, she found Vahid half asleep in the tub, a satisfied smile on his handsome face.

"Don't you look like the cat who ate the canary," she quipped as she toweled her long hair.

"I feel awesome," he confessed, the smile still in place. "You should see my clan mark."

Her brows rose. "Is that anything like inviting a girl to see your etchings?"

Silently, he stood up, water running down his muscled frame. He turned and Emily saw the dragon on his hip. Or rather *dragons*. Plural. Two entwined dragons holding a lightning bolt between them. She stared, shocked to see the lightning bolt. She touched it with a finger tip. He shuddered and her own hip burned.

"Shit!" She opened her towel and twisted, looking down at her hip. Two entwined dragons holding a lightning bolt writhed from her hip bone around to the curve of her buttock. She rubbed it and her pussy creamed. Vahid's allspice scent grew stronger.

"Dear gods. It's like dragon Viagra!" she exclaimed. "Every time I bump my hip, I'll want you!"

Vahid chuckled. "You do anyway."

She retucked the towel and turned toward the door. "This sucks. Do you realize how many pairs of panties I'll ruin?"

A splash of water was his only reply. She glanced over her shoulder and found him relaxing in the tub again, eyes closed. "So don't wear any," he murmured. "I'm good with that."

"I'll just bet you are," she griped under her breath as she went into the closet. As she dressed in jeans and a Henley shirt, she had a vision of herself walking around AI with nothing under her skirts. Bending over Vahid's desk. Bending over her desk. Riding him on the chaise in the women's executive wash room.

Gods, Em! I'm gonna burn all your thongs and panties.

His frustrated thought made her smile as she went down the stairs to the kitchen. She turned on the grill and went to the fridge to get out some steaks. She might not be all Bobby Flay like Vahid but she could grill a steak and nuke a potato.

Puttering around his kitchen gave her a warm sense of satisfaction. Not really domestic bliss but more possessive. She was gonna feed *her* man.

She had just dished up the food when a growl sounded behind her. "Don't you ever forget that again, Emily. I am *yours*. You are *mine*. Nothing and no one will *ever* change that."

He grabbed her and kissed her fiercely. *Mine!* His hand stroked over her hip and she shivered, stroking her tongue over his dragon fangs.

Vahid? I want to go home.

He let go of her, his brows lifting. *Home? To California?*

She nodded. *I want to see how this... us... will work at home.*

She picked up the plates and took them to the dining room table. Vahid poured two glasses of wine and they sat down. He let out a sigh.

"You're right. This isn't our normal environment. We do need to go home and work things out." He sipped his wine thoughtfully. "Don't you live in a high-rise condo?"

She nodded. "Yeah. It's nothing special."

"Would you... do you have any objections to moving in with me?" He looked at her hopefully and she smiled.

"None at all. I hate the condo."

His smile held relief. "Good. Shall I book us a flight home?" he asked.

Emily almost burst out laughing. His solicitousness after what had happened that afternoon was amusing. "Sure. The sooner the better. Now that we're mated, I'd rather have things settled between us at home before we have to go back to work."

Vahid's eyes widened. "Dear gods. The office is going to be hell. The gossip. The whispers."

Emily did laugh this time. "You didn't care before when you were with Eden. Why should you care now?"

"For the same reason you threw my relationship with her in my face," he admitted in regretful voice. "You're my mate. That didn't suddenly happen. You were my mate three years ago when I moved in with her. The whole office will realize that when they find out you're my mate. They will know the truth and they'll just see me as a monumental asshole who turned his back on his true mate to fuck his boss's sister."

Now that she'd savaged him over it, he seemed genuinely upset by what he'd done and how others would perceive his actions with regard to her and Eden. Unfortunately, some people would think exactly what he thought they would. The smart people, the ones who knew them both a little, wouldn't think that, but they'd definitely be in the minority. It wasn't something either of them could fix other than just show a united front of love in the office.

"It will work itself out, Vahid. It will be easier if we're more comfortable with each other. Going home now and knocking out the kinks in this relationship will help," she soothed.

His expression turned lascivious. "What if I don't want to knock out the kinks? What if your kinks turn me on?"

She laughed and cut into her steak. "Ask me that again after I've refueled."

“You’ve got a deal.” He winked at her and reached for his knife.

Chapter Sixteen

Vahid's stepped into Emily's condo and realized that Fate had smiled on him. He stared at the sterile living space in shock, his heart beginning to pound. He couldn't find a single personal belonging in the house except for a few things in the bathroom and a yellowed newspaper clipping on the refrigerator. The place didn't look as if anyone lived there.

He stood in the kitchen and stared at the clipping. Obviously staged and posed, it depicted a gorgeous oceanfront house with kids in the yard and loving parents cuddling on the porch. The clipping stood out in stark relief to the rest of the condo and Vahid knew he was looking at the symbol of Emily's hopes and dreams.

A lump formed in his throat as he opened first the refrigerator and then each cupboard. All of them were empty. Freakily, frighteningly empty. His hands fisted to stop their shaking. The condo told him how very close he'd been to losing his mate. Emily hadn't intended on coming home.

He went into the bedroom and found her filling a suitcase with clothes. She glanced up at him and froze. Her eyes darkened to honey as her expression turned wary.

"Get your most important belongings. We'll come back for the rest." He knew his tone sounded arrogant and commanding, but he couldn't stop himself. He had a very tenuous grip on his control at the moment.

Emily swallowed visibly. He watched her walk over to a serigraph on the wall. She move the artwork aside and opened a wall safe, pulling out a sheaf of papers and a few jewelry boxes. When she set them in the suitcase, he saw that the topmost document was a will.

His nostrils flared and a puff of smoke escaped. "Goddammit!" he growled in frustration, wanting to hit something.

"I'm sorry."

He glared at her and she paled. The cool ivory of her skin reminded him that he'd promised he would never treat her as other Doms had. He couldn't take his fear driven anger out on her. Others had used her in that manner. He'd promised to cherish her.

He caught her chin in his hand and raised her head. "You will promise me that this," he gestured at the soulless condo, "will never happen again."

She stepped closer to him and wrapped her arms around his waist, burying her face in his shirt. "I promise. Besides, how can it happen? We're mated now."

She rubbed her hip and he felt his clan mark burn. His cock began to swell. He yanked her arms from his waist. "Hurry up," he muttered gruffly. "I'm not about to make love to you in this mausoleum."

A sense of peace and satisfaction struck Vahid when they arrived at his house. He took Emily's things to the master suite and let her explore the multi-level townhouse on her own. He'd just finished tossing the clothes in his suitcase into the laundry hamper when she called him.

Vahid? Why is this door locked?

He went still. He'd known she would find it, but he hadn't known if she would question him about it. He opened the nightstand and took out a key, heading down the hallway to the smallest bedroom in the house. Emily stood before the door. She turned wary eyes on him.

"I know it's none of my business. I-I was just curious," she stammered.

He fit the key in the lock and opened the door. Emily peered in and gasped. Everything was just as it had been the day he'd had it outfitted. He'd never had the nerve to bring a sub home, but the urge to build the room had struck him the day he'd bought the place. In his heart, he'd longed for a mate who would be his sub.

Emily stepped into the room, her sneakers squeaking on the polished wood floor. She ran her hand over the padded leather spanking bench then moved over to the bed with the sling attached. She rattled the chains absently. Opening the drawers of the black dresser, she eyed all the toys within. Whips, paddles, vibrators, gags, blindfolds, and more.

Closing the drawer, she walked over to the St. Andrew's cross on the wall. Vahid held his breath. Her shields were up and he could feel very little of her emotions and could hear none of her thoughts. She reached out and fingered the buckle on a restraint.

"I don't have good memories of the saltire," she said hoarsely, keeping her head down and her eyes averted from his.

Vahid's heart sank. An abused sub like Emily often could not be repaired. But for her sake, he had to try. "We don't have to use this room, Em." He kept his tone low and even, trying to inspire confidence and keep her fears and memories at bay.

With a rush, she let him in, her shields disappearing as she let him feel her emotions and hear her thoughts. Her pain and embarrassment filled his head. Memories of what Guerlain had done to her. Fear and unhappiness. She gazed up at him, her hazel-gold eyes brimming with tears.

"I want to be a good sub for you, but I know I have problems, issues. And I don't want to disappoint you or disgust you," she whispered hoarsely as two tears spilled over and tracked down her cheeks.

It took two steps for him to reach her side. Sliding one arm around her waist, he pulled her against him and wiped at her tears with his thumb. "I told you, Em. You could never disgust me. And if I'm disappointed, it's not with you, only with circumstances. We don't have to use this," he repeated.

"Okay."

Vahid led her from the room, shielding her from his disappointment. They had covered a lot of ground during their vacation, but now they needed to get over the hurdle of going back to work. They had to learn to live together in the world they inhabited normally, the offices at Antaeus International, the industry they worked in, and even at home. The cross could wait. He could wait. Emily and their life together came first.

Meshing those lives turned out to be a lot easier than he imagined. They spent a day emptying out her condo and putting it up for sale. Moving her into his house went smoothly, even sharing closet space turned out to be a non-issue. However, when he found the yellowed newspaper clipping on the refrigerator door, fear flicked at him. He knew what the photo of the house represented to her – her dreams. The fact that she had slapped it onto his refrigerator told him plainly that she felt she hadn't achieved them yet.

The clipping saddened him and also left him with a bit of fear about her state of mind. Everything seemed to be working out well for them since they'd come home. He knew she'd been to see Dave Forrester, but also knew that it hadn't been at the club.

When he'd told her that they didn't have to have a Dom/sub relationship, he'd meant it. The day of their mating he'd learned that he would give up anything to have her and still be perfectly happy and content. Yet he couldn't help wondering if the same was true for her. She had serious demons inside her that rose when her emotions spun out of control. And her past had scarred her psyche, far more than it had scarred her body.

He admitted to himself that Guerlain's tattoo pissed him off and he could barely stand to see it on her spine. He thought about asking her to remove it, but their relationship was still too new. He didn't want to bring up something guaranteed to rock their little ship of happiness.

The night before they were due back in the office, Vahid sensed Emily's uneasiness. She didn't eat much dinner and had a major case of the fidgets. As she put the last dirty dish in the dishwasher and closed it, he pinned her against the counter, his hips pressing into hers.

"What's wrong?" he asked softly.

She bit her lip. He watched her white teeth sink into the pink flesh and knew two things instantly. One, something was on her mind that upset her and two, he wanted to lick that pink lip as he fucked her.

Her hands crept up his chest and she rubbed his pecs through his t-shirt. "I've been thinking about some things," she replied in a voice pitched so low he could barely hear it.

His body instinctively wanted to tense up as fear pricked him, but he forced himself to remain relaxed. "What kinds of things?"

She tipped her head back and looked him in the eye. "I've been thinking about your playroom," she admitted.

Now, he did tense. "And?"

Emily's head dropped. He saw her watching her finger draw a circle repeatedly on his chest.

"I want to try the saltire."

The words were so soft that at first he thought they were in his head. He reached up and circled her wrist, stopping the nervous movement of her fingers. With his other hand, he tipped up her chin. "Are you sure?"

Her honey colored eyes flashed gold for a split second. "Yes. I wouldn't have asked otherwise. But you have to understand that as much as I want to try, I may not be able to handle it." She bit her lip again for a moment. "I don't know how much I can process without losing it," she confessed.

Vahid hugged her hard. "Baby, you can lose it. I will stop and take care of you." He spoke the words in such a way that she would know they were a promise. "I only want to give what you can take and enjoy. I want to help you work through your demons."

"There are some things you can't help with, but maybe this is one that you can." Her gaze met his. "In my heart, I want to be your sub, Vahid. I know you won't ever treat me as the others did. I know you will respect me and love me. And I know that you are right. That is only a small part of our relationship. I think maybe part of my problem is that I've always thought my whole life revolved around being a sub and so parts of me went unnourished and unfulfilled."

Vahid shook his head slowly. "For some people, being a sub is their whole world, but you're not cut from that cloth. Neither am I. My life is not about being a Dom. But being one enhances my life. Not everyone has to embrace the lifestyle in the same way, Emily. Part of being in it means acceptance of the many ways people choose to belong to it."

She sighed and leaned against his chest. "So Dave says."

"Dave and Garrick are smart men." He stroked his hand over her hair, loving how the silky pale strands looked sifting through his fingers. He knew that Emily had a thing for his chest. But for him, it was her hair that drew him. Fine and delicate, with a texture like the softest silk, the color like palest moonlight. He couldn't keep his hands off it.

They were silent for a long moment, just holding each other. Then, Emily said, "Can we try this tonight? I need to test how far I've come, Vahid."

He nodded and took her hand, leading her upstairs. In their bedroom, he asked, "Do you want privacy to get ready?"

"No. Seeing you calms my nerves."

Her simple words sent his confidence soaring. She turned away from him and began to undress. He ducked into the closet for his leathers. When he came out, she was gloriously naked, tying her hair up in a ponytail. The pale strands swished against the tattoo and his fingers tightened on the leather.

He stripped out of his jeans and t-shirt and pulled on the leather pants and boots he usually wore when having a scene with a sub or slave. He left off the vest he wore in clubs. Taking the key from the nightstand, he took Emily's hand and led her down the hall to the playroom.

The moment she stepped through the door, her neck bent gracefully as her head tilted down, her eyes lowering to the floor. Hands clasped loosely at the small of her back, Vahid thought he'd never seen a more beautiful sub than his Emily. He led her to the spanking bench first.

"Emily, we'll start with the bench and some spanking. I will not restrain you, but you will obey my commands, is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

Her voice sounded wispy and weak, her fear palpable even without their mating bond. She trembled a little as he helped her kneel over the padded bench. As he opened a drawer in the dresser, he tested their bond, wanting to assure himself that she wasn't shielding.

