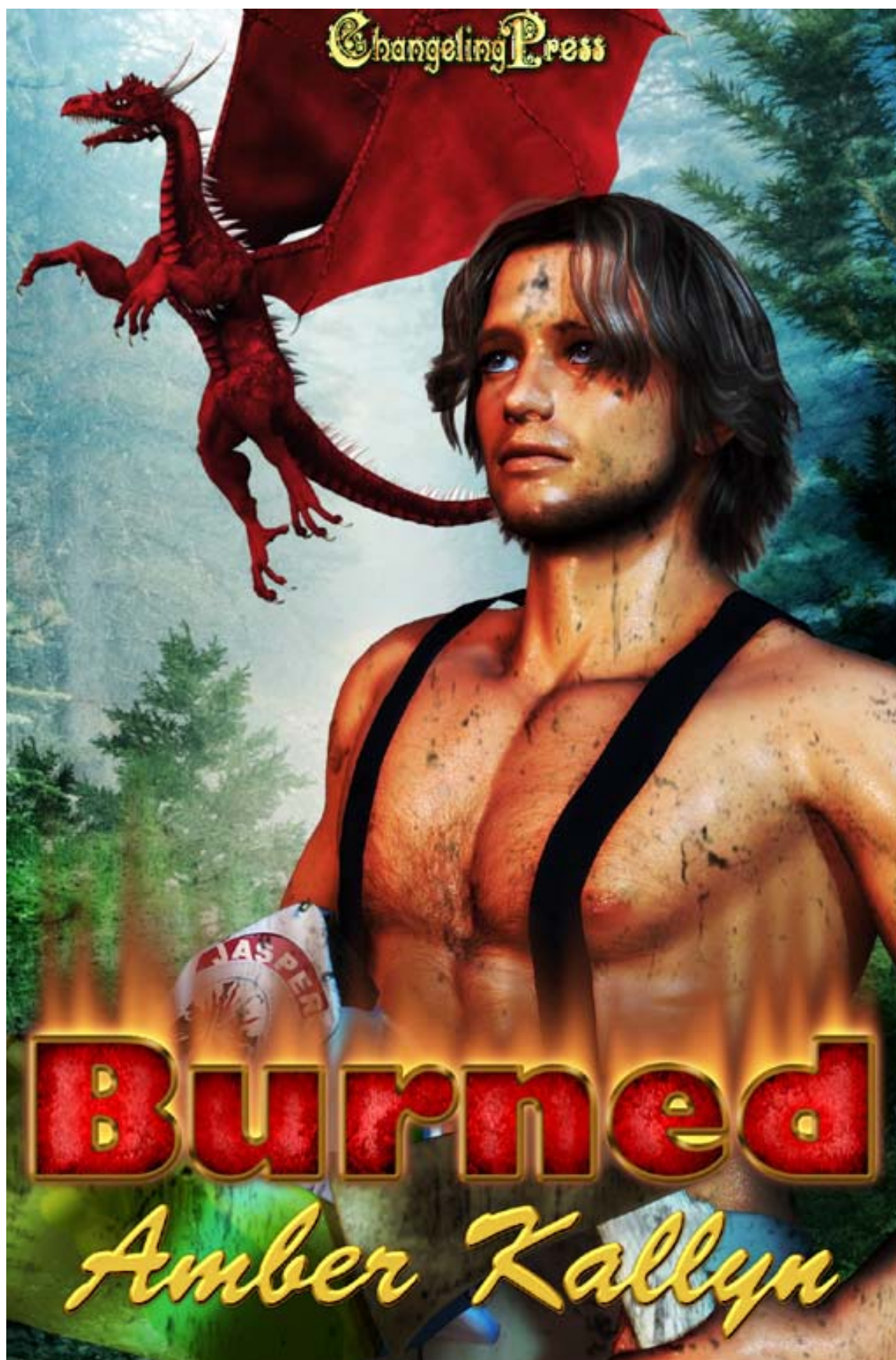


Changeling Press



Dragos 1: Burned

Amber Kallyn

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Dragos 1: Burned

Amber Kallyn

What happens when a dragon falls in love with a fireman? Someone's bound to get... Burned.

When Calla, a dragon shifter, heads to a sleepy mountain town to investigate their recent arson outbreak, she doesn't expect to come face to face with the dark dragon who killed her mother, or find her destined mate beneath the burning rays of the moon.

Firefighter Scott O'Neil can't fight his attraction to her, even after he finds out what she is, and the shocking secret of his own past.

Dedication

To all who helped make this dream come to life: my family who gives me time, my husband who helps me work out the love scenes and last but never least, the 7ED, all of whom have helped me beyond compare, and the S crew for keeping my coffee full.

Chapter One

The Other was here.

Lowering the truck window, Calla Dragos sniffed the chilly afternoon. Pine trees, asphalt. All overshadowed by the distinct stench of sulfur. Her stomach lurched, vileness rising to choke her. As she drove into the blink of a town, it grew stronger, overpowering all other senses.

Drawing closer to the Jasper Fire Department, she focused on keeping her clammy hands on the wheel, her concentration on the light traffic. Keeping her foot on the gas pedal, rather than slamming the brakes and fleeing.

How could he be here?

It was bad enough her job as an arson investigator brought her to this small, mountaintop town of Jasper, Arizona. Bad enough she'd left her family behind in the midst of yet another argument about her independence. The possibility of facing Eric brought tremors to her body.

Parking her cherry red pickup in front of the station, Calla shaded her eyes from the late afternoon sun and searched the colorful wood-front buildings. The stench faded.

Eric marked her, then fled. Like a coward. And he was a coward. She needed to remember that fact. Otherwise, the fear coiling in her heart would drive her batty.

After a couple deep breaths, she calmed the nausea a little. She could do this. She would do this. And if that bastard decided to show up, she'd face him with all her strength.

Calla stepped from the truck on shaky legs, smoothed her navy skirt and slipped on the matching jacket. Reaching across the seat, she grabbed her oversized black bag,

which held a notebook, pens and her kit. After another soothing breath, filling her lungs with the crisp mountain air, she headed around the corner to the firemen's entrance.

Giggles drew her attention to a group of teenage girls scantily dressed. And the man they huddled near.

In nothing but low-slung jeans, the top button carelessly undone, the man gave off the rugged air of a male underwear model with a sexy, take me to your bedroom now look. His blond hair, slightly too long for a clean-cut look, dripped water, from a recent shower maybe. Or a drenching with the hose. The scruff on his chin, a shade darker than his hair, enhanced the bad boy aura.

Gods, he was just like Petey. Playboy and chick magnet, an older version of her youngest brother.

"So can we have your autograph? Please?" one of the girls begged, her voice high. The other girls giggled some more.

"Certainly, ladies." The man's voice was as smoky and smooth as his gray eyes.

His gaze flicked to Calla. The intensity shooting from his eyes made her tense, caught like a rabbit in the headlights. His lips twitched. A flush spread up her cheeks. Calla stared at her feet, hurrying along the flower-bordered sidewalk. Before she reached the door, the teen girls filed past, happily waving calendars with mostly naked men.

Figured. A playboy, just like Petey. Which month was he?

Bare feet filled her view. She took in the long, jean-clad legs, the scruff of hair above the gaping waistband. A blond trail led up a golden, ripped abdomen and chest, to dark eyes. This close, flecks of green and blue mixing with the gray were visible.

His scent, suntan lotion and hay, punched into her, dissipating the last remains of the sulfur.

Her libido woke and started clamoring. She gritted her teeth. Not why she was here. And besides, she had no business being attracted to this man. This human.

"Howdy, ma'am." He tipped an imaginary hat, a lusty smile twitching at his lips.

"Excuse me," she replied, her voice steady and cool, the payoff from years of practice working around other untouchable hunks. "I need to see the fire chief."

Something unreadable flashed in his gaze and the smirk disappeared. "What would a beautiful woman like you want with him?"

"Frankly, it's none of your business." Knowing the best way to turn him off, she put a hand to her hip, jutted her chin and raked her gaze over his long, lean form. Unfortunately, her normal barriers weren't working. The only thing she wanted to do was reach out and touch his glistening tanned skin. Instead, she added in a sharp tone, "Let me guess. Mr. October."

His face hardened, all amusement fleeing. The playboy took a step back as if she'd actually offended him. Then, his grin came back, along with a devil-may-care shrug. "Actually," he drawled, "I'm December. I wanted a Santa hat on my lap, not a pumpkin." Leaning closer, his minty breath a whisper on her cheek, he added, "Why? You need a calendar?"

A shiver worked its way down the back of her neck. With a dry mouth and fluttering stomach, Calla strode past him and pushed into the icy air of the building. His stare burned into her back. She welcomed the cool relief when the door snicked closed. Without pausing to lean against the wall for support, Calla straightened and forced her feet to move.

A typical fire station layout confronted her. She headed down a short hall with two doors, one most likely to the truck bay. The tan walls led into a kitchen/living room combo. Crossing around beat up furniture that should have been relegated to the dump many years ago, she entered the hallway on the far side of the room.

With her luck, she'd end up running into one of the bedrooms and another half-naked hunk before finding the chief's office.

An older man stepped out of the first door, blocking her way. Faded brown eyes widened when he spied her. "I'm sorry, miss. You can't be in here."

Calla slipped her ID from her jacket pocket. "Calla Dragos. Arson investigator. Your department called me."

Smiling broadly, face wrinkling, the old man nodded. "Good, good. I didn't know such purty young things were in the business nowadays."

"Um. Thanks." She nibbled her lip. Did all the men in this town flirt so shamelessly?

"Well," he said, taking her hand in his bear-like grip. "Come along. Chief's office is just down here."

"You're not the chief?"

He slapped his leg, chuckling. "Ah, no, miss. I'm surely not. I'm Fred. Call me the mascot, though I don't have no spots or tail."

She followed him to the last door on the left and entered behind Fred, into an empty, disorganized office. Paperwork spread haphazardly across the desk. Books lay piled on the windowsill. At least the place seemed clean, just scattered.

"Guess the chief's outside. I'll go get him for you." Fred hurried out.

Stepping lightly, she pushed a chair from the desk and sat down, hands itching to straighten some of the piles.

The door creaked open as Fred peeked back in. "Sorry. You want anything to drink?"

Calla smiled at the man's simple spirit. "No, thank you. Just the chief."

Fred nodded as he disappeared once more.

She wrote a heading on the page with the date and time, then glanced around the office, impatient to get started. With Eric in town, she needed the details of the four fires. Gods, she hoped she was wrong and it wasn't him. But she had to find out for sure, before something happened beyond buildings destroyed. For her, the past was all too clear on everything that could be taken away, things unable to be rebuilt.

He hadn't bothered her family recently. Well, as far as she knew. Being one of the few women in a houseful of overprotective males, she rarely heard anything directly. No matter how much she grumbled and complained.

But why come to this small town and stir up trouble? He couldn't have been sure she'd be sent.

Nerves stretched taut, Calla set her notepad precariously on the desk, then strode to the window, needing the calming heat of the sunlight to soothe her. Weak rays fell over her face and arms, warm enough to push the ball of ice from her chest.

A minute later, a creak came from the hall. Calla hurried back to her chair. Her hip bumped the desk and a picture frame teetered. She grabbed it before it crashed to the floor. As she reached to put it back, the picture caught her attention.

She groaned silently as the smiling face of the playboy stared at her, young blonde girls plastered to either side of him.

* * *

Scott O'Neil grabbed a shirt from his room, then met Fred back in the hall. "Say again?"

"She's the purtiest thing I've seen in a long time. And she'd only be an investigator if she had brains. It's the whole package. You won't meet another filly like her in this tiny town."

Slipping the shirt over his head, Scott snorted at the old man's hopeful tone. He didn't mention he'd already met Fred's filly. Or that one of her cold glances could turn a man's lust to icy shards. He hurried down the hall, looking forward to her reaction when she found out he was the one she'd come to see.

Scott pushed open his office door and strode inside, his gaze landing on her slim body. Her hair fell partway down her back, soft waves beckoning for a man's touch. Sparkling womanly-clippy-things held the sides from her pale face. He'd never seen such red hair on a woman before. It made his palms itch to find out if she was natural or not.

Instead, he wiped the grin from his face and cleared his throat.

The woman turned, holding the picture of Scott and his two little sisters in a white-knuckled grip. He crooked a brow, meeting her stunning blue gaze.

She looked from him, back to the picture, then set it on the desk. "Sorry. I just..." She faced him, hands clasped in front of her.

"Can I help you?" Scott asked, not bothering to try putting her at ease as he'd normally have done. With a woman like her, it wouldn't do any damn good. Besides, if she really was an investigator like she'd told Fred, he didn't see the point.

She tugged a leather ID from the front pocket of her navy jacket and held it out. "Calla Dragos. The Phoenix Arson office sent me to look into your fires."

Scott glanced at it as he headed to his desk. The irresistible quip tingled on his tongue. "Mister December, at your service."

He didn't feel like explaining the picture of him in the charity calendar. She probably wouldn't care he'd only been talked into posing for the damn shoot to raise money for the Jasper Orphanage. The place was falling down around the nuns' ears and the free labor of the department only got them so far.

She shifted on her feet, sighing. "Look. I'm sorry about that. But can we get down to business now?"

Long black lashes framed those baby-blues. Her pert nose contrasted with a stubborn chin. Figured. Looking closer, he realized the creamy complexion belonged only to her. She wasn't wearing a drop of makeup. Interesting.

Most women with looks like hers seemed to take great pleasure in covering it with layers of colored plaster.

He took his seat, wishing his jeans weren't so tight. "What do you want to know first?"

She smoothed her hands down her hips and perched on the edge of her seat. His cock twinged at the glimpse of pale thigh peeking beneath the skirt as it rose. Picking up a long yellow notepad, she tapped a pen against her lush lower lip. Scott couldn't tear his gaze from the strawberry mouth. Hell, he didn't want to.

"Your real name, for starters," she said.

The words coming from that kissable mouth swirled in his brain, making little sense. "Huh?"

Her pen stopped moving. "Look. If you're just going to give me the runaround, you can figure this out yourself. I've already apologized."

"Oh." He was acting like a randy idiot. "Scott O'Neil."

She leaned over the pad and began writing, giving a great view of the swell of her breasts. A hint of white lace peeked out from beneath a light blue shirt. A small freckle dotted her left breast where it curved into cleavage. His cock stretched to full attention, pressing tightly into the wrinkles of his jeans. Before he gave in to temptation and jumped over the desk, he clenched his fists and hid them from view.

"When was the first fire?" she asked, then jerked upright.

With great force of will, Scott forced his gaze up to meet her eyes. Heat rushed to his ears, more to his throbbing cock. How juvenile to get caught ogling. "Um. Two weeks ago. The Riley farm."

"What burned?" she asked with a glare.

"Their feed barn," he said, trying to get his mind off her body and onto the town's pressing concern -- which wasn't his dick straining against his zipper. "Being spring, it was almost empty, but it's still gonna take a chunk out of their pockets to replace everything."

Calla wrote some more, her back ramrod straight. "Do you have a map I can plot the fires on?"

Scott gladly used her question as an excuse to swivel his chair and rifle through the filing cabinets against the back wall, even though there was a perfectly good map with the fires already outlined in his desk drawer. But he needed to look at something that wasn't the sexy woman sitting on the other side of his desk.

His lust completely unabated, Scott gave up and turned back. Surprisingly, her gaze, softer, darker, followed his every move. Maybe she wasn't so stiff after all. Interesting.

He pulled out the map and laid it between them on the stack of scattered papers. One of these days, he really was going to get them all filed. Calla scooted her chair closer, staring at the red circles.

"Which one is the Riley farm?" she asked, her voice coldly professional. But he was beginning to suspect that beneath her cold exterior, she might have a little heat inside.

Scott pointed to the circle on the far left, watching her long fingers grip the pen as she scribbled more notes. She asked about the rest, nibbling the tip of the pen between questions. His cock ached as he pictured those pink lips nibbling him.

After going through the dates and buildings burned, she traced the circles, then looked up, wide-eyed. "Am I seeing this right?" she asked.

He nodded, a breath of relief escaping his tight chest. So she'd caught it too. They were the beginnings of a spiral. And if the arsonist continued, the spiral would end in the center of town, which happened to be exactly where the firehouse sat.

"Did anyone figure out if an accelerant was used?"

Her tone scratched him wrong. Trying not to grind his teeth, he snapped, "We may be in the backcountry, ma'am, but we're not hicks."

She glanced up from her notes, eyes wide, mouth forming a pretty O. "I didn't mean to imply anything. Look. These are standard questions. I ask the same things of everyone."

Slightly mollified, Scott tempered his voice. "We don't know. None of the buildings were used to store any flammable materials. There was no odor of gas, or alcohol, nothing we'd expect to find with the way the fires spread. Damn quick, hard to put out. The only thing a few of us smelled -- at every site -- was matches. You know, the tangy, bitter smell you get when you put a match out?"