Em?

Yes, master?

Your safe word is dragon. I expect you to use it, whether aloud or in my mind, the instant I push you too hard and you are no longer comfortable mentally or physically. I will be very displeased if I discover you've held back. Do you understand me, Emily?

Yes, sir, I do.

Vahid pulled on a leather glove and picked up a studded paddle. As he turned toward her, his eyes on her beautiful upturned ass, she spoke again.

Sir?

He stepped over to her and ran his gloved hand over her ass, noting that she had a few scars there too. *Yes, Emily?*

I love you, but even more than that... I trust you. You are my salvation.

His heart brimming with love, Vahid caressed her skin with the glove. *I love you too.*

Taking the paddle in his gloved hand, he drew back his arm and smacked her across the ass, the studs leaving red marks in her flesh. He looked closely at her and noticed that her earlier trembling had ceased. The tangible proof that she was no stranger to pain both aroused, and upset, him. He concentrated on her thoughts and emotions, focusing on her reactions. Where the stinging of the paddle would have filled many people with fear, the pain comforted Emily. She knew pain and embraced it. Vahid realized he would have to monitor her thoughts closely because, in all likelihood, she would be so enthralled with the pain and so conditioned not to speak, that she would never utter her safe word.

He paddled her until her ass and the backs of her thighs shone bright red. She never uttered a single sound. While the spanking was quite mild, he'd at least expected a moan or two. Her silence unnerved him.

"Please rise, Emily," he commanded as he put away the paddle.

He watched her get up, his eyes raking her for any sign of discomfort or distress. She showed none. She moved with her usual gracefulness, rising to her feet and standing before him with her hands at her back, her head bent. Her thoughts were curiously empty save for her concentration on the pain.

"Step over to the cross."

She hesitated for a split second, and then stepped toward the X-shaped cross attached to the wall. Sometimes called a St. Andrew's Cross, the saltire was a staple in every dungeon. Vahid appreciated the versatility of it and used it regularly with subs who enjoyed being whipped.

With his body, he pressed Emily's front to the cross, taking her wrists in his hands and buckling them into the restraints. He ground his leather covered erection against her stinging ass as he nipped the side of her neck. For the first time, a moan broke from her lips.

Vahid smiled to himself as he knelt to buckle her ankles into the restraints. The pain didn't get a rise out of her but his cock sure had. He considered that a good sign. He stood and pulled a black velvet blindfold from his pocket. Stroking her hair, he slipped the blindfold on and adjusted it so she couldn't see. The deprivation would heighten her awareness of pain.

As he took out his whips, he spoke to her aloud, hoping to soothe her with the sound of his voice. "I know you prefer the cat, Emily, but it is my preference as your master to use whips without knots on you. Your flesh is mine and marking it permanently is anathema to me. The marks you already bear are badges of courage that speak to your loyalty. They do not, however, paint a favorable picture of your former master. He abused the trust of a young girl who had already been abused by a caretaker. When he should have nurtured you, and taught you the truth about pain and punishment, he used your past against you to feed his own sick needs."

He picked up a leather flogger and rubbed it over her back, the falls brushing the crack of her ass. He saw her skin prickle, goose bumps rising wherever the flogger touched her. Watching her reaction, he still had difficulty believing this was the Emily he'd avoided for three years, the cold,

haughty ice woman of AI. Who would have guessed that she loved being dominated, loved the feel of floggers and whips on her skin?

His nose picked up the scent of her arousal. The spanking hadn't done much for her, other than to prime her flesh for the main event. When he pressed his cock to her ass, she'd finally begun to feel excited. Now, both of them were experiencing full-blown arousal and Vahid figured their sex tonight would have some added oomph.

Emily, you do not have to remain silent during the scene. The sounds of your pleasure are what give me enjoyment. And I expect that if I am too harsh with you that you will use your safe word. Tell me what your safe word is.

My safe word is dragon, sir.

Good. If you are uncomfortable being blindfolded, you have only to speak the word, Emily.

I'm fine, sir.

Her thoughts were clear, no hint of fear or panic in them. However, he sensed her arousal underscoring them. That arousal made him eager to begin. He started with the soft leather flogger, hitting mostly her buttocks and the backs of her thighs, careful not to let the falls wrap around her body and hurt her. He could tell by the pattern of some of her scars that either her father or Guerlain or both had never taken such care of her.

As her skin heated, her panting grew audible. Vahid's cock swelled in his leather pants, his balls beginning to ache. He switched to a quirt, a beautiful whip made of braided blue and pink kangaroo leather. His strikes moved higher on her body, the lashes directed at her shoulder blades now.

Either the change in strike zone or the change in whips broke Emily's silence. She began to moan softly and through their bond, he could feel her pleasure. As a Dom, he'd had some sessions as a submissive in order to understand the nature of the pleasure they drew from their submission, but he knew not every sub and slave was the same. With his thoughts and emotions connected to Emily's, he now understood the particular nature of her submission in a more intrinsic manner.

When he sensed her arousal pitching over into a zone of mindlessness where pain and pleasure became one, he switched to a single tail signal whip. The lead weighted core of the whip gave its lash more force. At a big club, where he had room to work, he used a bullwhip, a much longer whip that required a high level of skill to use on a sub or slave. It was showy and dramatic and in public people stood in awe of his accuracy with it. Most Doms and Masters didn't have the talent to use such a whip and Vahid relished the fact that he had mastered it. In his own small dungeon, the bullwhip had too much length to be able to wield it properly. The three and a half foot signal whip suited his purposes better.

The single tail sang through the air, the cracker at the end of the fall snapping loudly as it struck Emily on the right shoulder blade. Her body jerked on the saltire and the scent of her arousal increased. He knew her pussy creamed when the whip struck her. Again and again, he struck her, alternating between points along her back from shoulder blade to shoulder blade. A couple of times, just to shake her up, he struck her buttocks.

Her body quivered visibly. The scent of her arousal filled the room. Her moans of ecstasy became louder and more incoherent as her pain level increased. Vahid stood behind her, panting with exertion from whipping her and keeping his emotions and arousal under control. Her

thoughts had become disjointed as she let the pain take her over. He felt her soaring on that plane where pleasure and pain became one. He knew that it wouldn't take much more to push her over into orgasm, but he was afraid her delicate skin couldn't take any more than he'd already given. He'd vowed to himself that he would never make her bleed, safe word or not, and the weighted signal whip had inflicted as much damage as he was willing to risk.

Switching back to the quirt, he lashed her buttocks again, the cracker hitting her upper thighs not far from her pussy. She shuddered and hoarsely cried out, "Dragon!"

Vahid froze, shocked that she had used her safe word. He dropped the whip and rushed to her side, ripping the blindfold from her eyes. She blinked rapidly at the sudden light. As she focused on him she smiled, a brilliant flashing smile of incredible joy. Vahid's heart went into triple overtime beats.

"Baby, are you okay?" he asked worriedly.

She nodded. "I'm fine, sir."

"No more sir. The scene is over. Just tell me why you used your safe word." He undid her restraints and caught her in his arms, touching her only lightly on her back and buttocks.

She wound her arms around his neck and rubbed herself on him. "Because I wanted you to fuck me, not whip me."

Unadulterated joy shot through him like a bolt of lightning. His clan mark burned on his hip as his excitement spiraled out of control. He picked her up and carried her to the dungeon's bed, placing her on her belly. He buckled leather cuffs on her wrists then attached them to chains on the headboard of the bed. With her arms outspread and her perfect, red marked ass in the air, she fired his blood.

Vahid yanked off his boots and leather pants, reaching into the dresser for a bottle of lube. Taking position behind her, he thrust two fingers into her wet pussy and she cried out, jerking as she fell over the edge into an orgasm. He bent and kissed the curve of her ass, his tongue licking her. He moved lower, his tongue tasting the cream of her pussy.

She cried out again, shivering as he lapped her heated core and suckled her clit. She quivered from head to toe from the two orgasms. Vahid stroked his hand over her clan mark and moaned. He felt the heat flare within her as he touched the entwined dragons with the lightning bolt. Placing the head of his cock at her opening, he thrust inside her. She bucked back against him, into each thrust, her thoughts filled with nothing but the urge to come again.

Vahid's balls ached like a motherfucker and he gritted his teeth trying not to come. He pulled free of her pussy, her cries of disappointment loud in his ears. Popping open the lube he squirted it on his hand and stroked it generously over his cock. Holding the bottle out, he squirted lube into the crack of her ass.

Emily gasped as the lubricant ran down to her anus. Vahid slicked it over puckered opening then slipped a finger into her. Wicked heat clamped down on his finger and he imagined his cock in that tight, hot hole.

"Oh, gods! Fuck me, Vahid. Please!" she moaned, pulling at the restraints.

He pressed the head of his cock to her ass and thrust, sinking deeply into her. A strangled cry escaped her but he knew it for one of pain and pleasure combined. Grasping her hips, he stroked into her with a rocking rhythm. Her moans grew louder and more incoherent. Reaching

around her hip, he rubbed her clit with his fingers. His thrusts rocked her body so that her stiff nipples raked across the rough material of the bed's sheets. Her every sensation transmitted itself straight into his brain so that he felt her pleasure in equal measure to his own.

His fingers plucked at her swollen clit, pinching it as he slammed his hips into her, his cock drilling her ass. She screamed as she came, his name on her lips, her slender frame jerking beneath him. The milking sensation of her muscles clamping down on him pushed him over the edge. Balls burning, he came in a rush, his cum spurting deep into her ass.

Vahid's knees shook but he continued to thrust inside her, the slickness of his cum making the strokes glide more easily. He shuddered at the additional friction, sensual pleasure washing over him and robbing him of rational thought. When his knees gave out, he pulled his cock free and tumbled to the bed beside her. Face flushed with pleasure, she stared at him with glowing golden eyes.

"I love you, master," she whispered hoarsely.

The adoration in her eyes, the complete look of worship on her face sent Vahid's heart soaring. Despite everything that had gone wrong in their individual pasts and everything that had been fucked up between them, they had conquered the issues and come out the other side to stand at the pinnacle of their world. Together, they had beaten the odds and found love and fulfillment.

He brushed her mussed hair back and smiled at her contentedly before taking her mouth in a kiss that promised to fulfill her every dream.

"I love you too, Em. Do you see how much fun we can have when you use your safe word?"

She nodded, grinning at him. "Now, that I know what awaits me when I speak it, I'll be sure to say it more often," she joked.

Despite her teasing, Vahid knew that never again would she remain silent and seek oblivion at the end of a master's whip. Not that she would ever be with another master. He had plans for her and they didn't include anyone but the two of them and a long, long stretch of joyful future.

Chapter Seventeen

Vahid walked into Far From Heaven feeling more anxious and panicked than he had since the day he'd thought he was a murderer. Emily had emailed him at the office and asked him to meet her at the club after work. When he'd gone down to her office, her assistant Juliet told him she'd left for the day.

Worried about her state of mind, he'd gone back to his office only to be confronted by the Antaeus clan. Sean, Declan, Holden, and Garret all stood staring at him like he'd kicked a kitten. He wondered briefly why they hadn't been this protective three years ago. He would have come to his senses a hell of a lot sooner if they had. Now, with everything nearly settled between him and Emily, their appearance seemed out of place.

"What the hell?" he muttered, glaring at them.

The three Antaeus brothers crossed their arms over their chests. Sean gave him a look he knew well, a "you better come clean" look. Holden had a ferocious frown on his handsome face. Declan had one brow cocked up, his eyes gleaming with a speculative light. The grilling fell to the newest member of the clan, Garret Renquist, Holden's mate and Emily's hand-picked successor.

"Where's Emily?" he asked in his cool British accent.

Vahid stifled a sigh. "I don't know. Juliet said she left early. I'm meeting her later tonight."

"She was smiling when she left!" Holden blurted out in an accusing tone.

Declan's brow rose higher. "Do you want to explain that, Vahid?"

He turned his gaze to his boss. Sean's mouth twitched as if he held back a grin. Vahid let the sigh out this time. "This company is not the most important thing in my life, Sean. Your friendship means more to me than the company does." He saw Sean's eyebrows emulate Declan's. Now, all four men gazed at him with similar expressions. "And Emily means more to me than all four of you and this company put together."

The four men relaxed visibly. Sean's mouth quirked a little at the corner in a typical Sean smile. Declan's eyes lost their chill and Holden openly grinned. Garret leveled a forefinger at him. "About fucking time, you bastard," he said with a touch of disgust. "She's worth ten of you."

Vahid nodded solemnly. "You're right. She is. I don't deserve her, but now that she's mine, I intend to take very good care of her."

Garret glared at him a moment longer, his green eyes sparking angrily. Then a reluctant smile flashed out. "Welcome to the family," he said with soft emphasis.

Holden strode around the desk and clapped him on the shoulder. "If you need a ring, I know this jeweler who makes exquisite custom pieces."

Vahid turned a sardonic expression on them. "You're not very subtle, any of you," he grumbled. Then he smiled at them. He was so happy he couldn't stay mad at how they'd ganged up on him. "I do need a ring. How quick is this guy?"

Sean glowered at him. "No fucking Vegas. Emily deserves better. And Careen is already planning something. Just family, so don't panic, asshole."

Vahid had felt like he'd been through the wringer by the time the four men of the Antaeus clan left his office. He'd cleared his desk within the hour and headed to Holden's jeweler. Now, hours later, he stood before the grim-faced host at Far From Heaven, jewelry boxes burning a hole in his jacket pocket.

"I'm looking for Emily Carrington," he said nervously, wondering what the hell Em had up her sleeve.