"Sulfur," she whispered. Her hand twitched, the pen slipping from her fingers. Calla caught it before it hit the floor.

He'd hit a nerve. "What is it?"

"Nothing." She shook her head, staring at the notepad. "How'd you put them out?"

He let it pass. For now. "Most places around here have at least one well. Our trucks are equipped with foam tanks, but also hoses to draw on the wells if needed.

Cost of living in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by forest. We have to get the fires out quick, otherwise they spread."

"Did the foam work?" she asked, still avoiding his gaze.

She definitely knew something. "Not very well. In fact, the first blaze almost reached the trees before we realized it. Funny thing though." He watched for her reaction. "As soon as we started using water, it went out easily. The last few, we went straight to the wells."

"You said some of you smelled the sulfur. How many?"

"What's that got to do with anything?"

Calla finally looked at him, her lips tight. "Answer the question please."

"Two. Me and Fred," he grumbled, ready for her to say something. The guys had made it a running joke around the station. No one counted on Fred for anything important. Which meant Scott was on his own.

She blinked rapidly, the corner of her lips twitching. The woman would make a terrible poker player, but it gave him an advantage. "You gonna tell me what's going on?"

She blinked. "What do you mean?"

"Come on, lady," he said, frustration getting the better of him. "I think I've got a right to hear what you know. There's no telling when this guy's gonna strike again."

Calla took a deep breath and pressed her lips together. She looked him over, wondering just what she was supposed to tell him. The truth wasn't exactly believable. She could just see it. *Mr. O'Neil, here's the scoop -- a fire breathing dragon is terrorizing your town. Yeah, I know. You don't think dragons exist. Well, if you like, I'll shapeshift here in your office and prove you wrong.*

Yeah. That would get her kicked out of town so fast she'd be left in the ashes.

Ignoring the twinge of guilt, she lied. "I'm not sure yet."

His gaze hardened, disbelieving. Calla stared back, trying to keep a straight face. Scott was the first to look away.

Taking a silent, relieved breath, she glanced at her pad. "Has your sheriff done any investigating?"

"We only have a county office. They're about thirty miles away in Payson."

"Thirty miles?"

"Yup. But..." His voice trailed off.

Calla glanced at him, waiting for the rest. The intensity of his gaze made her quiver deep inside. It was hard to sit here, her senses taking in his scent, her hands itching to touch the yummy eye candy.

He was definitely interested, considering the way he couldn't keep his eyes off her. Again, she reminded herself of the uselessness of the craving. He was human. She was not.

Yet, he'd scented the sulfur. Maybe... No. She broke off that line of thought and headed back to the conversation. "But what?"

Scott smiled devilishly. "You could talk to the retired sheriff. He lives in town."

"Okay. Where is he?"

The trap sprung. "Smokey's Bar and Grill, right outside of town." The corners of his mouth twitched as his eyes dared her to refuse.

Whether the man just wanted to get her into a bar or not, she'd go. She needed to talk to someone local with connections to the sheriff's office.

Lifting her chin, she stared down the cocky fire chief. "My car or yours?"

Chapter Two

Calla strode into Smokey's Bar and Grill, Chief O'Neil inches behind her. Not only had he driven, but he'd opened the truck door for her. After the fifteen-minute drive filled with strained silence, he'd jumped out and raced around to open the door again.

Though men surrounded her at home, Calla wasn't used to gentlemanly chivalry. Her brothers were more the rough and tumble type, no matter how much their mother had tried to impress manners on them. Her heart ached at the reminder of the woman. She shoved the memory out of the way. The tears would come later, as always.

Scott led her to the bar, a hand hovering near her lower back. His magnetism and warmth reached her skin even without a full touch. His enticing scent wrapped around her. Calla shouldn't be so aware of the man. Hell, she was near handsomer, buffer men all the time. None affected her like this.

The bar seemed dark after the colorful sunset outside. Music blared from a jukebox in one corner and neon lit most of the back wall. A sign proclaimed the local live band played at eight. Tables and booths crowded near a real sawdust dance floor. At least the place didn't live up to its name -- the air was clear and clean.

Calla eyed the stool warily, then set her bag on the bar before hiking her skirt well past modesty and climbing onto the darn chair.

"Would you like some help?" Scott failed to muffle his laugh.

Sending him an irritated glare, she pulled out her notepad and pen, daring him to make this about anything other than business. "So where is he?"

Scott's eyes flashed amusement, but at least the grin disappeared. "Two specials, Smokey!"

"Really?" Her lips twitched. "Don't tell me that's his name."

Scott drummed his fingers on the bar, walking them closer to her hand. "His real name is Orville, but don't let him know I told you. He's always gone by Smokey."

"Why?"

A grizzled bear of a man slammed two beer mugs in front of her. His voice, deep, rough, and amused, answered, "Because I was a troublemaker in my youth, that's why."

His dark gray hair was drawn back into a ponytail, and a salt and pepper biker's beard flowed down to touch his chest. Green eyes sparkled with merriment as he leaned his elbows on the bar. "Now, boy, what do I got to do to keep your mouth shut? Orville, ha. Ain't my name no more since my ma died. You think anyone else dares call me that?"

Scott laughed. "Maybe a free round might seal my lips."

Smokey shook his head. "Now, lovely lass. Who might you be?"

Maybe it was something in the water, or maybe this town just had a shortage of women. She'd have to watch it, otherwise all the flirting shot her way might go to her head.

She held out a hand, muffling a gasp at the warmth of his palm. "I'm Calla."

Scott added, "She's the arson investigator the city sent."

Smokey's gaze sharpened. "A bitty thing like you? You're too pretty to do such a dangerous job."

Calla couldn't help but smile, though comments like that normally struck the wrong nerve. "That's close to what my family keeps trying to tell me. But I ask you, why shouldn't a woman be an investigator?"

Scott answered. "Maybe your family just wants to protect you."

Calla waved a hand at him, unwilling to start an argument. Instead, she took a gulp from the mug. And spluttered as her tongue numbed. "What is that?"

Smokey winked. "Oh, it's my special brew."

Swallowing, she squeaked, "So, Mr. O'Neil tells me you used to be the sheriff?"

"Mr. O'Neil, huh?" Smokey laughed.

"I'm fine with Scott," he said, taking a drink of his own mug without the aftereffects.

Calla grabbed her pen. "Can you tell me what the deputies are doing about your arsonist?"

"Only if you can drink my beer," Smokey challenged.

"Sir, that is not beer." She softened the words with a grin.

"Maybe. Maybe not. So, big girl investigator. Can you handle it?"

Thankful her metabolism didn't allow her to get drunk easily, Calla grabbed the mug and downed the drink, the fire numbing her tongue, her chest, all the way to her stomach.

Trying not to cough, she set the mug back on the bar and stared at Smokey. "Good stuff."

Smokey and Scott both stared at her.

"What?" Calla asked when her mouth worked again.

"Wow," Scott said.

"You can say that again. I didn't actually think you'd take me up on my offer, lass." Smokey cleared his throat. "Atta girl. Maybe you'll do after all."

Slightly dizzy, and unusually relaxed by Smokey's banter, Calla laughed. "Now, tell me what the sheriff is doing to catch your arsonist."

"Damn feisty." Smokey slapped the bar. "Sharon, take over," he called, heading to a corner booth separated from the rest, beckoning her and Scott. She slid into the booth, paper and pen still in hand, and gazed at Smokey expectantly.

"All right. Now, first, you got to understand, the new sheriff ain't really a friend of mine. But, I still got plenty of contacts over there."

Three mugs landed on the table. Calla sipped the home brew while Smokey outlined the few, unsuccessful steps the sheriff, a bumbling man in the barkeeper's words, had taken.

"So, lass. What're you gonna do about our arsonist?" he asked.

Feeling as if in the company of a friend, she opened her mouth and almost let the word dragon escape. Snapping her teeth shut, biting her tongue, she took a second to corral her thoughts. And her voice. A waitress passed by. Ordering a glass of water gave her an extra minute to come up with something.

Pretending to study her notes, she replied, "I need to see the sites, of course. I have the map, so I can visit them tomorrow."

"Absolutely not --" Scott interrupted.

"Nah, lass. Ain't gonna work," Smokey stated.

"Why not?" she demanded, her self-sufficiency surfacing.

"This isn't the big city," Scott said.

Smokey leaned closer. "We're a small town. Everyone pretty much knows everyone."

"After everything, a strange face won't be welcome," Scott added.

"Huh." Smokey's eyes twinkled. "Scott's not on call tomorrow. He'll take you around."

Scott nodded as Calla shook her head. "I don't need --"

"Good. It's settled then," Smokey replied as he slid from the booth. "I'll let the two of you finalize your plans so I can get back to work."

As the giant retreated, Calla felt outnumbered and outmaneuvered. Just like at home. Well, she was tired of overbearing, overprotective men trying to run her life. "I don't need an escort. I can find my way, and keep out of people's hair. If anyone has a problem, I have my badge."

"Things will be easier if I'm with you," Scott replied. "You want it to take a few hours, or all day?"

Calla didn't need the distraction of a sexy playboy while she hunted for the cause of their arsons. And if it turned out Eric was behind it all, the man sitting next to her would only be a hindrance.

As Scott pushed her drink closer to her hand, he grinned. "I'm not going to take no for an answer."

Calla wanted to argue. She wanted to rail. Tell this arrogant male she could damn well take care of herself in ways he couldn't even begin to imagine. But as she met his strange blue-green-gray gaze, she saw a stubbornness in his eyes only matched by that of her older brother.

She rarely won an argument with Garreth. Which was why she'd jumped on the chance to get out of the valley and from beneath his hawkish gaze. Knowing stubbornness would only cost her precious time, she repressed her misgivings and finally nodded her agreement.

"You got the map?" Scott asked.

She slipped it from her bag and laid it on the table. Scott opened it and traced an outline on the paper with a long, tan finger, moving from site to site in the order to visit, based on what time families were home.

"Why do they need to be home?" Calla asked. She'd rather study the damage without the owners hovering.

"Like I said. This is a small town."

"Then why don't we stop wherever they work and get permission?"

Scott laughed. "You don't have much experience with small towns, do you? Most of these places are working farms, ranches. People don't come into town to work - they're somewhere out in the forest or the field. I don't relish the time needed to track 'em all down. Trust me, this is the fastest way for you to get your job done."

When he finished, he folded the map and slipped it in his back pocket. She wasn't sure if he did it out of habit, or if he wanted to make sure she didn't go by herself.

Scott leaned back and asked, "So, Miss Calla. Where are you from?"

Another set of mugs landed on the table. Scott took a long drink. The strangely sexy sight captured her in ways she'd never before experienced. His chin tipped up, showing her his stubble-covered throat undulating. A picture flashed in her mind of crawling over the bench and laying her tongue against the muscles working beneath his skin. Licking her way to his mouth.

As he set the mug down, Calla reined in her galloping sex drive. What the hell was up with her body today?

Averting her gaze, Calla tapped a thumbnail on the table. "Right now, I live in Phoenix."

She didn't want to get into all this small talk, but the man was her ride. Although if he kept drinking, it might be her doing the driving.

Scott peppered her with questions, either oblivious to or ignoring her short non-answers. She kept checking her watch, but the dense man didn't seem to notice that, either.

As the live band began setting up, Calla thought she scented the distinct odor of sulfur. Her breath caught in her chest and her heart tried to race away. Before she could even glance around the bar, the scent disappeared.

Just her crazy imagination? Or something more? Maybe she was losing her mind. First the stunning, encompassing lust for the fire chief. Now this.

Maybe it was this town, or the aftereffects of the last argument with her father. Her family hated the fact she refused to stay at home and let them all protect her. They hated her job, even though by the time she got to the site of a fire, it was usually safe.

Scott pestered her with more questions. Before her jaw broke, she relaxed her clenched teeth and gave clipped one syllable answers. She didn't ask anything in return, but the man seemed happy to freely share about his life.

A half hour later, and a third mug of Smokey's special brew gone, she realized she was enjoying herself. Slightly. The bar was comfortably warm, and so was her stomach from the drink. Scott's voice with the slight western twang soothed her.

"I'm from here originally," he said. "My parents died in a car accident when I was twelve. Me and my two younger sisters stayed at the local orphanage until I turned eighteen and enlisted in the navy."

"The navy? Why?" she asked, curiosity piqued. "The ocean is a far cry from this desert."

He answered, but she didn't hear him. The scent of sulfur hit, unmistakable. Calla studied the people in the bar, searching for a flash of dark hair, dark eyes. Searching for the twisted grin that made thousands of tiny ants invade her spine.

Eric. Dragon, but not. Not anymore. Now, he was Other.

"So you got family?" Scott asked.

"Yeah," she absently replied.

He noticed her distraction and glanced around.

"I'm the fourth of eight kids," Calla practically shouted, trying to draw him back in. She didn't want to give away her awareness. Not before Eric revealed himself. As the smell increased, she knew she'd done right.

Scott smiled. "Wow."

"Mm hm. We're all over the place."

He leaned closer. "So what made you get into arson investigation?"

Calla tried to surreptitiously look around without letting Scott know what she was doing. It took a minute to formulate her words into a coherent sentence. "Well, fire runs in my family."

It was such an understatement, she almost bit her lip to hold in a bark of laughter. Considering just about everyone in her family was a shapeshifting dragon, yeah, fascination with fire kind of went along with it. But she only said, "My family's business is pyrotechnics. They do fireworks for anything from the Fourth of July to rock concerts."

The sulfur hit harder, spreading goose bumps over her skin. It crawled into her nose and mouth, clawing at the back of her throat, stealing the ability to breathe. A shadow drifted toward her table.

Then Eric appeared, standing only a few feet away.

Blood hazed her vision, turning everything a deep shade of red. Her hands clawed, nails ready to rake down his face. Growls erupted from her throat as her dragon tried to crawl out of her skin.

Scott shot her a startled look, then glanced at Eric.

"Proditor," Eric growled almost too soft to be heard over the music. *"Brevis Soror."*

Calla's vision changed, everything sharpening, becoming more defined. How dare he call her the traitor. Nor was she his little sister.

The itching on her skin increased until her shift tried to come right then and there. Her legs reacted before she fully formed a thought. She jumped from the booth, then jerked back as her bag strap caught on the corner of the table. It cost her precious seconds to rip the dang thing free.

Eric disappeared in a flash, the bar door slamming closed in his wake. Calla raced after him, pushing through anything, anyone, in her way. His stench still clung to her.

Outside, she sniffed the wind, but the scent was everywhere. She couldn't pinpoint his direction. A bang came from the left. Scott shouted behind her, but she didn't wait. If he came up against Eric, the man wouldn't stand a chance.

Calla turned the corner. The wall of the bar was longer than she'd have thought, stretching out to meet a wide shed. To her right, trees spread out beneath the moonlight. She stared into the darkness, letting her eyes change, her vision expand, searching for movement. But the sulfur quickly dissipated. Eric had fled. Again. Her body shook with memories of what he'd done. Of all she wanted to do to him in payment.

"Hey. What was that all about?" Scott asked, catching up to her.

"Shh," she hissed.

Scott glanced out at the trees even though his sight must be next to useless. Unfortunately, there wasn't much to see even for her.

Shifting her eyes back to human, Calla turned to Scott. He stood like a warrior ready for battle. Trying to play it off, she said, "Sorry. I thought I knew that guy. But he's gone now."

"Uh huh." Suspicion colored his voice. She ignored it.

“Now look, this is my town, my people to protect. You know something and you damn well better share,” he growled.

Calla glanced back at the trees, hoping for something, anything. The smallest sign of the Other.

Scott grabbed her arm and spun her around, backing her to the wooden wall of the bar. A beam of moonlight shone down on his grip.

The feel of his skin on hers sent magic and heat rushing through her body. His palm burned with fire, his fingers sending hot pulses up her arm and deep inside.

Destiny. It had caught up to her.

Chapter Three

Scott stared at Calla's upturned face. Her eyelids partially closed and a fine sheen of sweat dotted her forehead. He wasn't sure he really saw a flash of reddish-purple encircling her enlarged pupils.

Her strawberry lips parted, her breathing turning into gasping pants. Sexuality rolled from her in waves. His body tensed, muscles tightening as his cock hardened.

His hand on her arm twitched as her skin became hot. Burning. "Are you all right?" Scott tried to let go, but their skin seemed fused.

Fire and lightning, a mix of pain and rampant lust, spread through his body, sending every nerve zinging. He pictured plunging into the wet heat of this woman.

She whimpered, her breathing fast, and plastered her soft, curvy body to his, rubbing against him like a cat.

Her hands roamed his sides. Her breasts pushed at his chest, nipples hard peaks. It took all his control not to drag her to the ground and fuck her.