The huge man looked him up and down and then moved around the podium he stood behind. "This way." He crossed the lobby to a discreet door, knocked twice, and then opened it with a key.

Vahid stepped into an office. Masculine, but expensively appointed, it looked like something straight out of an English manor house. Aubusson carpet on the floor. Lush leather seating. Expensive artwork on the cream linen walls. Dark walnut beams crossed the ceiling.

A lean, dark haired man got up from the desk. His shock of spiky black hair, beard and blue steel eyes proclaimed him to be David Forrester, Garrick's brother. The similarities were obvious to someone who knew Garrick.

Vahid sniffed the air. No baby powder. He frowned. "Where's Emily?"

Dave came toward him, dressed casually in faded jeans and a chambray shirt. "I'm Dave Forrester," he said, ignoring Vahid's question. He held out his hand.

Absently, Vahid shook it. "Where's Emily?" he asked again, a bit more forcefully.

Dave smiled politely. "She'll be here in a moment." He turned toward a corner bar. "Would you care for a drink?"

"No." Vahid fidgeted. He needed his wits about him. Why the hell had Em asked him to meet her at the club?

"What's this all about?" he asked impatiently.

Before Dave could answer, a door on the opposite side of the room opened and the scent of baby powder filled his nostrils. His jaw dropped when Emily stepped into the room. She wore a black corselet and matching thong. She had on black thigh-high stockings and fuck me pumps.

Vahid stared. Her height and elegance took him by surprise. In the thong and heels, with her moonlight pale hair twisted up off her neck, the long length of her body was shown to advantage. He'd never noticed how amazingly graceful her stride was. He'd never noticed they were the same height when she wore heels. He sucked in a breath. Looking at her was sheer torture.

Holding out her hands to him, Emily smiled. He took her hands and pulled her against him. "Oh, Em. You're magnificent," he whispered.

She caressed the side of his face lovingly, her fingertips snagging in his stubble. "I have a gift for you. Well, it's partly a gift for me too. Undo me?"

She turned her back and presented him with the row of tight strings. With trembling fingers he undid the laces of the corselet. It fell to the floor and he leaned forward, his lips on her spine, his hands cupping her naked breasts, for a moment forgetting that they weren't alone. He turned and found Dave standing beside a table that hadn't been there moments before. Draped in black velvet, the hem of the cloth boasted exquisitely embroidered silver runes.

Vahid looked from Dave to Emily and back again. Dave's expression was hooded. Emily appeared serene. "What's going on?" he asked cautiously.

"I have a present for you," Emily purred. She stepped around him and grabbed a stool from the bar. "Sit here, please," she said as she placed the stool near the head of the table.

As Vahid sat down, Dave helped Emily onto the table. He frowned. Other men touching her, especially when she was nearly naked sent his dragon into full possessive mode. With his head, he knew that Dave didn't want her as he wanted her, but his dragon still huffed.

Emily stretched out on the table on her belly, cradling her head on her arms. One of her hands reached for him and he grasped it in both of his. Her warm smile held gratitude and love.

"Tonight, I'm letting go of my past so that I can embrace my future with you, Vahid," she said softly. "For years, I carried my scars and the tattoo as a visible reminder of where I'd come from and what had forged me into the person I am today."

She gazed up at him, her honey colored eyes filled with happiness and what he could swear was hope. "Tonight, I'm going to let go of those burdens so that my future with you is no longer tainted by what others have done to me. Dave is going to remove Guerlain's tattoo and attempt to remove my scars."

Startled, Vahid's gaze met the Magia's. "Attempt?"

Dave shrugged as he rolled up the sleeves of his shirt. "Some of the scars came from being healed with magic. I may not be successful at removing those," he admitted. "Magic is an imperfect science and the artistic part of it is subject to the talents of the Magia weaving the spells."

Emily's smile held a wealth of confidence. "Dave is very talented. I'm not worried about the outcome at all."

For the next ninety minutes, Vahid sat on the stool, his butt turning numb, as he held Emily's hand and watched Dave work. Swirls of colored air writhed over Emily's skin. A few times he could feel the heat of the swirls himself and when the magic made her wince, he let her squeeze his hand until the heat and pain eased.

Dave removed the tattoo first, and as the eye dissolved, Vahid could feel Guerlain's evil releasing its grip on his mate's body. The instant the last bit of ink disappeared, Emily sighed and closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, he saw tears of happiness sparkling on her lashes. If the swirls of magic hadn't been wrapped around her, he would have kissed her.

The work on the scars turned out to be painstaking. Beads of sweat dotted Dave's forehead and Emily paled a few times. Vahid wanted to protest at her obvious pain, but it had been her choice and he knew Dave wouldn't hurt her on purpose. When the Magia attempted to turn her over to remove the faint white scar on her belly, she stopped him.

"That one was made with love. It stays."

Her eyes met his and Vahid's heart turned over in his chest. He might not have been able to acknowledge his true feelings for Emily on the day of her death spiral, but they both knew that his love for her had driven him to save her.

By the time Dave finished, he looked exhausted. He helped Emily down from the table and held her close for long moments. Vahid could feel how much the two of them cared for each

other, and he didn't feel a single twinge of jealousy. What leaked from behind Emily's shield was the kind of love a sister had for her older brother.

She stood on tiptoe and kissed his bearded cheek. "Thank you. All these years you protected me and saved me from myself and others. If it weren't for you, I would not be standing here with my mate," she whispered. "I would not have this promise of happiness if you hadn't taken a chance on me."

Dave smiled and stroked her hair. "Garrick and I love you. We always will. You are part of our family, small though it is. Now, your mate is part of our family too." He glanced up at Vahid. "She is the most glorious sub I have ever seen. Cherish her."

Vahid nodded, appreciating the Magia's vote of confidence. "I absolutely will."

When the Magic turned to leave, Vahid stopped him. "Dave. Wait."

Dave cocked up an eyebrow silently, but remained still. Vahid turned to Emily. "On your knees, love."

His commanding tone had her on her knees, head bowed, hands loosely clasped behind her now nearly perfect back. He touched her head, letting his fingertips snag on her silky hair. "I've never met a sub I wanted to keep. I've never met a woman I love as I do you, Emily. The thought of another man dominating you fills my gut with a fire that has nothing to do with my dragon."

Drawing a deep breath, he drew the larger of the jewelry boxes from his jacket pocket. "Dave, will you bear witness?" he asked quietly.

The Magia nodded, approval in his dark blue eyes. At his knees, Emily tensed at his words, but maintained her submissive position. He wasn't sure he remembered how the words went and he didn't much care anyway. Formality wasn't important. Intent and emotion was. He opened his mouth to speak the words that hovered on his tongue, but Dave placed a hand on his arm to stop him.

"As master of this club, this is my domain to preside over," he said quietly.

Laying one hand on Emily's head and the other on Vahid's shoulder, Dave began to speak the words of the commitment ceremony.

"Today, I bear witness to the joining of two friends of my heart. The commitment they share is without end. It cannot be measured nor is it tangible. Yet it can be felt within their souls and within each breath they draw."

Dave placed his fingers beneath Emily's chin, lifting her gaze to theirs. He took the jewelry box from Vahid and opened it. Lying on a bed of lush cream colored velvet lay the collar Vahid had paid a fortune to have made in half a day. Emily's eyes widened and Vahid held his breath. The truest test of their fragile new relationship lay before them.

Chapter Eighteen

Emily stared at the delicate platinum mesh of the collar. Hundreds of tiny, delicate links like the finest of chainmail, made up the bulk of the small collar. At the back lay a tiny padlock. At the front, a small hook for a leash lay hidden by a dangling bit of jewelry, two entwined dragons embracing a lightning bolt. One dragon was set with red stones, the other with black.

She trembled, in part from the exhaustion she felt after the removal of her tattoo and scars. The rest of it came from sheer excitement. She'd only seen a couple of collaring and commitment ceremonies. Both times, she'd yearned for a master of her own who truly cared for her. Now, she had one.

"With this collar comes the binding of one spirit to another. You shall be of one heart, one mind, one soul from this day forth," Dave said, holding the box out toward Vahid.

Emily saw the tremor in her mate's fingers as he lifted the collar from the velvet. He held it out to her so that she could see the open padlock. "Emily, this lock has no key. Nor does my heart have a switch that can be turned on or off at will. You are my forever," he said softly. "With the placing of this collar around your neck, and your acceptance of it, I vow to do my utmost to be worthy of you. I promise to love you and cherish you, to give you the freedom to grow as a person and a submissive, I vow to honor you and place your needs above all others."

She stared wide-eyed as his eyes flared with emotion. "I acknowledge the trust and loyalty you have given me and vow never to violate that trust. My heart overflows with love at the gift of submission you've given to me and I shall never take it, or you, for granted."

Vahid took the collar from the box and the little dragons glittered in the low light of the office. "This collar is only a symbol of what already lies within our hearts. You belong to me. You are mine for evermore. Do you accept this symbol of our mutual trust and love?"

Tears sprang to her eyes as she nodded, bending her head so that he could place the collar on her and snap the tiny padlock closed, binding her to him forever as master and slave, dominant and submissive.

"I do accept your collar, master, as an outward sign of your possession. I accept that you will honor the trust I've placed in you and will never violate that trust. I promise to always love and obey you. I accept you as my lover, my mate, and my master from this hour forward into forever," she whispered, her voice husky with unshed tears. "I submit to your will and know that you shall ever care for me and never hurt or break my spirit, nor damage my soul, the soul that belongs to you."

She bowed her head again, waiting for the conclusion of the ceremony. She heard a rustling sound and then a soft chuckle escaped Dave. Curiosity drove her to a frenzy as the two men whispered briefly, just out of range of her hearing. Then she heard a door softly close.

Vahid's hand touched her head, his fingers removing the pins that held her hair up. He smoothed the strands across her shoulders then placed his fingers beneath her chin. "Rise, Emily."

She stood, hands still clasped behind her back. The weight of her new collar rested low on her neck, the dragons in the hollow of her throat.

"I don't want a formal contract between us. We're dragons. We can't really escape each other anyway. We've tried and we know it doesn't work," he said with a rueful chuckle. "And besides, we have a life to live outside the walls of our home. At AI, there are times when you are the boss

and I bow to your expertise. Even privately, there will be times when a Dominant/submissive relationship won't work. I just want us to have everything and every chance at happiness."

He tipped up her chin so that their gazes met. "I love my collar on your throat, but even more, I love that entwined mate mark on your hip. You were made for me."

In a single graceful move, he went down on one knee before her and she gasped, shock rippling through her. He held a small box out to her on the flat of his palm. "Emily Balmont Carrington, will you marry me?"

He thumbed open the box's lid and she gasped. The cream colored velvet revealed a swirl of platinum with tiny red and black stones. In the center of the swirl was a perfect red heart shaped stone.

"They're red and black diamonds," he explained. "Just like the ones in your collar. Holden's jeweler made them just for you."

A choked laugh escaped her. "He used to have that jeweler send out a bracelet when he broke up with a woman," she said, trying not to giggle.

Vahid grinned. "I don't care. He did a great job." He sobered then. "So what's your answer, Emily mine?"

"Why do you think you need to ask? Why don't you just take?" She cocked up a brow and winked at him.

Standing, Vahid slid an arm around her waist hugging her close for a moment. He kissed her temple and took the ring from the box. "There is no turning back, Em. We belong together," he whispered as he slid the ring onto her finger. "Sean said Careen is already planning the wedding. Something small, just family he said."

Emily gaped at her new master and fiancé. "You've already spoken to Sean about this?"

Vahid grimaced ruefully. "I didn't have a choice. I was cornered by all four of them. And I have to tell you, for a man who wasn't born an Antaeus, Garret is the worst of them. No one is good enough for his boss."

A laugh escaped Emily as she imagined the four men converging on Vahid. Singly, they could be fiercely intimidating, together, she bet they appeared worse than the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

"Oh, it wasn't a pretty sight," Vahid admitted, but his smile told her he'd handled it all easily.

She slid her arms around his waist and leaned against him, nuzzling his neck. "Can we go home now? I have to admit to being a little tired after Dave's work and my skin feels funny. Besides, I want to be alone with my new fiancé." Her heart felt so full that she couldn't contain the emotions much longer and it just didn't feel right to let them free in place like Far From Heaven.

Vahid cupped her face in his hands and kissed her. "I can't wait to make you my wife. I want to bind you to me in every way imaginable. I don't want you to wake up one morning and realize you could've done so much better than an asshole like me," he whispered.

"Too late. I already know I could've found someone better," she teased gently. Her love for him began to spill over and she knew he felt the waves of her emotion leaking out from behind her shields. "What I couldn't find is someone more perfect. You fit me perfectly, in every way. I could never love anyone more than I love you."

“Well, then let’s go home and we’ll ride the lightning together, my Em.” Vahid kissed her, and then spoke in the commanding tone she loved. “Get dressed. You are not allowed to show your nakedness in public without permission.”

She knelt and picked up her corselet, keeping her head bent. “Yes, sir.”

When she turned away to go get her coat, his voice stopped her.

“Emily. Look at me.”

She turned back, lifting her head so that she could meet his gaze. His expression was solemn, his eyes filled with gratitude.

“I love you.”

Happiness so intense she felt as she did when bound to the cross, the pain taking her into oblivion, her emotions so powerful they transcended her body. “I love you too... sir.”

Her clan mark burned hot on her hip, as if the lightning bolt had come alive, and Emily knew that her life – the one she had always dreamed of and wished for – had just begun.

Epilogue

One Year Later

Emily's head shot up when her office door slammed open and then shut with a violence that made every window in the room reverberate with the sound. Vahid stalked toward her, fury radiating from every pore. He stopped in front of her desk, black eyes flashing, wide chest heaving, and smoke curling from one nostril. He planted his hands in the center of her leather blotter and leaned toward her.

"What the fuck is going on, Em?" he growled.

She blinked up at him as she sat back in her chair, leather creaking with the slow, deliberate movement. One brow arched up as did one corner of her mouth. She knew the smirky little smile would add fuel to his fury. A muffled roar told her she'd hit pay dirt.

"I'm working. What the fuck are you referring to?" she said coolly, giving him a dose of her icy executive persona.

He growled again, louder this time. "The whole damned office is buzzing! They're saying you walked into Sean's office and handed him your resignation!" He removed his hands from her blotter and strode around the corner of her desk. "What did Alfred offer you?"

Emily swiveled her chair to face him and stood up. In her high heels, they were eye to eye. "Nothing he hasn't offered me for years." She tilted her chin up and stared him down. "I did get a better offer, but not from Alfred."

In a move so swift, Emily almost didn't see it coming, Vahid grabbed her and shoved her against the wall, pinning her there with his body. "Who the fuck would dare try to steal you from AI? And who the fuck would you leave here for?" he demanded.

Evil thoughts entered Emily's head. She shielded them from Vahid and heard him growl as he came up against the barrier. Deliberately, she rubbed her hips against his. His response was instant and predictable. Her smirk widened and she pressed one hand to the thick erection that blossomed behind his zipper.

"My new boss is a man I know and respect. He understands my needs. The money and the position are perfect for me." She shrugged and Vahid ground his hips against hers.

"I don't understand why you would do this without discussing it with me."

Frustration laced his words and Emily knew his fury had begun to abate. She exchanged her smirk for a real smile as she wound her arms around his neck, rubbing herself against his hard body.

"Like Sean, I need more time for my family now. It's time for me to step down. Besides, Garret's ready to take over. I didn't have the heart to deny him any longer."

She kissed his jaw, her tongue snaking out to flick at his earlobe. Vahid groaned and his hands slid from her waist to cup her breasts.

"But Sean's leaving because he and Careen want to start a family."

Confusion laced with lust colored his words and Emily's smile widened.

"Yep."

The single word froze Vahid. She felt the absolute stillness of his body as his mind processed their conversation. Casually, she dropped one hand and stroked his cock through his suit pants.

"I'm so lucky to have such a virile master," she whispered.

In the next instant, a tidal wave of emotion hit her as every shield within him went down. His dark eyes pleaded with her.

"Gods, Em. Don't fuck with me."

She let go of his cock and took his hand, placing it on her belly. "Sean offered me a place on the board so I would have more time to devote to being a wife... and mother," she said softly.

No sooner had the word "mother" left her lips than Vahid's mouth took hers in a fierce kiss. His hand splayed across her abdomen, caressing the place where his child nestled. More love than she could ever imagine someone feeling wrapped itself around her as her husband gave free rein to his emotions. His mouth ravished hers, demanding and possessive. She kissed him back, happiness welling inside her. Having Guerlain's tattoo removed had freed her from her past. Mating Vahid and marrying him had freed her from her self-doubt. Now, carrying his child, she felt freed from a life of longing as her every wish came true.

"You, Emily Balmont Delrey, are the biggest bitch I know," Vahid said as he lifted his mouth from hers. "You had me twisting in the wind."

She grinned. She couldn't help it. The damn thing felt permanently stuck on her face. "You set yourself up so perfectly, how could I resist?" She stroked one hand down the side of his face and he turned his head to nuzzle her palm.

"So you're okay with this? Sean and I have big plans for the board," she told him.

"I'm sure you do." Vahid sighed and gathered her into his arms, sitting down in her chair and settling her in his lap. "Are you really pregnant? We're having a baby?"

She nodded. "No morning sickness yet, but I've been told it could happen any time now."

"We'll get through it." He kissed her then reached into the pile of mail on her desk, pulling out a big intra-department envelope. "You haven't opened this." He handed it to her.

Emily looked at the writing on the outside. "It's from you. What's going on?" She eyed her husband suspiciously. He was shielding again. She couldn't get a single thought from him.

"Just open it," he urged.

She ripped open the envelope and took out a sheaf of papers. A photograph fell in her lap. Her eyes widened as she realized the paperwork was from an escrow company. She picked up the photo and her breath caught in her throat.

"Can I throw away that clipping on the refrigerator now?" her husband asked as he stroked her belly and kissed her throat.

Emily's hand trembled as she stared at the photograph of the house that had figured prominently in her dreams. "You bought my house," she whispered wonderingly. "The one I've always wanted."

"Our house. The one our children will be raised in." Vahid hugged her hard. "You're not alone any longer, Em. You're mine forever, remember? Your dreams are mine. This house is *our* dream."

She tossed the photo and escrow papers on the desk and wrapped her arms around him. "I remember. And I know you will never let me forget. I belong to you, Vahid. Every facet of me from the cold executive to the submissive who wears your collar proudly." She kissed him, her mouth moving on his sensuously. "I love you."

"You forgot the wife who adores me and the mother who will love our children unconditionally," he told her with a smile. "I love you too, Em. More than I can ever express."

She rubbed her palm over his hard cock again. "Oh, I don't know. I think your dragon does a damn good job of making you express your love in a very meaningful way," she said in a sultry voice.

"I didn't lock the door," he warned as her hands unzipped his slacks. Flames came to life in his eyes.

"Juliet won't let anyone in. She's a great assistant. I'll miss her."

Vahid's fingers made short work of the satin covered buttons on her shirt. "Shut up, Em," he muttered as he unclasped the front catch of her lace bra. "Just shut up and do this."

His teasing voice reminded her of the time she'd said those same words to him while pressed up against a hotel room wall. Her neck arched as his teeth found the platinum band of her collar and tugged. She opened his pants and her fingers unerringly found the entwined dragons of his mated clan mark. She raked her nails over the raised lines of the lightning bolt and he shuddered in her arms.

Their thoughts entwined, each of them reveling in the power and freedom of their love.

Mine! his dragon declared.

Her dragon preened and Emily smiled, sinking her fingers into her husband's dark curls as her lips met his.

"Yes, sir.

About the Author

Lex has been writing stories and poems ever since she could hold a pencil. A few years ago, she got caught up writing in an online paranormal serial story. The story was very intense and a challenge to her writing skills. As she began to write more and more, fans of the story and her blog readers began to encourage her to submit her writing. Lex lives in Orange County, California with her long haired musician husband and her teen aged daughter. Lex loves loud music, reading hot stories, reading her friends' blogs and hanging out with them, enjoys building her own computers, and has a propensity for having very weird vivid dreams about Nikki Sixx.

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Tales of the Dark World Book 1: Shifting Winds

by Lex Valentine

Chapter One

The huge vase of tulips hid the face of Granville Cemetery's receptionist as she carried the flowers into the elegant office of the Chief Financial Officer. At least they weren't red roses, Elysia thought as Marnie set the vase on the corner of the rosewood executive desk, pushing it closer to Elysia's morning cup of coffee.

"You'd think they'd be roses," the receptionist sniffed, unknowingly echoing her boss's thoughts. "You're the CFO here, Miss E. You deserve the best."

A choked chuckle emerged from one of two leather wingback chairs across the desk from Elysia. Marnie stepped closer to the occupied chair and swatted the tall blonde man on the back of the head.

"That's what *you* deserve, Mr. Colin. You're always in here bothering her. Don't you ever work?" she hissed at him sarcastically before walking out. The door shut softly behind her.

Instead of smirking at the way their receptionist goaded her younger brother, Elysia turned an evil look on Colin. "Don't say a word," she ground out, shifting her glare from her sibling to the card peeking from between a couple of purple tulip buds.

"Obviously, you know who they're from without opening the card," Colin observed.

"Yeah, I know who sent them." Elysia snatched up the card before Colin leaned over the desk and grabbed it. She stared at the expensive vellum, afraid to open the small envelope and have the sender confirmed.

"You're not going to tell me, are you?" Leather creaked as Colin sat forward in his chair. "C'mon, Lys. You always tell me your secrets. I never spill them to Marius."

Elysia winced at the mention of their older brother. The last thing she needed was for Marius to find out about the flowers. Not that Colin would tell. She always confided in him and he always kept it to himself. If not for Colin, she probably would have died of stress years ago. She had difficulty keeping her emotions bottled up inside her. This time, what bothered her was something Marius would want to know... and exploit. And since it was something intensely personal, Elysia didn't want Marius to have even the tiniest inkling.

"Lock the door," she muttered grimly, turning the small cream-colored envelope over in her hands. She recognized the florist. They were the best in the county. "I can't have Marius walk in on this conversation."

Colin shot out of his chair with lightning fast reflexes that were a blur to human eyes. Fortunately, Elysia was no more human than Colin. In the blink of an eye, he returned to his

chair, his mouth quirked in a grin that showed off the white points of his fangs. He must really be excited to hear her gossip if his fangs were out.

“So where were you last night?” he asked. “Is it related to the flowers?”

Elysia nodded. “I went to the Undertaker’s Ball.”

Colin’s dark blue eyes widened. “You’re shitting me. You really went to that thing?”

She sighed and ran a hand through her long honey blonde hair. “Yes. Marius bugged me about it for a solid week. I agreed to go just to get him off my back. I don’t know why he couldn’t have sent you. I’m sure you would have enjoyed it much more than me. You like dressing up on Halloween.”

Colin laughed. “Of course, I do. I find it ironic to dress as Dracula or Nosferatu on Halloween. Last night, I did Nosferatu. I was scarier than Max Schreck, but that skull cap thing itched. And I had trouble getting the makeup off.”

Elysia cocked an eyebrow up as her brother ruffled his dark blonde curls. She noticed tiny little bits of latex and glue in his hairline along with faint smudges of grey white makeup. “You’ve still got some on your face. Go upstairs and use that stuff Callie has in the prep room,” she said. “That will take it off.”

Colin nodded absently, his envious eyes on her coffee cup. “Yeah, I planned on it, but I had to stop here first to find out where you disappeared to last night. It’s not like you to miss my Halloween party.” He shook his head. “I can’t believe you went to the Undertaker’s Ball. For one, it’s an industry thing. You don’t like industry events. For another, I can’t believe you caved in to Marius. You never do.”

“I know. I know. Believe me; I hadn’t intended to give in.” Elysia sat back in her chair, placing her hands flat on the leather blotter on her desk. She stared at her long fingers for a moment, their plain unadorned expanse, short oval nails, uncolored, unexciting... except that last night they had been excited... in a frenzy of touching...

She jerked her mind away from those thoughts and looked up, meeting her brother’s eyes. “Declan Antaeus was there.” She said the words casually and watched her brother’s eyes widen.

“Really?” Colin sat forward a little. “Did he talk to you about business? Marius said he’s been angling for a meeting for six months.”

“We didn’t talk about work much,” she mumbled, thinking they hadn’t talked much at all.

“So what did you go as?”

Elysia rolled her eyes. “Elvira. I know, I know. Predictable and boring, but you should have seen Declan. He was worse.”

Colin began to laugh. “Oh, no. He didn’t. Tell me he didn’t.”

Elysia nodded. “He did. It was an obvious choice for a man of his height, but still, coming as the Grim Reaper was totally predictable and dull.” She smiled at her brother as she recalled Declan stalking through the crowds dressed in the long black robe. “He was the only Reaper too.”

Colin snorted derisively. “Of course. Everyone else had more creative costumes, didn’t they?”

“Yes. He and I were probably the most boring costumes there, barring Alfred in a white sheet,” she told him with a reminiscent smile.

"You're kidding. Alfred Stone wore a white sheet?" Colin's eyes danced with laughter at the thought of the head of the Funeral Director's Guild dressed as a ghost in a plain white sheet.

"He did. And he had that same shiny black suit on underneath. You know, the one you call his undertaker's suit."

The two of them laughed at the old-fashioned way of dressing that Alfred Stone of Stone Mortuary Services had cultivated. Alfred was a techie. He loved all things technology based, but when it came to clothes, he always looked like an undertaker from 1900. Elysia usually loved talking to Alfred because she was the computer geek at Granville Cemetery and they had a lot in common. However, she didn't like industry events. At least, not since she'd been rather spectacularly dumped by Alfred's brother Austin at the Darkworld's annual Funeral Director's convention three years ago. That experience taught her that the immortal world was just as hungry for gossip as the human world. Their hunger meant no one ever forgot the most humiliating and painful moment of her life.

Colin let out a sigh, his eyes meeting Elysia's. "So the tulips are from Declan Antaeus?"

"I think so." She opened the card that lay on her desk.

You are so much more beautiful than these flowers, but the texture of their petals reminded me of your skin. Dinner tonight? You and me and that gorgeous skin of yours...

I'll call you.

Declan

Elysia sucked in a shaky breath. The man definitely had a way with words. Her heart pounded so hard that she wondered if Colin could hear it.

He stared at her with an arrested expression. "Holy shit, Lys. Don't tell me you slept with Declan Antaeus!" he said in a low, astonished voice.

Her lips tightened in annoyance. "Okay, I won't."

Colin flopped back in his chair, his expression concerned. "What possessed you to do such a thing?"

"Oh, I dunno, Colin. Hormones?" she quipped, her words just a touch angry. Her irritation grew. Colin acted as if she'd done something completely out of character. Declan Antaeus wasn't the first man she'd had a one night stand with, and he probably wouldn't be the last either. Although, as far as Colin knew, he was the first man she'd been with since Austin had dumped her three years before. Maybe that was what had Colin's briefs in a bunch. Luckily, the two other quick encounters she'd had in the last year hadn't been with anyone her brothers knew. "Declan is a good looking man," she admitted with a nonchalant shrug.