He tried to think. To control the rampaging lust stomping all over the word caution. Everything else disappeared, the sounds of the band inside the bar, of the insects in the forest, until only the two of them remained. His skin heated where her soft hands ran over his chest, down his thighs, up his hips. His cock pounded every time she came close, but the woman teasingly stayed away from his crotch.

Her nails finally traced the bulge straining at his jeans. Suddenly, he was able to let go of her arm. Scott fought to step back from the flushed woman who'd changed from a queen of ice to a fire nymph.

"What --" he began.

"Love me," she whispered, her voice husky, raw. She grabbed two fistfuls of his hair and yanked his head down.

Her soft warm lips pressed to his. He groaned as the object of his fantasies freely offered herself to him. Her tongue slid into his mouth, tracing his teeth. He groaned, pushing back, kissing her with barely restrained passion. She nipped his tongue, drawing it out and sucking.

Her taste, a combination of Smokey's whiskey-beer and vanilla, filled him, stoking his desire. Her scent, cherries, curled into his nostrils with every heavy breath he took.

Control almost shot, Scott's cock strained against his jeans. He wanted to rip their clothes away and plunge into her heat. Her lithe body bumped against him, her legs sliding between his and rubbing along his pulsing cock.

It wasn't every day a beautiful woman threw herself at him. Just how much had she drank? The thought helped him to find some tiny bit of control. It took every last ounce he could summon, but Scott grabbed her shoulders and pushed her back a little. "Honey, wait. I don't want to take advantage of you."

She growled deep in her throat and fisted her hands in his T-shirt, then ripped it down the front. Her hands ran over his chest, a finger flicking one of his nipples. One hand slid to his pants and gripped his cock through the jeans.

Pure electric shocks hit him. He was gonna lose it. Not that he wanted her to stop, but she'd be pissed in the morning. "Calla, we need to --"

"Fuck me." Her voice was throaty, animalistic. Calla jerked the button of his jeans undone, then reached for the zipper. She pulled his cock from his boxers and stepped back.

He almost moaned in despair.

Calla leaned over, her breath tickling his skin. Her hot little tongue darted out, encircling the head of his cock, enveloping him in wet heat, the woman sucked deep. Beyond normal lust, beyond control, primal urges seized him, unwilling to be denied any longer.

Magic and fire. They burned. Burned deep inside. A combination of pleasure and pain, of urges too powerful to deny.

The springy hairs on his balls tickled Calla's palm as she rolled them between her fingers. His cock twitched. Slowly easing her lips over his tip, she licked down the length, paying special attention to the ridge on the underside, loving the way the velvety hardness pulsed beneath her tongue.

Scott groaned, his hands delving into her hair. Distantly, she felt a clip come out. Her hair spilled forward and she peeked up at him. Scott's head was thrown back, his pecs and arms bunched.

Pushing her hair out of the way, she sucked his dick, drawing it deep into her mouth, teasing with teeth and hands, licking with her tongue. His smoothness tasted salty, musky. Needing to touch more of him, she pushed the jeans down his narrow hips and grabbed his ass. His cheeks were smooth, flexing beneath her grip.

Scott jerked her to her feet. She stared at this man whose touch made her burn beneath the moonlight. In her haze, one thought floated through her mind. The mating fire would not have begun if he was truly, completely, human.

The fire took control once more and she happily gave into its demands. It was the nature of her beast. They were one in their desire. "Fuck me now," she demanded.

With a low growl, Scott backed her to the wall. He jerked her jacket off, then tugged her shirt over her head. Cool air brushed her sweaty skin, catching her between fire and ice. His abrupt movements, full of controlled passion, made her feel small. Not weak, but dominated. As if she didn't need to stay in control and make sure everything came out perfectly.

His heated mouth traced her shoulder as he yanked at her bra strap. Then it was gone and his flexing pecs pressed into her chest, the dusting of hair rasping against her sensitive nipples.

A whimper escaped as she rubbed against him, feeling skin on skin, heat on heat. He ran his hands down her sides, hips, to her thighs. He pushed her skirt up as his mouth descended on hers, his tongue plunging into her mouth.

He slid his fingertips along the top of her thigh-highs, tickling her skin as he eased her skirt higher. Then they were on the scrap of panties she wore, teasing through the material.

She groaned, head falling back against the wooden wall. His tongue licked down her throat as his fingers rubbed against her aching clit in tight, hard circles.

Flashes popped beneath her eyelids. "Yes. Harder," she whispered huskily.

His hand delved beneath her panties and the cloth ripped. His tongue traced over the top of one breast, licking up her neck and pushing inside her mouth.

With his other hand, he kneaded a breast, rolling her tight nipple between his fingers. Then his mouth was gone, to suck her breast, taking a mouthful, his tongue playing with her nipple.

His dick slipped against her already wet pussy lips. Unable to wait any longer, Calla wrapped her fingers around him, guiding him to her entrance. She pushed her hips to meet his thrust.

Velvety heat drove into her. Further. Deeper. All consuming. Her moans joined his pleased groan. His scent, his taste, his body rubbing and grinding against her own. They fit together. Perfectly.

Slowly, teasingly, he drew out, his hand moving down to her clit. Then he slammed his cock deep inside her core, his tongue plunging into her mouth at the same time, demanding she take him all.

Her hips jerked in time to his, rocking and pounding. She grabbed his ass, raking her nails across his skin, pleased when he shuddered.

Wanting more, she pulled him to her, hard, fast.

He groaned, nibbling her shoulder and neck. Moving up her jaw and to her lips, Scott kissed her with such intensity she almost came just from the act. But the fire inside her was more demanding. It wanted complete fulfillment. Needed it.

The pleasure spreading through her nearly drove her crazy. She ran her hands over the smooth skin of his back, pressing her breasts against his chest, biting his shoulder.

He shouted, from pain or pleasure, she didn't know.

The pressure built, his slickness moving in and out, his thumb grinding her clit. Whimpers grew louder, escaping on her heavy pants. He licked her skin wherever he could reach.

As the orgasm approached, she jerked him harder, urging him on with hands and hips. He slammed into her, groaning each time their sweat-slicked bodies hit.

He plastered her to the wall. She barely noticed the tiny pinpricks across her back.

Every inch of her skin sang with sensitivity. Everywhere he touched her built the orgasm until she writhed in his arms.

Then it hit. Spasms wracked her, the exquisite pleasure spreading all the way to her curling toes. She screamed, biting his chest.

Wave after wave crashed, keeping her high on the peak. Still he fucked her. And still she came, her pussy clenching around him. His harsh cry filled her ears, vibrating against her neck. His mouth bore down, sucking at her skin, his dick pulsing as the heat of his come spilled into her.

He leaned against her, crushing her close. She loved it. Didn't want to move. Didn't know if she could.

Their heavy breathing combined in the still night air. Then, slowly, sounds of life came back -- music inside the bar, cars in the parking lot. A dog barking far away.

Scott straightened, his eyes no longer a mix of gray, but a dark emerald. He opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

Calla could only look at him, her heart still racing, her body trembling at all he'd made her feel. She didn't know what to say. *Hey, there. Guess what? My mating just began. With you.*

Not about to happen.

Luckily, there wasn't a chance of pregnancy. Not until they sealed the mating. Destiny would not allow it. But it begged the question -- what the hell was he?

Scott slid away and pulled his pants up, then bent down and got her clothes, handing them to her without quite meeting her gaze.

Did one apologize to a man for jumping him? Keeping her mouth shut, she tugged down her skirt and pulled on her shirt, moaning when it snagged something painful on her back. Scott turned her around then bit out a curse.

"You have splinters." He pulled her out to the parking lot and helped her into his truck. "Where are you staying?"

"Don't know. I was planning on checking in at a local motel or something."

Scott scowled. "The nearest place is all the way out in Payson."

Calla nibbled her lip.

"Shit." Scott put the truck into gear and left the bar, driving back toward town.

Chapter Four

The drive was tense, silent. The scent of sex lingered heavy in the air, leaving Calla semi-aroused and wanting more. Sometimes her keener-than-human senses could be a pain in the ass.

Scott passed the fire station and Calla started to ask why, but he glared at her. After another ten minutes, they were once more out of town.

"Where --"

"Just be quiet," Scott growled.

Well, hell. He wasn't much for sweet-talking after sex, was he?

A few minutes later, Scott turned onto a gravel drive leading to a rambling, two-story house. No lights shone, enhancing the sad feeling of emptiness. Scott stopped the truck in front of the wide porch and came around to open her door.

His gaze seemed to penetrate her skin, as if he was searching for her deepest secrets. Maybe she should apologize. "Scott, I --"

"We need to get your back taken care of," he stated, matter-of-fact.

Damn, he was one touchy male. She followed him up the steps and in through the unlocked door. He flipped lights on as he led her through the house, but she didn't get a chance to see much of anything. Then they were in a large bathroom, the walls blues and browns and whites.

Scott pointed to the toilet. "Sit down and lift your shirt."

She sat on the lid with her back to him, once more overpowered by his commanding presence. And turned on by it.

She hated taking orders, refused most of them. But this man seemed to be able to push through the cracks and make her enjoy it.

His intake of breath warned her it was bad. As if the spreading ache across her skin wasn't enough.

"This is going to hurt."

"Just do it," she replied, gritting her teeth.

Cold metal touched her skin, then a jerk, a sharp pain, and relief in one spot. By the time he finished, Scott had removed over fifteen splinters from her back. Mirth filled her. It was a wonder she hadn't felt the pain earlier. Did such great sex really make one so mindless? Repressing a snort, she answered her own question. Obviously.

He applied something cold and creamy, then tapped her shoulder. "Done."

She turned as he rummaged through the medicine cabinet, putting tweezers and antibiotic ointment away, taking far longer than he needed.

Working up the nerve, she hesitantly asked, "Do I owe you an apology?"

Scott jerked around to face her, his eyes wide, mouth gaping open. "Hell, no." He raised a brow, his mouth twitching at the corner. "Do I owe you one?"

"No."

He sighed in relief. Calla couldn't help a giggle. That's why he'd been cranky? He'd thought...

Scott took her hand and helped her to her feet. Then he leaned closer, whispering across her ear, "Where are you staying tonight?"

As the fire roared inside her once more, she replied, "Here."

* * *

Calla woke to sunshine. A warm male lay pressed to her side, one leg thrown across hers. Scott's face relaxed in sleep, making him look younger. His blond hair stuck out crazily.

Flashes of all they'd done during the night made the heat of a blush crawl up her face. She'd been out of control, wrenched from humanity to a primitive, animalistic state she'd never experienced before. But she knew exactly what it meant. When times had been happier, her parents loved retelling the story of their mating. Destiny, her mother used to say, could never be diverted or denied.

Scott stirred, eyelids flickering. Calla resisted the urge to brush the hair from his forehead. Instead, she slid out of bed and almost ran to the bathroom. After showering, she crept back to his room for her clothes. Scott jerked up in bed as soon as a floorboard creaked beneath her feet. He eyed her sleepily, a sensuous, kissable smile on his lips.

"Morn." His husky voice spread desire through her once more.

"Morning," she mumbled, digging her bra out from under his pants. Quickly dressing, she sat down on the foot of the bed, then stared him straight in the eye. "Look. I don't usually jump into bed with someone I've just met."

He met her gaze steadily. "Neither do I."

Calla repressed a snort of disbelief. "Sure."

His chin jerked. "Lady, it wasn't me running my hands all over your body while you tried to stop it."

The heat constantly rushing to her cheeks around him made her feel like some young girl experiencing her first crush. "Maybe not at first," she snapped.

Scott jumped out of bed, standing tall. And naked. She tried not to look as glorious memories of all he'd done to her during the night flashed through her mind. It was all she could do to resist pushing him back onto the covers and nibbling her way along his taut, muscled body. Trying to find the tattered cloth of professionalism, she blinked a few times.

"I need to get to my truck for some clean clothes, then I need to work," she said.

Scott's eyes slid partially closed, his greenish gaze assessing. "Give me ten minutes."

"Thank you," she said stiffly, leaving the room to wait on the front porch.

Calla sat on the swing, pushing to rock just a bit. She heard Scott moving around the house, the creak of pipes as he showered. She locked her knees and clasped her hands, forcing herself to stay outside, rather than join him.

The burning had been satisfied, and was now only a dim warmth deep inside her. Yet she still wanted him with an almost uncontrollable urgency. It didn't matter.

There was a job to do. It didn't matter everything was completely complicated -- more so than she'd ever expected.

But how?

Scott seemed human. While sometimes the burning happened between one of her kind and a mortal, it was so rare as to be considered a myth. Besides, only two supernatural creatures could produce such an intense burn beneath the moonlight.

Calla had to wonder about that, and the Other. Both here in this tiny town. Had Eric somehow known her destined mate lived in this small town?

Not possible.

The only way a shifter knew their mate was in a touch beneath the moonlight. She hadn't even been actively looking. Scott's face flitted through her mind. A playboy. A clown. She'd hoped for someone more... steady. Serious and dependable. Someone like herself.

Again her mother's voice ran through her head, saying destiny was destiny. Calla's eyes burned, thinking about the woman.

She could walk away and ignore this connection with Scott. Nothing permanent would come of it. This playboy was so not the man for her. She dug in her bag and pulled out her cell phone, then punched in the first five numbers to her eldest brother. He'd come and take over for her. All she needed to do was tell him about Eric. As a magical bounty hunter, Garreth's job was finding those like Eric and bringing them to the council for trial.

Her finger hovered over the next number. Was she a coward? She didn't think so, but if she ran now...

Calla snapped the phone shut and dropped it in her bag. The desire surging inside her wouldn't go away if she left. It didn't matter to the burning inside if they were compatible. To destiny, it only mattered they could successfully have children. Some couples fulfilled the burn, even though they couldn't stand each other. Once a child was conceived, they went their separate ways.

It was no way for a child to be raised, knowing their parents hated each other. It was no way for a woman to live -- a life devoid of love and affection from a man.

Yet, leaving now smacked of weakness.

So she'd give it a few days. Do her job. And she'd keep her emotions guarded. Scott wasn't the man for her, regardless of what stupid destiny thought.

Besides, if she left now, she'd forever regret not facing Eric. The bastard deserved to pay for all he'd done -- before he did more damage to her family or anyone else.

* * *

Scott spent a few extra minutes in the icy shower trying to calm his aching balls. He'd woken from the most incredible night of his life to find Calla gone, only the scrap of lacy undershirt and the lingering scent of cherries remaining. Panic came swiftly, a punch to his chest, until he heard her moving around the bathroom.

But when she'd finally come back to his bedroom, it was the ice queen, returned so soon.

How did the woman switch personalities so damn fast? Maybe he'd read too much into the whole thing. Hell, it didn't matter she'd been a tiger, demanding it all.

He'd told her the truth. He didn't jump into bed with just anyone. Yet last night...

It hadn't been just sex.

His legs turned to jelly as he realized they hadn't used protection. Any of the times he'd come inside her.

Shit.

His cell rang in the bedroom, the ringtone "Ring of Fire." The department. Scott jumped out of the shower, grabbing a towel as he raced to the room.

"Yeah?" he shouted, slightly breathless from nerves stretched tight with expectation of what he was about to hear.

"Boss?" Tommy asked. "We got another one."

The towel dropped to the floor. Scott rubbed his knuckles against the bridge of his nose. He'd hoped once the investigator arrived, they'd have a few days before

another fire. Only, the investigator turned out to be the completely upsetting, unsettling Calla Dragos, bringing even more problems into his life.

"Where?" he finally asked, needing to know regardless of wanting to chuck the phone across the room and hit something. Hard.

"The Garrett ranch."

Scott inhaled sharply as his heart sank. "I'm on my way."

"Boss, um..." Only the sound of Tommy's breathing came through the line.

"Spit it out."

"Sally and Jake are dead."

Scott's grip tightened on the phone and his free hand spasmed into a white-knuckled fist. The phone cracked, a plastic splinter slicing into the side of his palm.

He kept his breathing shallow, rubbing a hand over his chest, needing to get over the pain before it grew insurmountable.

Slowly, as if in a haze, he bandaged the cut, then dressed. Boots in hand, he took the stairs two at a time. When he stepped out onto the porch, he came to an abrupt stop, the lump in his throat preventing speech.

Calla turned with a small smile that disappeared as she looked at him. Jumping to her feet, she hurried to his side. "What happened?"

He opened his mouth, but the lump prevented speech.

"Another fire?" she asked softly, laying a hand on his arm.

Scott nodded.

"Come on. I'll drive. Tell me where to go." She took his keys and started his truck with a roar of the engine, then waited.

Finally, his feet responded. Scott climbed in. Calla drove down the long driveway, shooting him sympathetic glances, which only made the pain worse.

At the highway, she paused.