"He's a freaking shifter, Lys. A dragon. Not one of us." Colin's words were exasperated.

She gave him a sour look from her violet eyes. "I never realized what a prejudiced snob you are," she said stiffly, still wondering where her brother's weird attitude came from. She'd never noticed that he disliked dragons before.

Colin ran a hand through his hair, ruffling the golden curls. "I'm not! I swear I'm not. It's just that Marius has this fucked up notion that the reason Declan wants to meet with him is that Antaeus International intends to suck us up."

Elysia's eyes widened in surprise. Antaeus International was a huge conglomerate. They bought all of the little mom and pop mortuary and cemetery operations they could get their hands on. Afterward, they turned them all into highly profitable cremation based ventures. Granville Cemetery was very old and catered to the elite in the vampire world. They offered cremation, but vampires tended to not go that route. There was something about being reduced to a pile of ash that vamps didn't care for. They were influenced by too many cheesy movies about the undead, Elysia thought wryly.

"So Marius thinks AI is after us?" she asked aloud.

Colin nodded. "He said the only reason Declan would want a meeting is because AI wants to buy us out."

Her brother frowned ferociously. Obviously, Colin didn't favor the idea of being bought out. She didn't either, but unlike Colin, who rarely stuck his head into anything related to financials, she knew that the company's fiscal strength would withstand any buyout attempt by AI. However, she now wondered if Declan's plans for Granville Cemetery had fueled his easy acquiescence to her come on last night. She bit her lip.

Colin, seeing her expression and knowing her better than anyone, leaned forward and grabbed her hand. "I'm sure that's not why he slept with you, Lys," he said gently. "Every man in the Funeral Director's Guild, married or single or gay, wants to fuck you."

Elysia smiled. Colin exaggerated, but not by much unfortunately. It was one of the reasons Marius dealt with industry stuff instead of her, even though finance was her area. The fact that men didn't take her business acumen seriously had always been annoying in the past. For some reason, last night at the Undertaker's Ball, she just hadn't cared. She'd wanted to find someone who could take away the ache in her gut and Declan Antaeus fit the bill perfectly. Now, however, she had to figure out what to do about him. Obviously, he wanted to continue on from where they'd left off, but Elysia just wanted to forget it happened.

"It's hard to fake a hard on," she joked. "I'm pretty sure he wasn't thinking about mergers last night."

Colin let go of her hand and sat back, looking at the tulips. "Did you go to his place?"

Elysia made a face. "Yeah, after the first time."

Her brother's eyes registered shock. "Don't tell me you fucked him in the cemetery, Lys. That's just... just..."

"Too Halloween-ish even for you?" Elysia's expression turned wry.

"Well, yeah." Colin let out a deep sigh. "I know you don't listen to my advice very often, but Lys, have you thought about what you're getting into here? Declan Antaeus isn't the kind of guy you just have fun with."

"No worries, Colin. I'm not seeing him again."

Now, Colin gazed at her stupefied. "You're completely off your rocker, Elysia. You want a one nighter, but you pick up the man least likely to be interested in one? On top of that, the man is interested in buying us out. He's ruthless, dear sister, with a reputation for always getting what he wants. And you've now stepped right into his cross hairs. This is not going to go well."

Elysia bit back a sigh. She had a bad feeling that Colin was right. She glanced down at the card again and suppressed a shiver. She looked up into Colin's worried midnight blue eyes. She

loved him to death, but she needed to think without the distraction of his questions and concerns. She pushed the vase of tulips toward him.

“Put that in the small visitation room,” she ordered.

“That old vamp is in there. The one with no family.” Colin’s voice sounded puzzled.

“Exactly. No one sent any flowers. He pre-paid for his visitation and service and no one’s come. Put the flowers in there. It won’t look so sad then,” she explained.

Her brother got up and picked up the vase. “You’re making a big mistake with Declan Antaeus,” he warned her as he strode to the door.

“You have no idea what I’m going to do, Colin.”

Colin snorted in disgust. “Doesn’t matter what you do. It’s all a mistake. There is no winning with a man like him. Mark my words.”

After Colin left, Elysia spun around in her chair, to gaze out the window at the expanse of green grass marked with upright tombstones. She didn’t want to replay the night before, but after her conversation with Colin it was inevitable...

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Tales of the Darkworld Book 2: Hot Water

By Lex Valentine

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Chapter One

Eden walked into Carpe Noctem wearing a short black dress and thigh high boots. The outfit, along with her long shaggy ‘scene’ haircut, made her seem nearly as young as the crowd that filled the trendy vampire themed nightclub. In truth, as an immortal, she looked younger than her actual years, appearing to be in her late twenties. Her tight, sexually provocative clothing had been chosen to aid the illusion of youth.

Trolling was tough business. Eden knew this from experience. With throngs of beautiful young things packing the clubs, finding someone to fuck could be a major undertaking if you didn’t do something to set yourself above all the other immortals. Everyone wanted to get laid and available partners could be in short supply, especially when it came to vanilla sex. Despite what her older brother Sean thought, she figured her luck would hold better in the vampire bar than the ones she usually frequented. The cheesy vampire paraphernalia, the coffins, stakes and bats couldn’t disguise the club’s sophistication or fun factor. A sea of people, mostly humans dressed as vampires and true immortal Acerbian vampires, filled the club. Proving Sean wrong when he said the “Queen of Kink” would never go to Carpe Noctem, would give her immense satisfaction.

Ignoring the snarl that begged to get out whenever she thought of her elder brother, Eden turned toward the neon lit bar. She needed a drink before she contemplated the choice of partners offered by the club's patrons. As she elbowed herself a space at the end, her nose twitched. The scent of vanilla filled her senses, and her dragon suddenly itched to break free. Holy shit. Who the hell would walk into a social meat market smelling so innocent?

The smell came from her right. She wriggled in the tight quarters, trying to turn. Based on the sweet scent, she expected to see a woman. Instead, she found a tall man with midnight blue eyes smiling down at her.

"You just go right on trying to move," he quipped. "I'm enjoying it tremendously."

Eden's eyes narrowed. Every time she moved, her body rubbed up against his. Her hip dug into his groin and she could feel a slight telltale swelling there. Despite the fact that the man smelled all girly like a sugar cookie, the bulge held promise. She sniffed again. Sweet smelling. Smiling easily. No display of arrogance. A mellow and amused expression, eyes dancing with humor. Beta. He had to be. Her dragon stretched inside her, urging her to take him.

"Oh, really?" She raised one brow and wriggled against him again. The size of the ridge against her hip increased. Oh, yeah. He just might work out after all, she thought as she realized his more than adequate proportions weren't fully erect yet.

He nodded, his dark blue eyes gleaming as they raked over her from the top of her raven head to the tips of her designer boots. "Of course, we'd both enjoy it a lot more naked in my bed," he told her candidly.

Eden's pupils elongated as Blue Eyes roused her dragon. The scent of vanilla intensified.

"You don't believe in wasting time, I see." She turned, deliberately rubbing against him, breast to chest. In her boots, she almost matched his height.

He quirked a dark blond brow at her. "And you do? You can't tell me that the dragon in you isn't clawing to get at my cock."

Eden began to smile. He might not be a dragon, but he obviously knew them intimately. Good. One less thing she'd have to train him on. "You're a bold young thing, aren't you?"

He laughed. "I'm not as young as you think." His smile revealed vampire fangs.

She pondered the fangs for a moment. People often pretended to be vampires at Carpe Noctem. He could well be one of the wannabes. After all, she'd never met a vampire who smelt of vanilla before. Usually, the real ones smelled of blood. He didn't smell like a human either though. That vanilla scent masked his true nature and it annoyed her a little.

He shifted his hips against her and the hard ridge of his cock bumped against her belly. Her dragon poked her with its claws. Her thong grew damp as she rubbed against his erection. She finally decided he must be a real immortal, an Acerbian vampire.

"I just have a feeling I'm older than you. Indulge me," she said. "I like being a cougar." She reached down and boldly stroked the front of his jeans.

His engaging smile widened. "I'll be teacher's pet, I promise," he joked.

Her eyes narrowed. "Not a bad game. Have you been bad today? Do you need a spanking?"

As the words fell from her lips, she could have kicked herself. Tonight was supposed to be about vanilla sex, not toys or fetishes. However, the blond man just shrugged. "I'd rather just fuck you. All that other crap isn't necessary for me. As you can tell, I'm pretty much good to go."

His eyes gleamed preternaturally, answering her earlier questions about his status as an immortal. One hand cupped the side of her face, the long elegant fingers sliding into her dark hair. Angling his head toward hers, he dropped a quick kiss on her lips. An electric tingle went through Eden's body and her dragon came rushing to the surface of her skin.

When he deepened the kiss, parting her lips with his tongue, she sighed into his mouth. His free hand slid over her hip and curved over her taut buttock. She rubbed herself against him again as that sugar cookie scent grew stronger. Lifting her arms, she draped them over his broad shoulders, feeling the hard muscle and bone beneath his silk shirt. He sucked on her tongue and heat pooled deliciously between her thighs. Gods, he was hot!

"You know, at your ages, you should really get a room," a snarky voice spoke behind Eden.

The blond man lifted his head, his expression tinged with annoyance that only lasted a moment. Recognition bloomed in the midnight blue depths of his eyes and his lips twitched into a smile.

"Hey, I know you. You're..."

"Karl with a K... that elf with the internet gossip show... yeah, yeah," the elf said with a sarcastic laugh. "Everyone knows me, kid. Especially here."

Eden turned and looked at the man on the bar stool behind her. He had a half empty glass of Guinness in front of him and a bowl of bat-shaped pretzels. His grey-green eyes stared at her unblinkingly from behind wire-rimmed glasses. She frowned.

"You're immortal. Why are you wearing glasses?"

Karl gave her a look that would have withered most people. "I'm told wearing glasses gives you character. Since I don't have any character, I figured I'd manufacture some," he drawled.

Her blond hunk openly grinned now. Apparently, he found Karl's snarky sarcasm amusing. "I watch your show all the time. You have plenty of character. You're funnier than all the shows on TV."

"Tell that to my producer. He bitches daily that he's gonna fire me." Karl took a sip of his ale. "I meant what I said, you know. Get a room. All this grinding and humping is for the kids who got nowhere to go. You two are obviously old enough and wealthy enough to afford the room. So go there and grind. I don't like having to protect my drink from elbows that are in the throes of lust," he complained.

Mr. Sugar Cookie Scent chuckled. "Sure, Karl. Nice meeting you." He took hold of Eden's elbow.

Karl raised one brow at them. "We haven't been formally introduced, but I know who you are. And more importantly, I know who *you* are," he said, his eyes landing on Eden with a wicked gleam.

She opened her mouth to tell him to shut up when he waved a hand at her in a shooing motion. "I'm not telling. Names or lack of them is strictly between you two grinders. Now, would you mind letting me get back to my drinking here? Fucking horny immortals," he grumbled, turning away from them.

The blond man pulled her away from the bar toward the exit. "Where to?" he asked as they stepped out onto the street.

A cab whooshed up to the curb beside them and she opened the door, getting in. The blond man followed her. She gave the cabbie the name of a posh hotel on Park Avenue. As the cab took off, the blond man smiled. "From out of town? Me too."

Eden shrugged. "I'm here more than anywhere else. I travel almost constantly for work so I don't have a permanent place to live unless you count a dozen boxes of crap at my brother's house," she said in a dismissive tone.

"I can't imagine not having a home. I'm from the west coast myself."

Tall, blond, and vanilla's chatty behavior started to annoy her so she slid her hand up his jean-clad thigh and squeezed his half hard dick. It responded instantly to her touch. She smiled at him, her curved dragon fangs showing.

He sucked in a breath, his hand coming up to cup her breast. "I gather you're not much for chitchat," he said, his thumb teasing her nipple through the soft material of her dress.

"Nope," she replied. Naturally reticent, when her horny dragon raged, she was even less inclined to words. Only action of a sexual nature would calm the beast inside her. "Just looking for some vanilla sex. Nothing more. Nothing less."

"Well, just in case you feel the urge to shout my name later, it's Colin," he said and grabbed her by the back of the head.

Shock rippled through Eden as he held her firmly. He kissed her deeply, ravaging her mouth with the kind of kiss she'd expect from an Alpha, not a Beta like Colin. If his kiss hadn't completely overwhelmed her and made thinking next to impossible, she would have wondered if she had pegged him wrong. Where his kiss had been leisurely before, now it burned hot and urgent, demanding a response from her rather than accepting what she doled out to him.

Abruptly, he let her go. Her chest heaved as she sucked in great gulps of air. Colin's eyes glinted enigmatically at her in the dim light of the cab. "You gotta be more careful about judging a book by its cover," he growled.

She blinked. He looked at her with a feral light in his eyes. Ho-ly shit. She'd never misjudged an Alpha before. Of course, her familiarity with vampires fell far below that of dragons and fae men. She'd always been rather skittish around vamps. All that biting and blood sucking...

Colin took her chin in his hand, forcing her to meet his gaze. The midnight blue irises glowed preternaturally again, and she could feel the steely strength in his long elegant fingers. "You're lucky I'm a nice guy and all I want is to fuck your pretty pink pussy," he whispered. "Walking into a vampire club and making snap judgments about my kind can get you drained, despite the fact that you're a dragon."

Her eyes widened a little. He smiled then, and the sunny, amusing persona he'd displayed at the club, the persona that had shouted Beta to her, snapped back into place. "You are going to let me fuck your pretty pink pussy, aren't you?" he asked as his fingers turned from steel to silk, sliding warmly across her skin.