"Left," he croaked.

She turned and drove on. A mile from the ranch, he spotted the gray smoke on the horizon. The scent slid into the back of his throat, choking, stealing his voice, his breath.

When they arrived, Scott almost couldn't leave the truck. Fists clenched, he forced himself to do his job. Not just as Fire Chief, but as a family friend.

Chapter Five

Calla hurried from the truck to the group of people standing near the house, uncomfortable without underwear regardless that no one but she and Scott would know. Though the overwhelming stench of sulfur told her the fire had been in the opposite direction, the heaviness in the air said it was more than a building this time.

Scott followed, his movements picking up speed as he drew closer. Someone in the crowd shouted and raced into his arms. He held the young girl, looking over her head to stare at the older man slumped on the porch.

"Bobby, how are the boys?" Scott asked, his voice thick.

The old man glanced around as if in a fog. "Jake... Where's Jake?"

Scott knelt beside the man, drawing him into an embrace, speaking soft words of comfort that didn't do anything to help the pain, but at least allowed one to know they weren't alone.

Fred appeared at her side and took her arm, angling her slightly away from the house. "What happened?" she asked, keeping her voice quiet to not disturb the melancholy wrapped around everyone.

Eyes red, Fred yanked a limp cloth from his back pocket and wiped his nose. "It was the barn this time." He pointed to the older man. "Bobby Garrett hustled the ranch hands and his older boys to help get the animals out."

Calla twined her arm with his, trying to give comfort.

"The horses got out, all but the stallion in there for stud." His eyes teared and his voice cracked.

"Stud?" Calla asked, though she knew perfectly well what it meant, she just wanted to get his mind to a better place. If it was possible.

"He's been makin' the mares pregnant."

She nodded, rubbing his arm.

"So, Bobby's oldest boy -- Jake -- ran in to get the stubborn horse. That damn stubborn horse."

Calla watched the people, their lives having come to a shocking halt in one swift move by a stranger that thrived on such things. They'd lost a son.

"Jake..." Fred sniffled. "He was still inside when the roof went. His ma, Bobby's wife, went mad, screaming and clawing, like a wild animal possessed. She ran in there before anyone could stop her."

Calla's heart shattered into tiny pieces. Her lungs imploded, making breathing impossible. This family had lost a son, a brother, as well as a mother. The back of her throat burned with memories.

This here, now, was not her pain, but belonged to the family huddling near the porch.

Scott drew the young girl toward her father and they slumped on the stairs together. An adorable young boy of about seven climbed onto Bobby's lap, while a man about Scott's age came from the house carrying an infant. The six of them seemed to draw strength from each other.

Patting Fred's hand, Calla asked, "Can you direct me to the barn?"

He glanced at her, then in the direction of the smoke. "I-I can't let you go alone. I mean... the sheriff..."

"You can come if you want," she assured Fred.

"Yeah." They headed from the gloom of sadness and depression, walking closer to the stench of the cause.

Deputies milled around, but no one did much. The sheriff caught her eye, an overweight, balding man with a mustache that dripped down his chin.

A scowl wrinkled his forehead and he stomped her way. With barely a glance at Fred, he addressed her. "What do you want?"

Calla slid her badge out. "I'm the investigator from Phoenix."

He clamped his teeth. "Really? Wanna explain why you didn't check in with me when you got here?"

His rude gruffness was the cure she needed. Calla embraced the anger overpowering her deepest pains. Straightening her spine to reach her full five foot nine, Calla almost growled, "Protocol requires I check with the local fire department, not the sheriff."

"Hmph." He turned and looked at the destroyed barn. "Stay out of our way. We'll be done in a while."

Though she wanted to argue, Calla restrained herself. Instead, she let Fred lead her to the shade of a pine tree and they watched the sheriff and his men aimlessly wander. Finally, almost an hour later, they left.

The sheriff shot her a curt nod. "I expect your report by tomorrow."

Nibbling her tongue, Calla held in the retort that he could go ahead and hold his breath. She didn't report to that jerk.

She surveyed the scene without the distraction of people everywhere. Blackened beams created a skeletal frame covered with gray ash. The sickening smell of burnt flesh lingered in the air. She couldn't dwell on that, or the sorrow it brought. Trying to clear her mind, she did the only thing she could to help catch the monster who'd done this.

Pulling out her notepad and pen, she flipped to a fresh page and began jotting down observations. She surveyed the waterlogged wreckage, trying to stay detached. Right now, she was not a woman with family and relationship issues. She was a trained investigator. And she would investigate.

Fred tried to talk to her a few times, but eventually gave up and meandered away. Calla barely noticed, intent on her work. She took notes on the arrangement of debris, smoke patterns on what remained. Finally, she narrowed down the hot spot. Surrounded by black ash, near what she assumed had been the main doors, the area reeked of sulfur.

After bagging ash, soot and a few pieces of cooled wood, she slipped out her cell phone to report in.

No bars. No reception. Which figured.

Calla stepped away from the barn and just looked at it. Trying to see beyond what was there now.

She pictured the bright red barn, standing high, filled with animals. Their sounds turned panicky as the scent of the Other filled the air. Then came smoke, and frightened screams of horses.

People shouted, joining the screaming.

Before she could picture the deaths, a hand grabbed her elbow and spun her around. She blinked furiously, letting out a soft breath. As the cobwebs of the vision drifted away, she glanced at her rescuer. Scott's hard expression chilled Calla to the bone.

"Are you all right?" she asked softly, taking one of his hands.

"How can you be so detached to come and get right to work? Don't you care what happened?" he demanded.

She touched his jaw, realizing how badly he was hurting. "I'm doing the only thing I can do to help. I'm going to get the information needed to stop the bastard who did this."

His gray eyes darkened, the green flecks expanding, almost glowing. Calla almost asked him right then what he was. Instead, she let him lean into her, drawing comfort from the contact.

There was nothing sexual about it. Not even the burning. Just two people, near a tragedy, sharing each other's presence.

Scott shuddered, his face pale if stoic. He rested his forehead against hers, staring into her eyes.

"We have to get this guy," he whispered, his voice raw with pain.

"Yes."

He took a deep breath and stepped back, though he kept hold of her hand. His grip was tight, but Calla ignored the slight discomfort. She didn't care, as long as it made him feel better.

After looking over the destroyed barn, Scott asked, "So how are you going to figure out who did it by a few pieces of burnt wood?" The harshness left his tone, though the sadness lingered.

"It's like CSI. Each piece means nothing by itself, but a bunch of clues put together can give a lot of information."

"How?"

She pointed to the place she figured to be the point of origin. "This is where it began. There's no detectable accelerant." Of course, Eric wouldn't need an accelerant, but she couldn't exactly explain that. Yet. Soon, it would be time. "But this guy somehow got a blaze burning hot, spreading quick."

"So?"

She glanced at him sharply. "You're a firefighter, don't you know most of this already?"

"Maybe I just like to hear you talk."

Heat spread through her from the intensity in his gaze. He'd jumped to the next stage of grief. Sex worked wonders to combat sadness, but now wasn't really the time. Pity.

Calla caught her thoughts. Last night had been great. But she wasn't ready for the mating, certainly not with him. Yet, this softer, vulnerable side of him touched her in places that had nothing to do with lust. Maybe he wasn't just the playboy she'd assumed.

She scratched down the last of her notes, then carefully moved away from the outer border of scattered wood pieces. "I'm ready to go if you are. I need to make some calls and my phone isn't working here."

He didn't move, just stared at the blackened destruction, pain etched on his face. Calla leaned against him, sliding her arm around his waist. "Is the family going to be okay?"

"Eventually. We breed 'em tough out here. But nothing will be the same. Ever."

She almost let slip her familiarity with such feelings, but nibbled her lip to keep the words inside. The time wasn't right to tell him any of the things she probably should.

Then again, when was it ever a good time to tell someone you were a magical creature no one believed existed? One being hunted by a darker, perverted version of herself.

With a heavy sigh, she tugged him toward the main house and the truck. He let her lead until they reached his vehicle. Then, he sent a wave to the people still gathered on the porch and said, "I'm driving."

"Fine with me."

When they reached the highway, Scott sped up, keeping his eyes on the road ahead. But his posture was stiff, his grip tight on the wheel. "Why do I get the feeling you know who's doing this?" he asked.

Calla stared out the windshield, taking a deep breath to try calming her raging stomach, wishing she had a bit more time before this conversation.

"My friends are dead. My town's being ravaged," he whispered. "Any information you have needs to be shared. Tell me what's going on."

A dam blocked her throat.

"Tell me who it is. Why they're doing this."

"Why does anyone commit crimes, do evil things?" Especially Eric. His change from the strong, caring man she'd once known to a dark beast was beyond comprehension.

"Fine. Who?"

"His name is Eric... he's going by the last name of Borgensen." She fell silent, drowning in the painful memories.

"You've dealt with him before." It wasn't a question.

"Yes."

"So this Eric guy is a fire bug from the valley. Why'd he come here?"

"I don't know."

"Why hasn't he been caught?" Scott demanded, his tone full of suppressed rage.

Immense wings flapped above the truck, sending dust billowing against the windows. Something latched on to the cab, sending them careening from the road and into the trees. Branches whacked the sides, ripping her side view mirror off. More hit the windshield and cracks appeared.

Scott swore, pumping the brakes while trying to control the wheel. "What the hell is that?"

The truck shuddered to a stop with the grill only inches from a tree. Metal groaned and the flapping rose higher above them.

Calla felt no fear, only a determination to make the Other pay. The time had come. Adrenaline swamped through her, making her muscles tense, ready for the battle ahead. She faced Scott, the only question in all this. For she was pretty certain she couldn't bear for him to get hurt. Acknowledging the feeling was almost as scary as the creature flying above them.

"You need to get out of here as fast as you can."

His eyes widened as his mouth thinned. "What --"

"This is my responsibility. I can't explain right now. Please. Trust me and go."

She jumped from the truck. Scott began to open his door, but she yelled, "Stay inside. Go."

"I'm not leaving you here with that... whatever!"

Calla turned her changing gaze to Scott, knowing her eyes were almost a pure red, her pupils vertical slits.

Scott gasped, but didn't waver.

"Honey, he ain't got nothing on me." She ran from the truck, letting her body flow from small, soft, vulnerable human. Her clothes ripped apart as she grew larger,

her arms and legs thickening. Soon she was on all fours, claws digging up dirt with each stride. Her true form. Huge, red scales reflecting in the sunlight.

Wings flowed out of her back, the right tangling in a branch. But soon she reached the road. Freedom.

Flapping her wings, Calla lifted into the air, her senses telling her exactly where the darker, almost black, Other hovered.

She roared, instincts crashing full force. She must protect the fragile human below. With a push against the air, she hurtled through the sky.

The Other bellowed, shooting a blue flame at her head.

Calla dodged, twisting alongside him, slashing with claws, biting with dagger-like teeth. Flying past his bulk, she flicked her spiked tail, slamming it against his hip.

He roared in pain, trying to turn and twist.

Smaller, faster, she whipped beneath him and soared up, ramming her bony head against his soft underbelly. Calla wished for fire in her arsenal, but that would not come for some time yet. And not until her mating was almost complete.

Eric should not have fire either. But his was not a true dragon's fire -- instead, a perverted dark magic.

Chapter Six

Scott clenched the door handle as he stared into the sky. With his free hand, he slowly rubbed his eyes, then stared some more.

He'd lost it.

There couldn't possibly be two dragons, flying above the Jasper Forest, fighting with fire. He couldn't possibly have seen the beautiful woman he'd made love with slip from the truck, tell *him* to run, then shapeshift into the red dragon roaring above his head.

Scott rubbed his eyes again, yet the dragons remained.

The wind whispered softly through the trees, carrying the scent of pine needles, sap, and a slight metallic burning from the truck. Birds chirped, a grasshopper nearby rubbed its legs.

Everything seemed like a normal sunny autumn day.

The red dragon roared as the black dove, raking claws across her back.

Unable to stop himself, Scott shouted, "Calla!"

The red dragon jerked her snout as if urging him to get into the truck and flee. Then, she rolled in the air and flew away.

Scott didn't think. He leapt into the truck, cranked the engine, then sped through the trees, angling to meet the highway. He didn't head to town, but north. Following the dragons.

* * *

Eric blew fire, arcing it through the air, the blue flames flickering in the sky. Calla ducked, but the fire caught her hind left foot.

Pain unlike any she'd ever known before raced up her leg. She screamed. Ignoring the panic urging her to flee, she flew closer to the Other, then flipped and dug

her claws into his chest. She scrabbled, desperate. Finally, she knocked a few scales loose. Blood ran over her foot, dousing the flames.

Off to the north, she spotted the blue of a large body of water. She needed to draw him there, put out his flames.

Flying in circles, Calla scratched and bit at the Other, slamming her tail against his head twice in quick succession. Then she dodged away.

She flew slowly, taunting him to follow. With a roar of rage, Eric flapped his dark, shimmering wings and raced after her.

Fire swept near her side, but she bucked in the air, dipping beneath a wind current. The air was her friend, pushing the flames further from her body.

Trying to keep Eric enraged, preventing him from seeing her plan, Calla swooped higher and came down at his back. He twisted, meeting her claws with his own.

Eric struck her side, claws slashing through her scales and skin. She broke away, trying to fight through the pain spreading across her ribs, trying to get closer to the water.

Rising higher, she flicked her tail, slamming it into his side. He bellowed in pain as a rib cracked. Then she clawed at his face, hoping to get his eyes.

But he protected himself well, turning away and taking a deep breath. She was too close to avoid the flames. They spread along her neck, curling across her chest.

The agony made her left wing go limp. As she began her plummeting spiral, she grabbed his tail between her teeth and clamped hard, pulling him with her. Calla glanced down. Thank the gods, they were over the lake.

His back legs scrabbled at her to let go. He saw what lay beneath them and panic strengthened his efforts. For her, the water would put out the blaze devouring her body. For him, with his perverted dark magic, it would be crippling.

She held on, squeezing her eyes shut so her scales protected them. Eric roared, his kicking frenzied. A claw ripped into her nostril and she couldn't stop her mouth from opening. Tail free, he flapped his wings, trying to rise.

Calla plunged into the water. A splash rose and from Eric's bellow, at least some of the cool blue liquid hit.

The fire burrowing into her scales and her skin was doused, but the pain only roared louder. Calla sank deeper into darkness. The pain ate away her control, her strength.

Only one wing moved, and her front right leg didn't seem to be working. Defenses rose, forcing the shift to start the healing process.

Then she was a fragile human once more. She tried to swim to the surface, but the edges of everything grew dark. Deep inside, something screamed to get her ass in gear. She could not die like this. She could not let Eric continue to wreak havoc on the world.

Or on her family.

And she certainly would not prove her father and brothers right about their smothering protection.

Adrenaline raced into her limbs and she weakly began pushing up through the water. Her lungs burned, their need for air clamoring for attention. The swim seemed to take forever, but suddenly she broke the surface and gasped deep breaths of fresh air.

She started to sink, but a strong, calloused hand pulled her from the water and into a small boat.

Calla looked up into Scott's dazed, confused face and giggled hysterically. Then he touched her side and the pain forced her into unconsciousness.

Scott stared at the naked woman on the floor of his boat. Bloody cuts and rash-like scrapes covered a good portion of her body. An angry purple-red colored the skin on her left side, from armpit to hip.

Had he lost his mind? He didn't know.

Following in his battered truck, speeding, recklessly dodging other cars in his way, he'd almost lost them until he realized they were heading to the lake. After taking a shorter back way, he screeched to a stop at the docks just as the dragons fell toward the water.

Scott pushed some old guy out of his boat and stole it, speeding out onto the lake.

The black dragon knocked her loose. She'd disappeared into the water and not resurfaced. Scott was about to dive in, still knowing he was crazy -- dragons didn't exist and if they did, how could he pull one up to the surface? -- when she'd reappeared. But this time human.

Slowly, feeling as if he'd been jerked into some alternate form of reality, he started the motor and headed toward the bank. The question was, did he go to the hospital, or the nuthouse?

Her eyes fluttered open, bright blue peeking from between dark lashes.

Scott fell to his knees on the bottom of the boat, running his hands over her skin, checking for broken bones.

She moaned.

"Calla?" he asked, gently patting her cheek.

"Mmph."

"Honey, I'm gonna get you to the hospital. Hang on." As he beached the little boat, Calla jerked, moaning. Scott grabbed her and raced for his truck, trying to hold tight as she twisted in his arms.

"No..." she whispered.

"Honey, we'll get you taken care of. We'll make it. The hospital's only a few minutes away." He'd make damn sure of it.

As she continued to moan and writhe in his arms, panic caught up. She was so badly injured. His throat closed and his teeth clenched. He'd make it to the hospital in time.

"No..." she screamed.

Scott held her tighter to his chest as he dug behind the truck seat and drew out a blanket. Laying it on the seat, he laid Calla on top, then covered her body, hoping he was doing the right thing.

He slammed the door shut and raced to the driver's side, jumping in and starting the engine.

Calla's hand fell on his thigh, gripping tightly. Blue eyes wide open, pain twisting her lips, she said, "No hospital."

Scott could do nothing but stare at her for a long second. "Honey, you're hurt --"

"No hospital. I'll be fine. Just need sleep."

Scott shook his head, but her grip on his thigh became painfully tight.

"Promise. No hospital."

She didn't give him a chance to answer. Her eyes fluttered closed and her hand went limp, sliding from his thigh.

Now what the hell was he supposed to do?

* * *

Calla woke to softness. A familiar scent comforted her ragged emotions through the haze of pain.

"If you don't say something, I'm going to take you to the hospital. I don't care if you don't want to go," Scott's voice demanded.

Her eyelids cracked open and she stared into his hovering face.

"Finally. God."

The breeze, night cool and scented with some sweet flower, blew in through the open balcony doors. The curtains twisted and twined, letting moonlight fall over the bed in undulating waves.

The light spread over her skin, healing, but also finding the burning.

Without thought, without control, though she didn't really want to deny it, she slipped her hands over Scott's chest and up his neck, pulling his head down to meet her.

Kissing him with the intensity of the fight and the magic, she slipped her tongue into his mouth, scooting her body closer to his.

He jerked away, his breathing heavy. "You're hurt."

The hard dick pressing into her hip contradicted his words. And she wasn't feeling any pain, only need. Desire.

But Scott sat up, running his hand through his short blond hair. "What's happening to me? And what the hell was all that today? I don't even know if I'm going crazy. Dragons?"

Calla slowly pushed herself up, the soreness absent during their kiss coming back full force. "W-where..." She tried to swallow, but her mouth was dry.

Scott reached over, then put a straw to her lips. She sipped the cool water.

"Where are we?" finally escaped.

"My house. You were practically crazed, screaming about no hospitals. I didn't know where else to take you."

"No. This is fine."

"How come you're not dead?" he asked, his gaze wavering between concern and fear.

There were so many answers to that simple question. With a slow shrug, she replied, "Because I'm magic."

He snorted, his jaw tight. "You're a dragon?"

"Yes."

"A real, honest to God, fire-breathing dragon?"

"Well, except for the fire-breathing part, yes."

His eyes narrowed as he stiffened, drawing further away. "Dragons aren't real."

Calla couldn't help but smile. She lifted higher, still slow in case anything was badly wounded. Nothing hurt beyond manageable, so she sat up and plumped a pillow, then slid it behind her to lean against the headboard. "Obviously, we are real."

He stared at her.

"Yes. I am a dragon. I can shift my form between her and my human."

He still just stared.

"The man behind the arson is also a dragon," she said, her gaze unwavering.

Chapter Seven

Scott flinched. "I don't believe in dragons. I..." He looked away, his tone softening. "I used to. A long time ago. But then I grew up."

"Yeah, well, I'm grown and I still believe in dragons," she said lightly.

"How?"

She shrugged, then tensed when pain spread through her chest. "Magic has always existed. But with time and technology, people no longer believe. We hide to protect ourselves, something our kind learned centuries ago."

"So you're not human," he stated too calmly.

Unsure whether he was about to laugh like a loon or run screaming out into the night, Calla tensed, preparing to react however needed. "I'm as non-human as you."

His hands drew into fists. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Calla rolled her eyes. "The sexual intensity between us. We call it the burning. It's destiny's mark -- I couldn't be so affected by you if you were completely human. So, why don't you share? What are you?"

Instead of answering, he began another staring contest. This time, Calla stayed quiet.

"Nothing," he finally replied, though without much confidence.

"So," she said after another long minute of silence. "Would you like me to leave?"

"You're injured and naked. Where do you want to go?" he said, sounding more like himself.

"To the bathroom, for starters. Then back to bed."

He stood and helped her to her feet. She caught his glances at her body. Was he looking at her as a woman or a beast?

Either way, there was nothing she could do to change it. She finished in the bathroom, then headed back into the hall where Scott waited.

"I can use another room until I feel better."

The corners of his lips twitched. "My bed is the only one in the house."

"A couch then?"

He glanced at her as if she'd offended him. "You're welcome to my bed as long as you need it."

He probably hadn't meant it sexually, but his words struck that chord. The heat inside her turned to a tingling lust.

When they got back to his room, she slipped beneath the covers and inhaled his spicy scent. The scent of them together. Sweetly sensual. She watched him with a hooded gaze, enjoying the play of his muscles across his back. Deciding to not have sex was like asking a fish to breathe out of water.

She wanted this man. From the arousal straining against his boxers, he wanted her too.

Maybe it was coming so close to her own mortality. It had been a fleeting thing, but the impact would linger for a long time.

Tiredness overcame her, forcing her eyes closed, though Scott's face lingered in her mind.

* * *

Scott lay on the bed, stretching his legs out next to Calla. She stirred in her sleep, rubbing her cheek on his thigh. It felt right.

He'd sat beside her all night and now, with the pre-light of dawn highlighting her beauty, his mind was no longer scattered, but finally a puzzle put back together.

Examining her words was the hardest thing he'd ever done. But the more he'd thought, the more he remembered.

Small things from his childhood, before the accident took his parents' lives. The recent call from his sister, living on a ranch in Montana. Amy was pregnant and going a little crazy. Some of the things she'd said...

He couldn't deny it. There might be something non-human about him. He just didn't know what.

She mumbled in her sleep, her hand sliding up his leg.

Scott realized no matter what, this woman was someone he wanted to know better. So she was a dragon, able to tear him into little pieces. He couldn't find it in himself to be afraid. Or to even really care. She was just Calla.

He leaned over and placed a kiss on her forehead. She'd almost died today. The feelings inside him expanded. Such a thing would be unbearable. Which didn't make any sense. He'd only known her for a little over a day, and yet, she seemed a necessary part of his life.

* * *

Something brushed Calla's cheek. A caress. She opened her eyes in the dim light to see Scott stretched out beside her, head propped up on one hand and staring with blank, unemotional eyes.

Growing uncomfortable at being unable to read him, she asked, "What time is it?"

"Don't know. Too early."

The silence stretched. Finally, he raised a hand and trailed his fingertips down her cheek, jaw. "I don't know what I am," he whispered.

Calla smiled, feeling something inside her unclench. He accepted her. She drew her fingertips in a small circle on his chest. He looked so lost, confused.

She'd known people driven crazy at finding out creatures like her existed. Others had run, screaming in fear. It was hard to have a relationship with anyone. She either hid the truth, or drove people away. But this man remained.

"I've done a lot of thinking," he said softly. "There are things from my childhood I've never been able to explain. It's easier to just not think about the way life was before my parents died in the car crash."

With the realization he wasn't human, came a question about that. Because when it came to mystical creatures, sometimes accidents weren't just accidents.

"So how do I find out what I am?" Scott asked, his hand trailing over her arm.

"I'll help you," she replied.

"How long can you stay?"

She didn't want to think about limiting their time together, even though it was going to come to a close soon. She couldn't bring herself to investigate the pain creeping through her at the thought. "Until I catch Eric."

"Days? A week?"

Calla glanced away, not sure why leaving didn't sound as good as it should. "Hopefully days. The destruction he could do..."

The ache lodged in her chest. She wouldn't be here longer than a few days. She was here to find Eric. To stop him. And once done, she would leave. Strange, soft emotions swirled within her, confusing everything.

Because when those few days were up, there might be a problem.

She might not want to leave.

Her breath caught and she bit her lip, looking away. This couldn't... hell, she didn't know.

"So let's say I'm not crazy. How do we catch this bastard?" he asked.

She pushed the confusing stuff aside and concentrated on his question. "We need to figure out where he's staying. The problem is it could be anywhere from a motel to a cave." Calla rubbed her fingers across her temple, trying to think it through.

"Will he continue to follow the spiral we saw on the map?" Scott asked, taking her hand in his, warm and soothing.

Calla couldn't prevent the smile twitching her lips at the romantic gesture. "Perhaps. He's not some evil genius, so we might catch him if we follow that. Take me to the most likely spots. I'll try to figure out which one he'll choose."

"Sounds like a good plan."

"It's better than nothing, I guess," she replied, staring out the doors and into the dawn sky. As plans went, it pretty much sucked.

Scott tugged on her hand, drawing her attention. "What is this between us? I don't understand it."

"It is the burning. Destiny." She couldn't bring herself to use the word mate, because this was just a passing thing. Fate was wrong. They were not destined for each other. Besides, she couldn't stay, nor would she ask him to leave everything behind.

"I know nothing of magic, or what my parents might have been. What can we figure out about me in such a short time?" His hand trailed down her shoulder.

She turned back to Scott, and the burn sprang to life. Her voice came out a bare whisper. "Whatever we can, we will." Calla reached for him, but he was already moving her way. His lips brushed hers and his hand moved across her stomach to cup her hip through the thin sheet.

Running her hands over his shoulders, she marveled at the contradiction -- smooth skin, covering hard strength. The burn of the mating pressed closer, but it wasn't all consuming this time. Good. She planned on savoring this man.

Scott teased her lips apart with his tongue, the minty taste tingling in her mouth. Her fingers clutched at his arms as a small groan built in her throat.

She nudged his leg with her knee, wanting to feel more of his body. Wanting to take things slow as long as the magic allowed. To savor this man, his heat.

She trailed her fingers along his jaw, then lifted her head to place small kisses along the scruff of his chin, then both corners of his lips.

Chapter Eight

Scott pulled back. Her eyes shone in the darkness, reflecting moonlight. "I'm going to seduce you tonight."

She shivered, her lips curling.

He ran his hand over her stomach, her hip, the sheet between them a barrier. Trailing his fingers over the tops of her thighs, he didn't touch her pussy, even when her hips bucked and she tried to push against him.

Instead, he licked the top of her breasts, moving up her soft throat to the sensitive spot behind her ear. She shuddered violently, grabbing his back, her nails digging in painfully yet wonderfully.

Slowly, he inched his hand closer to her heat. She moaned, head pushing back into the pillow as her back arched.

His cock twinged at every little mewl bursting from her. Finally, he gave her what she wanted, rubbing his knuckles over her clit through the cloth.

Her hips lifted, bumping against him. Needing to touch her bare skin, he jerked the sheet from her body and slipped a finger between her soft, wet lips, sliding into her tight heat.

Calla moaned, "Yes."

"Impatient," he teased, though it was all he could do not to cover her and plunge his cock inside.

Her eyes snapped open, a tinge of red turning them purple. "Yes."

She arched her back, pushing a breast toward his face. Scott gladly took the offer, drawing her sweet flesh into his mouth, between his teeth. He bit down a little. She shuddered.

Her hands delved into his hair, tugging him on. He nibbled her breast, still teasing her folds and sliding his fingers deeper.

Then her fingers wrapped around his cock, jerking him up and down. Pure lust rushed through him. He couldn't stop his hips bucking forward.

He grabbed her hand and raised it above her head, holding it there. "I told you. I'm going to seduce you tonight. That means we're taking this slow." Scott pulled her other hand above her head, holding her wrists together.

She smiled, a shine in her eyes. "Guess you have me at your mercy then. What are you going to do about it?"

He captured her mouth with his, sliding his tongue inside. Vanilla heaven filled him. He slid his tongue in, then out, enjoying her squeaks. He found the spot in the hollow near her throat she seemed to like, her pulse rapid as it beat against his tongue. He moved higher, kissing her earlobe.

Calla turned her head to give him better access and he raked his teeth along the sensitive outside of her ear.

She moaned, her back arching off the bed.

Damn, the woman sure liked his teeth on her. He wanted to explore it. A lot.

He licked down her neck, then scraped his teeth lightly on her collarbone.

"Oh," she moaned.

He gently kissed down the slope of her chest, licking the freckle near her cleavage, then sucked her nipple into his mouth. As Calla began to pant, Scott sucked harder, drawing in more of her breast.

Her hands twitched, trying to break free and he rose. "No," he said.

Her eyes fluttered open and she stared at him, her lips curling up at the edges. "No?"

"No."

"We'll see," she said with a grin.

Scott kept her gaze, moving his free hand down her side, over her breast, rolling her nipple between his fingers.

As she wiggled beneath him, he traced her stomach, belly button, then slid his fingers between her thighs. Her hot slickness almost drove him over the edge, but he concentrated on making this last.

Their lovemaking had been too urgent before. Not that he minded. But this time, he wanted to make Calla scream before he filled her. He wanted her to see she was special. To him.

He rubbed her clit and lips harder, dipping his fingers into her opening, then spreading her juices over her mound.

She tugged at her wrists again, but he refused to let go, even when her hips bucked and her breathing became short gasps.

Then she found her release, crying out and twisting so hard he lost his grip. Scott continued to move his fingers over her, in her, her pussy clamping around them as she came.

Then he kissed her, loving the feel of her mouth, her tongue on his. She ran her hands over his back, grabbing his ass and squeezing. Slowly, she drew back.

"Do you want me?" she whispered.

"Oh, yeah."

"Then fuck me, damn it."

Scott reached for the table beside the bed, but she wouldn't let him pull away.

"Protection," he gritted out.

"Can't get pregnant. Promise."

Unable to hold back any longer, Scott lifted above her and plunged into her tight, wet heat. She screamed, tossing her head, then grabbed his ass, pulling him closer, demanding more.

Calla felt every inch of him and wanted, needed, more. The fire inside burned, demanding they fulfill their destiny and complete the mating ritual. She couldn't do that.

But she took what she would allow herself, this pleasure, this feeling of being connected to him. Of being one. For this short time she'd have at least that much.

His dick slid in, bumping her deepest areas. Reaching between them, Calla rubbed her clit, building the climax to a staggering height.

The scent of his sweaty body, all lusty male, was erotic. Her skin felt every inch of him, from coarse hair to smooth skin.

Her hips pushed up, meeting his thrusts. Without warning, Scott grabbed her legs. He pulled her ankles over his shoulders, maneuvering to plunge deeper.

His dick hardened and she couldn't help the little moans coming with each breath.

"Like that, baby, don't you?"

"Yes." The pleasure was intoxicating, building layer upon layer until she was certain she'd be driven over the edge again.

Scott slowed his hips, refusing her desperate grasping hands tugging at him. He grabbed her ass cheeks, controlling her jerky movements.

She looked at him, ready to demand, but the fire in his eyes killed her ability to speak.

"Tell me what you want," he said.

"Harder."

"No." A grin lingered on his lips as he slowed even more, his dick inching in, then drawing back out. So slow, so sweet.

The damn man was playing with her. "Faster," she growled, pushing her hips, trying to force the issue.

Scott pulled back, smiling. "No."

"Why not?" She gasped as he filled her once more. He had her on the brink of orgasm, but instead of pushing her over, he was holding her there.

It was so damn good.

"Oh, we'll get there. Just not yet. Look at me."

She did.

"Now," he bit out, slamming into her while grabbing her head to meet him in a passionate kiss. His tongue slid into her mouth, tangling with hers, while his dick slammed inside, over and over.

She exploded, intense waves of pleasure wracking her body. He kept going, ignoring her scream of ecstasy.

"That's it, baby. Come for me."

"Scott," she shouted, digging her nails into his hips.

He shuddered and let out a deep cry, but continued the onslaught on her senses. She spasmed, the orgasm shaking her whole body.

Then Scott slid on top of her. She lowered her trembling legs, her thigh muscles twitching.

"Happy now?" he asked, a bit breathless.

"Mmm. Beyond."

"Good." He slipped onto his side, pulled her close, tucking her against his chest. "G'night, darling."

She sighed in contentment, ignoring the fact it would end all too soon.

Chapter Nine

A banging came from downstairs, jerking Scott from sleep. He sat up, glancing at the peaceful look on Calla's face, laughing at her quiet, delicate snores. The light of afternoon seeped into the room, bathing her pale complexion with a rosy light.

He moved to kiss her cheek when the racket came again. Someone was pounding at the front door. After untangling from Calla and the sheets, he pulled on some sweatpants and hurried downstairs to stop the persistent pounding.

When Scott pulled open the door, he came to a stop at the fierce giant glowering his way.

"Can I help you?" Scott asked, wondering where he'd last put his metal baseball bat.

"Who are you?" the giant demanded, blue eyes flashing darkly.

"The owner of the house." Scott stepped forward, refusing to be intimidated. "Who the hell are you?"

"Garreth Dragos," the man answered, looking Scott over. His nostrils flared as he took a deep breath, then he said harshly, "Now, who are you and why do you smell of sex and my little sister?"

* * *

Calla woke, languidly stretching, the soreness from the fight gone.

Scott was gone too. A small pain itched beneath her ribs. Had he run?