Eden nodded. Several strands of her raven hair caught in the golden stubble that covered his jaw. His vanilla, sugar cookie scent grew stronger and she realized his arousal intensified it. The more aroused he became, the stronger the scent grew. The sweet smell flooded her entire being, making her mouth water. She wondered what he tasted like...

In a split second, the dragon within her roared to life. She pushed Colin against the back of the cab's seat and kissed him hard, her lips and tongue sucking urgently at his. The heat and depth of the kiss pushed her arousal up several notches. It had been a long time since a man had affected her so strongly, and never had one's scent overpowered her as Colin's did. Potent and distinctive, she would have been able to find him in a crowd of thousands at Madison Square Garden. Definitely something to remember if she ever had to hunt for him.

Colin's hands slid up under the hem of her mini dress, his fingers digging into her ass. She rubbed herself against him and he rewarded her with another growl. Pure sex emanated from the sound, with none of the male fierceness that had colored it previously. The sound skittered along her nerve endings, reaching her inner dragon and rousing the beast's tremendous sexual appetite.

Heat and wetness rushed to the sensitive flesh between her thighs. Colin's nostrils flared and she knew he had caught the scent of her sex. Beneath her hand, his cock had swollen to a satisfying proportion. The long thick ridge behind the zipper of his jeans promised to fill her as no one had before. Size had never mattered to her, but then, she'd never had someone as big as Colin promised to be.

The cab screeched to a stop, the centrifugal force pushing her back against the seat and away from the press of Colin's body. She sprawled awkwardly; her skirt hitched up so far her thong showed. The driver didn't even bother to look in the rear view mirror at her. Colin ran his hands over his face, then opened the door and got out. He reached in, holding out a hand for her. She put hers in it and let him pull her out of the cab. Tugging her dress down, she waited as he paid the driver.

When Colin turned toward her, she saw the feverish glitter in his eyes. He apparently didn't care that anyone who chose to look at his crotch would see the bulge of his erection. He took her arm and they walked boldly into the lobby of the expensive hotel. Exhilaration swept through Eden as they headed toward the elevator. Once in the car, she pushed the six and the car swept upward. Her dragon clawed at her insides. She was so aroused, she expected her cream to drip down her bare thighs any moment.

At her floor, they got off the elevator, and she turned down the plushly carpeted corridor, her long legs eating up the distance to her room. As she neared it, she took out her keycard. She stopped in front of 669, slipping the keycard in the slot. Colin chuckled at the room number. Moments later, he closed the door, sticking the Do Not Disturb sign on it. When he turned toward her, she reached back and unzipped her dress, letting it fall to the floor.

Standing in front of Colin in her black silk thong and leather boots, a sense of empowerment filled her. Her fingers twitched, aching for the thick handle of her whip. Colin looked at her hand and arched one blond brow in amusement, almost as if he could read her thoughts. He casually pulled off his jacket and tossed it on the chair, following it with his shirt.

Eden's eyes raked over the muscles of his arms and chest. He had a fine boned aristocratic caste to his build, with pale gold skin, a shade or two lighter than her own tan. The muscles of his arms, pecs, and shoulders were sculpted and well defined, but not bulky. His rock hard abs had classic six pack ridges. A fine dust of blond hair encircled each of his pale brown nipples... pale brown pierced nipples.

Her lips quirked in a smile. He really wasn't what he appeared to be, she thought as he bent and removed his shoes and socks. When he straightened, she briefly eyed his long narrow feet. Elegant like his hands. Her gaze shifted to those hands. They pulled down the zipper of his jeans, pushing the denim down his muscular thighs. He kicked the jeans away and hooked his thumbs in the waistband of his boxers. She stared at him thoughtfully, deciding that he had predictable taste in underwear. He seemed like a boxers kind of guy. With a practiced flick, the garment in question hit the floor and he kicked them in the same direction as the jeans.

"Will I do?" he asked, as her eyes wandered his hard body. Dark gold hair arrowed from his navel to his groin. She saw that he kept himself well trimmed and thought that it extended to his balls too. Even from a distance, they seemed smooth. He had a larger cock than the bulge in his jeans had given away, she noted, taking in his girth and length. Her mouth watered at the thought of licking him.

"I believe you will." Desire turned her voice husky and unconsciously, her fingers reached down to her panty line to stroke over her clan mark. The dragon inside her began to pace. Touching the swirling lines of the clan mark that covered the soft skin inside her hipbone made her even hornier.

"Your clan mark?" he asked quietly, watching her stroke it.

She nodded and he walked toward her, reaching out to brush one long finger over the mark. Her inner dragon preened at his touch. She knew the mark just looked like a tribal dragon tattoo to the uninitiated. However, Colin seemed to know about clan marks and how they reacted to touch.

"You're a black dragon. I'm not sure I recognize the clan though," he murmured, circling her and looking up and down her body.

"It doesn't matter. All you really want is to fuck my pretty pink pussy, right?" she reminded him with a lift of her brows.

Colin smiled angelically. "For now, yes, although, you have yet to show it to me..."

As his voice trailed away, Eden bent over and unzipped her boots. She could feel Colin's eyes on her breasts as if he touched her. The weight of his gaze made her rush and she kicked the expensive designer footwear off, something she never did. She lifted her head, her eyes holding his as she shimmied out of the black silk thong.

Inside her, the dragon roared, knowing that the tension they shared would soon be released. Eden walked over to the bed and ripped the covers back. Lying on the sheets, she spread her legs so that Colin could see the pussy he'd promised to fuck. She didn't need a mirror to know that her flesh glistened wetly in the low light. She could feel her swollen, sensitive lips throbbing. She stroked her hand over the clan mark and her nipples tightened painfully.

If you want it, come and get it, bite boy. Standing there staring at it, doesn't do either of us any good.

Colin's eyes jerked to hers and for a split second she had the weird sense that he had heard her thoughts, something that sent fear arcing through her. But then he flashed a seductive smile that widened as he started toward her. In a flood of lust that drowned her momentary fear, she gazed mesmerized at the thick erection that bobbed with each of his steps.

"It really is very pink and very pretty," he said softly, his tone filled with satisfaction.

When he reached the side of the bed, his long fingers trailed over her knee and up the inside of her thigh. Her heart thundered in her chest and her dragon's harsh breathing sent a trail of smoke from her nostrils.

Colin leaned over her, his hands denting the mattress on either side of her hips as he sat on the edge of the bed. "How much foreplay do you want, baby? Because as far as I'm concerned, what happened in the cab was all I need."

Eden licked her lips, watching as Colin's eyes darkened even more. "I don't need any more teasing. Just fuck me hard and fast before I explode from looking at you."

She didn't know what to expect, but what happened next still surprised her. With an economy of movement that made it all seem like a single smooth move, Colin reached out, flipped her onto her belly, pulled her hips back against his and thrust the entire length of his cock into her throbbing wetness. She let out a startled half yelp, half moan. He filled her so tightly it bordered on pain. Taking someone as big as him without any warning had driven every ounce of air from her lungs.

Colin's fingers roughly pinched and twisted her hard nipples. Pleasure ripped through her in a great wave. She had no idea how he knew what she liked. He certainly didn't look like a rough sex sorta guy. He looked cultured and refined, the elegant and arrogant sort who liked to order women to service him.

He jerked her up off her hands, his chest cradling and supporting her torso. His hips stilled as his hands swept over her body, finding all the places she most liked to be touched. When she moaned uncontrollably, he licked her neck and she shivered. The most incredible sensations buffeted her body when his tongue stroked over her skin. She almost asked him to bite her, but he bent her over again. Her palms hit the mattress as his hips slammed into her ass. He pulled back and thrust into her forcefully.

Eden's pussy stretched to accommodate him while clinging to his thickness. He fucked her harder than she'd ever been fucked before. The head of his cock battered her G-spot with every thrust. Shivers of pleasure racked her body. Her orgasm crested and she cried out, tossing her head.

Colin chuckled but his tempo didn't lessen. He gave her exactly what she'd asked for. She shuddered and gasped for air, her heart racing thunderously. Unbelievably, as one long finger flicked over her clit, she found herself coming again.

She knew he could feel her spasms, feel her pussy clamping down on his thick cock. His strokes became shorter. The slap of his hips against her ass grew more frantic. His teeth nipped the back of her neck as his hands tightened on her thighs.

"Oh, baby. Come for me one more time. You can do it," he growled.

His tongue licked at her neck in time to the glide of his fingers against her clit. His cock filled her so full he could barely press inside her despite the fact that she was wetter than she had ever

been. His thumb stroked over her mark and inside her, the dragon roared as heat flooded her veins. Her pussy clutched his cock as her whole body vibrated in a third orgasm.

With a muffled cry, Colin came. His cock jerked inside her and she could feel the gush of hot seed that filled her. Shaking uncontrollably, her arms gave out and her face landed on the sheet, her ass still in the air as Colin's cock throbbed inside her, spurts of cum still erupting from him. Finally, he pulled out of her. She moaned at the feel of his flesh separating from hers, leaving her sensitive, open and exposed.

Colin flopped onto his back beside her and her knees gave out, her lower body sprawling bonelessly on the bed. They looked at each other, both of them gasping for air. Then Colin reached out and brushed a lock of hair off her face.

"I'll give you fifteen minutes to recover. Then I'm pounding that pretty pink pussy again after I lick it into submission."

Eden's eyes popped open in astonishment. She didn't know what astonished her more, the fact that he would be ready again so soon or the way he took control. His lips curved in a grin.

"I don't think you'll need any of the toys I'm sure you have here. We'll just fuck. I'm good at it and I like to do it for hours." His midnight blue eyes twinkled at her. "Unless you're sending me away now that you've come."

Although he hadn't framed his words as a question, she shook her head anyway. "I don't think I can send you away. At least, not until I'm worn out and can't walk," she replied, her own smile growing as approval flashed across his face.

"Good." He leaned over and kissed her hard. "Time for tongues and fingers to discover cocks and pussies."

He grabbed her hand and placed it on his half-hard cock, still wet with her juice and his seed. She stroked him, wondering why she'd never been into biters before. Unbidden, her mind went back the phone call that had sent her storming into Carpe Noctem looking to get laid. An outcast to her family, she rarely went home, rarely participated in family events. Even so, she loved her siblings. When one of them had accused her of being the Queen of Kink, an unfeeling bitch of a slut who lived to get off, it stung. Those words from someone she had looked up to her entire life, struck deeply into emotions she struggled daily to control. To survive the pain, she'd retreated into the cold bitch persona she'd been accused of.

Now, that same self-preservation kept the lid on her emotions, when she looked at Colin. The core of her wanted to know him, but the icy bitch who'd taken control of her during that painful phone call refused to let go. The bitch coolly surveyed Colin, wondering why she hadn't hit on vampires before. She snarkily thought that if she had known biters were this good, she would have been picking them up regularly from Carpe Noctem. And that same cold bitch decided that she had more one item she could add to her sexual buffet menu now that she knew about vampires' stamina.

Inside her, behind the icy bitch, the real Eden gazed at Colin's beautiful face and wished her life was different.

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Prologue

Alfred Stone leaned back in the sauna, casually adjusting a white towel over his naked lap. His voice sounded as casual as his demeanor, but to his one man audience, the tone rang more warning bells than a three alarm fire.

"I am Magia. My job is to ensure that nature's intended matings actually occur."

Sean Antaeus stared at his best friend in shock. "You have got to be joking." Nothing in his life had prepared him for the words Alfred had spoken. It wasn't so much what Alfred had said about Sean's younger brother, it was what Alfred had revealed about himself.

The Darkworld held people with power and powerful people. Sean had been living in a dream world thinking that Alfred, as the head of the Funeral Directors Guild, was merely a powerful person. Now, he knew the truth.

"Sean, I wouldn't have told you if I didn't think you could handle the information. My job isn't always easy. Your family has been especially hard. In fact, I need Marius' help too. His family is going to be just as tough." Alfred's brow crinkled with worry as he spoke.

Sean arched a sardonic brow at him. "So you're letting Marius in on the secret too?"

A sigh escaped Alfred.

Sean thought it sounded rather dramatic and long suffering, which made him feel like he'd walked into some kind of set up.

"If you knew what I was up against, you wouldn't ask me that," Alfred replied in a morose voice.

Now, Sean knew he'd been played. Maybe not a lot, because at the core of it all, he knew instinctively that Alfred had spoken the truth, but Sean also could tell when he'd been manipulated. After all, he was a master of manipulation himself. *Took one to know one.*

"So you're telling me that both Diandra and I were the victims of your...gift?" Sean put his friend on the spot.

Alfred shifted uncomfortably on the sauna's seat. "Not victims, Sean. Recipients of a power that managed to keep you from fucking up your life. If it weren't for me, do you think either you or your sister would have ended up mated? Both of you were so stubborn and arrogant, refusing to see the truth, not wanting to be seen as weak."

Alfred made a rude sound and his gaze locked with Sean's. "If I hadn't butted in and used my gift to help you, both you and Diandra would be single today and unhappier than you could ever imagine," he said solemnly.

Sean bit back his own sigh. He couldn't imagine. His life would be awful if he didn't have his mate and wife, Careen. Yet, getting to the place where he'd accepted that he had a mate, a woman he loved beyond everything else in his life, had been a particularly rough road. The same had held true for his sister Diandra. Her path to love and marriage had been every bit as rocky. Now, Alfred made it seem like neither he nor Diandra would have managed to mate without a nudge from Alfred's power.

"Please tell me that you didn't pick our mates," he growled, feeling unnerved by everything Alfred had told him.

"Of course not. Those are nature chosen. But it's my job to ensure that those who are resistant become...more amenable to having a mate." Alfred smiled, something Sean knew he rarely did. "I smooth the path in any way I can without disrupting the natural flow of a mating."