She didn't know how she would react in his position. She'd grown up knowing mythological creatures existed, were only hidden from the mortal world. For someone to confront proof they were real, then to find out they were also a magical creature of some sort, had to be mind blowing.

Shouts erupted downstairs. Something slammed into a wall, rattling the house. A door crashed closed. As the voices rose higher, Calla recognized them both. Garreth was here.

Jumping from bed, she searched for something to wear, then gave up and grabbed the sheet. Calla rushed downstairs to find her brother and Scott on the floor like some teenage wrestlers. Garreth slammed his fist into Scott's jaw, sending the man flying across the floor.

Scott slid to a stop in front of Calla's toes.

"Garreth!" Incensed, she stepped over Scott and stomped toward her brother, who struggled to his feet. "Knock it off."

He towered over her, long black hair messy, rather than tied back with his normal leather tie. His face, pale and clammy, struck her as just plain wrong. He looked worried as hell. His blue eyes softened, then he sniffed, nostrils flaring. He gripped her shoulders, turning her in a circle, staring at every inch of exposed skin.

Calla tried to shift the sheet higher, to cover the lingering bruises on her shoulders and arm, but Garreth's grip tightened. She was half afraid he'd yank the sheet away to make sure she wasn't hurt further, so she gripped the dang thing between both fists.

"What happened?" Garreth demanded.

With a sigh, Calla pointed toward the living room. "Go find the kitchen and make me some coffee while I get dressed."

Garreth clenched his teeth and a tic began in his jaw. His voice was raw as he gritted out, "I felt your death come close, sister. Too close. Tell me what happened."

His pain ripped into her as he opened their sibling bond. Accompanied by terror and confusion, every emotion he'd experienced rioted inside, taking over. She hadn't considered the link. They'd all learned to shield it as children. Coming close to death, her barriers must have crumbled.

If she'd known, she would have at least called to reassure him and their other siblings.

"Tell me what happened," he repeated, his voice still rough.

Though she understood the confusing place he must be in, she wasn't about to get into it all right then and there. "Coffee. I'm not talking to you wearing a bed sheet."

She let stubbornness shine from her eyes as she stared at her brother. Finally, Garreth blinked. He growled and shot Scott a glare, but spun and stomped off into the living room.

After a deep breath, Calla turned, hoping her smile wasn't as weak as it felt on her lips. Scott stood near the stairs, fists tight, ready to jump back into the fight. It was brave and noble. And completely stupid. He wouldn't stand a chance against her brother.

"Come on, let's get some clothes." She took his arm and pulled him toward the stairs.

He didn't budge, though his arm tensed beneath her hand. Her smile became more brittle as worry filled her. Finally, with a loud, annoyed sigh, he followed.

Hopefully, she could calm him down before he did anything rash. Trying to lighten her voice, Calla said, "I hope you have something that might fit. I seem to be going through clothes awfully fast here."

The tension slowly leaked from his frame. "Maybe."

"Good."

Reaching the bedroom, she led him inside, then sat on the bed while he jerked his clothes on.

"I'm sorry about my brother."

He glanced at her. "Why? Did you tell him to try beating me up?"

"No." A grin worked its way to her lips.

Scott rummaged in the closet before tossing her a shirt and some running shorts. "I don't have any women's underwear lying around."

"Good." She dressed, rolling the top of the shorts so they wouldn't fall off.

"What did he mean, he felt you almost die?" Scott asked, leaning against the door so no one could go, or enter. His voice sounded suspiciously angry and she didn't

know if it was just the presence of her brother. When concern flashed in his greenish eyes, she realized some of it must be because of what happened to her.

Calla tried a casual shrug. "He's my brother. As siblings, we have a bond that sometimes allows us to know what one of the others feels."

"How did he know it was you? There are eight of you, right?"

"Each person has their own distinct... flavor, I guess you could call it. When we were younger, the link was hard to close. It's something we all worked on. Now, I rarely feel anyone else."

"So will he help us find Eric?"

Calla scowled, staring at the dense man. "The men in my family tend to go overboard when it comes to protecting the women. He wouldn't leave even if someone tried to drag him away."

"What's wrong with that?" Scott asked.

He was serious. Ire rising, she tried not to shout. "How about I'm an adult and can take care of myself?"

"You're still his sister. It's a brother's job to keep his little sister safe."

"Come on. You don't hover over your sisters, butting into every aspect of their lives."

"Of course not," he said and relief swept through her. Then he added, "I only do my job. I know where they are and what they're doing most the time, even if they live in other states. When Amy wanted to get married, I made sure her husband was a good man. My job."

Wide eyed, Calla just stared at the man in front of her. She really wanted to keep picturing him as a frivolous playboy. It would make everything so much easier when she left. But he kept impressing her with his other side -- serious, responsible, tender.

As if he was a mix of all her brothers combined. The perfect man. She pushed that thought away, unwilling to even consider it. "Come on, let's go."

Scott stayed in front of the door. "Why?"

"Because I don't want Garreth to come looking for us," she replied.

"So what if he does?"

Calla gently patted his jaw. "Sweetie, my brother is a dragon."

He straightened, his cheeks reddening. "Do you think I'm a wimp?"

"No," she replied, choosing her words with extreme care. "But there isn't much that can overcome a dragon."

Scott's face reddened further and he stepped to the side. Calla didn't know what to say, so she said nothing and walked out.

At the base of the stairs, Garreth met her with a hot cup of cream-colored coffee, then took her arm and propelled her into the living room. She smoothly took a seat on the couch and sipped the brew, ignoring her brother's hovering and Scott's scowl as he hung back.

"Eric is here, isn't he?" Garreth demanded.

"Yes."

"How many are dead?"

Scott cleared his throat. "Two as of yesterday, and then your sister almost joined them."

Garreth rounded on Calla, while she shot a glare at Scott.

"It wasn't that bad --" she began.

"Wasn't that bad?" Garreth raked his hands through his hair, making it stick out like he'd touched an electrical socket. Fear struck her. Not of what he'd do to her, never that, but what buildings he might demolish in his anger. "I felt your life slipping away. I heard you screaming for help. Tyler called me, frantic, wondering where you were. He'd be here too if he wasn't halfway across the country."

Garreth stopped, took a deep breath, paced from her to the living room wall, then back. His gaze landed on her and his face mottled once more. With another deep breath, he spun and paced some more.

Calla stayed silent as he tried to control his emotions. They rolled off him, slamming into her through both his physical presence and their still partially open link.

Finally, eye twitching, jaw clenched, Garreth faced her once more. "What do you think you're doing going up against such a beast? I'm the bounty hunter. I have the resources to catch him. You don't."

"Look, I'm sorry I worried you." Being treated like a child was getting so old. "But for your information, I *was* doing my job."

Scott cleared his throat as if disagreeing.

Garreth's voice grew louder with rage. "If you think your job includes suicide by monster, then I need to call everyone right now and tell them to come drag you home."

Her anger spiked. Even knowing it wasn't entirely hers, she couldn't stop it from boiling over. She was tired of the constant treatment she got from her family. She slammed her cup on the table so hard it cracked. Jumping to her feet, she pushed into Garreth's space, facing him with the fury that belonged to them both.

"You just try it, brother. I'm not a child." Pissed at both men, she shouted back. "Hell, I've spent the last two nights fucking a stranger."

Garreth grabbed her shoulders, his fingers digging into her skin. "You dare speak to me like this --"

"Get away from her," Scott shouted.

Garreth's hands ripped from her as he flew through the air and crashed into the far wall. Her brother shook his head. His fiery blue gaze struck her, then moved above her shoulder, staring past her.

Finally dampened, her emotions happily handed back the reins of control. Calla stared at her giant of a brother crumpled against the wall, his legs splayed out on the floor. Mouth dropping open, she turned to Scott. His hands spasmed open and closed, his wide-eyed gaze fixated on Garreth. Scott still stood near the door. He hadn't been close to her brother. Yet, neither she nor Garreth could have done such a thing, throwing him across the room without a touch. It wasn't a dragon's magic.

Just what was he? Garreth stood and limped to Calla's side. She leaned against his warmth, feeling his amazement match her own.

A million questions flashed through her mind. Scott, his face a sickly gray, opened his mouth, then snapped it shut. Turning, he stomped out of the room toward the front door.

Calla didn't hesitate to run after him. He was already slamming the door of his battered truck when she reached him.

"I..." He shook his head and stared at the tight fists clenched in his lap.

"How did you use your magic?" she asked, wanting to hold him. But the confusion prickling from him said it might be a bad idea.

He shuddered. "I... I don't know. I saw him grab you. You flinched. It pissed me off. I was going to get to you, but he just..."

"Garreth would never hurt me. He'd cut off a part of himself before he ever let such a thing come to pass."

Scott glanced away. "Good to know."

Should she congratulate him on finding some of his magic? He wasn't happy, so probably not.

His gray-blue eyes turned her way, full of confusion and a touch of pain. "I'm on call at the station tonight. I need to go."

"All right," she whispered.

"Stop by?" he asked softly.

"Yes."

With a nod, he started his truck, then said, "You guys can stay at my house as long as you need."

"Thank you."

Scott drove away, leaving Calla feeling bereft and alone. Squaring her shoulders, she marched back into the house, shouting, "You stupid, pigheaded idiot!"

Chapter Ten

Scott drove into town, his mind on the happenings in his life the past few days. Never one to back down from the truth, he usually just rolled with the punches. But all this...

He pulled into the fire department and turned his truck off, then just sat.

Mystical creatures existed.

Okay. Accepted.

He was one of them.

Okay. Harder, but okay.

He had some sort of magical power.

Sure.

He could throw a man off his lover, send him hurtling across a room without even touching him.

It stuck in his throat, leaving a bad taste. Shaking his head, he got out of his truck and stomped inside the station. The other men on duty called out, but he strode to his office without a word.

Fred was asleep on the couch.

Scott slammed the door, waiting as Fred stretched, then rubbed his eyes. The old man looked at him, then grinned. "You've finally found it."

"Found what?" Scott grumbled, heading toward his desk.

"The Greek philosopher Empedocles once said there were two main forces in the universe, Love and Strife. To combat these, the gods made mortal protectors."

"Humph. Which means what, old man?"

"You've found your magic, boy. It's about time, too."

Frozen in place, Scott couldn't even force his body to turn and face Fred.

“Ayup. Been waiting for this day. Now, you’ll be able to find your destiny like all magical creatures.”

Unable to move, Scott tried to say something, but there wasn’t exactly a standard protocol for such a situation.

Fred slapped him on the shoulder and Scott stumbled a few steps, broken from the iceberg. He spun to face the old man, noticing the strange yellowness of his eyes, the youngness in his lined face.

“What...”

“You’re just like your parents. Wonder which version though. Like Amy too. Not Steph though. I’ve never got the vibe from her.”

As his legs turned watery, Scott back-shuffled the last few steps and slumped on his desk. He didn’t care about the stacks of paperwork coursing onto the floor. The picture of his sisters caught his eye though.

He glanced at Steph, the youngest, now in California. Then at Amy. Feeling strange things he’d attributed to her pregnancy.

As Scott turned back to Fred, he realized even though he’d seen Calla shapeshift into a dragon, he’d not really believed in the whole thing. Certainly, at least, not the part about him being magical.

Not even when he’d seemingly sent her giant of a brother flying across the room with nothing but his thoughts.

But the sincerity in the eyes of this old geezer, a man he’d known his entire life, broke some barrier. A strange, pulsing something in his chest expanded, warming, as if a magical part of him had come unlocked.

He didn’t know what the hell to make of it, but guessed belief was the first step.

The question was, how many steps were in this program?

* * *

As tempting as it was, Calla kept her stance in front of the door rather than grabbing a frying pan and breaking it over her brother’s head. “I’m going with you. Just try to stop me,” she shouted.

"You're not going to do anything stupid or dangerous while I'm around," he growled back.

"You know what? No one even asked you to butt in. Look at me. I'm fine. Eric is probably still holed up somewhere, recovering from the injuries I -- me, all by myself -- gave him. Now is the time to find him and you can't cover the whole mountain by yourself."

"You're not --"

Calla screeched and grabbed her hair. "If you tell me one more time what I'm not going to do, you're going to be seriously hurt, brother mine."

He rolled his eyes. "You're as bad as Mam was."

Calla ignored the piercing pain at his comment. "Either give me your keys or drive me into town."

With a heavy, aggravated sigh, Garreth followed her out to his car. She slid into the passenger seat, gritting her teeth as he took his sweet time starting it and heading down the driveway. They were only a minute from town when Garreth pointed to a thin black line snaking into the sky.

"Hurry. Maybe we can catch Eric in the act," Calla urged.

Garreth hit the gas, flying through town, careening around corners until they reached the fire. A restaurant engulfed in flames.

Calla got out, flattening against the car as a fire truck screeched up beside her. Scott sat in the driver's seat. He shot her a worried look, then barked commands to the men.

People shouted, jumping around everywhere. A hose was connected and water began shooting onto the fire.

Then, from behind the building, the black dragon flapped into the sky. He let out an earth-shaking bellow. A taunt.

"Don't you dare move from that spot." Garreth raced around the building, then, a larger, blue dragon swooped into the air, chasing the black. Calla wanted to join them, but heeded her brother's words. For the moment.

"How can we help, lass?" Fred said beside her.

As she glanced around, Calla realized only three people were still moving, rather than rooted to the spot and staring at the dragons fighting in the air. Her, Scott, and Fred.

His eyes were lit with a knowledge and wisdom she'd only ever seen in old magical beings. The old man wasn't human either. This place was looking less and less like just any mountaintop town.

"Get them to spray the water at the black dragon."

A whoosh of red fire sprayed across the parking lot, almost hitting the car and fire truck.

"Garreth!" she screamed.

He raked claws along Eric's back, pushing the fight further from the humans still frozen in place.

To Fred, she said, "Get them moving."

He hustled through the crowd. At his touch, firemen shook their heads as if coming out of a daze. Soon, everyone was rushing about to get the fire put out. Another hose plopped on the ground. The firemen quickly unrolled and hooked it up. A heavy spray of water hit the snarling, bellowing dragons above them.

Garreth roared as Eric drew further back, squealing in pain. Then, he got his claws into her brother's delicate wing, tearing it open. Garreth spun toward the earth.

Before thought stopped her, Calla ran behind the building, stripping her clothes as she went. She shifted, lifting into the air to get between her fallen brother and the Other.

She snapped at his legs, scratching his belly, forcing him away from Garreth.

Below them, her brother snorted and trumpeted commands for her to leave. She ignored him, and her internal instinct to follow the command of a dominant. Calla would not leave him, or this town, to the mercy of the black dragon.

They fought, with claws and teeth and tails. The stench of blood filled the air, mixing with the smoke. A heat built inside Calla's throat and she snorted to get it out. Pure red flames shot from her snout, enveloping the black dragon's tail.

He screamed with fury and dove toward the front of the building, trying to get to the humans.

Calla followed, slipping through the air effortlessly. She roared, shooting more flames, feeling an ecstasy almost as good as sex to have finally come into her fire. The mating must almost be complete. It was the only explanation for this power racing through her.

Eric headed straight for Scott. Blue flames licked the ground at his feet.

Calla bellowed, pushing herself faster. She dug her claws into Eric's back, trying to lift, divert him from her lover. Then, Garreth joined them in the air.

Eric shook her off and turned with a fury. His blue fire touched her chest and pain made her scream. Claws raked the side of her head, ripping her ear.

She fought back, but he pushed her closer to the earth. Garreth tore into his side with his own claws and teeth, driving Eric off. Something scraped against her side. Trees. Caught.

She crashed through branches, hitting the dirt. Above, Garreth grumbled out an order not to follow, then chased after Eric's retreating figure.

Her body shifted. After a few minutes, she could think again. Calla tried getting to her feet, but her legs were too shaky. She slumped back, staring at the gray sky, breathing deep until the pain became tolerable.

Something crashed in the trees, heading straight for her. Calla searched the ground, digging through fallen leaves for a weapon. Small sticks, a few rocks. Finally, her fingers clenched around a hefty rock and she drew it closer.

But it was only Scott, storming through the trees, looking for her, tightly gripping the blanket he held. He stopped when he saw her, a scowl showing how fiercely protective he was feeling at the moment.

A small grin touched her lips at the sign of his concern.

Chapter Eleven

Scott swayed, dizzy with relief seeing Calla alive and mostly uninjured. She dropped a rock to the ground, then pushed herself to stand. With a short cry, she fell back onto the leaves.

He hurried to her side. "Fool woman. Your brother could have handled it." Scott glanced into the sky, thankful nothing was near.

"I will protect him, and you." Her glare raked at his pride.

"Damn it. I'm the guy. It's me who's supposed to be doing the protecting." The urge to strangle her was as strong as his desire to kiss her senseless.