Sean's brain raced as he absorbed Alfred's words. "And now you're telling me that Holden is in trouble?"

Alfred nodded solemnly. "A lot more trouble than you and Diandra put together. I need your help, Sean, or your brother will be unhappy until the day he passes to the Afterlife."

"Fuck." Alfred had him. Sean loved his younger siblings fiercely. He would fight anything that threatened their lives and happiness.

"So you're in." Alfred looked at him expectantly, triumph already shining in his eyes.

This time Sean did sigh. "Yeah. I'm in."

He shook hands with Alfred and realized that he'd sealed a pact of duplicity and manipulation as he did so. Luckily, being Machiavellian was second nature to Sean, and he bet Alfred knew that fact quite well.

Chapter One

The first to arrive, Holden slipped into his seat and opened his leather covered notepad with irritation. He disliked rah rah meetings. Despite all the team building pep talks, things always went back to the way they had always been...with his oldest brother Sean wielding his iron fist and micro-managing while he and his other brother Declan struggled not to let Sean overwhelm them.

In Holden's opinion, corporate life had been worse while Declan had been gone. During Declan's tenure at a European conglomerate, Sean had refused to replace him. Instead, Holden's oldest brother had taken on acquisitions himself in his brother's absence. Sean had gone crazy buying up whatever he could. Declan had a lot more finesse and savvy when it came to choosing the funeral homes and cemeteries that offered the best value. The company needed Declan's firm hand and cool head when it came to acquiring new businesses and Holden had been relieved when his brother returned to Antaeus International.

Declan's return to the company heralded the end of their sister Eden's term of employment in the corporate world. Her contributions to the company were myriad, but all of them had been tainted by her unhappiness in that environment and Sean's determination to keep her there. It had all come to a head not long after Declan's return. Eden had ditched her marketing job at

Antaeus International, packed up her cameras, and headed to New York City. Within a few months, she'd become the fashion industry's new hot photographer, making her name shooting nearly naked men in designer underwear. Sean's fury knew no bounds over her defection and both Holden and Declan had borne the brunt of it.

The door opened and a muscular man with unruly black curls entered the room. Holden cocked one brow up at Vahid Delrey, his brother Sean's right hand man and the company's Chief Operating Officer. Vahid had also been Eden's live-in boyfriend for two years prior to her departure from all things Antaeus. Holden had always been amazed that Vahid had retained his cool demeanor, his deepest emotions, if he had any, masked from everyone when Eden had dumped him. Not for the first time, Holden wondered how Vahid had ever gotten together with his free-spirited sister. They seemed like such polar opposites.

"This is another attempt at a team building meeting, isn't it?" Holden asked as Vahid took the chair opposite him.

A dry chuckle escaped Vahid. "You know Sean. He may suck at something, but his determination won't let him stop trying to master it anyway."

Holden felt his lips curl in a derisive smile. "My brother is a force unto himself that's for sure."

Now, Vahid's brows rose. "Nice way of saying he's an arrogant ass."

The door whooshed open and the subject of their conversation strode in with Declan and another man behind him. Holden's nose twitched. The scent of spearmint assailed him.

"Thanks for the compliment, Vahid," Sean said smoothly, a sardonic expression on his hawkish features.

Declan took the chair at the foot of the table, seating himself on Holden's left. Sean took the chair at the head of the table. The spearmint scent intensified as a man Holden didn't know took the seat beside Vahid. More staff rushed in to join the meeting, but Holden found his gaze caught by the newcomer. Intense green eyes gazed back him, an indefinable emotion churning within them. Holden had no clue as to the man's identity, but an odd sense of familiarity pricked his awareness as he stared into those enigmatic eyes. It was as if knew the man, but couldn't place where or how.

The green gaze shifted as a tall, blonde woman strode into the room. Dressed in an unrelenting black suit and matching silk shirt, her pale hair twisted into a neat chignon, Emily Carrington looked like a fashion model until one noticed her stern visage. As one of the most powerful people at Antaeus International, she held the company's purse strings in her long-fingered, capable hands. The new man smiled at her as she took a seat beside him. Her expression turned smug and the new guy's identity dawned on Holden. The wunderkind of the death care industry's financial sector, Garret Renquist.

Sean and Emily had somehow managed to lure Garret from his position as the head of finance for Stone Mortuary Services, a job he hadn't even held very long. Alfred Stone had hired him away from the biggest British mortuary conglomerate in the hope of turning him loose on the Funeral Director's Guild's financials, a big project that Alfred had spearheaded as the head of the FDG. Instead, Sean and Emily had whisked the whiz kid to Antaeus International. With an internal smirk, Holden briefly imagined the acquisition of the stock market genius taking place over a round of golf. His brother Sean golfed regularly with Alfred and Marius Granville of

Granville Cemetery, the oldest cemetery in their part of the Darkworld. Holden figured the three powerful men brokered all kinds of industry related deals during those golf games. Something told him that Garret Renquist might just have been one of those deals.

“Let’s get started,” Sean said from the head of the table. “This will be a short meeting anyway since we’re all leaving.”

“Leaving?” Holden asked, startled. What the hell was his brother up to now?

Sean’s intense golden stare turned on Holden. “Yes. Leaving. I’ll get to that in a minute.”

Holden watched as his older brother’s hawk-like gaze settled on the new guy. “Has everyone met Garret? Garret Renquist is our new Chief Investment Officer. He’ll also be working in the capacity of Budget Director under Emily, which means he’ll be working with all of you on your budgets. He comes highly recommended and has a great reputation for increasing a company’s investment returns. If you haven’t had an opportunity to introduce yourself to him, I suggest you do so over the next four days...”

Sean’s voice trailed away and Holden mentally braced himself. He knew that tone. Sean was up to something that would probably irritate the hell out of him. His brother’s suggestion that everyone introduce themselves to Garret was a thinly veiled order. Since Eden’s departure, Sean regularly did things that he knew would force his younger brother out of his comfort zone and push the limits of his patience. In the past, Holden had always bounced back from Sean’s Machiavellian power trips. Lately, he found himself beyond angry when his brother’s machinations involved him.

Turning his gaze to his notepad so his brothers wouldn’t see the anger beginning to simmer inside him, his nostrils flared as the scent of spearmint wafted toward him again. Who the hell smelled like mouthwash?

“I’ll be closing this meeting in a few minutes, but we will reconvene tonight at six over dinner at the Gargoyle Resort. You are all to go home and pack. We’re headed out to the mountains for a retreat.”

Holden’s head shot up and his eyes met his older brother’s. A gleam of triumph lit Sean’s amber eyes. Holden’s jaw tightened. Sean had made his feelings clear a few weeks before regarding the woman Holden had been dating. Since Sean had never interfered in his sex life before, Holden had been surprised that he’d even mentioned her. He’d brushed off his older brother at the time. Holden really didn’t give a shit whether Sean liked who he was fucking. It was none of Sean’s business and it wasn’t serious anyway.

Now, however, Sean’s machinations had pissed him off and cost him money. Holden had cleared his calendar for two days so he could have a long four day weekend. His intent had been to spend those days in a sexual stupor at an exclusive spa in Santa Barbara. The steep deposit he’d put down with his reservations for two would now be lost, and the woman he was seeing would require placating. Fury rose within him. The loss of the money didn’t irritate him so much, but the thought of having to soothe Gina’s ruffled feathers made Holden furious with his oldest brother. Even though Gina had a tongue that could lick all day, she also had a rather bitchy attitude that showed up when she didn’t get her way. Thanks to Sean, Holden would now be the recipient of the bitching rather than the licking.

“This will be an opportunity for us to work on some team building and strategizing. It will also give you all a chance to spend some time with Garret to see how he can help each of your departments maximize your budgets.”

Sean’s smile widened as Vahid got up and handed out brochures and packets to everyone. Holden opened his folder and stiffened. Sean had paired everyone up, forcing them to share rooms. Sean and Declan were together. Vahid shared with Todd Ryan, the Chief Technology Officer and Holden’s draw was...the new guy. His head shot up and his gaze collided with Garret’s intense stare. A little smile quirked up one corner of the man’s mouth. That little smile kicked Holden’s irritation up a notch. He frowned, wondering what it would take to get Vahid to trade with him.

Holden’s eyes tracked Vahid around the table. When the head of Operations returned to his seat, he cocked a brow up at Holden. His smirky expression dashed Holden’s hopes for a trade. Vahid obviously knew that Sean had put the new executive with his youngest brother for a reason.

Fuck! Anger tore through Holden at his brother’s little games. Grinding his teeth together, he eyed the itinerary included in the packet. All the rah rah stuff was there and, even worse, there were scheduled strategizing sessions between each set of partners. Great, now he had to talk business with the finance geek all weekend instead of spending his time getting blown and fucked by the hottest woman he’d dated in a year.

The law degree and MBA hanging on his office wall had made Holden the company’s General Consul and Chief Legal Officer. He dealt mostly with contracts and the mergers that Declan arranged. Anything related to litigation got shuffled off to a firm on retainer. Holden answered directly to Sean, but spent most of his time working with Declan. Looking at the itinerary for the next four days he couldn’t believe Sean hadn’t paired him with Declan. It made better sense to him because he and Declan were in the middle of some delicate takeover negotiations with an Australian company. He didn’t have any strategizing to do with the bean counter, Holden thought with annoyance. Pairing him with the whiz kid had to be yet another Sean Antaeus production.

Holden watched Sean close the meeting. An odd glow of triumph lurked in the golden depths of Sean’s eyes. Holden’s dragon senses pinged. A triumphant Sean wasn’t necessarily a good thing for the members of his family. He jerked his attention from his brother and gathered up his things, fury propelling him out of the board room. Fuck Sean. Maybe he’d just not show up at the retreat. That would teach his brother.

The scent of spearmint caused his nostrils to flare. He turned his head to find that Garret Renquist had followed him out of the board room. His frown deepened.

“I gather you’re unhappy about being paired with me.”

Visions of a cool woodland waterfall flitted through Holden’s mind at the sound of the British accented baritone. Holden didn’t know why it hadn’t dawned on him that Garret was British. The man had come from a British based company.

Holden stepped into his office and Garret followed. Holden shut the door and waved the financial whiz kid toward a chair. As he sat down behind his desk he noticed that Garret’s green eyes flickered over the wall of certificates, awards, and degrees. For a moment, Holden again had the sense that he knew the man. The spearmint scent apparently came from Garret. Holden’s office smelled like a bottle of mouthwash.

"You're the General Consul." Garret's clipped British accent made the words sound almost accusatory, though Holden knew that wasn't his intent.

With a nod, he gestured toward the wall of plaques. "I went to Harvard Law School. I wasn't top of my class, but close." He smiled a little and joked, "All the Boston beauties kept me from studying too hard so I missed out on the top three spots."

Garret's eyes glowed a little and his mouth quirked up in the same smile he'd displayed in the board room. "I've been to Boston. There are a lot of good looking women there. It's a very academic town, isn't it?"

Holden nodded absently. Something about the spearmint scent bothered him, but like the sense of familiarity he had when he looked in Garret's eyes, he couldn't quite place it. He studied the man before him more closely. They had similar builds and were about the same height. Garret stood perhaps an inch taller and he appeared to be a little leaner than Holden. His chestnut brown hair was cropped close around the back of his neck but fell over his forehead with a wave in front. He had a boyishly handsome face, but his reserved demeanor made him look rather stern. Holden wondered if the golden boy of the stock market ever had any fun. He certainly looked all business.

With a mental shrug, Holden studied the man's very green eyes. They held an open expression, but Holden felt sure that behind that expression, Garret Renquist was quite guarded. Had he been the new guy, he'd be totally on his guard.

"I'm not unhappy about being paired with you. I'm unhappy about the whole weekend," he explained, reaching out to grasp his pen, twirling it absently in his fingers. "For one, my brother Sean likes to play at being the puppet master, making us all dance on strings. For another, I had plans."

Two beats of silence followed his words. Then Garret's eyes clouded, the emerald green irises darkening. Holden figured the man didn't like the idea of Sean being a manipulator. It sure as heck wasn't something he'd want to know about his boss's boss on the first day of a new job. He felt a little sorry for Garret now. He'd obviously had no idea what Sean Antaeus was like when he accepted the position at Antaeus International.

"Look, we'll just have to make the best of it, as we do with any of these team building things Sean springs on us. I'm sure we'll find something to work on during the strategy sessions," he said easily, hoping he hadn't scared off the new guy. Sean would kill him if he did.

One of Garret's brown brows arched up. "You don't think we're a good match?"

Holden blinked at the man's odd choice of words. "There's not a lot of interaction between my department and yours. I work more closely with my brother Declan. Declan works with Emily. I'm not sure why Sean put us together."

Garret's mouth quirked knowingly as if he had knowledge Holden didn't. Resisting the urge to shift uncomfortably in his chair, Holden snuck a glance at the guy. He sat there cool as a cucumber, his expression enigmatic, while Holden could barely keep from fidgeting.

Holden looked down at his hands then and dropped the pen he'd been twirling. When he raised his head, his gaze collided with Garret's. The scent of spearmint intensified and a nervous sweat broke out on the skin between Holden's shoulder blades, making his clan mark itch. He sucked in a breath as realization hit him.

"You're a dragon."

Garret nodded, the enigmatic expression giving way to amusement. "Your natural enemy. I'm a green."

Holden made a rude sound. "The dragon clans haven't fought in a millennia. And even then, there was nothing natural about it. All the wars were about power. Not color or clan. Legend says we were all one color in the beginning. Our natural enemies were humans, not each other."

A huge smile broke out on Garret's face. "You're a purist."