"And you will. But until you learn what you are, guess what will happen."

Scott jerked back, stomping a few steps away. "Do you remember when you told me how you hated the overprotectiveness of your family?"

"Yes."

"Do you truly think I'm different?"

"Unfortunately, no," she replied wryly.

Scott met her amused gaze. "Come on," he said, wrapping her in the blanket then picking her up in his arms and carrying her toward the restaurant. The relative safety of other people.

She inhaled sharply.

"Where are you hurt?" he asked.

"Nowhere you can see. I ripped a wing."

Despite the fact that it was hard to wrap his mind around such a thing, he accepted it. "I don't suppose you want to go to a hospital?"

"No. There's nothing they can do for me. I'll heal on my own."

"Fine," he grumbled.

"Did you see which direction Garreth and Eric went?"

"Not really. They headed west, but could turn any time."

"Hmm."

"What?"

"Do you have any old mines, caverns, anything like that around here? Specifically to the west?"

"No."

"By around here I meant up to a hundred miles or so. We dragons are fast."

He stopped, staring at her. "Actually, there is an old geode mine in the next county. It's about fifty miles as the crow flies."

"Or as the dragon flies," she replied with a pert smile.

The tension building inside him became unbearable to keep fighting. He gave in to it, leaning down to press his lips to hers.

"Mmm, it's about time," she whispered, her voice needy.

He kissed her again, his pain and worry infusing his desire with a need to control, to dominate. She moaned, her nails raking the sides of his neck. Shudders ran through him as lust drove into his cock.

Tightening his grip, Scott turned her to face him more fully. Her tongue teased his lips, licking the corners of his mouth, then dipping inside to run along his. She drew his lower lip into her mouth and sucked, her teeth lightly scraping along his skin.

His groan came out against her lips. He wanted to lay her down in the cool air of the forest. To savor the taste of every inch of the woman in his arms, to drive his tongue into the sweetness of her own desire.

Yet, the intensity of how much he wanted Calla was beginning to become a concern. Sure, he'd lusted after women before. But never like this. Hell, he'd happily stay in bed with her for a week, doing nothing but fucking until neither could stand. And yet, he wasn't sure even that would calm his raging desire.

A small part of him said the week would be just fine if they only held each other and talked. Which was the scariest part of all. Because this thing with Calla had a time limit.

She would leave soon. So there was no point in getting emotionally attached. Unfortunately, he suspected he might already be doomed to heartache.

Calla ran her hand along his jaw. "What are you thinking so seriously?"

"Nothing," he answered.

When they reached the back of the building, Scott helped her dress. They emerged to see Scott's crew milling about. A shout went out when someone spotted him.

Fred hurried over. "Take her home. I'll handle the others."

With a nod of thanks, Scott slid Calla into her brother's car, then headed for the driver's seat. After getting in, he hesitated with his hand on the keys. "Fred knows."

"Knows what?"

"Everything. Said he knew you for a dragon the moment he smelled you. Knows about my parents, and me. My sister. Only one though, Amy. She's pregnant and been experiencing some strange things I chalked up to hormones. Fred also said something about us being soul mates before he raced out of my office like a spooked horse."

"Interesting," she said, leaning back and playing with the seatbelt. "So what did he say about you?"

Scott turned back to the steering wheel. "He wouldn't say much." Thinking about it wasn't getting him anywhere. Finally, he turned his mind to more practical matters. Like getting her to safety.

"Can you stop by the department so I can get some things from my truck?" she asked.

Scott nodded.

"Are you all right?"

He asked the question burning his tongue. "Do you normally do such things? Fight other dragons, risk your life?"

Huddled in the blanket, Calla looked like a waif. Slowly, she shook her head, never breaking their gaze. "Usually, no. I'm just your normal arson investigator. But there are... Others."

Scott started the car and headed for her truck. "What are the Others?"

Her gaze unfocused, she turned to stare out the windshield, a tremor shaking her body.

She didn't like talking about the Others. Scott reached over and took one of her hands, giving comfort she so badly needed.

He was brave and courageous, willing to take on anything, even a dragon if need be, without any guarantee of winning. Some might call that foolhardy, but to Calla, it was a sign of everything wonderful in a man.

"Since the dawn of time, magic has existed in creatures, and in the earth itself," she began. "Destiny guides magic, finding each creature's perfect mate. When the two meet, and share a touch beneath the moonlight, the mating burn begins. Desire, lust, fills both. Undeniable, and unwavering until satisfied."

Scott slammed on the brakes. "What?"

Calla glanced behind them, but luckily, they were alone on the road. "Drive," she told him.

He nudged the car to the shoulder, and repeated his question in the same incensed tone.

"Look, do you want the whole story or not?" she demanded, feeling a prick of her own anger.

"Is that what is between us? This destiny thing?"

Squirming uncomfortably beneath his greener than normal gaze, Calla nodded.

"So, it's not that you're intensely attracted to me. It's this mating thing?"

"Well, it's both," she answered, exasperated at the silliness of his question.

He stared at his hands. "So sex makes us husband and wife in magical terms?"

"Once the joining is complete, yes."

"And how does it get done?" he demanded, his voice deceptively low.

"I assure you it requires the willingness of both parties." She turned to face him fully, grappling with her seatbelt. "Look, I'm not trying to trap you into anything you don't want. I couldn't even if I wanted to."

With a soft sigh, Scott put the car back in drive. "But I'm not a dragon."

"So?"

"Different species and all that?"

"Can I finish my story? It will answer most of your questions."

When they reached her truck, Scott refused to let her get out. Instead, he grabbed everything she wanted, throwing her bags in the back of the car. Then he turned back onto the highway, this time heading home.

"Tell me the rest."

"As I was saying, about a thousand years ago, something in the magic changed. Most think it was because the numbers of each kind of creature were so low. Suddenly, different species were able to mate and bear children. Normally, the children share all characteristics of their mother. This perpetuates the species. Sometimes, the child will inherit a few traits, magics, from their father as well."

"That defies all laws of biology."

"So? We're not talking science here. The key word is magic after all."

He snorted, waving a hand at her to continue.

"On a rare occasions a child is born who looks like their mother, but without the magical abilities of either parent. They're Other. Destiny will never find them a mate. They will never be accepted as one of us, yet they are not human, either."

"Why aren't they accepted?"

"It's a hard fact of life, but one we have learned very well. Only the strong survive. It doesn't matter Eric can shapeshift into a dragon. He has no magic. He should not be able to fly, or breathe fire. In most cases, these Others are killed -- or murdered -- young. Hunters exist. So do eon long wars between species, between families."

"But he can fly and I've seen him breathe fire," Scott said. "So how's that possible?"

Anguish filled Calla, panic clawing at her insides. "Stop the car please."

He jerked the wheel and stopped. Calla jumped out, clutching the blanket close, breathing deeply of the fresh night air. Scott came to her side, wrapping her in his arms and pulling her to his chest.

She laid her head on his shirt, listening to the thump of his heartbeat.

Slowly, trying to contain the pain, she said softly, "There are still a few mages who can pervert earth magic to their bidding. Sometimes, an Other will find such a mage. In return for a piece of their soul, they are given the power to use blood magic and gain the powers their kind are supposed to have."

"Blood magic?"

She didn't want to go on, not with the tears burning the back of her throat, the pain ripping her heart to shreds. But he needed the answers if he was to survive in this new world she'd brought him into.

"The Other must use the blood of a relation, the closer the more powerful. By taking the life and drinking the blood, eating the flesh, the Other gains their magic."

Scott shivered. "Who did Eric murder to gain his power?"

Drawing back so she could see his eyes, Calla forced the answer to leave her tight throat. "Our mother."

He flinched, but did not pull away. Gaze steady, he whispered, "He is your brother?"

"No. Once, maybe, but not any longer. He is Other. Evil. A being who must be destroyed so my mother's soul will find freedom. Peace."

Chapter Twelve

Pain filled her blue eyes, along with determination. And fury. He couldn't imagine knowing your own brother killed your mother. And there was nothing he could do or say to comfort her hurting.

An idea struck. "Do you like hot springs?" he asked.

"Yes," she said cautiously.

Scott drove less than a mile up the road and turned onto a narrow dirt lane. A few miles in, he parked, then led Calla into the trees.

They came to the first of the springs, but he bypassed it, tugging her hand playfully, enjoying the way her eyes were lightening, the painful past pushed back by the present. He took her to the fourth heated pool of water. In a secluded glade behind a craggy hill, a small waterfall flowed on the far side.

Big enough for swimming, it had always been his favorite. And now, with the beautiful woman by his side, with the moonlight shining down, it seemed even better.

Calla quickly stripped and slipped into the water, splashing water over her shoulders and breasts. Ducking beneath the ripples, she swam to the center of the pool. Like some nymph, her head rose above the water, red hair darkened and slicked back. Moonbeams fell on her skin, embracing her beauty.

She raised her arms, reaching back to grab her hair. Her full breasts jutted out, the moonlight glittering on a drop of water sliding down the slope to reach a pert pink nipple. His hard-on came back, his cock jumping at the sight of water droplets on her creamy skin. His hands twitched as if the fullness filled his palms.

Shucking his clothes, he joined her in the hot water, but ignored his lust for another answer he needed. "How can I be a magical creature and not ever have known?"

She stopped paddling and turned. A drop of water moved down her cheek, to the corner of her mouth. The tip of her pink tongue slid out, catching it.

"It's actually not that uncommon. Shapeshifters like me can't get away from it. When we're young, the moon calls us every month and our families must make sure we stay safe and don't hurt anyone else until we learn control. But others, well..."

"So I'm not a shapeshifter?"

"Not unless you shift every full moon," she replied with a ghost of a grin.

Good. The conversation was working. Now he wanted a full smile. "No."

"Well then. We know you have the ability to move things without touching them. It could be telekinesis, or something entirely different."

"So what else is there?" he asked.

She slid through the water, coming closer, her eyes a deep blue. Calla ran her hands up his sides. "Too many to name. I'm not even sure what creatures still exist, and which do not."

The sadness came back into her eyes. Determined to make it leave, he splashed her.

She sputtered, wiping her face and glaring at him, but a smile touched her lips. Then she dove under the water. Hands grabbed his feet, jerking him down.

Scott took a deep breath before plunging beneath the water. He twisted until free, then caught her in his arms and kissed her.

Slippery, she slid from his arms. He surfaced, drawing a deep breath into his lungs. Calla didn't. Worried, he was about to dive beneath the water when her hands slid up his legs and around his ass.

Then she wrapped her hands his cock, her touch feeling hotter than the water.

Calla enjoyed swimming. Especially the capacity she had for holding her breath. Underwater, she slid Scott's dick into her mouth, loving the soft smooth texture against her tongue. Loving the way his body jerked and tightened in response.

He tugged at her hair, trying to get her to surface. The man was so cute, worried about her being able to breathe. She slapped his ass, the effect slightly lost by the weight

of the water. She needed this. New, happy memories to overshadow the old ones dredged up. She needed to feel alive, to feel loved, even though this relationship wasn't about love. Was it?

Trying to ignore everything swirling in her head, she didn't think, only felt.

She sucked him hard, then slow, enjoying the way he responded to both. She nibbled the tip of his dick, then took his balls into her mouth and rolled them around her tongue.

Sliding his dick back into her mouth, she sucked fast and hard, until his hips began to buck. He nudged her head again, to let her know he was about to come. She sucked him harder. Slammed the tip of his cock against the back of her mouth while pushing her tongue against him.

He pulsed, filling her with salty-sweet come. His body twitched, then relaxed, the tension flowing into her mouth.

Calla surfaced, a smile on her face. "You taste good."

His breathing raced, but he grinned. "Wow. Never done that before."

"That's 'cause you've never been sucked by a dragon before."

"True." Scott grabbed her, plastering their bodies together. Then he kissed her with a passion that stated he wasn't nearly done for the night yet. Good. Neither was she.

Their bodies twined, his leg sliding between hers, his knee grazing her hot sex. He rubbed her clit, the coarse hair on his leg tickling deliciously. She moaned into his mouth, their tongues rubbing, his chest pushing against hers.

He grabbed a breast and licked his way to her nipple, then bit, the sensation a mix of pleasure and pain, just the way she liked.

His muscles beneath her hands bunched as he carried her out of the water. Scott kept her in his arms, holding her high, while he walked to where their clothes lay.

Slowly, he slid her down his body. Calla shivered in the cool night air, a contrast to the heat inside her, the heat coming from him. Kissing her again, his hands roamed all over her body as he knelt in front of her.

"I can't hold my breath that long," he said with a grin.

"I don't mind," she replied, her words drifting to a moan as his tongue pushed between her legs. She was ready for him; the act of pleasuring him had pleased her.

Scott ran his hands up her legs, mumbling, "You are so damn sexy."

He pulled her hips to him and leaned forward, flicking his tongue over her nub. The shock hit her hard and her hips jutted forward. Scott took it as a cue and covered her entire sex with his mouth, sucking greedily. One hand cupped her ass, the other slipped down, his finger sliding between her buttocks and rubbing in tight circles, his fingertip sliding inside her hole, then back out. His tongue slid along her lips, then pushed into her pussy.

The pleasure of having him touching her so completely was overwhelming.

The intensity of the double penetration made Calla's knees shake. His tongue rapidly penetrated her core. Urgently, as if about to come himself, he moved his other hand to stroke her clit.

A cry escaped Calla's throat and she grabbed handfuls of his hair, trying to stay upright, feelings coursing through her.

His finger worked inside her ass, his teeth alternately nibbled and licked and sucked on her clit. A scream built inside her as the pressure became unbearably exquisite. Then she exploded into his mouth, hot and wet, the orgasm spasming throughout her entire body. Scott licked her roughly.

Before Calla recovered, he tugged her onto his lap. Hands on her hips, he guided her pussy to his dick. She slid down his length, gasping as it increased her orgasm.

Her heart fluttered and she stared into his gray-green eyes, feeling this man so completely. His very presence touched her everywhere, but the soft look in his gaze touched her heart.

She rode him, filling with pride at his moans. Lifting higher, she slammed down, then ground her clit against him. She took control of their movements and Scott used the opportunity to take one breast in his mouth, the other in his hand.

Her legs trembled as she rose and fell, bringing him to the brink of his own pleasure, making sure his matched hers. He grabbed her head and pulled her closer for a kiss, before lifting her off his cock.

"Not yet," he whispered, his voice rough.

"But --"

"Shh." He led her back to the water, rinsing her body, then his own. Then Scott gently laid her on their pile of clothes. Starting at her ankles, he kissed and nibbled and licked his way to her knees.

He nudged her legs apart, moving between them, and pressing his tongue into the dimple at the back of her knee. A shiver worked through her body. The rough shadow on his cheeks and chin scraped along her sensitive skin, on her inner thighs, his chin pressing against her lips and her clit.

Then he moved to her belly, rubbing his cheeks against her stomach, nuzzling between her breasts, pausing to lick each nipple.

A smile touched his lips and he softly kissed her forehead, then her eyelids, cheeks and mouth. Before she could kiss him, he pulled back and stared into her eyes.

"Do you want me?"

"Yes."

"You. Not some magical thing. Only you, Calla."

Knowing he was serious, she laid her hands on his cheeks. "Me. Calla. I want you."

He kissed her, not with intensity, but with a sweet passion that made her eyes prickle. She ran her hands up his back, his sides. Scott perched between her legs once more.

Scott massaged her hot, quivering clit with his tongue. Her hands grasped his hair, opening and closing. Her hips tightened beneath his grasp. Sliding down, he plunged his tongue into her sweet warmth, fucking her with his mouth.

She moaned, her body wriggling, closer, away, closer.

He grasped her clit between his thumb and forefinger, tugging on it. Her moans became whimpers and her pussy shuddered around his tongue as she climaxed.

Calla's body jerked, tight. Her whimpers became screams of pleasure.

Cock straining, about to explode, Scott moved over her, then teased her pussy with the tip. She shuddered, pushing her hips up, wanting him inside.

He held back, watching the frustration build as he teased her, only slipping the tip of his cock in, then backing out. She raked her nails over his ass, making him shudder from the sensation.

"One of these days," she growled, "I'm going to tie you down and make you beg for mercy."

"Any time, honey. Any time."

He pushed his cock into her, spreading her legs wider so she took all of him. She gasped, digging her fingers into his skin, pulling him, frantically wanting more.

Scott tried to pull out, but his control was shot. He pumped his hips, her hot wetness surrounding him, straining the little control he grasped.

Her breaths came faster, little sounds with each one that drove him crazy. He fucked her harder, giving in to the demands of her hands and hips.

The pressure built, but he pushed it back until she surged up, meeting him with a scream of desire fulfilled. Then he exploded, coming into her tightness as she spasmed around his cock.