Holden's stomach lurched. Geez, the man had the most brilliant smile he'd ever seen. He shook his head. "I'm a realist. Dragons were not born to kill each other. We were never each other's natural enemies. Humans on the other hand instinctively want to be rid of any being stronger than themselves. Their fear drives them."

Both of Garret's brows rose, but his smile stayed intact. "A psychology major."

"Biological Anthropology." Holden grinned, beginning to relax. Maybe the weekend wouldn't be so bad after all. In fact, it would be perfect if he had a victim. "Hey! Do you play...?"

"Tennis," Garret finished for him with a nod toward Holden's college trophies. "Although not in your league."

"That was years ago. My reflexes aren't so fast anymore. I sit at a desk all day after all."

Garret's brow cocked up again. "You don't look so out of shape."

Holden shrugged. "I'm not, but I don't play much anymore and to stay at the top of your form you have to play every day. I had the skill to go pro, but not the drive. I like working for my family." He grimaced. "My brother is a pain in the ass, but I wouldn't work for any other company."

"Your brothers, this company...Antaeus is a powerful name in this industry," Garret said quietly. "I was flattered that Alfred wanted me for the FDG and Stone. I was floored when Sean said he'd pay me more to come here."

Holden laughed. "I'll bet Alfred was tweaked. He's one of Sean's closest friends so I'm sure he gave my brother an earful, but the rest of us would never know it."

"Strangely, Alfred took it all very calmly, as if he had expected it to happen."

Holden prepared himself for the sense of familiarity when he met Garrett's gaze. "I'm sorry if I gave you the impression I was pissed at having to share a room with you."

Something indefinable flickered in Garret's eyes. He rose from his chair. "It's all right. I've been feeling a bit out of my element today so I overreacted." He turned toward the door. "I'll see you up at the resort. Maybe we can get in a couple of rounds of tennis while we're there."

Holden smiled. "I'd like that. Welcome to Antaeus International, Garret."

The other man looked back over his shoulder. "Thank you." A brief smile flashed across his face and then he was gone.

Holden sat staring at the closed door for long minutes, the scent of spearmint lingering faintly in the office. The anger he'd felt at Sean's manipulations had fizzled during his conversation with Garret. He should know better than to get pissed anyway. It never changed anything. Holden had never known anyone to get his way more than Sean.

On his way to the elevator, he ran into Declan. "Nothing from Australia?" he asked.

His brother shook his head. "Not yet."

They both stepped into the elevator. As the door closed, Holden said, "Why did Sean stick me with the new guy?"

Declan shrugged. "Why does Sean do anything? Everything is about control with him."

"Has he messed with your private life too?" Holden's gaze sharpened as he looked at his older brother.

"What private life?" The words were cool and sardonic with a bitter edge.

Sympathy washed over Holden. His older brother had a huge thing for Elysia Granville, one of the most powerful women in their industry. However, she was engaged to the industry's biggest asshole, Austin Stone. Holden didn't understand how such a smart woman had ended up with such a monumental jackass. A woman like her belonged with a man like his brother, not a weasel like Austin.

"I gather Sean's little jaunt to the mountains is interfering with your plans," Declan said, his voice rumbling out of his broad chest.

Holden looked up to find his brother's expression filled with understanding. "Yeah. It's gonna cost me a bundle too between the deposit on the suite at the spa and keeping Gina from being disappointed."

Declan's eyes twinkled. "Buy her an expensive bracelet. She's mercenary enough to be placated by rocks."

The elevator stopped at the underground garage and they headed toward their assigned parking spots. "Why do you and Sean think that's all Gina wants from me?" Holden grumbled as he watched his brother's tall form move toward his Mercedes.

Declan shot him an amused glance over the roof of the car. "Because it's obvious?"

Holden grimaced. "Money isn't the only thing she wants. She likes my cock too."

His brother grinned, white teeth flashing in his tanned face. "Well, she should. Especially when the man attached to the cock buys expensive presents. Just watch it with her, little brother. She wants the gold ring with rocks and you just want to get your rocks off."

Holden walked over to his SUV. "Yeah, well, she can want the ring, but that doesn't mean she'll get it. I'm not the marrying type."

"Neither was Sean." Declan laughed and unlocked his car, the headlights flashing as the alarm disarmed. "I'll see you at the resort. Good luck appeasing Gina."

As Holden drove to his condo, he pondered his brother's words. He knew Gina wanted to marry him. He knew she was dazzled by his job, his money, and his good looks. He also knew that a woman like her would never fit in his family. For all their money, the Antaeus siblings were all about home and hearth and true mates. Holden wouldn't dream of marrying a social climber like Gina. A woman like her could never be his mate. Maybe Sean's interference wasn't such an inconvenience after all. Although left with only his hand to see to his sexual satisfaction, being rid of Gina and her demands was more of a relief than he'd wanted to admit.

Holden's condo was in a high rise condominium complex only two blocks from the beach. He drove into the underground garage and parked in the space reserved for the penthouse. His footsteps echoed in the cement structure as he walked to the elevator. Thoughts echoed in his head too. Everything from Declan's bitterness to Sean's manipulations to the prospect of kicking Garret's ass at tennis. The weekend was starting to look up.

In the elevator, he punched in the security code that took him to the penthouse level. The elevator opened onto a foyer that had but one door, his. Unlocking the penthouse door and automatically disarming the alarm, Holden stepped into his home. From his living room, he had an unparalleled view of the coast in both directions. His expensive, but comfortable furniture softened the starkly modern architecture. It was a bachelor's home, not meant for entertaining in spite of its size.

Holden jerked off his tie and jacket, tossing them on the brown leather couch. In the kitchen, he pulled open one side of the huge brushed aluminum refrigerator and took out a bottle of water. As he drank, he eyed the crayon drawings stuck to the refrigerator with magnets. His sister Diandra's twins were the only Antaeus offspring. He, Declan, and Eden were unmated. Sean and Careen hadn't had any children yet. Holden figured his brother wouldn't have kids until all his siblings were mated. It was a very Sean way to go about things.

For himself, he didn't even wonder if he had a mate. He didn't particularly care. Kids and a white picket fence and the kind of woman who would want that life were so not his style. On the other hand, society type women and career women weren't really his type either. People with that kind of driven personality irritated him which is why he was no longer pissed at missing his weekend with Gina. He really only had one use for her and now that he realized it, he was too nice a guy to continue fucking her when he didn't even like her.

As he headed for his bedroom, Holden wondered if Garret Renquist was the driven type. He didn't seem that way, but it was tough to tell with wonder boys. Things seemed to come so easily to them that if they were driven, those around them never noticed. Holden opened his packed suitcase and changed some of the items so that now his clothing was more suited to a mountain business retreat rather than a beachside spa. Once the suitcase was ready to go, Holden picked up the phone and called the exclusive jeweler his family always used. He ordered an elegant ruby bracelet to be delivered to Gina that evening and headed down to his car.

He figured he'd call Gina while he drove so she'd know he wasn't lying to her about having to go to the mountains. It was going to be an uncomfortable call, so doing it while driving also gave him the excuse of the call dropping if he got tired of listening to her rage or whine. The more he thought about how unpleasant the call would probably be, the more he just wanted to be rid of her. And so, when he was halfway up the mountain pass on the way to Gargoyle Resort, Holden found himself breaking up with Gina over the phone.

She whined. She raged. She cursed him in Italian. And then he hit a dead spot and the call dropped. Sighing with relief, he shut off his cell phone. The remainder of the drive to the resort relaxed him and by the time he arrived, Holden looked forward to playing tennis with Garret. He loved tennis and rarely got the opportunity to play anymore. He hoped Garret played well enough to challenge him.

Holden's shared suite turned out to have two bedrooms and a well stocked wet bar in the sitting room between the two rooms. Since he was the first one there, he picked one of the rooms and unpacked. As he stowed away his suitcase, he heard the door open. He walked into the sitting room to find Garret standing in front of the door, taking in his surroundings.

"It's a two bedroom suite," Holden said with a grin. He gestured toward the door across from him. "That one's yours."

Garret returned his smile and picked up his suitcase. "Thanks."

"Can I get you a drink while you unpack? It's an hour until dinner and there's a fully stocked bar here. No mini bottles." Holden's nose twitched as the spearmint scent reached him. He'd never smelled cologne like that before.

"That would be great. Just a glass of red wine if they have it, please," Garret replied as he walked toward his room.

Holden heard the sound of Garret opening his suitcase and then the closet door. He searched through the wet bar's stock of alcohol looking for wine and found a full size bottle of Merlot and one of Cabernet Sauvignon. The Merlot was a decent vintage and he decided he'd have a glass. He pulled out a corkscrew, expertly removed the cork, and poured two glasses before ambling over to Garret's bedroom door.

The British man had his back to Holden, putting folded shirts in the dresser. Holden noticed absently that they were dressed similarly in khaki slacks and polo shirts. Without the suit jacket covering his torso, it was obvious that Garret was taller, yet leaner, with a narrow waist and broad shoulders.

"Here's your wine. They had a decent vintage of Merlot. Surprised me," Holden said as he watched Garret finish unpacking. The whiz kid had an elegance of movement that was graceful in its economy. Certainly not what he expected of a bean counter.

Garret stowed his suitcase, turned, and took the glass of wine from Holden, their fingers brushing briefly. A frisson of awareness trickled down Holden's spine at the touch of Garret's warm hand. Something about him affected Holden physically. First, there was that odd prickling of his clan mark that he'd felt earlier and now the touch of their hands made him feel flushed. Not to mention that damned spearmint scent that assailed his nose.

Magia. The thought flashed through Holden's mind and he wondered if Garret was more than just a green dragon. Sometimes dragons had magical abilities, but usually those that did belonged to the community of Magia rather than the dragons. He wished he understood what unsettled him so much about the other man.

Abruptly, he turned and walked back into the sitting room, opening the slider to the balcony. He stepped outside into the crisp mountain air and sat down on a comfortable patio chair. Garret followed him and took the chair on the other side of the small table.

"This is a very tolerable Merlot."

The smooth British accent caused Holden's clan mark to prickle yet again and even though they were outside, the spearmint scent was just as strong as it had been inside. Holden didn't understand why the man had such an odd impact on him. Again, he wondered whether Garret was Magia. It would certainly explain his reactions to the guy. His annoyance at being unable to figure out Garret rose.

"So how are you settling in?" he asked abruptly. "Are you looking for a place to live?"

Garret nodded, his eyes twinkling a little as if he had a secret. "Yes. Something with a view of the coastline, rather more modern than not. Nothing I need to spend time keeping up...that sort of place," he replied.

"You should look around my neighborhood. There are lots of very nice condo complexes like that. In fact, I can ask my association manager for a list of availabilities if you'd like." Holden couldn't believe what had just come out of his mouth. He didn't need the new guy living in the same building! Not that he could take the words back now...

"Thank you. I would appreciate that very much."

Garret's cool, even tones set Holden's back teeth to grinding silently, although for the life of him, he didn't know why. "I'll call her this weekend and have her fax a list to you at the office," he muttered, lifting his wine glass to his mouth and gulping down half the contents.

The emerald eyes of his companion glittered knowingly. Frustrated by how the man unsettled him, Holden knocked back the rest of his wine and rose to his feet. "It's almost time for dinner. I'm going down to the restaurant."

Garret's expression turned sympathetic as if he knew how Holden felt. He didn't speak, but those uncanny eyes watched him like a hawk. A muffled sound of exasperation escaped Holden. "I don't get you," he ground out in a low tone that expressed his frustration. "Are you Magia or what? Cause I'm all edgy and weird around you and I don't know why. My clan mark is prickling. You smell like a pack of spearmint gum. Every time I look at you, I think I know you from somewhere, but I can't place where! What the hell is going on?"

The glow in Garret's eyes intensified as he rose to his feet, facing Holden. "Think about what you just said to me, Holden," he said quietly. "Think about what those things might signify. I'm not Magia, but as far as you're concerned, I'm something far more rare and important."

He walked over to the sliding door and then stopped, looking back at Holden. "Open your mind, Holden Antaeus. Life doesn't always fit in neat little boxes or compartments. Things happen for a reason."

Garret stepped into the sitting room, disappearing behind the blinds. Holden stared at the empty doorway for long moments. Emotions tugged inside him. Even though Garret had gone inside, Holden could still smell his spearmint scent. His eyes narrowed thoughtfully. That scent...his dragon lore came rushing back to him and his jaw went slack with shock.

Holy shit! No fucking way!

He shook with reaction, his fingers clutching the empty wine glass convulsively. It couldn't be true. It wasn't possible. Somehow Sean had set him up. His brothers were punking him, playing him off against the British man somehow. The guy was probably some tennis stud who would kick his ass six ways from Sunday the moment they took their rackets out. Yet, how could they have manufactured his scent and Holden's reaction to that scent?

Holden stormed into the suite, fumbling a little with the door and the blinds. As he stumbled into the sitting room, Garret turned, his hand dropping from the handle of the suite's door. Their eyes met, Garret's sympathetic. Holden knew his expression was wild with disbelief. This couldn't be happening!

Garret sighed loudly and turned his back on the door, facing Holden fully. "It's not as complicated as you think, Holden," he said quietly. "I don't know why either. I just know it *is* and I recognized you right away. What you do with the knowledge, how you deal with it, is up to you, but you cannot change it unless one of us dies."

A growl began deep in Holden's chest as fear took hold of him. "Something's wrong!" he burst out, his emotions wildly overwrought.

Garret shook his head. "No. Something's very right." He moved, crossing the room swiftly to stop a few inches from Holden who wanted to recoil but somehow managed not to. His voice when he spoke was soft, but firm. "Holden, you're my mate."