Chapter Thirteen

Warmth surrounded Calla. The scent of dirt and leaves and Scott filled her as she took a deep breath. Opening her eyes to the dawn light, she looked up through the entwined branches to the purplish sky.

Beside her, Scott whispered in his sleep. She slowly moved his arm off her stomach and sat up, wondering what woke her. Hearing the swoop of large wings, she shook Scott awake and scrambled for his shirt.

Hopefully it was her brother.

But luck was not to be. The black dragon landed a little ways away, then shifted into Eric's form.

The Other, a hundred years older than herself, had the ability to shift with his clothes intact, a skill she really wanted to master. He strode toward her, a smirk on his lips.

"Where's Garreth?" Calla demanded, tugging her shorts on beneath the long shirt.

"Who cares? But you..." He tsked. "Allowing me to catch you out here with no protection."

Scott snapped his jeans and pushed her behind his back, staring at Eric. "She is not unprotected."

Eric sniffed the air, then shook his head. "He smells human, sis. A little beneath you, don't you think? You'll never get pregnant that way. He'd have to be magic."

At Scott's swift intake of breath, Calla moved to his side. "You know as well as I our mating must be complete to have a child."

"A mating? Really? Well, now. We didn't count on that." Eric glanced at Scott. "So then, what is the scrawny whelp?"

"None of your business." She could not think of him as her brother. It hurt too much. She remembered being a small child, Eric bouncing her on his knee, chasing her and their other siblings. He'd been so kind, so sweet. To this day, she had no idea why he'd suddenly turned down the wrong path.

She also remembered finding her mother's body. Or what was left of her.

"What are you doing in this town, Other?" she spat, his flinch making her hurt. Calla hardened herself, refusing to give in to the pity and sorrow.

"Luring you here for my master, of course."

"You couldn't know they would send me."

"Couldn't I?" His eyes blazed a reddish color, overtaking the black they'd become when he'd used the dark magic. "Wait until you meet my master. He'll introduce you to many things, many ways of knowing."

Calla wracked her brain. She'd heard whispers Eric did the bidding of the dark mage who'd given him the key to black powers. The magic council Garreth worked for wanted this creature who called himself the master with a desperate need bordering on obsession. From what she'd overheard, this master corrupted many. Too many.

And now he had Eric.

"Now, sister, you can come with me peacefully, or I can rip your human to shreds and take you by force. We both know which I would prefer."

"She's not going anywhere with you," Scott said protectively.

Calla wanted to cover his mouth and tell him to shush. He didn't know what he was, how to use whatever magic resided in his tall frame. She didn't want to see him get hurt.

On the bright side, neither she nor Eric could shift surrounded by all these trees. They'd never get airborne.

Decided, she grabbed Scott's hand and pulled. "Run."

They raced away from Eric, dodging through the trees. But he didn't follow her plan. With a cry of rage, he shifted into his beast and rampaged after them, pushing trees down in his wake.

Calla refused to look back. Her hand tight on Scott's, his fingers crushing hers, they ran. The sounds of Eric crashing through the forest came closer. They were almost to the car, but there wouldn't be time to get in and drive away before Eric caught up.

"Faster," she panted.

Scott glanced at the car as they passed it, but didn't slow. Calla's legs burned, her heart pounded. It was no use. Eric was catching up.

"I'm going to shift," she said between filling her lungs with air. "I'll divert him. You get to the car. Home. Garreth might be there."

"No." His grip tightened on her hand and he pulled her to the left.

"He's going to catch us. I don't want you hurt."

"No."

She would have sighed if she had breath to spare. Instead, she jerked from his grip and turned to face Eric.

The black dragon bounded toward her, letting out a bellow loud enough to wake the dead. She offered a brief "Sorry," for the loss of Scott's borrowed shirt, then let her body flow into dragon form.

She met Eric's charge with her tail, flicking her spikes at his head. It slammed into him and he stumbled, going down, making a deep gash in the ground.

Calla backed away, snorting at Scott to run. The stubborn man got out of the way of her girth, but didn't leave.

Eric rose, opening his mouth to breathe his evil blue fire. There was only one option. She raced toward him, slamming one clawed paw at his mouth. He roared and slashed at her.

* * *

Scott's nails bit deeply into his palms, drawing blood, but he didn't care. He watched the larger black dragon claw Calla, saw her blood splash red across the ground.

He'd never felt so useless. He could fight men, fight fires, hell, he'd take on the world for Calla. But how did he fight the monster trying to kill her?

Something deep inside him expanded, something in his chest opened. Threads of hot and cold spiraled through his body. The wind stirred, picking up leaves in a matching spiral.

Okay. He could work with this. He thought back to what he'd done to Garreth. He'd been thinking about ripping the man from Calla and throwing him across the room.

He tried the same thing now. He pictured throwing the black dragon.

Surprisingly, the dragon flew from Calla's red form and slammed against a tree. It cracked, the top hurtling onto the beast's head.

Claws gently grabbed him, jerking him from the path of the tree. He froze, the paw tight around his waist, staring into purplish eyes. His fear dampened as he realized that this was not just some mythical beast holding him.

It was also Calla.

He patted her scaly paw. She snorted, bounding through the forest on three legs, trying to dodge trees. A whimper came from her and Scott knew she hurt from the fight and the branches lashing her body.

"Go left. There's a cave. The trees open up near it."

She growled and headed left.

Behind them, Eric roared. Scott glimpsed the black dragon getting to its feet. Then it chased after them. "Honey, I think you better hurry," he said.

She moved faster, but carrying him interfered with her gait.

"Can you put me on your back or something? I bet I'd be a good dragon rider," he tried to joke.

She glared at him, her eyes flashing blue.

He smiled tensely.

Slowing, she lifted him higher. He jumped from her paw to her back, gripping one of the spikes along her neck and pulling himself higher.

Four paws available, Calla put on a burst of speed. The black dragon fell further behind. They reached the cave and Calla crouched so Scott could jump off. Then she nudged him toward the cave.

"I'm not hiding," he said, unable to prevent being pushed into the hole in the rock.

Calla turned to face Eric, keeping her body between him and the cave. Scott stared at her huge, scaly rump, wanting to smack it for her stubbornness.

Then he tried his magic again. He pictured her lifting -- gently -- and moving a few feet to the side. This time, it happened at the same time he thought it.

Scott strode from the cave and stood by her side, staring into her disbelieving gaze. "Ha," he said.

She shook her head, snorting.

"We will face him together."

She snorted again, this time a puff of black smoke coming from her nose. Scott patted her front leg. "Get that fire ready, baby. Let's see what I can do."

Eric crashed into the clearing with a roar. He whipped his head back and forth, then took a deep breath and spewed bluish fire.

Scott pictured it wrapping backwards, flowing over the black dragon's body. The wind whirled with speed, then flew at the dragon, curving his fire onto himself.

This time, Scott saw the air as it moved. It had colors. The wind he commanded was blue, like Calla's eyes.

The black dragon roared in pain as his own fire licked over his scales.

Calla roared, blowing her fire -- a clean, pure red. It joined with the blue, covering the black dragon from head to back.

Calla couldn't believe her eyes as Scott manipulated the air to do his bidding. Nor could she get over the heady rush of the power contained in her own dragon fire.

Eric screamed in agony and her fire faltered. She couldn't burn him alive. She just couldn't.

"Done?" Scott asked, his voice sympathetic and understanding.

She nodded.

"Okay. Let's see if I can do this."

Air blew, racing for Eric. The flames covering his scales lowered, then went out. Scott had smothered them. What air could inflame, it could also stop. He must be an elemental. A sylphid, so named by Aristotle, for Scott's power was one of the four strongest on Earth. Such mystical beings had been created by the gods to protect mankind and mortals, just as the dragons had. So he was matched to her, not just by the mating and the burn humming through her veins, but also in power and in the destiny of the intended use of their magics.

Such a mystical being was rare. In fact, Calla had only ever once met one -- a water elemental. Her father.

Eric shook his head, dazed, his eyes wide in fright as he came to the same conclusion Calla had. He backed away, but before he could flee, Garreth flew down into the clearing. He roared, the earth shaking. Then he shifted and strode toward Eric, slamming a small silver rod against Eric's side.

With a shudder, Eric shifted to his human form. His skin was blackened, burned. Calla forced herself to watch, even though the sight sickened her. She had done that. Her fire.

Though she'd wanted it for so long, now, she wasn't so sure.

Garreth leaned over Eric and snapped a set of handcuffs on his wrists. They were special, made of silver and magic and dragon scales. Eric wouldn't be able to shift or even call on his stolen magic while wearing them.

Knowing her brother was alive and Scott safe, Calla shifted, hating being naked, surrounded by three clothed men. It didn't matter she was related to two of them. Scott gallantly stepped in front of her, shielding her body from view.

"Thanks," Calla whispered.

Garreth scowled and stripped his shirt off, tossing it to Scott. Calla tugged it on, then approached.

"What are you going to do to him?" she asked, her heart sore.

“He will go in front of the council as befits such a creature,” Garreth said harshly, though pity shone from his eyes.

Scott pointed them toward the road, then raced back into the trees to get Garreth’s car. Calla walked behind Garreth and Eric, unable to shake the sorrow for what was going to happen to the man. Once, she’d called him brother.

Yes, he deserved it for all he’d done. The traitor’s death that awaited him.

It was not just him, but this master he’d spoken of. Without the persuasions of that dark creature, Eric would have never become such a beast. Their mother would be alive.

Soon, they reached the side of the road. No vehicles passed. Garreth held tight to Eric’s cuffed arm, neither willing to meet her gaze. With all her heart, Calla wished for the ability to change the past. It was useless, for no one had such magic.

Scott drove up, pulling to the side of the road. They piled in the car, Garreth holding Eric captive in the back, while Calla sat in the front. She tried hard not to turn, to catch one last glimpse of the brother she would never see again.

Chapter Fourteen

After Garreth left with Eric, Calla drove her pickup to Scott's house. He'd gone to the fire station to work, but said Calla could use his house before leaving town.

The conversation had been brief, abrupt even. Tiny pinpricks of pain stayed in her chest at his abrupt dismissal.

After showering and changing, she headed out of town. Just before turning onto the main highway leading back to Phoenix, Calla stopped at a red light. The building on the corner seemed to beckon to her. The Jasper Town Hall and Library.

Before she second guessed herself, Calla whipped into the parking lot and strode into the place.

"Hi, dearie. Can I help you?" an old matronly woman asked, using one finger to push her glasses higher on her nose. "We're closing in a half hour."

"Where do you keep old records? Newspapers."

The woman, Gladys by her nametag, pointed her to a back room. "Past fifty years are on the computer, before then, you won't have much luck."

Calla scrolled through the articles, going back twenty years. Finally she found the story about the crash. Hitting print, she stayed in her seat and read it on the screen.

John and Carrie O'Neil. A car crash on a dark, stormy road. No bodies recovered.

Calla had seen too many reports like this. It was the same with the report of her mother's death -- no body recovered. Even though she had seen her poor mutilated mother lying in a heap.

Magic. Mystical creatures. Cover-ups.

The question in her mind was whether Scott's parents were actually dead or not.

She took the printed pages, paid for them, then sat in her truck, wondering just what she was going to do with this information. Scott didn't have the contacts in their world to ferret out the truth, but she did. So did she tell him, or not?

Finally, Calla put her truck in drive. At the exit, she idled, unable to make up her mind to go left or right. Someone honked behind her.

Before she could stop, she turned into town, heading for the fire department. She parked and headed down the sidewalk to the side door, but stopped when she heard a curse.

Snapping her gaze up, she saw Scott. Barefoot, wearing nothing but a pair of jeans, he stood in front of the wide bay doors, glaring out into the distance.

His body, though no longer hers to touch, continued to entice. She remembered so intimately the touch of his skin, his lips. The way he filled her.

Heat blossomed and she squirmed in her jeans.

Scott turned and spied her. A broad smile broke out across his lips, but disappeared quickly.

He strode toward her, the lust in his eyes causing her to shiver. Calla wanted him to grab her, hold her, demand she stay. But he stopped a few feet away. "Did you forget something?" he asked, his voice a bit distant.

"Um. Can we talk in your office?" She didn't want the whole town hearing.

"Sure." He gave her a quizzical look, though he led the way to his office.

A few men lounging in the living room snickered, and someone whispered, but Calla didn't hear what they said, nor did she care. She filled herself, her memories, with the way Scott looked. The way he smelled. She wanted to remember.

In his office, Scott waited for her to enter, then closed the door. He slowed as he passed her, but quickly took his seat. The desk seemed a mile wide, separating them.

Calla took the printouts from her bag, and stepped closer. "I stopped by the library to look at your parents' accident. Something about it bothered me."

His face hardened, shutting down. He played with the picture frame on his desk.

"Did you know they didn't recover the bodies?" she asked.

Scott's chin jerked and his eyes, a bluish-gray, met hers. "Yes, they did. We had a funeral and everything."

"Are you sure?" She gazed into those eyes, realizing they changed with his moods. The gray became greener in happiness and lust. Blue when he was in pain or using his power. Was it uniquely him, or part of his magic?

"I know we had a funeral."

"But did you see their bodies?"

"No. The cops and the nuns said we were too young."

Calla nodded, taking a deep breath and pushing on. "Sometimes, with creatures like us, the news reports aren't the truth."

He stiffened, his body stilling like a tiger before it pounced. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, their deaths might not have been an accident." She couldn't add they might not even be dead. It wouldn't be fair, not without knowing for sure. "I-I can look into it if you want."

He stared at her, his mouth a thin line.

"Okay. Well, I need to go." Calla took a business card out of her purse and wrote her cell number on the back, then slid it to him. "Call me when you decide."

She left the office, her feet heavy, her heart pounding. She didn't want to leave him.

It hit her then, all the great things about the man. He was her dream. Not the playboy she'd first assumed. A strong, solid, responsible man.

But, they'd both known going in this was temporary. Neither could just up and move. And long distance relationships never worked. Which left what?

Her eyes prickled as she left the station, heading for her cherry-red truck, a symbol of everything she was.

* * *

Scott sat at his desk, staring at the card she'd set in front of him. The woman had barged into his life like a whirlwind, turning everything he knew upside down.

Hell, she'd forced him to realize he wasn't even human, but some strange magical creature.

And the most damnable thing was he could do nothing but thank her for showing him the truth. But now, his parents? Not an accident?

Did he want to be drawn deeper into this new world she'd introduced him to? Was there a choice?

Slowly, his body relaxed and he leaned back in his chair. Her blue eyes and strawberry lips flashed in his mind. The ghostly touch of her soft hand on his arm for comfort, kind words trying to ease his pain, made his chest swell.

The woman was his destined mate after all.

* * *

Calla drove from Jasper, pushing her truck to the limits. She almost wanted to ditch it and fly home. She'd get there faster. Then, she could climb into bed and eat a pint of chocolate brownie ice cream.

Start forgetting the man and console herself that one day, destiny might pick a new mate for her. Not that it had ever happened before to her knowledge, but maybe this time would be different.

How could he have gotten so deep inside her in just a few days? Sex was great, but she'd had that with other men.

Not many, but enough to know that sex didn't make a relationship. She couldn't even blame it on the mating heat. Sure, that propelled them into bed. But the heat didn't guarantee both parties liked each other, much less fell in love. It just told them they were compatible in ways of conceiving children.

No. It was all he'd done, all he stood for, that truly got her.

Calla shook her head. It didn't matter he made her burn, made her come so sweetly. She had a life to get back to.

Lights flashed and a siren rose behind her. "Damn it to hell."

She'd only been going... a glance at her speedometer told her thirty over the posted limit.

"Great. Just great," she whispered, pulling to the side of the road.

In her rearview mirror, an officer stepped out of the passenger side and hurried to her window. She rolled it down and opened her mouth to apologize for her speed.

But it wasn't a cop. Scott grinned at her. "Damn, baby. You drive like a wild woman."

Calla swallowed the lump stuck in her throat, pain and hope warring within her. "Did I forget something?"

He leaned in through the window, grabbed her neck and pulled her closer. His lips descended on hers, and Calla filled with a warmth that had nothing to do with the burning.

"Yeah," he whispered. "Me."

Amber Kallyn

One of those rare breeds, Amber Kallyn is an Arizona native who can trace her family's history through six generations in the state. She lives with her sexy husband, and their four very active children. Included in the menagerie are two cats (though there's always room for more) and two dogs. We won't count all the fish. She also writes urban fantasy under the name Higley Browne.

Amber loves the paranormal, from dragons to werewolves to vampires. She's currently at work on her next book, probably running around the house acting out a fight scene with her collection of swords and daggers. Or maybe, wishing she had claws to practice the other fight scenes.

A voracious lover of the written word, Amber found at an early age that she could read fast. Really fast. She devours novels by the day, novellas by the hour, and is always looking to get her hands on more.

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